

The Family Store
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01 October 2016, Revised 22 October 2020

It's a bad day for the three granddaughters. I only am alone in the room with them when they crescendo above 100 decibels. I scream to be heard – “Continue this and I will hang you all upside down by your feet from the ceiling like bats.”

This arrests their fight. “Grandpa, bats don't hang upside down from the ceiling.”

“Yes they do. They hang upside down from the roofs of caves and poop up the floors of their caves. The poop piles as deep as a swimming pool.”

Group laughter broke out. Any mention of poop or private parts, which one of the granddaughters repeats as if it were her mantra, is always a cause for laughter. These founts for humor we retain throughout our lives, despite all our attempts at dignity. And the violence I threatened the girls with rolls off like the proverbial water off a duck's back.

We are immersed in poop in the womb and submerged in violence and terror from the moment of parturition. For children the refuge is Mr. Roger's Neighborhood, a tranquilized construct so flimsy it folds at the first zephyr. For adults the refuge is civilization, our veneer of decorum over the whirlwind and the holocaust.

Children know violence innately. So, I embrace absurd threats to salve the sibling hostility in my sugar and spice granddaughters.

Of course, sometimes sympathy is a more effective tactic. Remember that you gather more flies with honey. One sister comes to me crying bitter tears about the vile acts or words of another. For this situation I resort to...The Family Store.

“Yes,” I tell GD (GrandDaughter) #1. “GD #2 is evil. She is a rotten sister. Let's get rid of her.” GD #1 agrees and a sly smile begins to peek through the tears, just as the sun sometimes brightens the landscape the moment it pierces a tiny gap in a thick, dark cloud.

“Do you know how we will get rid of her? We will go to the Family Store.”

“What is the Family Store?”

“The Family Store is a wonderful place. There you can trade in your sister, your mother, your father, or even one of your grandparents and get a better one you want.”

“Is there really a Family Store, Grandpa?”

“Of course! There is one right downtown.”

GD #1’s smile has broadened. The idea is alluring, even enticing.

But there is a terrible proviso that puts a damper on the joy. After all, we do not live in the best of all possible worlds, and it is my life’s mission to teach them that. “There is only one problem. When you trade in your sister, the Family Store rule is that you must trade in your whole family. You must also trade in your other sister, your mother, your father, and your grandparents.”

Suddenly, the idea of the Family Store is no longer so enticing. But the spell has been broken – GD #1 has been completely distracted from her agonies and is itching to return to play with the Devil herself (GD #2).

The girls now know the Family Store intimately. Not only do they know that it is an imaginary place, they know it is far from ideal. They are tired of it. This demands a more ingenious solution to the agony of their conflicts.

GD #3 begins crying inconsolably and is about to hyperventilate. I open my arms wide and she runs to be enfolded. “What’s the matter?” Through the heaving sobs I learn that she has been terminally exiled by GD #1 and GD #2.

GD #3 wants Grandpa to provide more than mere comfort. She wants Grandpa to be her angel of revenge. Grandpa more than accommodates her. “Yes, they are evil. Do you want me to punish them?”

“Yes, punish them!”

“Should I glue them to the ceiling? Should I put burning rods in to sizzle out their eyeballs?”

GD #3 is silent but her sizzling eyeballs say, “Yes!” and she shakes her head, “Yes,” with a growing smile to confirm it. “Yes! Yes! Yes!” A budding James Joyce we have!

“Should I do it now or a little later?”

“A little later.” Promised punishment is prolonged punishment.

“Should I tell them, or is it our secret?”

“It’s our secret,” GD #3 says quietly and runs back happy to her tormenters. So hard did she work for her revenge and fairly she got it. OK, only in her mind, but that’s all that really counts, all that is really real.

The most difficult situations involve legal decisions more complex than the Supreme Court ever imagined, for nowhere on Earth is there a Constitution of the Family. Two of the Granddaughters arrive at my lap, either in series or parallel. They force me to judge between them – more accurately, and implicitly, of course, to tell which of them I love more. For this delicate conundrum I have developed the most ingenious solution of all. After consolingly wrapping my left arm around one and my right arm around the other, and looking alternately at each of them, I ask, “Which one should I punish?”

Immediately, the free arm of each of the aggrieved extends and a finger of each points toward the other. I need say no more. Each vindictive, vengeful, violent, but luscious granddaughter is vindicated. Each is overjoyed.

I await the Nobel Peace Prize.