

Sometimes life is about taking your feet off the pedals

By Wendy Fontaine

Published 08/15/2011 12:00 AM



Courtesy of Wendy Fontaine

COMMENTS (0)

SHARE   

PRINT

My daughter, Angie, was three years old when she rode her tricycle down Baldwin Hill for the first time.

No longer content with the sidewalk on flatter ground, she pedaled her bright red Radio Flyer to the intersection of High Street and Baldwin, where safety crossed paths with chance.

Beneath the stop sign, she looked to her right, where the hill sloped toward the old primary school. She looked ahead, where High Street continued level and smooth into the distance. Then she looked back at me.

I don't recall the exact name of Baldwin Hill, but that's what my friends called it when we were kids. We rode our bicycles down that street to get to the corner store, where we bought penny candy and root beer popsicles.

Later on, as teenagers, we drove our parents' station wagons too fast down Baldwin, squealing with delirium when the wheels hit the hill's crest fast enough to launch us into the air.

And Baldwin Hill was one block from the house I rented for Angie and myself after her father fell in love with another woman and asked me for a divorce. After 12 years of what seemed to be a happy marriage, I took my daughter to the place that felt safest: an apartment on solid ground in my hometown in western Maine, where I could gather my strength after losing the man I had loved and the life I had expected to lead.

After about a year, Angie and I were doing well. I had a part-time job as a secretary at the local university, and she was getting invited to birthday parties and learning how to write her name.

Each night after dinner, we wandered the neighborhood — her on the

Radio Flyer, which we had found at a yard sale for seven dollars, and me strolling behind her. We made our way up High Street and over to Baldwin, where the corner store still sold candy for pennies.

As Angie waited beneath the stop sign that day, I wanted to say no to her. I wanted to pull her tricycle back to the flat, safe sidewalk. But I also wanted to see her grow, see her take a chance and discover her own potential.

“OK,” I said. “But go slowly and pay attention!”

In a second, she was off, her little trike bouncing over the gritty pavement. I watched her long brown hair flap in the breeze of her momentum. I saw her lift her Little Mermaid sneakers off the pedals and thrust them toward the horizon.

“Woo hoo!” she shouted. “I’m doing it!”

A few months after that ride down Baldwin Hill, Angie turned four — and I set out on a ride of my own. It was steeper than any hill in my hometown, riskier than any crossroads I had ever faced.

Every night after Angie went to sleep, I studied for the graduate school entrance exam. I passed the four-hour test and applied to a university in Los Angeles, where only twenty percent of the applicants are admitted. I never expected to get accepted. But I did.

I stood at that intersection for weeks, wondering whether to stay on the flat, safe path of life in my small town or to chase my dream of getting a master’s degree in creative writing. I consulted my family, friends and neighbors — even strangers in the grocery store. I listened to my heart and my head, but neither instinct nor logic provided an answer.

My parents probably wanted to grab the back of the tricycle too, to keep their daughter and first-born grandchild from coasting away from them — three thousand miles away

from them. But they didn’t.

“Go,” my father said. “If it doesn’t work out, the plane can always bring you back.”

After weeks of vacillation, I decided that I wanted more out of life than a safe place to hide. I could either spend the rest of my life living with the choices my ex-husband had made for me, or I could turn my devastation into a second chance to accomplish something great.

So I gave my notice at the university and paid my last month’s rent. Angie and I said goodbye to her classmates and her teacher, our family and our friends. We gave our furniture to relatives and donated our winter jackets to charity.

Then we boxed up our favorite things (she packed a black-and-white stuffed cow and a worn copy of *Goodnight Moon*; I packed her baby book and the pink patchwork quilt I sewed before she was born) and crammed the boxes into the trunk of our car, which we shipped off to southern California.

We sold the rest of our things, including that red Radio Flyer, at a yard sale on a cold Saturday morning in October. Another mother bought it, for seven dollars. Angie and I earned a hundred dollars that day — just enough to bag-check two suitcases and get some dinner on the night our plane left Boston bound for Los Angeles.

Somewhere over Iowa, Angie fell asleep, and for a few moments, I felt the buoyancy of my decision and the magnitude of the adventure that was about to unfold. I knew how my daughter felt that day at the precipice of Baldwin Hill, the moment she made up her mind to go for it and boldly pushed her tricycle toward the slope.

Life is not a consolation prize. It’s not about playing it safe or learning to live with the circumstances that are handed to you.

It’s about pushing yourself and feeling your own momentum. It’s about taking your feet off the pedals and having faith that the ground will rise up

to meet you.

As Angie snoozed in her airplane seat, I leaned over and pushed aside one of her long brown locks. My lips touched the soft skin of her right earlobe.

"Woo hoo," I whispered. "We're doing it."

~~~

If you have some writing that you'd like to share with Grace readers, contact the editor at [f.trafford@theday.com](mailto:f.trafford@theday.com) or 860.701.4375.

[CLICK TO SEE ALL COMMENTS](#) 

## Quick Links

PAST ISSUES

ADVERTISING INFO

BROWSE THIS ISSUE'S ADS

CONTACT US

NOMINATE A WOMAN OF GRACE



[SUBSCRIBE](#)

The Day Publishing Company  
860-442-2200  
New London, CT USA  
Copyright © 1998 - 2012