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Growing Up in the Floodplain

And Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel. And Samuel said to Jesse, "The Lord has not chosen these." Then Samuel said to Jesse, "Are all your sons here?" And he said, "There remains yet the youngest, but behold, he is keeping the sheep." And Samuel said to Jesse, "Send and get him, for we will not sit down till he comes here." And he sent and brought him in.

1 Samuel 16:1–13 ESV

CONSIDER THE STORY OF David's anointing. His father, Jesse, presented all of his brothers first. What does that say about David? Was he an afterthought? Was he considered unimportant or inconsequential in his family? Jesse knew that Samuel wanted to

see his sons, but Jesse didn't call David from his shepherding duties until specifically asked.

David was the youngest, and I can relate to David because I am the youngest in my family. I don't know how many years separated David from his next sibling, but nine, thirteen, and fifteen years separate me from my three siblings. Maybe Jesse didn't want to be troubled with finding someone to take over the shepherding for David. Maybe Jesse didn't think that David was important enough to be called to Samuel with his other sons. Surely Samuel would be more interested in one of the older sons. Samuel thought so too, yet God corrected him, reminding him that God sees us differently, looking at the condition of our heart instead of our outward appearance. I wonder if David felt dismissed, unimportant, invisible in this family. I wonder if he also felt the burden of all his untapped abilities, wondering when he would be able to develop them and use them. I know I felt this way for years, always wanting but not understanding how to get there.

I grew up in Grand Rapids, Michigan, the third daughter trailing my last sibling by nine years, the youngest of four children born to the same parents. As the caboose, a surprise, a mistake, my life was an odd combination of being controlled and being neglected. By the time I was eight years old, I had already learned the unwritten house rules: make my mother happy, stay out of trouble, and get along at all costs.

Growing up, I spent a lot of time in my room, although I never felt it was my own, controlled space. Because it wasn't. In 1971, when I was six years old, I had my very own bedroom next to my parents' bedroom; however, my room did not have a door, just a doorway. Anyone could walk into my room at any time. I was not allowed to set boundaries on my room or my person.

I would not get a bedroom door until I was eight, but it was a shutter door, not a solid door. At night I feared the monster eyes staring at me through the shutter and wanted so badly to cover this

door, to have real privacy. Still, I was happy to have my own room. At least, I was told I should be happy that I was being given my own room.

In the other corner of my room, I had a gorgeous dollhouse. My mother had always wanted a dollhouse and found a handmade one at an estate sale. The royal-blue dollhouse had white trim, and each windowsill had three plastic roses sticking out of the sill. The front door was white with a gilt doorknob. There were three floors with two rooms on each floor. Each room had its own variety of wallpaper, from pretty grey and blue or pink striped wallpaper with a window painted to overlook the countryside to rich baroque gilt wallpaper with ornate scenes of aristocratic couples dancing. The second-floor room had wallpaper picturing bookshelves filled with books. I suppose this should have been a library or study, but I thought it made a perfect bedroom.

For furniture, I had covered little blocks of wood with fabric in pretty pink flowers on a yellow background using staples, and voila, there would be a new couch. I showed my mom the couch I had made.

“I bought you furniture for your dollhouse,” Mom said. “I spent the money your grandfather sent you for Christmas.”

What I really had wanted to spend that money on was a Dawn doll because they were the current doll that would actually fit into the dollhouse. “I can make my own furniture,” I said, incredulous.

Nevertheless, my mom preferred more traditional furniture that fit the ideal dining room, living room, bedroom, bathroom—both in her house and in my dollhouse. But it was the 1970s. I wanted bean bag chairs and bead curtains.

My mom said, “That ‘couch’ doesn’t really fit in the dollhouse. It looks like a piece of trash. Why are you always so ungrateful? When I was little, I would have given anything to have a dollhouse like this.”

Although my mother always won the conversation, I struggled

in my spirit to work around her demands and preferences. At one point I unscrewed the top and used the “attic” for extra things. I was very proud of myself for discovering the attic. After all, it was my dollhouse. I felt I should be able to use some creativity to play with my options.

“What have you done to the dollhouse?” my mother demanded.

“I made some furniture. Everything doesn’t fit in the house now. I need storage space. We have storage space in the basement in the furnace room.”

“But you’ve ruined the dollhouse!”

“No, I haven’t. Look, the screw goes back in. See how nice the parquet floor is in there? Just like a real attic. I can switch out the furniture and keep everything together in the house. This way none of the furniture will get lost.”

My mother frowned but didn’t say anything else. “Hmpf” was the last she had to say about it, which either meant she had to retreat and think of a better argument or she didn’t think arguing was any longer worth her time. Whichever the case, I had won this round of conversation and the right to store dollhouse furniture in the attic.

My mother had always wanted a canopy bed, so she purchased a bedroom set with a matching bed, dresser, and desk for me. The canopy bed was full size, intended to grow with me, but I would have been content with any bed that fit in my room. I liked the idea of bunk beds so I could have a friend sleep over because all my friends had sleepovers. I thought spending time with friends this way was more important than having a big canopy bed I slept in alone.

The dresser was a lingerie dresser, tall and thin. My play clothes, pajamas, and underclothes were in my dresser, but the rest of my clothes and the clothes of other women in my family were all but packed in my closet. My clothes took up about half of the small closet. My uniform jumpers and Peter Pan–collared blouses were hung up next to my Sunday dresses. I remember having four or five

pairs of shoes: Sunday shoes, tennis shoes, school shoes, and boots. I grew fast and so did my feet.

