

Emma Birthday Letter

November 13, 2020

Dear Emma,

Memory's a slippery fickle thing. It makes me think of the few fish I caught, back in my youth. The most prominent place in my memory was Lake Granby, the very location of the terrible, catastrophic fires in Colorado last month. I wasn't very experienced so when the wriggly creatures ended up in my hand, my task to kill them, which by itself gave me shudders and I wasn't sure whether I wanted to do it, but those few times I actually held a brown or rainbow trout in my hand, I didn't actually own it. It wasn't mine. It was really the lake's. Memory's a little like that.

Each morning when I braid my hair, a little memory of you floats by me. I haven't cut my hair for 4 years. I made the decision after Trump's election as my own personal protest against a society that condones the mocking of handicapped people. Mostly when I try to explain that to the few people who ask me, they just look at me quizzically and go on with another conversation. So I've been braiding my hair for a while now. The act itself took me back to the 1970's when for many years I had a braid down my back - at one point even being able to sit on it. So there's a memory. But when I'm braiding in front of a mirror and can see my hair, it is you that I think of. My memory is that you said to me, "Daddy all your hair isn't white. There's lots of dark hair in there." It's amazing to observe that, indeed, there is a fair amount of brown mixed in with the preponderance of white. Mostly salt but a little bit of pepper. Like I would use with a hard boiled egg or perhaps an avocado.

It's quite possible you have no such memory. Memory in some ways links people. Families and couples reminisce and share stories back and forth. Rocking back and forth on the front porch - that's a shoddy way I imagine aged couples spending their twilight years. Bound by memories.

But I have been aware for a long time that memories are also private and individual. Even when multiple people are in the middle of the same event their memories will differ. Memory is a slippery fickle thing.

Even more so for those of us who have entered the stage of life that is precisely marked as a time of memory problems and memory loss. During the last few years of my mother's life I spent a fair amount of time with her. Not as much as Bill but enough to track and observe her decline. It was frustrating but helped to endear her to me. We've had her ashes on our mantel in the living room for a couple of years now, waiting for the time that those who care to can gather at Myrtle Beach to spread her ashes with her beloved George's in the Atlantic Ocean.

I vividly remember an exchange you and I had, standing beside a white van in the carport, back of our townhouse. There was a larger conversation, or at least

question, that we were talking about, having to do with the pain and conflict going on in the household and family. At just the right moment you summed it up and concluded with the words, "Fix it Daddy." It was mostly your words that motivated me to finally try to talk to your mother about "What we needed to do for the best interests of the girls."

You listened to that "conversation" from the stairs beside your sister. I often wondered what your memory of that time was. My own memory includes feelings of bitter disappointment. I've also rummaged through the memories in years since, looking for clues about the deep unknowns and suspicions that have arisen in subsequent brutalities.

I was naive to think that your mother and I would be able to have that conversation. In fact, of course, that conversation was the end. She never spoke to me as a husband / father again.

I am sending you these words because words are the only thing I have available to me to connect with you. All I have is an email address. There is confusion to me even about the email address. My spiritual director asked me "Why did you think all those years that you didn't have any contact information for Emma?" I wasn't sure. I couldn't remember. I guess it was that I sent you messages and got no response. When I asked people who did have good contact information, they told me that you did not want me to know or contact you. But you did confirm that this is a working email. So I do have that.

One thing your mother demanded through the separation, into the divorce, was that I pay for college. You may someday come to recognize that it is not easy to make a change of career when one is over 60. As far as I am aware, most of the men who have faced that over the past decades – and there have been millions of them – have had to take significant cuts in income and quality of life. The women who have faced it have, not surprisingly, fared much worse. That is what I faced in 2010 and 2011.

Prior to 2011, I expended a fair amount of energy trying to get a new position that would allow me to provide for you and Lydia. Since 1980 I had basically had two kinds of professional work: teaching and pastoring. When my bishop in Colorado asked me how I imagined my future ministry that's how I described it: a combination of teaching and pastoring which would allow me to serve small, struggling congregations. That's pretty much what I did for 30 years.

