

Public Lives

December 8, 2002

Randy David

The life of babies

My first grandchild, Julia, turns two tomorrow. I have looked upon this day with an expectation that I do not remember reserving even for my own children's birthday. In the past two years, she has been my sister, philosopher, and friend, keeping me company each morning when everyone has left for work. This baby rounds off my three other passions: books, bikes, and birds.

We begin each morning at the little pond in our garden by greeting the new lotus flowers that have opened during the night. She points to me the wilted ones that have fallen back into the water, having completed their fleeting moment of radiance at the start of a new day. Then we move to the moths and butterflies, creatures so oblivious to this alternation of beauty and decay, of which they themselves are beautiful reminders. She names their colors, and follows their flight through various clusters of blooming violets, whites, and yellows. I call her attention to the fugue being played by the pied fantails that have made a home in our mango tree. I ask her to peer through my binoculars and watch how these tireless birds seem to accompany every note with the rhythmic movement of their tails.

Then we move back into the house to watch Sesame Street's inimitable way with letters and numbers on TV. Recently we have been watching serious stuff on my computer. Having discovered she could view films on my laptop, she insisted one day that I play the discs of David Attenborough's "The Life of Birds" that she found on my table. For the past 3 weeks, we have been going through this extraordinary 10-part BBC documentary that is as much about the cycles of life in general as it is about birds.

The episode on "The Problems of Parenthood" particularly absorbed her. A pelican brings out three chicks into the world, yet could gather enough food to sustain only one. The two remaining ones get less food over time, until they fall from their nests and die. In the rare times when food is abundant, says Attenborough, the mother might

be able to sustain two, but never the entire brood. One wonders what logic lurks in this seemingly irrational and cruel pattern, but that's the way it works. Julia watched as two babies starve to death so that a third lucky sibling can make it into the world. While I was filled with moral questions and found myself pondering the wisdom of population planning, my little friend said nothing. I like to think she understood this event as something that was as fixed in nature as the rise and fall of lotuses.

Over the years I have learned to stop questioning nature and its ways. The life span of humans is really 100 years, says the philosopher Schopenhauer. I don't know how he arrived at this determination. While a few get to live that long, most of us live very much shorter lives. Some, like lotuses and butterflies, come into the world, and go in a flash.

Each day that I look at Julia, who has given me so much joy, I am aware that all this could end when I am least prepared. I guess so much of what there is in religion or philosophy consists in making us accept this truth without rancor or bitterness. The Lord gives, the Lord takes away.

I am filled with these thoughts because in the past month alone Julia has had to be confined at least three times for what her doctor says could be the beginning of asthma. Anyone who has lived with this dreadful affliction would be familiar with that drowning sensation when the lungs cannot seem to expel air. You watch helplessly as this illness works its mischief on the body of a little child, and you wish it had chosen you instead. The condition, we are told, could be triggered by anything – her stuffed toys, strands of hair from the Cocker Spaniels, invisible mites from the cockatoos, the dust that collects on furniture, the food she eats. I have a strong suspicion however that her asthma is activated by the burning of leaves and trash that, though illegal in the city, many perform in the late afternoon to smoke the trees or drive away the mosquitoes. We have taken all the precautions, and so far her health has held up wonderfully since her last hospitalization.

But whenever I reflect on my granddaughter's fragility, I now always think of Stephen, who is only a few days younger than Julia. He is

the firstborn of my first cousin Tina. He came into the world with a little mass inside his head. As he grew, so did the tumor, and no one knew. His parents noticed how he would sometimes stop in the middle of play, touch his head to acknowledge an intrusive pain, and then bump his head against a wall. Thus relieved of the offending sensation, he would wryly smile and go back to his toys. They thought at first that it was a strange trick he played, and so they padded the walls of his room with foam. A few months ago, he began to stagger and vomit. An ultrasound test showed the mass had grown into a vicious and malignant presence.

A delicate 12-hour surgery excised the tumor, but it came back after only three weeks, having regenerated to its original size. A second surgery was done to make sure no piece of malignant tissue would be left behind. But subsequent tests showed the tumor had returned with vengeance within a much shorter period. A third surgery has been proposed, but Stephen's parents said their little boy has borne enough pain, and it was time to bring him home. I last saw Stephen during a family Mass. His eyes were sad, but when he saw the balloons, his face lit up. For one brief moment, he gave his mother cheer. He has come like a radiant lotus in the night, but his time is short and we could lose him anytime.

Tomorrow I shall light two extra candles for him on Julia's cake. He will be two on Dec. 19.

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Comments to <rdavid@pacific.net.ph>