

## Opening Essay to *Cherishing Children*



My grandparents were farmers. They lived in a big, old house on a little plot of land nestled amidst rolling hills in rural Wisconsin. There, my grandparents raised chickens and calves and corn and cabbages—and nine children. And there, on eighty acres total, they harvested lands, lessons, and lives. They understood that there was a law which governs the promise of harvest, a law which applies to all of life—to fields and to families. Simply, the law is this: That which is sown will be that which is grown. Grandpa said it this way: “You can’t plant tomatoes and expect to harvest beans.”

My grandfather used this simple truth to gather his bounty. The same principle of harvest was at work in regards to his lands as was at work in his life, the exact same. He knew this, and understood—with clear-eyed common sense—that what he experienced in terms of love, joy, and peace would be the result of what he purposed for.

And so it is with us. When we seed our families with laughter and love, with sharing and caring, with simplicity and with thankfulness, the harvest comes. Again, that which is sown will be that which is grown. Beans from beans. Corn from corn. Peace from peace. Love from love. There’s no other way. Seed by seed, deed by deed, we turn the soil of our souls over in our lives and plant something there, and that something begins to grow—unseen at first, but not at the last.

My grandfather seeded gratitude into his life and, because of this, he didn’t need a calculator to tally his wealth; he only needed his eyes. His “gold” was spilled out all around him—in the cornfields ripening behind his farmhouse, in the hair on the blond heads of his little ones, in the amber of his wife’s eyes, and in the sunrises that spread themselves across the heavens at dawn as barnyard roosters crowed “Good morning!”

in welcome.

What mattered most, to him, was knowing that those he loved—and who loved him in return—were nearby. Nothing in the world, he believed, was more worth having.

My grandfather. He was a man who could be filled with happiness at day's end simply by reaching for a doorknob attached to a place called home, a place where people ate meals together as a family and sat on mismatched chairs gathered around a wooden table in the kitchen at suppertime to eat chicken and ham and soup and casseroles and mashed potatoes and gravy—those stick-to-your-ribs kind of foods that were served when no one knew what calories were, much less how to count them.

It was a time when the sound of clanging kettles being pulled from cupboards could be heard in every house in the neighborhood daily as home-cooked meals were being prepared. And it was a time when conversations around those kitchen tables amounted to nothing in particular—an aproned mother sharing news from a letter received in the mail from a distant relative, an older brother warning a younger one to quit crossing his eyes or they would stay that way, a little sister rambling on about tea parties and teddy bears. There was, and still is, a certain satisfaction in plain-spoken talk, in hearing someone ask you, “How was your day?”

Home was a place where a made-from-scratch apple pie could be found baking in the oven, a pie that would later be served up with a heaping helping of ice cream after the kids finished reading aloud on the sofa about a boy name Dick, a girl named Jane, and a dog named Spot. *See Spot run. Run, Spot, run.*

Home meant homework and housework and doing dishes—*You wash, I'll dry.* It meant seeing jars of pickles with dill sprigs inside lined up smartly along pantry shelves, and smelling laundry from the washline scented with fresh air. Home meant mothers rocking babies into gentle slumbers with lullabies so sweet that even songbirds outside the windows paused for those musical kisses goodnight. And it meant listening to the poetry of cribs and cradles—babies cooing forth conversations in a language only God could understand.

It's when I'm rocking my own grandchildren these days that I find myself thinking more and more about things that matter most, like how a person can live for a long time—years and years and years—without ever realizing that they already have all that they need, or realizing that happiness is not a place we can arrive at because *we're already there.*

Maybe this thing called “happiness” is simply about choosing to place a higher value on the moments in front of us instead of chasing after the monumental ones in a distant future. I can't say for certain, but I am beginning to believe this is true.

I do know for sure, however, that my grandchildren remind me that using my time to worry about shoes that match dresses and purses that match shoes is not nearly as important as taking time with them to watch a sunset being painted with such splendor that it appears to be an opened box of Crayola crayons. They remind me

that doing nothing can be a very good use of a person's time.

So we keep a slower pace and dangle our bare feet from the end of piers and crawl on the ground looking for bugs while we wear out the knees on our pants; pants we can get more of, but time we can't—it's blinked away.

Just thinking about my grandchildren right now is making me hungry for a lollipop, a licorice stick, a lopsided ice-cream cone, and a blue M&M. And a frosted cupcake with sprinkles.

I will see them tomorrow, but I wish I could see them this very minute so I could zip them up in their feetie pajamas, wrap them in their favorite blankie, and tell them a bedtime story about a magical pumpkin carriage or a purple unicorn. We could walk through their garden in the twilight and watch butterflies dancing to "pretty music" only children hear.

