

What Would You Do If You Had No Fear?

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A cool summer breeze fluttered the leaves on all the trees surrounding Gunsolly Mills, the public park where my son was driving his R.C. car on one of the last days of summer vacation.

At first, I stood with him on the wooden platform, high above the dusty track, watching his blue and orange, flame-painted remote control car zip and turn, flip and soar into the air.

One flick of the wrist, and the car turned right, then left, then careened on two wheels around a tight turn.

When the adventure of maneuvering his car entranced him fully, I slipped to the picnic table underneath the platform to work. As a mom of four teenagers and a marketing entrepreneur, I work around my kids. Some days are easier than others.

I tried to work, but in the beauty of a warm afternoon, it was difficult to focus.

On the last August Monday, two of my kids returned to school. Hair blown straight, button-down shirt pressed. Looking their best for watching eyes.

On the driveway, they allowed me to take their picture. "My last first day of school," my oldest son said. I was not crying, yet. Life moves too quickly to be sad.

The sadness will come in the empty spaces, in the leaving. Or maybe there won't be sadness, but rather a slow acceptance of the way things must be, the way time marches on, and we with it.

The older I get, the more I see the possibilities in time and empty space, the more I want to do, the more I believe I can do.

When I was younger, all I wanted was to become a mother. And when I held my first son, then my daughter, and finally my last boy, I knew what was expected of me, even though I had no glimpse of the surprises that would come.

I knew the landscape of motherhood in the way that the beauty of Lake Michigan always stuns me into silence. No matter how many times I drive the car over paved hills and silent highways until the first tree-lined glimpse of roiling blue, where cold air meets independent waves, I admire it nonetheless, as if it is the first time. I know the landscape, and yet it is new to me.

On the second day of school, my youngest son went rock climbing. Only 13, he needed me to supervise – or at least, the gym required it, even if he didn't. He and his friend hooked auto-belays onto their harnesses and shimmied up the rock wall.

They made it look so easy.

I sat at a round wood table, typing words into my iPad, admiring the challenge but seated far from it, wondering what it would take at mid-life to climb that wall myself.

The older I get, the bolder I get, but also the more fearful. The other day, talking with a fellow parent about senior spring break and how to avoid sending my teenage kids to a drunken festival of poor choices, my friend remarked, "I remember wanting that and not knowing how stupid it was, not seeing the dangers."

My senior year in high school, I went with friends on a Caribbean cruise, wished farewell and bon voyage by our well-meaning Midwestern parents, unleashed and unfurled on the sparkling, sun-kissed waters.

We got into trouble. We made it home alive. Adulthood is the state of knowing you can do anything and also knowing the specific dangers that lie between here and possibility.

In the rock gym, a little girl, maybe 10 years old, hugged the harness next to a rope connecting ceiling to floor. She dangled, legs bent, body in an L-shape. She leaned into the tether and spun herself in circles. Round and round, her head angling into her shoulder, her

eyes closed.

What did she dream about? What story played behind her eyes? I didn't know her, but I knew she believed she could fly, soar, touch the ceiling. And I believed she would.

Her brown hair in a long ponytail, her skinny arms reaching up, her skinny legs pointing down, she epitomized the open-ended possibilities of childhood.

It is a well-loved cliché to say childhood is wasted on children. When I was 27 and left full-time employment to be a freelance writer, I sought the freedom to witness a mid-day movie or rollerblade on a sunny afternoon.

I remember the delicious taste of the anything – I could go out to dinner, I could cook, I could drink with friends at happy hour, I could dance late into the night, I could invite a man I'd just met home with me in the waning twilight, I could watch hours of TV or a double feature or buy a plane ticket to anywhere.

Today, I could take off and circle the globe, but I won't. My children will miss me, they'll be hurt by my absence, they'll nurse feelings of abandonment for the rest of their lives. There is too big a stake at pinpoints in life to live too well in the music of freedom.

But the music plays, and gains volume as we grow older. In the climbing gym, even the strongest men look like specks on a wall. One step leads to the next until you reach the top, and then you push off with padded feet and slide gracefully to the soft ground.

What does it take to break through the fear of heights, of depths, of abysses and dark holes? What does it take to be so thirsty for that simple sip of freedom to actually drink from the pitcher of possibility?

What in your life is holding you back from fully stepping into the person you can be who can change this world?

As mothers, we are the memory-makers for our children. But are we making memories for ourselves at the same time? Or are we tabling that, shelving it, for some future time when we can return to focusing on ourselves? Will we? I wonder.

As I wander along the journey of motherhood, I am reminded that all the lessons I try to instill for them, I must also send to myself.

Perhaps curating childhood is a reminder that we must retain some sense of playfulness, of wonder and possibility, for ourselves, as we give it generously and lovingly to our children.