

Joanne Fedler

LOVE

IN THE

TIME

OF

~~JOY~~

~~HEZITATION~~

~~COMPUSSION~~

CONTEMPT

Consolations For
Parents Of Teenagers

THE EXTRA CHAPTER

*I have had worse partings, but none that so
Gnaws at my mind still. Perhaps it is roughly
Saying what God alone could perfectly show –
How selfhood begins with a walking away,
And love is proved in the letting go.*

C D Lewis, 'Walking Away'

Between the time it took me to write *Love in the Time of Contempt* and get it published, Shannon finished school and Jordan bean-stalked three inches, overtaking Zed, which as Jordan points out, 'isn't a titanic achievement,' given that Zed, while huge in heart, brains and spirit, would never be selected for the NBA.

Zed and I find that weekends roll around and we have no child-care responsibilities, because Shannon is getting picked up by Zoe and Rachel and they're off partying and 'maybe I'll be home tonight, and maybe I'll be home tomorrow,' and Jordan is bussing it to a friend to hang out and he'll see us when he sees us.

So we make a cheery effort to go out for lengthy breakfasts and hold hands. We talk about what kind of campervan we'd like to get and dream of the places we'd like to visit that don't include 'kids' entertainment' or games rooms. Planning for two is a different species of adventure-forecast than planning for four. I now only have to compromise by half, not quarters and since Zed is so accommodating I may even get my way entirely, if I can actually remember what my own uncontaminated preferences are. My brain isn't used to thinking so small or so selfishly. The kind of 'us' we were is shrinking. The challenge is not to feel diminished, but to contract into a deeper space and emerge a bigger person.

In the Divine Comedy, Dante wrote: *'In the middle of the road of my life, I awoke in a dark wood, where the true way was wholly lost.'*

That pretty much sums up where I find myself. I'm poised in a kind of bardo between parenting others into selfhood, and struggling to understand what that means for my own sense of person-hood. I'm transitioning. I just don't know where to. It's a stretch for control-freaks like me.

These days with a GPS on my dashboard or Google Maps on my iPhone, I don't get heaps of opportunities to seriously lose my way. There's always a voice or a chart redirecting me back on track. In fact, the part of my brain that used to have to think about how to get places has atrophied like the quads of the bedridden. I mindlessly follow instructions, which has taken a lot of stress out of geographical navigation, let me tell you.

But maybe that's not how we humans evolve in that full, rounded way we're meant to. What we gain in expedience, we may lose in experience.

I think what Dante was alerting us to, is that losing our 'true way' is perhaps the start of a new journey, one that relies less on certainties and more on a kind of inner delving.

So I try not to let the beckoning wide-openness of my future, stark of mothering responsibilities, become a kind of agoraphobia. My challenge is to meet it with a fullness of being, which embraces the richness of all the days I have parented my children, with all the kinks and crookedness of my limitations; and in acknowledgement of the truest of truths, that I did it all with the best of my intentions. If I caused damage or wounds, I never meant to. Where there are scars I inflicted, I ask for mercy. Forgive me, for I knew not what I did.

I have come to a gentle insight – that we cannot excise the exercise of parenting from life. We are always someone's child (whether they're

alive or passed on) or someone's parent and sometimes we are both at the same time. The shadows of how we were parented will cast their shapes onto the landscapes of our children's experience of being nurtured. We can't change the domino effect of intergenerational weather patterns. But we can catch ourselves in the act. We can take precautions against ourselves. We can issue a warning: look out, here comes my baggage. Take cover.

Getting to parent other people gives us the opportunity to reflect and grow. As much as babies and toddlers can push our buttons, we recognize that they are little and we are the grown-ups. When they become teenagers, we may have to look up to meet them eye-to-eye, but it will work out much better for everyone if there is one real adult in the room. Someone who can handle confrontation deftly. Someone who can manage her anxiety. Someone who doesn't need to manipulate or control others. Someone who likes who she is and what she sees in the mirror.

When our kids are small, we may endlessly wonder, 'Am I a good enough parent?' When they're teenagers, the question becomes, 'Am I a good enough person?'

If we ever indulged in the vanity of self-congratulation, teenagers will make sure we get to see how ridiculous we are. They will roast us and turn us into a parenting-spoof. Bless them. Those cocky little fuckers.

There is a beautiful concept in Japanese art: *wabi-sabi*, which refers to the beauty of that which is imperfect, impermanent and incomplete. The Japanese go even further than naming this paradox. They fix damaged pottery with gold resin and call it *Kintsugi*. It's an art form that goes beyond repair by transforming an object, and in so doing, recognizing that being broken is simply an event in the life of every entity, rather than discarding its service at the moment of breakage.

The world around us abounds with metaphors to help us through this time. The vessel we were for our kids for so many years has cracked. Either we will drip out or we can fill those cracks with ‘gold resin,’ which may be nothing more than a softening sigh at the flaps of old-lady skin on our arms rather than abrading into the ‘uggh’ of antipathy. Letting the hair grey stay rather than squelching it with ammonia-laden colour. Taking that deep breath and mustering sympathetic joy as we wave our kids goodbye on their gap year rather than letting them see us sobbing in despair. We are training to lose everything. How did we ever kid ourselves that it was about anything else? How much more precious then, is each passing moment we have with our teenagers?

Lost. Broken. Words I feared for so much of my life are changing shape, opening up new possibilities for me.

There is no map. No One Way to Do It Right. There are no guarantees.

But this should not scare us.

We are our own true compasses.

Don’t be bullied by the books or harangued by the ‘how-to’s.’ God help us, we don’t need any more rules or expert opinions. We’re suffocated by information and robbed of the time it takes to process it all.

But who couldn’t do with a few sensible reminders of what we already know, in the guts of our hearts? Here are some of the things I remind myself daily:

1. *Hover not:* Hang back watchfully. Dive in only when they’re drowning.

2. *Don’t steal their mistakes and fix their fuck-ups:* Let them save themselves.

3. *They are not your Promised Land:* They belong to themselves.

4. *You never need to be a psychotic bitch or a mean bastard:* You want their respect. Be someone they can respect.

5. *You are not their beeyatch:* Don't be bullied. Say 'no' occasionally. Say 'yes' when they least expect it.

6. *Find friends your own age:* They need you to parent them, not party with them.

7. *Always Be Connecting:* Listen invitingly. Be interested, not curious. Pat their heads in passing. Offer hugs, but never enforce them on an unwilling participant.

8. *Get your shit together:* Know who you are and what you stand for.

9. *There is kindness in everything:* That's how the love gets in.

10. *Trust yourself:* Trust them.

Stay strong and sane.

Love was built to always conquer contempt.

Joanne Fedler

2015