

Chapter 1

“I runned out of dreams...”

Developing perceptions of reality

It was a Sunday evening, on a day that had been filled with laziness and a lot of very much needed relaxation. Danny, my eight-year-old, and I were plopped down on the love seat in the family room, watching a football game on my little black-and-white television (the color set had been claimed by the females of the family, who were “Ohh-ing” and “Ahh-ing” over the home shopping channel).

Danny doesn't particularly care about football (“Why are those men jumping on each other, Daddy?”), but he likes to sit with me and jabber, usually early in the morning when I'm out in the living room trying to read. But now it was near his bedtime, and he was trying to distract me so that I wouldn't realize just how late it was.

Danny is a talker. I mean, Danny is a real talker. I don't know what he's going to be when he grows up, but it ought to be something where his passion for talking will have full play - a preacher, a talk-show host, a teacher, or a politician, maybe. If he has an audience, he'll talk incessantly - whether or not the audience is paying attention. If he doesn't have an audience, well, that's no real problem - it only lessens his verbiage in volume, not in its flow. I hear I was the same way when I was small, so I'm not complaining (I think this must be “get even” time for what my parents had to endure).

But there are times when I want to stuff a rag in his mouth.

Let's digress for a moment. I have learned, in becoming someone who is not the world's greatest dad, that a little “cute” goes a long way. Kids can drive you crazy with cute. And I'm persuaded, sometimes, they've figured this out, too, and they do the cute routine on purpose, just to keep us dads off balance. Danny is one of these perceptive, yet slightly malicious or sadistic kids. Talking is his form of cute. He talks to drive me crazy.

But as he talks, he reveals things about himself. Things about his inner reality that help me to understand what's really going on in that little mind.

“Up to bed,” I say, giving Danny a nudge with my elbow. I don't take my eye off the television. Joe Montana, the wily old quarterback of

the 49ers, has just been pounded into the ground by a swarm of evil Rams. The camera focuses on the sidelines, where Joe's backup, an athletic quarterback with the appropriate name "Young" stenciled across his shoulders, tries to look concerned. But an anticipatory drool begins trickling down his chin.

"Did I tell you about how this Magna Force vehicle transforms into ..."

"It's bedtime, Danny." Montana is struggling to his feet. Several of his offensive linemen, who are supposed to keep the Rams at bay, are carefully examining the dirt and grass under their feet. It's remarkable how sheepish and worried a 300-pound behemoth can look when he's nervous about holding a job that earns him hundreds of thousands of dollars per year. Montana is a star. Without him, they're back bagging groceries - and they know it.

"You see, if you turn this thing to the right, and then you ..."

"Don't make me punch you out, monster. It's bedtime. Go up and put on your jammies." It's commercial time, so I can give the situation my full parental attention.

"I'm not tired. And besides, there's no school tomorrow."

"I know that," I say, pretending I've remembered that the teachers are taking a day off to do whatever it is they do when they all get together to plot our children's education. "I don't want you waking your mother up at the crack of dawn, the way you did this morning."

"I couldn't help it, Daddy," he says. He thinks for a moment. "You see, the problem is, I runned out of dreams."

Now, we all know you don't wake up because you run out of dreams. Or at least, that's not the view of contemporary psychology or sleep science - or whoever it is in the scientific community that explains all this stuff with such learned tones and authoritative posture. But it's an interesting idea nonetheless.

The kid thinks he wakes up because he runs out of dreams. Well, maybe he does. Who really knows what goes on in a kid's mind? Who really knows what goes on in any of our minds, when you get right down to it? The main thing I've learned in all my years of studying psychology is that all those guys with the letters after their names agree on only one thing - whoever came before them (including the Big Daddy, Sigmund Freud) knew nothing. And all those other guys in the field (call them competitors), who collect such big fees for their professional services - they don't know anything either.

So, who's to say the kid's so far off?

