

Cannonball Moments, Part 1

“Winning wars and wooing women.” That may not seem like the kind of life that would lead a man to sainthood, but that’s how St. Ignatius of Loyola started out during the late 1400s and early 1500s. Everything changed when he was a soldier at the battle of Pamplona.

During a *Christopher Closeup* interview about his book *Cannonball Moments: Telling Your Story, Deepening Your Faith*, author Eric Clayton explained, “[Ignatius is] defending the castle against the superior French forces, who offer terms of surrender to which Ignatius says no...So, he gets the rest of his troops to go along with him. And it’s a terrible outcome.

“[Ignatius] gets a cannonball to the legs, but everyone else is killed or grievously wounded...He realizes, ‘My pride has brought about devastation unnecessarily.’ He spends 11 months in bed recovering in his castle in Loyola, and it’s there that he’s given two books: one on the life of Christ and one on the saints.”

Those two books set Ignatius on a new path towards God.

When pride comes, then comes disgrace; but wisdom is with the humble. (Proverbs 11:2)

Help me resist being prideful, Lord. May I instead embrace a humble attitude.

Cannonball Moments, Part 2

While recovering from the injuries he sustained after being hit in the legs by a cannonball, Ignatius of Loyola was given two books to read: one on the life of Christ and one on the saints. They allowed Ignatius to consider a different path for his life.

Eric Clayton, author of the book *Cannonball Moments*, explained, “God is inviting him to imagine these different paths. One is his old way of life, and one is this potential new way of thinking, of being a pilgrim for God.

“The cannonball moment is just one moment, and it gets held up as, ‘He was knocked down a soldier, and he stood up a saint.’ That’s not it at all. He was knocked down, and then he had a very long time to pray, to think, and to grapple with different ways his life could unfold, his vocation story.

“Then, [Ignatius] has to go out and try it and begin the journey. It’s not like he gets the answers all at once...He has quite a journey ahead of him, but it’s one that he does carefully through discernment in the company of the Spirit.”

Clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God.

(Ephesians 4:24)

If I am on the wrong path, Lord, lead me to a better way, to Your way for me.

Cannonball Moments, Part 3

Another key moment in St. Ignatius's journey occurred while he was living in a cave, both meditating and working on his new path in life. Though he wrote his acclaimed *Spiritual Exercises* there, he also struggled mightily.

During a *Christopher Closeup* interview about his book *Cannonball Moments*, Eric Clayton explained, “[Ignatius is] having these profound experiences of God, and he’s also going out and serving God’s people in the nearby town of Manresa. At the same time, the evil spirit is tempting him...[Ignatius] struggles with depression, he struggles with suicide, he struggles with thinking God wants him to suffer.”

Eventually, God wins out in Ignatius's heart, mind, and soul. Eric noted, “The greatest thing he does in that cave is remember that he’s the beloved of God and treat himself that way. [He realizes]...‘I should be out in the world because God still has dreams for me,’ as opposed to allowing the evil spirit to hold him fast with shame and guilt...I think it’s important for all of us to release ourselves from our own cavernous experiences.”

The Lord God helps me...I know that I shall not be put to shame. (Isaiah 50:7)

Remind me of Your dreams for me, Creator.

Cannonball Moments, Part 4

During his time as an undergraduate at Fairfield University, a Jesuit school, Eric Clayton felt a deep connection to St. Ignatius's life and the way he practiced his faith. And as someone with a talent for writing stories—as well as enjoying them in books, TV, and film—Eric has been greatly shaped by the spirituality of storytelling.

Eric observed, “As we think about our own lives and our own vocations as stories, and you pair that with Ignatian Spirituality...you're called to remember God is in all things. God is in all stories. God is in all the details, as mundane and ordinary and nitty-gritty as they may be. Then, everything is worth sifting through and exploring to find God.”

“Thinking about stories on the screen, even these so-called godless stories, we might [say], ‘God is necessarily there because God is everywhere.’ And so, stories...are ways for us to put ourselves in these other worlds and think about, ‘How is God speaking in this fantastical language that might be relevant to me in my very real, mundane world.’”

**The whole crowd stood on the beach. And [Jesus] told them many things in parables.
(Matthew 13:2-3)**

*Reveal Your presence to me through stories,
Creator.*

Lenten Journey in Guatemala

During Lent 2024, writer Mary DeTurrís Poust traveled to Guatemala for a retreat. Though the U.S. State Department had cautioned visitors to beware of crime, Mary “found only love” among a people who had endured “forced conversion, a stripping of their Mayan culture, enslavement, civil war and far more than we can imagine,” she wrote in the newspaper *The Evangelist*.

