

Chapel Talk
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A few weeks ago my family and Katie, Tania, Beth, and Grace took a trip to the Renaissance Fair in Pennsylvania. The girls were looking forward to seeing the hypnotist. Last year three of our girls were hypnotized, but this year, it was just Grace who ended up on the stage. There were moments of hilarity—at one point the hypnotized were sent on a rocket ship to the moon, and it got very cold. They were told to snuggle up with the warmest body they could find. After the audience was encouraged to take pictures, those on stage were temporarily “awakened.” Grace awoke to find herself cuddled up against the stranger in the chair next to her, much to her dismay! (And I do have pictures, by the way!)

The hypnotist then suggested to the men that they did not like moon men; that they thought they were dirty, dishonest, and generally distasteful. He suggested to the women on the stage that they *loved* moon men; in fact each was engaged to a moon man. They thought moon men were sexy, and so on. He went through and asked some of those on stage what they thought of moon men (Grace had a fantastic fiancé named “Bob”), then switched the roles. “Guys you’re now women. You love moon men. Ladies, you’re now guys, you don’t like them at all” and went through and asked a few more opinions. People reversed their initial positions on the moon men. Women now said (in gruff, manly tones) that they did not at all care for moon men, and vice versa. The hypnotist paused at this moment, turned to the audience, and said something like, “**Through the power of suggestion, I have just created and reversed prejudice and affection.**” He reminded us that similar techniques are used by the media, by politicians, and by other forces in our culture to guide us in forming opinions and beliefs.

This moment really stood out to me. Not because I worry that by the power of suggestion, I may find myself pining for a moon man, but because in my roles as a mother and as a teacher, I am in a position to practice this same kind of suggestion and subtle shaping of opinions everyday. How do I present myself, how do I interact with my family, students,

and colleagues, how do I respond to the cultural norms within the school and the wider world that dictate what we do, how we behave, and why?

As Lydia's mom, I must constantly socialize my daughter; I explain to her why we do things, and I stop her from doing things that are not socially acceptable. She is learning how the world works, and will never again be this open to possibility. It's a scary responsibility, the socialization of a child. We don't yell at people. We don't throw our food on the floor. These are easy answers. But then there are some I can't entirely explain, that I myself wonder about: We don't go outside without shoes on. We don't go to Eden's house unless it's a Wednesday. We don't eat cheese sticks for breakfast. It's hard sometimes to answer the inevitable response, "Why not?"

What really concerns me are the tacit and potentially insidious messages I give to both girls every day, the unintentional ones I send as I go about my business. I worry about the mixed messages Lydia gets about what it means to be a mom versus a dad, or about the value of work versus the value of family. What do I teach her when she tells me "don't go" as I tuck her in to bed, but I leave anyway? What about on a busy morning as I push her to get ready and out the door? Do I teach her that it is right to be ruled by the clock, that it is right to unequivocally do as she's told? And what do I teach her about how I value her and respect her own burgeoning sense of self and time? I often wonder about the implications of those morning struggles to get out the door, and whether the benefit I get from coming to work every day outweighs the detriment those prolonged battles have to our ability to interact with each other as mother and child. I think about the different lessons I'd teach her if I chose instead to stay home with her, home-school her and her sister, be a mom first and save being a math nerd for sometime later in life.

But the larger question I am plagued with is this: How do we come to our current understandings of what is appropriate and what is not? It is how we are socialized that influences so much of what we accept and reject. Think about your own sense of identity, and the sources of your beliefs. What does the media tell you, what do politicians tell

you, what does the school tell you about who you are and who you can be? It's not always easy to uncover our basic assumptions.

For example, gender roles are defined by socialization. Although some of our behavior is indeed shaped by our biology, a parent of small children can tell you without a doubt that socialization is a phenomenal force in shaping the gender roles of a person. I'm having fun "bucking the system" by buying Lydia underwear with Spiderman and Thomas the Tank Engine on it, but would I be so gleefully gender-bending if I had a son? Probably not, because of the way *I* have been brought up. I have been actively resisting Barbie and pushing back as hard as I can against the myriad little voices who tell us "can" or "can't" based on sex.

