

Measure

This morning I'll be meeting a woman by whom I measure my life. Her plane arrives a little after 11:00 and I pray her flight will be comfortable and uneventful. I've borrowed her from her husband and daughters for a few days and promised to return the lady home safely. She has no idea how much she means to me.

Since the moment I helped wrap her in a bunting and drove her home from the hospital more than a few years ago, she has always been a wonder to me. And she was different. I couldn't explain what I meant by that at the time and I still can't. But whatever it is, I know it's true.

I remember showing her off at age three the day I took her to the mall to buy a Christmas present for her mother. From age four she was the go-to girl if you wanted to know the location of anything in the house. She was a master observer with a suitcase mind that cataloged everything.

And she was always a looker. I have the photos to prove it, snapped while she sat on my roll top desk at age five and made that funny prolonged giggle sound at the back of her throat only little girls know how to do.

But there was one time at age six I won't forget. Through a window I watched her fly back and forth endlessly on the swing in the back yard, an angel with ringlets of red hair streaming behind, her face a picture of intensity, her mind on its way to somewhere in the universe only she could find.

Her mother called her for lunch but I hoped the little girl would stay out there in the universe on her swing for a minute or two longer. Her eyes wide and open, full of wonder as she gazed ahead, evidently from one galaxy to the next. It came to me that from the simple act of loving her mother I had launched this explorer on the journey. Her success in finding that special place in her universe would ultimately reflect upon me. It would measure my own usefulness among the heavens when I was finally gone.

She became a young woman of charm, responsibility and caring. I saw her at age twelve out in the barn on a windy, snowy night, feeding her horse. Although sick with the flu, she would not let the animal bed down for the night without a hug. She loved that creature, but sometimes the sight of my lovely daughter on the back of what could at any moment turn into a raging beast scared me. But as she would prove so often in life, she knew the dangers and she knew the beast.

Only a few years later I watched with trepidation as she drove away on her first "official" date with some numbskull young idiot who probably had more sense than I did at his age.

I remember staring at her one evening after an argument when she was sixteen years old, stunned by the realization I had sired a

girl child whose mind worked like mine, but faster. She would always be a step ahead of me.

I suppose she was a normal young woman and I was possibly a normal father. We had our share of arguments. Neither of us ever won. How could I win an argument with a young lady who stomped out of the room just before I delivered my best line? Or she with a man who wouldn't open his eyes to reality, but with his eyes closed would rather believe what he imagined was the truth.

I surely embarrassed her at times during her teen years with my ideas from what she called the Olden Days and my pronouncements to her boyfriends. She would complain, but I believed such was my job as a father. Besides, I told her, she would come to agree with me when she became a woman and learned to think straight. Over the years one of us has come around more to the other's way of thinking.

She left for college and afterward seemed to hardly ever come home. She did, of course, and regularly, but never enough for me. Only fifty miles apart we saw each other often. But as a member of my household, I lost her at age 18.

And what a loss. The Pretty Women population at home dropped by fifty percent. The same was true for female minds to contend with, warmer hearts to measure my compassion by, as well as someone to show me how to do simple things in the kitchen. And the occasional help of a resident Grammar Girl. But mostly I missed her sparkle and humor.

When she'd been gone only a few weeks during that first semester of her freshman year of college, a startling thought came to me. "I have a daughter somewhere in the universe, but for the first time since her birth I am no longer sure where." That night when the television announcer said, "It's eleven o'clock. Do you know where your children are?" I answered, "Not really."

Then came career, her Lancelot, marriage, children, lots of responsibility and cares. I'd sometimes drive up on a Saturday to take her out for breakfast and see if her quirky sense of humor was still intact. It always was.

It's true that as the years piled up her lights dimmed a little on occasion from exhaustion. The daily chores of a woman managing a career and family, caring for the loves of her life, can take their toll.

But I've always carried that vision of her in my heart, red curls streaming behind her as she swung out in search of something in the universe that was truly hers, uniquely hers, always hers. I have no idea what it might be. She may not either.

I measure myself as a father by her. Not by her success as a mother and wife, roles she surely loves. But by her love for herself and by her desire to seek what is right for her. I am certain she will find it.

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