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Dreaming is big business to a kid. I get to hear about it a lot (usually in the greatest detail), and the truth is, I'm always a bit envious. My dreams seem bland in comparison. Kids' dreams are full of vivid images and powerful events. Even their nightmares have the positive feature of being better than most of what passes for horror shows on television these days.

Kids also live more vividly than we adults do. When they have fun, they really have fun. Each experience is something worth writing home about. Each laugh is a belly-shaker. Each love is forever. Kids live in the eternal now. They believe, with absolute conviction, in capturing the moment. If there's a way to turn a boring situation into fun, a kid will find it, whether it's a ten-hour trip to Grandma's or a rainy Sunday afternoon. They'll badger you to death, trying to get you to create fun for them, but if all else fails, they're quite capable of creating their own fun.

Do kids get bored? Of course. Like the rest of us, there are times when they feel sorry for themselves and mope around, hoping someone will figure out a way to entertain them (my wife and I are both very good at this too). But given the slightest encouragement, a kid can turn a glop of finger-painting goo into a work of art. Given a couple of toy robots, a kid can wage an entire space war, with the universe saved by mighty deeds of courage by a few valiant warriors. Given a box of Legos, a kid can construct an elaborate city - and tell you all you ever wanted to know (and then some) about what each citizen is doing.

And when they get hurt, kids really get hurt. Their tears are free flowing and heartfelt. Their sense of life's tragedy is absolute. This part of the vitality of being a kid is not so pleasant, of course. But in terms of quality of life, it has to be better to feel the way kids feel, even if the hurts are more dramatic and overwhelming than the pale sort of emotions we adults experience. Even pain is a powerful emotion to a kid, giving quality to life - if only in the sense that it feels so good when it stops. And kids have this remarkable resilience. They can move from tears to laughter in the blink of an eye.

The dreams that kids dream come out of the substance of their lives. In effect, dreams are their way of extending all the fun, even during sleep time. For kids, movies don't end when the television gets turned off. They start up again when head meets pillow, with the advantage that plots can go in all sorts of fantastic directions the staid adults who scripted the original movie never would have allowed

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themselves to consider. Games don't end when bedtime comes, either. And in a kid's dreams, he can always win.

Even nightmares play a special role in a kid's life, because they provide the perfect excuse for climbing into bed with Mom and Dad. A real screecher is good for several minutes of cuddling in a totally nonthreatening environment. Even a real "tough guy" can get some hugs after a bad dream. And maybe a cup of hot chocolate too.

Kids dream and kids live. And we who are older have a great deal to learn from them.

A kid's world is a marvelous place, where nothing is impossible, and cold, hard pragmatic facts carry no more weight than dreams and fantasies. In a kid's world, there is room for Santa and Mr. Wizard, the Easter bunny and Abraham Lincoln. Fantasy and reality bleed into one another - and the one doesn't interfere with the other.

This makes the kids' world a very special place - a place we parents need to protect and cultivate. Frankly, the kids' world is a place I like to visit, even if I have to do so secondhand by seeing it through my own kids' eyes.

Some of us are better at this than others. One of the things I appreciate most about my wife, Brenda, is her capacity for a childlike relish for life. She loves amusement parks and sitcoms and dressing up for elegant occasions - all with equal passion. To Brenda, the entire year revolves around Christmas. She gets as excited about choosing and decorating the Christmas tree and the house as many people do over purchasing a new car or winning the lottery.

In this far too jaded world, Brenda is a very special person, and I've been greatly blessed to have her as my wife. She helps me see things and embrace experiences I know I would otherwise have missed - being a somewhat stuffy, "sophisticated" sort of guy (the "stuffy" part I might get agreement on, but not likely the "sophisticated" part).

Not only have I benefited from Brenda's relish for life, but our kids have picked it up too - enhancing their natural proclivities.

The boys are at an age when they're becoming increasingly conscious of people who suggest there is no Santa Claus. They hear it from other kids at school, on television - and even from the pulpit, at times (our pastor decided one week that he needed to burst everybody's bubble about the pagan aspects of Christmas, telling the kids there was no Santa. I was not pleased, to put it mildly).