Yes, believe it or not, somewhere in me is a radical hippy bucking the cultural norms of the day; I went shopping online (yes, I see the irony) looking for books about doing things differently—living sustainably, eating, raising children, celebrating Christmas. *{Christmas was awesome when I was a kid. But it is crazy as a "grown up". When did we decide that showering people with stuff they don't need was a way to celebrate the birth of Jesus? "Come on, I need ideas for Christmas!" Where can we find the power to resist a media and commercial culture that pushes us to buy-buy-buy? I was going to put my foot down regarding the girls—no piles of presents for us, no thank you. But then am I robbing my parents and Brian's parents of an opportunity to show Lydia and Juliet how much they love them? But again, there it is. When did buying gifts become synonymous with love? My kids don't need any more toys. We have enough.}* I found a list on Amazon: "So you want to be a... crunchy-hippy-earth mama?" There's book there that the list-maker suggests because it tells us that we should carry our infants, always. There's one that promotes going diaper-free—the concept of being so in tune with your infant that you can anticipate their needs sufficiently to not need diapers. I didn't purchase these books. And I decided perhaps I'm not as radical as I thought. But I did get one book that is challenging my assumptions of the way things are, the way I have been raised. It's called *Natural Family Living* and is written by the publishers of *Mothering Magazine*.

Sophomores—recently you read an unsettling story called “The Lottery” in RS. What did this story mean to you about “the way we’ve always done things”? My crunchy-hippie-earth-mama book would say that something almost as barbaric as the ritual stoning in the story happens in American society today: circumcision. I didn’t have a son, but if I had, I don’t know if I would have entered into this debate early enough to decide on my own what was best for my family.

Consider my infant daughter, Juliet. Where should I lay her down to sleep? Americans are inundated with messages about the safety of sleeping arrangements. At the pediatrician, the question “is she sleeping in a crib?” follows right after “is she in a car seat?” In Acme, I heard a PSA (created by Albertson’s) about how 40% of SIDS deaths are due to a child not being in his own crib. In the parenting magazines I get for free from the OB I read that babies belong in cribs and bassinets. You can bet that the companies who sell cribs, bassinets, and travel cribs say baby is safer in a crib. But leave the US for other countries, and you won’t find babies sleeping in cribs. According to this same book:

“If you ask an Italian or Japanese or African mother whether her baby sleeps through the night, she won’t know how to respond to the question. That is because in two-thirds of the cultures around the world, babies sleep with their mothers, who instinctively soothe them back to sleep before either mother or child has fully awakened. The United States is one of the few societies in the world in which babies are left alone to sleep in their own rooms.

In other cultures, family sleeping is not just a product of a lack of adequate space. In Japan, for example... the practice reflects the strength of family bonds, and children’s sleeping with parents expresses a strong cultural emphasis on the nurturant aspects of family life.” (p100)

In fact, many outside the US have disputed the one (one!) study that reported that co-sleeping is unsafe. This study came from the Consumer Product Safety Commission, yet twenty other peer-reviewed scientific papers, including research in Great Britain and New

Zealand, have demonstrated the safety of intentional bed-sharing. Why am I making decisions based on consumerism and not on what is best for my child?

One of my dreams is to use my sabbatical year (still a good way off) to travel the world with my family, and live in different countries for a month or two at a time. I don't want to travel to see the world, per se, but to immerse us in cultures different from ours, cultures with different norms and beliefs. Living in several different places would allow us to hold a mirror up to our commonly held beliefs and to assess whether they are universal truths or just American, or East Coast, or Klecan truths. This kind of cultural immersion could have amazing influence on my children to see that different people thrive and survive in different ways.

But this isn't supposed to be a talk about how to raise kids; it's about questioning our assumptions and questioning the cultural norms that we have tacitly accepted. It's about walking into experiences with our eyes open, ready to re-evaluate what we've always accepted as "true" and realizing that much of what we take for granted as true is constructed knowledge. That's what that hypnotist made me think about (that, and how fortunate Grace was that she was engaged to a moon man). That constructed knowledge is constructed behind the scenes, where we don't even know to look. So perhaps the best way to uncover our prejudices and constructed beliefs is to expose ourselves to other people and other ways of thinking. Travel can accomplish that, and so can reading.

On a smaller scale, we can do it here, because we house some diversity of belief here at SAS. But we must beware, as our inclination can sometimes be to surround ourselves with people who think the way we do, for comfort, safety, or to avoid being challenged. Our inclination, as Ryan mentioned in his article in the last Cardinal, may be to silence or push away dissent rather than embracing and engaging it by "...having the conversations that will help stimulate real thought and reflection on the issues." If our goal is to be engaged citizens of the world, we must be thoughtful and intentional about examining what the voices of that world are telling us is right and good. Listen closely to each other,

to the adults in your life, and to the messages you hear over-and-over, like hypnotic suggestion:

You have to go to a highly selective college to be successful

You have to be perfect—there's no room for mistakes

You have to have hookups and friends with benefits

You have to be thin, beautiful, more manly, more feminine

You have to be a consumer

You have to be strong and independent at all times

Listen, so that you don't suddenly awaken to find yourself not at all where you expected to be. Society is constantly teaching you what to accept and what to reject. Make sure you trust the teacher.