

Chapter Eight

Prize Age

We heard a shrill voice wailing plaintively; "I want my Cheeto's!" as my friend Kathy and I were hunting for coffee. The insistent high-pitched voice was accompanied by loud whacking on a snack dispenser. The voice sounded like a child, but it belonged to a tiny African American woman in a wheel chair. She was ancient yet bristling with life, possessing an ardent desire for her Cheeto's stuck in the machine. She was a startling contrast to the other residents in this skilled nursing facility.

Kathy and I delivered her stuck Cheetos, placing them in her grateful hands. Next to the snack dispenser was a grand piano, and Kathy said; "Fawn, I've never heard you play the piano, why don't you sit down and play something for me?" Never one to respond to that specific request, to my amazement, I immediately sat down and started to play.

Our little Cheeto lady's face blazed like a perigee sun. "Oh!" she squeaked, an octave higher than normal, "It's been sooooo long." "You know," she conspiratorially whispered; "I was a famous actress once. I starred in 10 movies and I sang with Lena Horne." She lowered her voice further, "God took away my voice because I was a floozy." Then she launched into a song, her face radiating joy.

Kathy and I were transfixed at the invasion of wonder that descended into the room. Heaven swept in on the wings of this little lady's joy. It was a once in a lifetime moment. God bent down and kissed us all.

I admit getting someone a snack and playing the piano doesn't sound like much. Sometimes though, something

simple, can unexpectedly open a door of joy. Sometimes heaven opens to us when we least expect it, right in the middle of our ordinary lives, right in the middle of wanting nothing more than coffee, we get bliss.

Heaven intersected the mundane that day and infused it with splendor.

Of course, it's not always that way. One Christmas we invited some ladies from a homeless shelter to spend Christmas with us. Some friends of mine had given a Christmas party at their facility 3 weeks before. I had met one of the elderly ladies who was coming. I raved to my family. "You are going to love this woman. "She grateful for the very air she breathes. You have never met a homeless person so full of gratitude." I enthused.

I worked on dinner with great care anticipating the extraordinary day we would enjoy together. I set the table elegantly, remembering a marvelous talk I'd heard about the power of eating together. The talk I'd heard said that one of causes of decline of the Roman Empire was the decline of the sanctity of the home. The speaker made a great case statistically about the power of eating together at the family table. She had reinforced for me my conviction of the importance of creating sacred space where hospitality was offered with joy.

When my elderly-grateful-for-the-air-she-breathes-new-friend arrived, my expectations were at an all time high. It wasn't long though before I dimly realized that this was not the same woman I had met. Perhaps she'd forgotten her medication, I don't really know. All I know was I was blindsided. She was madder than a wet hen, bristling with hostility, emotionally vomiting anger all over our house. We kept smiling, valiantly trying to be gracious. Our Christmas that year was memorable for all the wrong reasons.

Even though the day was laughably disastrous, our son Joel, got to experience a Christmas that was other centered. A Christmas much like the very first Christmas where the gift was lovingly offered, and angrily distained.

In a culture that worships youth, beauty, vitality, embracing the elderly, can be challenging. For Westerners it's counter-intuitive. We tend to save our love for what is young, what is beautiful, what is athletic. We warehouse everything else. Embracing back is an art that again like learning to be fully present will take all our lives to learn well.

What would happen if we didn't segregate everyone according to age, sending the kids off to amusement parks, the elderly to museums, and the rest of us to unending self-improvement classes? No matter your age, it is wisdom to embrace those older than yourself. Invited them into your life, into your days, into possibly even your heart.

My young friend Kelsey found the joy of embracing an older woman in her life. Kelsey had looked for a mentor, but when it didn't happen right away, she gave up. Then when she wasn't looking, all of a sudden there appeared a lady appropriately named Mamma Hug. Mamma Hug had raised 3 grown children and 56 foster children, along with countless others. Mama Hug certainly didn't need another person to tuck under her wing, but suddenly Kelsey and Mama Hug found themselves merging their stories.

Kelsey had grace to embrace the unfamiliar. Fiercely independent, she was initially hesitant. Kelsey told me, "I was afraid of inviting someone else into my life at such a deep and personal level. In general, I believe a major hindrance for my generation is fear. Many of us have been hurt and disappointed by people in authority who are older. So, when we begin to embrace them, we battle the fear of being hurt again, fear of rejection, fear of disappointment.

Kelsey goes on to say; "Mamma Hug feels that true mentoring can best happen as we experience life together, as questions arise in the course of life. I realize now there are many things you learn in school, but that you can only truly understand by seeing it live. I have the unique privilege of learning from a woman who has a heart to teach and nurture the next generation.

I asked Kelsey what advice she'd give her generation about

older people. "As youth, I think it's very important for us to honor those who've gone before us. We need to recognize that their lives and their prayers have paved the way for us. We need an attitude of gratitude about all that they have done to make a way for us and our generation. We need to humble ourselves and admit that we don't know everything. We can learn from those who are older, wiser and more experienced.

Matthias Kuhn, better known as Kuno, a young Swiss says' "I believe we need to hold each other's hands. To the younger generation I say, if we do not return to the hearts of our fathers and mothers, there may be a few more stories and a few more books about us at the end of our lives, but we will not see all that we desire. We desperately need to return to a place of dependence. Let me no longer seek that which serves me and my generation, and how to become more radical, but how my generation can seek to honor our fathers and mothers. I wish us courage."

Ponderings;

1. In what ways do older people scare me?
2. What are some ways I could be more attentive to the elderly?
3. Do I believe that there any other Kelsey's or Matthias's in the world, who are wanting to honor and befriend me?
4. If a Kelsey approached me desiring a relationship, how would I respond?

