

Life and joy: the soul, my child, a feather

By Allison Seay

It is important to realize that in the first period of a child's growth, his environment and the impressions it produces are, one might say, engraved on his soul in an indelible way. A mother who takes her child with her to church provides him with an appreciation for religion which no teaching could arouse. MARIA MONTESSORI

Let me be clear: I am a mother who has not brought her child to church each week. Even before the pandemic, when I could have, I didn't. Now, though there is time and space and diocesan permission for us to come every Sunday and receive the bread, I often come alone. It is a long list, the ways I am imperfect, selfish, the ways I am sure I fail—myself, my son, perhaps my God. If it is true that the impressions of an environment—the home, the church, the world, all the people inside it—are imprinted indelibly on the soul, then they are surely marks of a true and trying life, not a perfect one. I find some comfort there.

My practice these days has been simple and hard: I am trying to consider the responsibilities of my life as gifts, not weights. It is my belief that human beings are obligated to take care of what takes care of them—for me this means the Earth, the Church, other people, art, and the systems from which I benefit and on which I depend, particularly those systems (food, privilege) which rely on the hidden suffering of others. It is not so difficult to feel the immense, if not impossible, weight of this obligation.

So I am doing a new thing, trying to think differently in order to live differently—not as therapy toward self-improvement, exactly—but as antidote to all the ways the world has of tricking me into despair and exhaustion. I am trying to consider my responsibilities as prisms, as joys, or as joys within the weights: mother, Christian, sister and daughter, wife, citizen, worker. I want to think of these as delights and gifts and honors, whose joys are within the difficulty and are never difficulty alone.

When I took my son to church with me recently, I knelt beside him in the chapel and we each received the bread. (Standing, he is as tall as I am on my knees; its own revelation: I must, in order to meet his eyes, all but bow down.) We locked eyes and it was silent. I know him well enough to know he was trying to remember what to say: he almost said 'thank you' and caught himself; I knew he was looking for 'Amen.' What came instead that I alone could hear was a whisper to the bread itself: "God is with us."

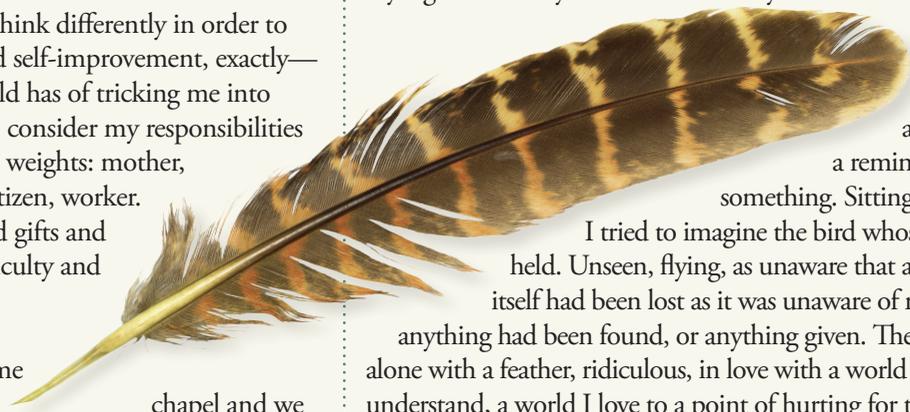
It is the sentence we speak when we light a candle at dinner—God is with us—and sometimes, I admit it, this is the extent of any explicit religious formation in our home. But, if that sentence alone is imprinted on the soul, I pray it will make up for whatever else might compromise it. This is what I mean by

a thing being both weight and gift, responsibility and joy. My practice is in noticing how it feels to live this way, even on the days I know I am failing. Maria Montessori says that children, "like the voice of Christ, teach us a lesson in forgiving. 'Not seven times, but seventy seven times.' From the depths of his nature, the child repeatedly pardons the adult and strives to flourish despite the latter's repressions."

Thank God, who is certainly with us. Yes, God indelibly is.

If anything of this house has imprinted on my child's soul some joy, some gratitude, beauty, kindness, affection, respect, then it has imprinted a religion. If something has imprinted upon him a feeling of both being held and also of holding, then it is the imprint of Christ himself, the imprint of love we share. All of us are being held. All of us are holding.

I keep with me a feather I found years ago when I was sitting in a field many miles from town. A feather caught in the fold of my dress there on the grass. I had been looking at wildflowers and it was June in the late morning. I remember a sense that everything felt something more than charmed—lit, charged with the grandeur, clothed in majesty. One of those rare, fleeting, divine moments of rightness. I said out loud to no one, I love this world. I remember the feeling of saying it as clearly as I remember my own name.



The feather became an emblem, a reminder of

something. Sitting in that field,

I tried to imagine the bird whose feather I held. Unseen, flying, as unaware that anything of itself had been lost as it was unaware of me, and that anything had been found, or anything given. There I was, alone with a feather, ridiculous, in love with a world I do not understand, a world I love to a point of hurting for the ways it is broken and breaking, a world I love for taking care of me in spite of myself. We are part of something much larger, the emblem reminds me, a system beyond all systems—one of gift-giving and gift-receiving, one of love and care and joy and weight.

If it is true what they say—that we don't go to church; we are the church—then this, too, is a great responsibility. We are, knowingly or not, giving one another gifts all the time just as we are also receiving them, sometimes taking or wasting them. The responsibilities of our human life are deep. And the indelible impressions on the soul are real. Thanks be to God: the joy is in the weight. And we do not bear it alone. 🏛️ 🍷