In addition, Mary witnessed moving displays of faith as homes, businesses, and churches flew purple Lenten banners to commemorate Jesus’s walk to Calvary. Residents also prepared “large scale Stations of the Cross...for street processions.”

The experience brought a newfound sense of enlightenment to Mary’s Lenten journey. She wrote, “In a place where people live in corrugated tin shacks and where street vendors sell their wares with babies strapped to their chests and blankets stacked on their heads, faith and joy and generosity are rampant...I never met a rude or cranky Guatemalan, even in the airport after hours of delay, even among the beggars on the street. Instead, I was met with a pureness of heart that exemplified the Gospel.”

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. (Matthew 5:8)

Jesus, grant me a pure and grateful heart.

Making a Family in the NICU

The Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) at Methodist Women’s Hospital in Elkhorn, Nebraska, had already played a major role in the lives of Taylor and Drew Deras. It’s the place the two nurses met while working the overnight shift, leading to their marriage in 2020.

Then, in 2021, a baby girl named Ella, born premature at 23 weeks, came under their care. Ella faced numerous health issues, including chronic lung disease. The doctor wasn’t sure she would even survive. But under Taylor and Drew’s loving care, Ella began to improve.

When Ella’s birth mother retreated from the scene, Ella was made a ward of the state, reported *People* magazine. By then, Taylor and Drew had grown to love the child, so they took steps to become her foster parents—and adopted her in 2023.

Taylor said, “I feel like it’s a total God thing, that He’s kind of like, ‘This is your path with nursing, this is your place, and here’s your husband. And then, here’s your daughter that you’ve been praying for.’”

He destined us for adoption as His children through Jesus Christ. (Ephesians 1:5)

Lord, may we trust in Your divine timing.

Bocelli's Priceless Gift

Singer Andrea Bocelli has become a superstar around the world due to the talent, heart, and soul he puts into his songs. He is also a person known for embracing his Catholic faith. But as Bocelli revealed to George P. Matysek Jr. in an interview for the *Catholic Review*, this wasn't always the case.

Although Bocelli grew up as a churchgoer in his small Tuscan village in Italy, he went through an agnostic period as a teenager because of the "arrogance of youth." Age brought more wisdom, and the singer eventually chose to believe in God again.

Bocelli now calls his faith a "priceless gift," explaining, "Whoever has this same gift improves their own life and the world around them. I believe that having faith means believing in the power of good, and at every crossroad choosing the road that leads to it."

Music, he adds, can help us in that regard: "When we touch our spiritual chords, we create a bridge across which to access, at any time and in all simplicity, what is hidden behind the veil of everyday life. Personally, when I interpret a holy song or one that is spiritually elevated, I experience it as a form of prayer."

I believe; help my unbelief! (Mark 9:24)

Jesus, strengthen the priceless gift of my faith.

A Teen's Beliefs and Doubts

After attending a Christian grade school and going to Mass every week, Alessandra Harris's son declared that he no longer believed in God, following his first year in high school. Harris felt shocked and unsure of how to handle this, so she prayed. And despite her son's objections, she made sure he continued to attend his Confirmation preparation classes.

One weekend, the Confirmation class headed off to a weekend retreat "which included Mass, keynote speakers, adoration, praise and worship, confession, and small group discussions," Harris wrote in *U.S. Catholic*. She was happily surprised when her son returned home having had "a personal encounter with God" thanks to the teens' honest discussions about faith and the challenges in their lives, as well as a transcendent experience with Eucharistic adoration.

Harris knows her son's faith may undergo ebbs and flows over the course of his life, but she does "feel confident the [students] who have received the sacrament of Confirmation will carry that grace with them for the rest of their lives."

Draw near to God, and He will draw near to you. (James 4:8)

Open young people to the gift of Your grace, Jesus.

Amish Neighbors Lend a Hand

A fierce windstorm and falling trees in March 2024 seriously damaged The Martyrs Chapel in Auriesville, New York. The wooden structure had been built in 1894.

Contractors estimated that the cost to renovate the chapel, which often hosts small pilgrimages, would be \$300,000. The insurance payment covering the damage was far less, so the board of Our Lady of Martyrs Shrine wasn't sure what to do.

As reported by *The Evangelist*, that's when the nearby Amish community offered to do the repairs themselves. They already helped maintain the wider property by mowing grass and weeds in exchange for hay that they could take and use.