By 2010 I was looking for a teaching position, because for several reasons a church position in Hawai'i had become unavailable to me and seeking one on the mainland seemed impossible given the marriage circumstances. I was not hired to teach by my first choice – teaching at Iolani. I was really disappointed, even surprised, when they didn't hire me. I've thought ever since that it was because of a misunderstanding of something I said or perhaps something Bob Fitzpatrick would have said. Probably it was "none of the above." But by 2012 I did find a way to begin teaching – at Chaminade University. I even knew and had talked to several Episcopal priests and lay persons who had taught there.

When I finally got a teaching contract at Chaminade, I then had a way to provide for a college education for both you and Lydia – tuition-free. The contract included a provision for my children to get a full-ride to Chaminade University. Sadly, by that time, it was too late. You and Lydia had decided that you didn't want anything to do with me.

During a conversation with Bp. Fitzpatrick in 2011 or 2012 about the estrangement from you that caused me so much pain, he told me that he was aware, then, that your mother had, to quote him, "Said things to you two girls that no parent should ever tell a child." His words were seared in my memory. In my ministry I have heard things that no parent should tell a child; so I have some sense of what sorts of things a priest/bishop would be referring to by using those words. The bishop didn't tell me what the "that" was. What an empty hole that has caused in my life.

Over the years I have repeatedly asked people who were in a position to know what it was that I did to cause such a rupture with you. None of them have been willing to tell me what they know. Mostly they have claimed that they are honoring your wishes.

I had one exchange with someone that confirmed for me that what had been told you was profoundly untrue. On the day of your graduation, Tim Vail walked boldly up into my face and spoke to me in great anger and self-righteous indignation. His words were so bizarre and disconnected from any reality that I was aware of that it felt like he was a patient in an asylum. I knew, of course, that that was not the case and that he felt justified in what he was saying. I knew, that there was some kind of truth being propagated somehow, somewhere, that was utterly and profoundly disconnected from the truth and even reality that I knew. There was, of course, no way at that moment, on the grounds of St. Andrew's, for me to explore what that was all about. All I had was an irrational threat made against me by someone who didn't know me and was acting on someone else's testimony.

To this day I do not know what has made you so angry that you wanted to have nothing to do with me.

Someday you may come to recognize – but maybe not – that as a parent I loved you and cared for you as few fathers are able. Parents are seldom just what the children want them to be. I've been both, a child and a parent, and I know it's not easy being either. Life doesn't really come with an owner's manual. But I have learned some things in my life. One wise person said that the thing about humans is that we're so slow at learning how to live that by the time we know a little bit our time's about over.

I came to realize through my spiritual director that I had spent much of the 90's and into the 2000's staying in a marriage that was in many ways a failure, but staying "for the sake of the children." What led me to decisions in 2011 that finally led to the breakup of that marriage was that I became persuaded that the best thing for the two of you girls was to end the marriage. I had concluded that the damage being inflicted by modeling such a broken relationship as "normal" was, in

the end, doing more damage to you. That decision can be second-guessed, but I was genuinely doing what I thought was best for you and Lydia – first and foremost.

I'm not telling you all this because I am trying to put into place some kind of **remedy**. The time has passed for that. I long since gave up trying to persuade you to re-open your relationship with a father who had loved you with all his being. I called you two girls the "lights of my life." I knew in a way I had never known before that I would easily sacrifice my own life for the sake of yours. I guess, maybe, in some ways that has come to fruition.

I am sending this letter to you because you broke the silence by informing me that you intended to get married. You made it clear that you were doing it because my brother David had persuaded you that you "should" do it. You made it clear that you didn't want to have a relationship with me. But you did say something.

Now the wedding has occurred. I am stepping into that space. I am handing the slippery fickle brown trout to you.

There is so much that I could have given you these past 10 years. You have no idea, I think. But that opportunity is gone.

I can give you this, however, looking forward to what might be. Up to my last dying breath I would welcome you with love. I would tell you anything and share anything with you. None of it would be to hurt you and none of it would be self-serving on my part.

It was your birthday, I think maybe 2011 but maybe 2012, when I gave you a gift of parasailing over Honolulu Bay. I never heard from you whether you cashed in the ticket. Then I never heard from you. Until now.

So perhaps to complete a link, or just for free, no strings attached, I'm sending you a \$100 dollar Amazon card. I don't have a way to send you much of anything else. I send you these words and Amazon should send you a link.

Happy Birthday.

Love,
Dad