



By Nancy Sharp

Firsts

This past summer my twins and I ventured to Glenwood Springs for a couple of nights. It was the first time we'd been to the mountain town with the world's largest hot springs pool. After we relocated to Denver, many people suggested we go; we just hadn't gotten around to it yet. The timing for our Mommy & Me getaway was ideal since I was about to head off to Baltimore for a two-week residency as part of my graduate studies for a Master of Fine Arts in creative nonfiction writing. (The return to dorm life is the stuff of another column.)

I wanted to have unscheduled fun with my 9-year-olds, away from the daily interruptions of our Denver lives. The trip was mainly for their benefit, of course, but I figured a little playtime would serve me well, too.

One of the pleasures of traveling with young children is that their joy is manifest. The twins were just as thrilled with the Jacuzzi tub at the Glenwood Suites as they were with the hot springs pool. My son was so busy greeting guests that the manager wanted to know if he was for hire. Everything about our stay delighted them: going to Dairy Queen at 10 a.m. just because we could; rafting down the Colorado River; exploring cave bacon dating back five million years at Glenwood Caverns Adventure Park; and horseback riding with a former rodeo queen named Tammy at Sunlight Stables. It's not the first trip the three of us have taken, yet I was struck by how many "firsts" we were experiencing together. Watching the kids scream with wet delight as our raft crashed against sloppy waves made me feel triumphant because they were so happy. Then, when the water calmed, they dangled their feet in the river only to jump overboard as the raft pulled them along. It was a crystal afternoon for me, the lens of loss nowhere in view.

This trip was also the first time that the twins rode horses without anyone walking alongside them holding the reins. "Mama, look at me," they beamed, sitting tall in their saddles as they jumped over muddy trenches and then steered their mares uphill through the woods of Babish Gulch. My daughter even appreciated the dangerous beauty of fresh paw marks dug into the aspen trees from visiting black bears. I could see in her round, brown eyes that she felt excited by it, even as she contemplated just where these bears were at the moment.

My twins, I realize, are crossing a threshold. No longer babies or small children of 5 or 6, they are grasping at independence, albeit haltingly. Probably because of their own close experience with the loss of their father, it feels to me that they have been slower to reach for autonomy than other kids their age. They are still tentative about solo ventures, but each bike ride on their own, each scooter and skateboard trip, each walk to the park to watch their teenage brother

and his friends play football, builds their confidence and engagement in life. Only now, I think, are they beginning to understand that their finite world is actually part of a bigger universe.

My children have unwittingly taught me that the firsts of yesterday root deep into our memory banks, building the foundation for new firsts and seconds each year. I might not be able to replicate the instant my daughter took her first wobbly steps, but a similar feeling of wonderment came to me as I watched her scurry up the red-leaved tree two streets east of ours this October. Both memories connect, the more recent one jogging the earlier image of the toddler trying to reach new heights.

This is true in my own life, too. I remember feeling very impressed with the fancy title of director of public relations that I was given for my first job out of college. I was working for a small jewelry firm, right in Manhattan's diamond district. Sure, the title was nice, but in reality I spent many a lunch hour filling orders for tight-fisted employers who cared little about my career or dreams and ambitions.

I'm embarrassed to admit how often I cried on that job. And yet I learned from that miserable first career experience how to be savvier for the next. Well, maybe not the second post, where I wound up as a secretary to a rage-aholic boss who once dumped the contents of my desk on the floor. But by my third stint, at Ketchum, a leading communications agency, I picked smart people to learn from and understood that hard work and enthusiasm were still the keys to success.

There are telling firsts, too, like glancing love. My dad told me about the first time he laid eyes on my mother in the summer of 1961. They were counselors at Camp Silver Birch in State Line, Massachusetts. "She wore a simple black bathing suit, and her dark hair was pulled back in a low-slung French knot," my dad remembers. It took him four days to ask her out, and he only made his move when she dropped her flashlight and he did the honors of fetching it. Their marriage has been a long one - 48 years - and through the good and hard times, my dad easily summons that first vision of my mom as if it were yesterday. Haven't we all carried visions of loved ones that sustain us?

And what about first marriages? It's a lucky thing in today's world to remain married to the same person. Whether through divorce, death or re-partnering, in 2008, 46 percent of all marriages involved a remarriage for one or both spouses. Divorce is said to be as high as 50 percent

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in first marriages, although new research indicates this is receding. Hopefully, this means that we're learning from mistakes the first time around. Let's be real: Relationships are a lot of work, and no matter our individual circumstances, whether we choose to end our partnerships or they end with the premature death of a spouse, it is still wholly possible, I think, to bring the best of the first relationship into the realm of the second or third. Forget the spouse-bashing and go back to that moment in time when you met your first (or second) mate, where happiness prevailed. Do you remember what you wore on your first date? Or the walk in the park that lasted three hours, the two of you never running out of things to say? Bring that same goodness into your present relationships and I promise you feelings of renewal.

Firsts are sacred. And I hadn't realized until recently how vital they are to our sense of place in the world. Think about those meaningful firsts in your life and how they have shaped you, the linear moments with your children - how they move from one milestone to the next - and in our adult lives that sometimes happen in sequence and sometimes not. I'm learning to revisit cherished firsts, but also to be mindful that most days are opportunities to experience something new. It's what keeps life fresh and moving forward. ☺

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