Bill Baaki, board member of the nonprofit that operates the Shrine, expressed gratitude and admiration for the help: "The Amish have the craftsmanship at the same level that [the chapel] was built...Even though it is not an ornate structure...it was built with a lot of love and care. We have [the Amish] as the neighbors right up the road, and they can apply the same love and care and do the repairs at a cost that is manageable."

They restored the house of God to its proper condition. (2 Chronicles 24:13)

*May we be open to interfaith friendships,
Creator of All.*

In My Father's Kitchen, Part 1

We've all heard the adage, "Charity begins at home." John and Leigh-Ann Tumino of Syracuse, New York, truly took these words to heart when they created "In My Father's Kitchen" 23 years ago. It all started when John was driving and saw a seemingly homeless man holding a sign pleading for help.

John told *The Catholic Sun's* Eileen Jervis, "I heard the Holy Spirit tell me, 'You know, he thinks he's invisible, and I see him. I want you to feed him.' So, I...bought a sandwich, water, and cookies, and took them back to the man."

For 20 minutes, John sat with the gentleman, whose name was Tim, as he ate. Tim revealed the "traumatic childhood experiences" that led him to addiction and homelessness.

John continued, "I went home and said to Leigh-Ann, 'I know what we are supposed to do... Find these individuals, tell them they are not invisible, and feed them...' We thought we were just going to be feeding folks. And then we find it's not just feeding them, but...getting them connected to the services they need. A sandwich opened the door." More tomorrow...

**I was hungry and you gave me food.
(Matthew 25:35)**

Father, open our hands and hearts to those in need.

In My Father's Kitchen, Part 2

John and Leigh-Ann Tumino's charity In My Father's Kitchen has expanded greatly over the last two decades. As reported in *The Catholic Sun*, it now has "three arms to its faith-based nonprofit organization."

The first arm is Street Outreach, a program geared towards "individuals who...have a disability that prevents them from adequately caring for themselves." Nonprofits, such as the one the Tuminos established, give people a "hand up, not a handout," by directing them towards the right places to get further assistance and changing their lives for the better.

The second arm, Life House, exemplifies this by providing "a safe, comfortable home for women who are victims of human trafficking." Leigh-Ann explained, "By collaborating with professionals, community agencies, trauma-informed staff and Human Trafficking Courts, we are able to help women navigate the system, so their journey to healing can begin."

"People don't choose to live outside," Leigh-Ann added. "There is always some type of trauma...that led them to using drugs." More on one such individual's story tomorrow...

Defend the rights of the poor. (Proverbs 31:9)

Abba, may we strive to protect and defend the rights of all.

On Hire Ground, Part 1

The final arm of In My Father's Kitchen's outreach efforts is aptly named On Hire Ground. It is a mobile program, which offers nine different homeless individuals a day a more "healthy alternative to panhandling," in the form of free community work.

Kevin Batsford serves as the manager of On Hire Ground. When he first met John and Leigh-Ann Tumino 12 years ago, he was in an extremely low place. Bad choices had led Batsford to crack cocaine and alcohol addictions.

He was "sleeping under a bridge" and "holding a cardboard sign" when John Tumino approached him. It was just like the situation back in 2003, when Tumino went up to the homeless man on the street.

"I asked myself, 'Who is this guy?'" Batsford told *The Catholic Sun*. "John gave me lunch, and a few days later, he brought me another lunch, and prayed with me. We got to know each other, and over time, became friends."

After losing his brother, who was also homeless, in a house fire, Batsford felt providentially inspired to seek more serious means of help. More on this tomorrow...

The...Lord directs the steps. (Proverbs 16:9)

Messiah, may we listen for Your call in all stages of life.

On Hire Ground, Part 2

Three months after the death of his brother, Kevin Batsford was walking past the Salvation Army Adult Rehab Center in Syracuse, New York, and felt the tug of God's guiding hand.

"I had probably walked past there 1,000 times on my journeys while getting drugs or whatever," Batsford recalled in *The Catholic Sun*. "But that day...I heard a voice in my head that told me to go in."

As it happened, the Salvation Army had a bed available for Kevin. A few weeks later, a visit to the chapel, during which he "gave it all to God," proved to be a turning point.

After months of intense rehab, the Salvation Army took a chance on hiring Kevin. John Tumino remained his "mentor through it all," and eventually hired Kevin himself to manage On Hire Ground.

"It's been almost 10 years since I've been clean and off the streets," Kevin concluded. "I have my daughters back in my life, and we live as a family...When you're ready to get help, know you're not alone...God helped me get clean so that I could help other guys...He just continues to bless me."

You have been born anew. (1 Peter 1:23)

Creator, may we believe in the power of second chances.

