



## Are You Having Fun?

My father loved a carnival. He loved any event that included clowns, noise, streamers, and cheap prizes. He loved church festivals, Fourth of July celebrations, and the surrounding rural small town annual parades. Kolacky Days in Montgomery, Corn on the Cob Days in Belle Plaine, Dairy Days in Prior Lake, and New Prague's Crazy Days were all on my father's agenda as he spent endless summer hours in the seat of a tractor, out fencing, or loading hay bales on and off wagons. In fact, it was not uncommon for my father to be out cultivating the corn fields late into the night so he could be in the front row the next day when clowns, riding atop parade floats dressed up like John Deere tractors pulling corn cultivators, waved back at him.

Sometimes I'd go along. But by age five I already knew the payoff for going with my father to these events was minimal. As soon as we arrived at the site of entertainment, my father would head off on his own, leaving me to make my own way through the rowdy crowds. At every carnival and parade, I kept just close enough behind my father to see him smile and wave to the clowns. And most likely, my father never once turned around to look for me or notice that, of the two of us, he was the only one with a smile on his face and arms waving in the air. I might be my father's daughter in many ways, but when it came to having fun, my father was the Baltimore oriole and I was the house finch.

Since being diagnosed with lung cancer seven months ago, I've been frequently asked, "Are you having fun?" Family and friends are eager that

I thoroughly enjoy what time I have remaining. My two sons encourage me to set aside what I might think needs doing in order to have some fun. After completing my Disability Medical Form questionnaire with “patient has terminal metastatic lung cancer” and “will be impaired for at least one year,” my oncologist asked the same question as all the others, “So, are you having fun?”

“I’m not always sure what fun is,” I said, “but I am trying to spend time doing what I most enjoy in life.” That seemed to satisfy him. And, while I am grateful I have yet to be asked such questions as “Are you cured yet?” or “Can I have your car after you die?” these are questions I could answer with certainty: “No” to the first and “Yes” to the second, depending on who is asking.

My father’s kind of fun did not become my kind of fun, perhaps, because I spent so much of my early life watching him. All week I’d see my father caught up in the milieu of continuous stress and unexpected disasters. The hay wagon’s hitch broke, the tractor ran out of gas too far from home, the corn picker lost a bolt and froze up when he turned the corner of the field. It even seemed possible that when my father waved to the clowns in the parades, he might well have been hoping to persuade a clown or two to follow him home to help with the never-ending farm work.

Because the daily grind of farming so often wore down my father’s body and spirit, I grew up thinking he deserved better than Sunday excitement over cotton candy, loud grandstand music, and stuffed pink bears won in a ring toss. And I began to question the value of the kind of fun one had to go to town to get. Unlike my father, cattle pasture dandelions and the funny way chickens scratched for their daily dose of grit were enough to entertain me. Even as a little girl, I preferred pleasures connected to my everyday life rather than my father’s summer Sunday afternoon escape into crepe paper mirages.

Raising my two sons was probably the most certifiable fun I’ve ever had. I’d take them dressed in their pajamas into the next door park to watch the bats fly around in the dark. As our little family of four traveled and camped out in eastern Europe, what was then “behind the Iron Curtain,”

I had fun riding in the front seat of a rental car making up endless chapter stories about four goats navigating their way around the world inside an abandoned Citroen. Back on the home front, I spent hours playing every imaginable game with my two little lads. I found parenting to be fun in abundance.

By most standards, I've had plenty of fun ever since. While my life list of fun is short on carnival rides and Disneyland-like entertainments, it is long on enjoyment of friends and is a feast of simple pleasures. Ten years ago I had fun gutting and redoing a little cabin in the northern Minnesota woods. I had fun two years ago collecting over 600 aprons, researching and writing about the aprons, and putting together the exhibit for the Hennepin History Museum called *A Century of Aprons: American Women's Aprons—Their Art and Function*. These days I have fun listening to stories my grandchildren tell me. I had fun last night sitting out on my screened porch laughing with one of my women's groups. Today I started reading a new novel and enjoyed glancing out every once in awhile at the nearby lake. Now, I'm even having fun writing this essay.

But the question "Are you having fun?" still feels odd to me, as my life goal was never to have as much fun as I could. Instead, I have always been far more focused on being mentally and spiritually satisfied, not just for a summer Sunday afternoon but for as many waking hours as is humanly possible. Like everyone else I want to be happy, but certainly not in the way modern consumerism might define happiness. Modern consumerism, for example, tells us it is fun to throw out the old and buy newer and flashier items. My Volvo and old Birkenstocks have about the same mileage on them, but I'd be hard pressed to find fun or satisfaction in replacing either anytime soon.

In his essay, "The Happiness Conspiracy," John F. Schumaker states:

"The study of 'happy societies' is awakening us to the importance of social connectedness, spirituality, simplicity, modesty of expectations, gratitude, patience, touch, music, movement, play and 'down time.'"

Given that definition of a “happy society,” it is not all that surprising to me that Nigeria recently gained attention as “the world’s happiest country.” I remember being in southern Tanzania in 1987 and spending an entire day waiting for a 9 a.m. bus that never arrived. To my amazement, none of the people surrounding me seemed upset or angry. There were no verbal outbursts from men kept from selling their goods in the next town or women complaining as they shuffled their children around in search of shade from the scorching heat. At the time, I thought about how this degree of patience might work well for the central government. With people this patient and with such low levels of expectations of public services, perhaps recovery from colonialism could continue its slow grind for a very long time before massive dissent set in.

But then I realized that I, too, had no reason to be angry or to complain, as I waited alongside the men and women in that rural bus terminal so far off the tourist track. Like everyone else, I had everything I needed that day to be happy. My two young sons and I shared our juicy orange slices with the local children moving in ever closer to get a better look at two blond, blue-eyed boys, boys who stuck out like sea gulls in a boiling stew of black-shouldered kites. When I pulled out my journal and began to write, our surrounding crowd grew even larger. Adults found a *mzungu* woman with a pen scribbling away in a blank book every bit as entertaining as watching a skinny white chicken making her marks in the swirling red dust.

My father’s idea was that fun was a private affair. As we headed home from the town’s festivities, he and I never talked about what we had just seen. Our shared experience of seeing tilt-a-whirls and fancy ponies did little to connect my father to me, his first daughter and only child until I was eleven. Maybe it was because my father got everything he was after before getting back into the pick-up truck and heading home. Time and time again, my father seemed satisfied with an afternoon spent in a crowd of other fun seekers. Once the parades passed and the carnivals folded, however, my father was back where he had started: alone in a tractor seat watching rows of corn passing through cultivator blades.

Am I having fun? It is possible I am having as much or more fun than my father had at those Sunday afternoon carnivals. But more important to me is the question of happiness, the kind that comes with feeling connected to family and friends, gratitude for so much in my life — including my farmer father — and the simple knowledge that each and every day spent alive is far better than its alternative. My desire for more time to read, write, sleep in the summer shade, and play the piano still far exceeds any expectations I have for finding fun. Time to talk and laugh with my loved ones is all I need to keep me happy.

Ancient Navajos defined happiness as *hozho*, or “May you walk in beauty.” I may still not be sure what fun is, but I do know when I am in the company of beauty and what makes me happy. And when the next person asks me, “Are you having fun?” I’ll say, “If fun is a ride alone on a tilt-a-whirl, I’ll pass. But if fun is the same as happiness, then I am having more fun than I could ever have hoped for.”