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MAKING SOME THINGS RIGHT AGAIN

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When I was a child growing up in a family where things were often dreadfully wrong and no one knew how to make them right, my siblings and I had to carry some pretty adult-sized burdens at far too young an age. In little ways, large parts of our childhood were stolen in order to help my mother keep my father's impulsive decisions from capsizing our wobbly family boat in rough seas. He didn't mean to create such chaos, but he had the nature of one who grabbed for what he wanted when he wanted it, and the pieces were left for my mother and the children to pick up or put back together. One example of this phenomenon – a relatively small blip on an already chaotic family radar screen – is an era I have always spoken of, heavily punctuated with sighs, as "The Horses!"

To make amends for actions that wounded my mother deeply, my father decided to buy a farm and move his city family to the country. We were children used to roaming the streets of our very safe neighborhood every summer or weekend day in bands of friends. We wandered from one home to another from breakfast until day's end, inventing games or creative play. There were always adult eyes on us wherever we were. Often, we rode our bikes for miles...from the near end of the neighborhood to its far reaches. It was a rare day when there wasn't a friend eager to play. Without consulting any of us, we were suddenly living on a country road, miles from our friends and our familiar places to ride, play, and explore. The nearest neighbors were a long walk through a hayfield. Their children were older and younger than we were, so we were not a fast or easy match as friends. Days that had been full of laughter and play were abruptly long and lonely times. We grieved most of the summer and looked to the new school year with dread. Friends, familiar from kindergarten on, would no longer be at school to greet us on the first day. For the first time, we would ride a bus rather than walk to school with our best buddies, sharing the excited first-day chatter of young children.

The summer days passed slowly. I was bored, lonely, sad, and convinced nothing could compound my state of unhappiness.

Then my father decided to board horses from a children's camp that was closing for the season. Because he traveled extensively in his work, it was part of his plan that my sister and I, then ages 12 and 10, would learn to care for the horses ourselves. I don't know whether he thought this would keep us busy or make some money from the farm or whether he didn't think at all but the horses arrived...and suddenly two city children were put in charge of their care. My sister and I had never been near a horse, never touched one, never mucked out a stall, never groomed, fed or watered a horse. Of the two horses that came with the deal, the mare stood at sixteen hands and the pinto pony was the living incarnation of the word *mean*. He had probably been abused, perhaps for years, but then I only knew that he bit, kicked and battered his stall, scaring both my sister and me nearly to death. Still, we had no choice. Most mornings we rose at dawn, dressed for the bitter cold of the old barn, scurried down the rickety stairs that connected the barn and the house, and learned to dodge the pony's mean temper and unpredictable kicks to care for him. We hauled manure out of the horses' stalls by pitchfork and wheelbarrow, tossed fresh bales of hay from the mow overhead, struggled with our terror every morning, and learned, of course, to hate horses.

One warm day, my father (having failed miserably in his attempts to teach me to ride) thought it was time for my six-year old brother to learn. He saddled up the pony, slipped his little boy onto the pony's back, and slapped the pony on its hindquarters to get it started at a gentle walk in the large, enclosed paddock. Instead, the pony bucked and bolted with my little brother clinging to the saddle, screaming for his daddy to help him. His cries further frightened the pony, who galloped out of control as my father chased him around the paddock and my mother ran to call for help from a more experienced neighbor, screaming all the way into the house. My sister and I sobbed as we watched this horrible scene unfold until the pony finally tired, and slowed down so my father could reach my brother and lift his terrified boy from the skittish horse's back.

Some time after this incident – although not immediately, which would have been my preference – the horses were gone and the potential for a positive human-animal connection was lost with them.

The story of the Horses is one that testifies to a childhood taken hostage by circumstances we children could not change or control. My father's job took him 'on the road' much of the time. Traveling the state, he left his children to cope with shoveling out from snowstorms, with household responsibilities far beyond our years, and with a vague and generalized burden of providing comfort and companionship to my unhappy mother (who truly hated living on the farm). I have many memories like this. They stand alongside happy memories, yet create an overriding image of a mother bearing heavy burdens and children forced by circumstance to grow up before their time. Because I know we were not the only children made to rise quickly to the occasion when things happened in their families that they hadn't chosen and couldn't stop from happening, I carry an especially tender spot in my heart for parents struggling with adversity and children who grow up with it as a constant companion.