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Santa is very important to the boys, and they're not sure how to relate to this attack on his reality from all points. On Christmas Eve this year, we faced the issue:

"There isn't a real Santa," Brandon offers.

"Oh?" Brenda asks. "Why do you say that?"

"David told me." David is his older cousin - who is four years older and knows "everything."

"Well, then," Brenda asks, "who eats the cookies we leave out on Christmas Eve? And who writes the notes to say, 'Thank you?'"

"Yeah, Brandon," Danny agrees. As the older brother, Danny is the authority on all matters relating to the fantasy world (including Santa, Transformers, He-man - and all the rest). If he buys into something, Brandon will usually go along.

Brandon grins, content with the logic. After all, he's seen the note and the crumbs. Who can argue with that kind of evidence?

It is Christmas morning. And during the night, it has snowed - the first snow of the year. In the South, a white Christmas is a rarity - a "wet Christmas," often, but almost never a white one. But this year, much to everyone's surprise (including the TV weatherman), it has actually snowed.

My two sons creep into our bedroom, as excited as two little munchkins can be on a Christmas morning. They've been awake since long before dawn, counting the moments. I spot them, two dark shapes moving along the foot of the bed.

"Hey, did you see the snow, boys?" I ask (I sort of like seeing the snow too - though in a totally "adult" manner, of course).

"Snow?" Brandon returns. "Where?"

"Look out the door," I suggest, pointing toward the French doors in our bedroom that open onto the deck.

"Wow!" Danny exclaims, his face pressed against the glass. "It did snow." Actually, the snow is only about an inch deep, but it's far better than nothing.

"Did anyone hear Santa last night?" Brenda asks. Brenda is normally not a "morning person." But Christmas morning is different.

"I did," Brandon says.

"Me too," Danny adds.

"What about the reindeer?" I ask. "Did you hear anything on the roof?"

"I heard the bells jingling," Brandon offers. "And the hoof-beats on the roof."

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“Did anybody see Santa?” Brenda asks. This is the real clincher. Nobody ever sees Santa, only the evidence of his passage.

“I did,” Danny returns. He gets very serious, preparing to expound on this remarkable experience. “See, I heard a sound, and I got up and went downstairs. Nobody knew it. I snuck right by Mommy and Daddy’s room [he’s sort of telling this to Brandon, as much as to us]. Santa was just putting some packages under the tree.”

“Wow!” Brandon says.

Another crisis past.

I’m persuaded that life needs to be rich in the sort of imagery Santa and the Easter bunny bring - happy, hopeful images that say the world is essentially a safe and good place. I understand full well that the world is not always a safe place, and that it is not equally good for all of us. And my kids will understand this too. There is no escaping it.

But there is a time for everything. And the darker truths of human experience can’t be allowed to deny or overwhelm those perspectives that are bright and hopeful. In fact, it is our belief in the essential good in life that enables us to endure the ugliness we see. And we’re helpless without it. The stories of Jesus we read our children each evening are the brightest and most hopeful stories of all, because they communicate the marvelous truth that we are not alone in this world. God is here too. He has a plan, and even if we don’t always understand it, we believe everything will end up “happily ever after.”

The truth is, we adults don’t benefit as much from our vaunted logic and rationality as we often claim - or would like to believe. And our confidence that we know what is objectively or absolutely true is often based less on factuality than arrogance. There is a thing or two in this universe that we don’t yet know. And I, for one, am glad of that.

A kids’ world can be a wonderful place, as long as we don’t mess it up for them.

And, to some degree, that’s what being a parent is all about: letting kids celebrate life to the fullest, doing as little harm to them as possible, and being there when they need us. If we do all this, we can’t be all bad. And the kids will have a much better shot at growing up happy and healthy.

Frankly, I don’t want my kids to run out of dreams. I want to learn - better - how to dream with them.