

## Reflection for December 5, 2010

Back before I had a child, I remember standing in line at the grocery store behind a woman and her son. The boy innocently asked his mother if she would buy him a piece of candy. She snarled back, "No! And if you ask me again, you'll be sorry!"

I harbored such harsh judgments about that mother. "Oh, you don't need to speak to your child that way. You are such a bitch. I'll never speak to a child of mine that way. Oh, I am so much more a loving person than you are..."

Nothing in life has done so much to poke holes in the inflated balloon of my own self-image as motherhood has. I am, at times, filled with shame at memories of such self-exultation. This usually happens right after I hear myself snarling at my son, especially in public when someone might have heard me, and is no doubt that very second concluding I'm a terrible mother and a rotten bitch. But I imagine I am not alone. Life has a way of humbling us along the way. Showing us time and again our own foibles and failures at being the almost-perfect person we might've imagined ourselves to be.

And that penchant for comparing ourselves to others – where does that come from? I see it in Isaiah all the time. I frequently hear him say, "I can do that better than him." Especially if I praise another child in front of Isaiah, like, "wow, you read that really well. I liked your expression in your reading," he'll pipe up with "But I read with expression too!" as if my praise for another child meant he was somehow lacking in comparison. What is it in us that so craves being assured we're King of the mountain?

I don't know how to teach him humility. Maybe because I haven't learned it myself. That little knee-jerk ego is alive and well in me still, comparing myself to others, trying to assure myself that I'm as good or better. Mostly I'm interested in being better. I just disguise those thoughts from others more skillfully than my 8-year-old son does, but they're there.

But I don't think I'm alone in this. I sorta think most of us have that going on part of the time. It's not the part that makes us most proud to be human, but it's there, at least for a good many of us. We are, all of us, a tumbled-up combination of wise and silly, saint and sinner, open-hearted and stingy, full of love and full of fear, assured of our rightful place in the world, and concerned with proving to the world we are worthy.

Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, in their wonderful book *The Spirituality of Imperfection* that Chris read from earlier, say this about that: "...our human task, as countless sages have suggested, it to get beyond our selves without trying to escape ourselves...we must first learn to put up with – to accept – our selfish, impatient, often recalcitrant human nature.

How grapple with this anomaly? How come to terms with our own paradox? "Rejoice every time you discover a new imperfection," suggested the 18<sup>th</sup> century Jesuit spiritual director Jean-Pierre Caussade. If we find ourselves getting impatient, Caussade counseled, we can try to bear

our impatience patiently. If we lose our tranquility, we can endure that loss tranquilly. If we get angry, we ought not get angry with ourselves for getting angry. If we are not content, we can try to be content with our discontent....the caution "Don't fuss too much about yourself" sums up Caussade's ultimate spiritual counsel." (p. 40)

Later in the book, they write "*Humility* signifies, simply, the acceptance of being human... It is the embrace of the both-and-ness, *both* saint and sinner, *both* beast and angel, that constitutes our very be-ing as human. Beginning with the acceptance that being human – being mixed (and therefore sometimes mixed-up) is *good enough*, humility involves learning how to live with and take joy in that reality. (p. 186)

So how can I help Isaiah learn humility? Probably I should admit to him when he's proclaiming "I can do that better than he can" that I have thoughts like that too. It's part of being human. But it doesn't matter. There will always be somebody who can do it better than you. To be humble is not to make comparisons. If, like Rachel in *The Ugly Menorah*, he can learn to see with eyes of love, he will see that the menorah is plain, *and* it is beautiful, that he and I are both wise and foolish, saint and sinner, and that we are good enough. That what matters is the love we share, and, like Fred Small says in the song the choir is about to sing, "the love we leave behind when we're done."