But I must wait until tomorrow when we will buy tickets for the carousel at Lakeside Park in Fond du Lac and keep company with a few elaborately carved prancing ponies riding along on their enchanted way.

I know it seems silly, but I really do love that carousel. In truth, I even keep a photo of it here at my desk, right beside me. My father is in this photo. He's sitting on a picnic table next to the carousel as he watches it go round and round. Sophie Grace, his great-granddaughter, is deciding which horsie to ride.

My dad is smiling. It's his smile I see, even though other people would probably notice something different—maybe his oxygen tank, or those tubes carrying breath into him.

Yet he, my dad, is smiling. This was the last photo ever taken of him, on Father's Day 2008, because shortly thereafter he went to live with God instead of with us.

So I will remember him tomorrow when I visit one of the many places he loved, and I will give thanks for the immeasurable contribution he made to my personhood. I will sit on a picnic table and take a backwards glance over half a century of time as I recall my visits to this park with my folks in the summertime, and in the winter too, to see the red lightbulb that the park caretakers screwed into the tiptop of the lighthouse at Christmas so youngsters would believe that Rudolph was in flight over their city.

Then the grandkids and I will retrace our steps back to the car, and I will turn my head and take one final glance at the whimsical horses going round and round, and on and on, like life. I'll strain to keep that music with me as long as I am able as I drive away, and I'll smile, just like dad, while reflecting on the noble undertaking called parenting. I'll think about those things that families hold most dear, those things they are protective over: their traditions, their photos, carried around in wallets and framed on living room walls, the words they repeat every time they hug one another goodbye—"I miss you already!"—the yellowed newspaper clippings, folded up neatly inside family Bibles, announcing the arrival of naked newborns, and, of course, the recipes they hand down from one generation to the next—like the stuffing recipe my family makes every Thanksgiving Day. One bite is all it takes for me to know that I

am home, it is Thanksgiving, and there is no better place in the whole world to be at that moment than where I am, among members of my scattered family, now gathered, some who have known me since the first hour of my life.

We're nourished, as families, by more than food. And more than blood unites us—our shared memories do too. These are the links that bond one generation to another, the fenceposts that hold everything together. They represent the history of who we are and where we came from, a place called home, with its cookie cutters, cupcake tins, ice-cream scoopers, and loved ones asking “Would you please pass the soup?” on those days when the only thing you really needed was a warm breeze to blow the laundry dry.

**By Rochelle Pennington, from the book *Cherishing Children: Taking Time for Togetherness***



## **Closing Essay to *Cherishing Children***

*“There is just one way to bring up a child in the way he should go, and it is to travel that way yourself.”* Abraham Lincoln

While attending a local high school graduation ceremony recently, the role parents play in the lives of their children came into sharp focus for me. It was truly a defining moment, one I shall not soon forget.

Following the principal’s opening words of welcome, students who had received scholarships spoke briefly. One common theme united their individual messages: All were quick to take the emphasis off of themselves and acknowledge the love and support of

those who had stood alongside them through the years, helping to bring them to this place of achievement and honor.

Their expressed appreciation centered on their parents, and the specifics of their gratitude included thanking them for “all of the love,” “all of the encouragement,” “for always being there,” “for being a great example,” “for setting high standards for yourselves and for me,” “for being an awesome role model,” and “for everything.” Applause followed each graduate as he or she stepped off of the stage and returned to the seating area below.

The last person to speak was the class valedictorian. She walked to the podium, took the microphone in her hand, looked across the sea of faces in the packed auditorium, and then asked this question: “Mom and Dad, where are you?”

Scanning the crowd, but not finding them, she asked again: “Where are you, Mom and Dad?”

Still not seeing them, she paused, and then directed: “I would like my father and my mother to please stand up at this time.”

Two people, looking quite sheepish and confused, stood up. It was at this point that their daughter, beaming, said: “Audience, I would like to introduce you to my parents. I have asked them to stand along with me because I would not be up here today had it not been for them. And now I would like everyone to give them a big round of applause because they are the ones who deserve it more than I.”

And applaud they did—with such vivacity that it seemed as if the noble efforts of parents everywhere were being honored.

Parents. They love, they nurture, they example, and they lead, and their influences are as much a part of us as our very breath.

Parents pave the way of our life path, and the value of their abiding presence and care cannot be overstated.

**By Rochelle Pennington, from the book *Cherishing Children: Taking Time for Togetherness***

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Rochelle is shown in the four-generation photo below with her mother, her first grandchild, Sophia Grace, born January 1, 2007, and her daughter, Erica, who was a high school English teacher for five years before pursuing a law degree at Marquette University. *Cherishing Children* was written for parents and grandparents everywhere, and was dedicated to Sophie.