The desk fit very nicely in the corner of my room by the window. The desk had storage on both sides for files or books or whatever I wanted. I was interested in art, crafts, designing clothes, writing, and reading, so I filled the desk with all those things. Since no one showed me how to organize the things I wanted to keep, I shoved everything into the drawer or desk shelf. Once they were stuffed full, it was time to sort through the papers and choose which ones to keep and which ones to throw out. I wanted to keep every paper, so these decisions were hard for me.

My walls were painted yellow, deemed my favorite color, even though I really preferred light blue. My mother strictly guarded how my room was decorated. No ridiculous posters or other youthful expressions were allowed because of the inappropriate culture they projected. I was allowed a knickknack shelf, a painting of a little girl with a teacup, and a bulletin board, all of which my mother had picked out herself without my input. The knickknack shelf had been populated with things my mother had collected and thought should be important to me.

While everything about my bedroom was controlled and chosen for me, the only thing I had complete control over was a daily schedule that I kept on my bulletin board, among the articles, pictures, and letters. For the daily schedule posted on my bulletin board, I preferred thirty-minute increments and was frustrated when I felt forced to use odd time increments. Some tasks took me twenty minutes or thirty-five minutes instead of an even fifteen or thirty minutes. I could do fifteen-minute increments, but if the task needed twenty minutes, I would bristle at the disorder of it all. I would try to better my time to get the task to fit into my schedule. Giving myself more time than I thought I needed for a task would have easily resolved this conundrum, but giving myself more time seemed like losing to me. Cutting time from the tasks made my efforts seem more efficient and more deserving of praise.

This schedule represented the ideal of what I was to do, and the time increments gave me control over how long I had to complete each task.

The effort of making the schedule was tremendous, but following the schedule was haphazard. I made a new schedule at the beginning of each school year, each calendar year, and for each summer vacation. Already at six years of age, I felt an intense need to win approval regardless of what it cost me. This was my first lesson in optics, a reaction to the chaotic emotional environment around me. Employing optics gives the impression that everything is as it should be when it really isn't. For example, I was organized with my schedule, ready to contribute what was necessary and worthwhile, but in actuality I did not follow my schedule. I had shoved all my toys under my bed instead of putting them away, even though I had written "put away toys" on my schedule.

My room was messy, a perfect outward example of the underlying chaos in my family. I could not get in the habit of making my bed or picking up my toys. No one took the time to show me how to clean my room. No one took the time to explain to me how accumulated dust could make you sick. I was expected to know how to clean by observing and to have mastered doing so. I hated cleaning my room because I would always fail at it. When I asked for help, I was told how lazy and ungrateful I was for not wanting to clean such a beautiful room.

My method of cleaning became similar to the way I dealt with my emotions: swept under the bed and out of sight. Everything was still there, just not as tidy and certainly not visible. It wasn't that I didn't want my bed made or my toys picked up. I very badly wanted to want to clean, to have my room look like one of the clean rooms I saw on television. But I always thought, *Why start something I was going to fail at anyway?* The whole idea seemed ridiculous to me. Avoiding the situation by sweeping my things under the bed seemed like a much better idea. This habit of avoiding dealing with the root cause of how I felt and why I felt that

way took a firm hold in my life, even at a young age, and began to control the inner me.

Other than creating my daily schedule, the only external aspect I was allowed to control was my time. Outside of playing cards with the family, no one was interested in spending time with me. I played with my dolls, drew all kinds of pictures, and sometimes played with the kids down the street. At age five, I started reading and writing well. I had a set of classics that captured my attention and I spent a great deal of time reading. Although I didn't understand all the content, I knew how to look up words in the dictionary and ask questions.

No one greeted me on the way home from the bus at age six, so I carved out my own path in the afternoons. My first stop would be to visit Mrs. Van, our elderly neighbor, after school if I could not get the key to work or if I forgot my key. Mrs. Van was a very nice lady and seemed happy to listen to me chatter about my day. I remember she made tea for us and always had cookies.

Because I enjoyed reading, I loved to write, and wrote my first fully illustrated book. I was so excited about my accomplishment that I called three New York City publishers who would surely want to publish my book. This was in 1971 when local and long-distance service was all handled by AT&T. I had no idea about phone charges, long-distance charges, or how much my calls cost, and when the phone bill arrived, my parents were furious.

"Robin, what were you thinking?" my mother demanded. "You spent all this money on long-distance calls!"

"I wanted to tell them about my book. They might want to publish it." I was just trying to make things happen. I hadn't known to ask for permission because I only used the telephone daily to call my friends down the street.

"Oh," Mom gasped in frustration, "you cannot use the phone for long-distance calls, ever! Who is going to be interested in a stupid little book that you wrote with all your scribbled pictures? It's not as if the artwork is even passable. You will never make any

money with nonsense like this.” She waved my book in front of me.

“Robin,” my father said more reasonably, “you need to ask permission for long-distance calls. They cost a lot of money. Your mother and I have a budget to manage and to pay bills.”

Money was an important source of conflict in our family and with my parents.

I nodded obediently, but went to my room, crying. I felt flustered and anxious. How was I supposed to know about how much things cost and what a budget was? I thought writing a book was an accomplishment. Like my doll-furniture making, my book-writing efforts were falling short of the mark, and I began to think that maybe I would never make it, that all my ideas seemed stupid and worthless no matter how much effort I put into them.

From then on I kept my writing to myself and journaled regularly. Since I was often alone, I had plenty of time. I wrote down how everything felt. I wrote stories. I wrote about how I felt life should be, how I should be. I wrote prayers to God.