This brings me to my buddy Alex. Alex is a charming, bright, creative nine-year old boy who loves to build things but hates to play outdoors. His father died a year ago... and Alex, his Mom and brother are slowly, tediously rebuilding a life without much of an underpinning. Alex's father left behind a burden of debt, a trail of outraged creditors, a legacy of lies and betrayals, and an aging mother with Alzheimer's disease who has no family to look out for her needs other than Alex, his Mom and brother. Although they were divorced when Alex's father died, his mother assumed these responsibilities and is carrying them out to the best of her exhausted ability. In the midst of this already critical time, her rented home was sold. She and her children were prematurely and hurriedly pushed into buying an old house that needs many repairs she cannot afford to make.

I wasn't thinking of my mother at the time. Perhaps my father's impulsive nature lives in me too; I offered to see if I could gather some members of my extended family – brother, sisters, spouses, children – for a day to help with the most immediate need: to paint her house. Maybe we had learned compassion in the fires of hardship, or maybe it was just that we became responsible so young, but my siblings and I are all good folk who respond to genuine need when it's presented to us. I put out the call to help Alex's family. As various family members responded, I thought to suggest in the future that as a family project, we take a day every year to gather somewhere to help another family lift out of their burdens long enough to gain a better foothold in life. We can paint, we can repair broken doors, and we are all handy in lots of ways that single moms can use. We also know other handy people who can be coaxed into coming along.

Next weekend – along with Alex, his mom and brother and six members of my family – we plan to paint Alex's house, fix the broken doors and reach the high spots his mother can't paint indoors herself. In the course of planning this, it occurred to me that I have moaned through much of my life about my father's impulsive or unwise actions and how they burdened my mother and worried us beyond our years. In Alex, perhaps I'd seen my own face...a child made old by adversity too soon. If the house had to be painted (as the stalls had to be mucked out), I hoped the job could be fun for Alex, a burden shared lightly with his family rather than one that was too heavy for his mother to bear alone.

My mother didn't tell anyone how heavy her burden was. She kept her secrets, and probably her embarrassment, to herself...and we all paid a price for her decisions, as well as my father's. There were times when many hands would have made light work in our family, and people who loved us and would have gathered happily to help, if only my father's self-centeredness and my mother's pride hadn't interfered with them telling the truth of our need. It was difficult for Alex's mom to admit she could not carry the burdens alone that were handed off to her – that she needed help – but in finally admitting her humanity, she gave me a

perfect opportunity to make some things right that had gone wrong for my own family. I could call for help on her behalf...and help would come.

It's my hope, of course, that our combined efforts will ease her heart a bit and allow her to feel companioned in this life rather than alone. But I can't make that happen. I can only make some things right for a nine-year old that were not right when my sister was nine and I was not much older. I can rally the troops for one day and they promise to come prepared to work. I have only two rules: "Whoever can come, comes," and "Everyone helps." That means Alex will participate in building something he and his family might remember forever: the day they were not on their own to make everything right again.

Small things, small choices, small actions. Nothing earth-shaking or worth shouting about. This is a quiet step taken to honor my own family's struggles, to recognize the toll that worry took on my mother and all of us, and to lighten the load in just one other family for just one day. It may not seem like much, making some things right after so many wrongs but this registers somewhere in the great book of accounts. We learned lessons from not having help, I don't minimize the value of those lessons but under like circumstances I am pleased that Alex will have a chance for another kind of lesson. He'll see the cars roll into the yard, the people pile out, the laughter we put into sharing a job, and the purely felt satisfaction of being one part of that accomplishment.

I urge you to look around for where your friends, family, or neighbors need help. Think about giving 'just one day,' and notice what a difference that makes to lift another's burdens, brighten another's perspective on life, and make right some of what has gone wrong for just one family. It is just a day for you, spent on someone else – and yet so much more for those to whom you give this gift.

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