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Creating a Strong Family Living in the Moment

By John DeFrain, Extension Specialist, Family and Community Development

As a young father, I learned to live in the moment. And to enjoy the moment.

I think it was the time when the doctors thought I might have a brain tumor or an aneurysm. I'd been having headaches for several weeks, and they just wouldn't go away. As a young professor back then, I had been under considerable stress, or, perhaps, was creating considerable stress in my life by over-involving myself in what at the time seemed to be "important" activities.

The specialist's hypothesis that I might have a life-threatening problem got my attention, of course, and I remember driving out to Wilderness Park south of the city, parking the car and hiking deep into the forest. I found a log next to a creek and sat down to talk with God. "What will happen to Nikki (my wife)? What will happen to the kids? What will happen to me?" I asked.

A couple of hours later, I came out of the woods with one thought in mind: "Make every second of life count. And enjoy every second."

Though I would be the first to admit that I have not always lived this principle perfectly, the idea has been firmly in my mind ever since.

Not so, early on in life. As a child I can remember thinking that life would finally begin after my tedious years in elementary school ended. In junior high, as it was called back then, I looked forward to the end of ninth grade when high school - and life - would begin. This hope proved illusory, of course, and the prayer was for high school to end quickly and quietly so what I was waiting for would finally happen. Whatever that would be ...

Much of college, also, was lived looking anxiously forward. And graduate school. The moment never quite measured up to the allure of the future.

Becoming a father, fortunately, put me in a position to be able to learn a new way of looking at life. Little children are remarkable for their miraculous ability to live in the moment. At 18 months, Amie,

our first daughter, could toddle down the sidewalk in our neighborhood and discover the world in 15 steps: a leaf, a bug, a crack in the sidewalk, a bird on the wing, the glint of the sun on a window. She was open to all of these great discoveries, and she began to teach Nikki and me how to be children again.

Soon we had three little girls, and every summer we would pile all of them and the camping gear into the van and take off for points west. The girls were remarkable for their ability to focus on small miracles, though sometimes they would ignore simultaneous and stupendously large miracles. One afternoon, sitting by the edge of the magnificent Yellowstone Falls, 6-year-old Amie was oblivious to the roar and spray as she sat on the ground near the lip of the falls and concentrated single-mindedly on drawing a picture of a favorite doll in her 25-cent sketchbook. The life and sound of the waterfall crashed and fell and drifted all around her, while she maintained concentration on drawing the doll's smile in pencil.

A few years later I found myself in what educators call "a teachable moment." Faced with a possible brain tumor or aneurysm, my children had prepared me to receive the wisdom I brought back from Wilderness Park that bright February afternoon. They had taught me to find enjoyment and wonder in the small things in life and to find this enjoyment when I was with them and with Nikki.

Strong families spend a lot of time with each other and enjoy each other's company a great deal. Of course, they can plan and prepare for the future. And they are quite capable of finding comfort and enjoyment in remembering the past. But they also know how to live fully in the present, and they enjoy the moment. They enjoy just being with each other. They don't have to be doing, doing, doing anything special. Just being. And while they are with each other, serendipitous good times unfold. Good times that just happen, that just spring from the moment. To actually discover and enjoy these times, however, we must be alive and aware and open to the moment. An important quality of strong families, then, is serendipity, defined as "a seeming gift for finding something good accidentally."

Oh, by the way ... in the final analysis, it wasn't a brain tumor. My father, who wasn't an M.D., was critical in diagnosing the source of my headaches. Dad spent lots of time with me during those difficult six weeks. He knew how distressed I was. He listened to me talk about my headaches and listened to me tell about the professionals' theories. He gave me the gift of his time, and he said one afternoon, "Say, didn't you bang your head while riding in that Jeep awhile back?"

"Yes ..."

"Go talk with your doctor about that."

I did. I told the doctor Dad's theory. The doctor smiled thoughtfully and did a couple simple tests on me right then and there.

"Pinched nerve," he said confidently, 15 seconds later.

And the next morning, when the stress of believing I was going to die of a brain tumor was gone, my headaches disappeared. I was well again. Serendipitous family times turned out to be crucial in diagnosing my illness.

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