

Upfront

Sometimes this column comes to me quickly and I peck it out, without angst or excessive effort. On other occasions, less frequently, I struggle. When I'm struggling, I find reasons to avoid the work. A silly strategy, since the closer I get to deadline or the farther past it I slide, the pressure to produce mounts.

Why the counter-logical self-sabotage? Employing homespun self-psychoanalysis, I've developed a hunch. People have asked me about my writing process, and I have a stock answer (that is accurate, most of the time). "I sit down in the morning on the day we go to print. I have no idea about a topic. I've got 90 minutes, and I just let it rip." Usually, it works. My best stuff comes on such days. Once in a while, though, I convince myself that I have writer's block. I avoid the responsibility of this recurring obligation. I stay away from my desk, choosing distractions over diligence, growing more anxious and disappointed in myself as each minute slips away. I suspect the trouble is the result of my subconscious identifying a topic that I NEED to address, well in advance of the time to type. And I understand that my needs don't necessarily align with yours, the reader. So I dread the self-indulgence and resultant vulnerability, even if I portray the act of creating a personal essay as no-big-deal.

And then, Philip sends me an email, in the matter-of-fact language he tends to employ: "Do you have an ETA for Up Front?" So I start to put one finger in front of the other, a reckoning that I can no longer postpone.

Except that I must, because my younger daughter has just walked in: "I'm going to go get boxes to pack."

To which I reply, "I'll go with you," combining my parental and procrastinatory instincts in one act.

And I'm suddenly in the middle of a *Seinfeld* episode – a set of disparate and unremarkable circumstances converging in a common theme. Because it's my daughter's boxes that are troubling me, in a way.

She's moving. To New York City. In exactly one week. My younger girl is stripping my nest bare. It's over, their time as my dependent girls.

You're now expecting something poetic and melancholy, which I could do, and it wouldn't be a reach. Time-passage is one of my go-to inspirations, and this milestone feels as lousy as any end-of-an-era can get. But the truest emotion I'm feeling in this moment...one that comes with a small measure of shame...is envy.

She is wide-eyed; her excitement is unrestrained. I vaguely remember what it feels like to be free of sustainable worry, and I miss it, I think. She's like a driver approaching southern California's most complicated interchange, unsure of where she's going and how she'll get there, but

expecting it to be sunny and warm when she arrives. I'm far down a straight, two-line highway, running low on gas, with no exit in sight.

I want to infuse her with everything I've learned experientially, especially the bad stuff. But (reluctantly) I want her to enjoy (wrong word?) the heartache and uncertainty that give context to a life.

So it's ironic that after doing everything I can to avoid writing about the heartache I'm feeling as my daughter leaves home, she walks in on me and compels me to both face the source of my sadness, prolong its gestation, and yet hurry it along.

Evidently, irony breeds its own kind. On the way home with my aforementioned daughter, I saw a sign – literally. Shaking from the burden of carrying a too-big stack of shipping boxes, I paused reluctantly to permit a familiar horse-drawn carriage pass before I could cross the street. When the driver finally cleared, just after her scripted and trite suggestion that James Oglethorpe's statue (crafted by the sculptor who shaped Lincoln for his Washington memorial) reminds her of Captain Morgan of cloying rum fame, and a few seconds before enthusiastically pointing to a restaurant that served as a set for "the Julia Roberts film, *Something to Talk About*. How many of you have seen it?" which is like the dopiest question employed by downtown tour guides, since the film was released in 1995 and has grossed less than \$80 million in its quarter-century life. (If the poorly reviewed dramedy is a source of significant local pride, our city has more issues than we already acknowledge, but I digress...) Anyway, from behind, I smelled the horse and its gift to the sizzling summer asphalt, prompting me to turn and notice a tiny (6 by 6-inch?) sign tacked to the back bench of the rolling touring trap. "Stay back at least 15 feet. Not responsible for damage or injury to vehicles or persons." A lot of words for a little piece of cardboard – hence, tiny font. The inherent ironies: If you're 15 feet away, you have zero chance of reading the text; a personal injury attorney would make a hasty dispatch of the sign's liability protection as the horses do their waste around our pristine squares; and if the operators gave a (...okay, I've used enough dung metaphors already) about the safety of our citizens and their cars in the presence of animals that belong in open spaces covered with grass, they'd stop disrupting traffic, peddling half-true anecdotes and using the Historic District as an open-air equine port-o-john. No carriages, no risks.

But that's another column for another day.

Today, we'll focus on parenthood's cruelest irony: You've prepared them for this moment, and you've done it well. The proof: They are strong enough to leave. In satisfaction, there is profound sadness. In pride...pain.



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