So Much to Give

Maureen Stanko was lying in bed one night, worrying about what would happen to her 20-year-old son, Nick, once he graduated from school. Because Nick has autism, she wondered if there would be a place in the world for him. Then, Maureen recalled her father's favorite saying: "When you have a problem, pray like hell, then get off your knees and do something."

That was the inspiration Maureen needed to open So Much to Give Inclusive Café, which employs people with disabilities as waiters, cooks, and greeters. As reported by CBS News' *The Uplift*, the café in Cedars, Pennsylvania, has also become a safe space for people with disabilities to dine without stress.

Hostess and sign language teacher Lauren Opelts is hearing impaired. Her job at the café has transformed her tremendously. She said, "I have grown so much self-confidence."

Nick has also started working at So Much to Give. Before opening one day, he set the entire room up himself, without being asked. Maureen observed, "The level of pride in him was just incredible."

Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. (1 John 3:18)

Help me turn my prayers into action, Holy Spirit.

Service in the Time of Cholera

In 1832, the citizens of Baltimore, Maryland, fell prey to the cholera epidemic, an intestinal illness which killed more than 800 people and sickened thousands more. By today's standards, cholera is easy to treat. But when the Oblate Sisters of Providence volunteered to care for the sick, that wasn't known.

As reported by *Catholic News Service*, the Oblate Sisters are "the world's first sustained religious community for Black women, founded in Baltimore by Mother Mary Lange, a candidate for sainthood." Until then, the order's focus had been on educating children. Dennis Castillo, a professor of church history at St. Mary's Seminary, explained, "Here you have these women...getting into this unknown terror. They put their faith in God and were ready to be martyrs of charity."

The Sisters received little recognition at the time due to racism, but they are finally being honored by the government and the Archdiocese. Sister Rita Michelle Proctor, the order's current superior general, observed, "Our sisters were motivated by their love for God...and the need to serve God's people."

Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. (Galatians 6:2)

Father, guide me in serving Your people.

The Five Keys of Stewardship

What does it mean to be a steward of your parish? Most people believe it is a combination of donating your time, money, and/or talents. While this is true to an extent, the nature of stewardship encompasses more than that. To that end, Susan M. Erschen of *OSV News* presents us with “five keys” or guidelines “for living as good stewards”:

- **Spend time with God.** As with any significant relationship, forging a lasting bond with our Lord requires consistent time and effort.
- **Realize God has chosen us.** God has a plan for each one of us to be stewards in our own unique capacity, through the use of our “different gifts.”
- **Contribute something for God.** Be it financial support or skill, each of us has something to offer our church.
- **Trust in God’s abundance.** It’s easier to give selflessly when we trust that God will provide for our needs.
- **Love and serve.** “When we love and serve others...we build up a community that will love and serve us.”

Think of us in this way, as servants of Christ and stewards of God’s mysteries.

(1 Corinthians 4:1)

Father, may we build upon a legacy of faithful stewardship.

Look For Me There, Part 1

The late *Meet the Press* moderator Tim Russert was admired both for his interviewing skills and the person he was off camera. His son, Luke, believes this stems from the way he was raised.

Tim's dad—Big Russ, as he was called—was a churchgoing World War II veteran with a “servant's heart” and an optimistic attitude. His jobs included driving a truck and working for the Sanitation Department in Buffalo, New York, for 40 years. During a *Christopher Closeup* interview, Luke recalled that one of his grandfather's favorite phrases was, “It's nice to be important, but it's more important to be nice.”

This mindset had a huge impact on Tim. Luke noted, “He tried to make sure that no matter how famous he became...that he kept up a connection with where he came from, which was the small Irish Catholic community of South Buffalo.”

Tim also decried TV personalities who used “highfalutin language” to make themselves sound smart. He once told Luke, “That's not authentic. Talk how you talk, act how you act, and be respectful.”

God...gives grace to the humble. (James 4:6)

Remind me to be humble and kind, Savior.

Look For Me There, Part 2

Two days before Tim Russert's death in 2008, he was on vacation at the Vatican with his wife, writer Maureen Orth, and his son, Luke. They attended a prayer service with Pope Benedict XVI before Tim returned to the U.S. for work, while Maureen and Luke remained in Rome. That's where they received the tragic news about Tim's fatal cardiac arrest.

Because Tim was a public person, Luke had the eyes of the country on him as he experienced his own grief. That fact had its positives and negatives. For instance, as Luke and Maureen drove to Tim's wake in Washington, D.C., they saw a long line of thousands of people. At first, Luke thought there might be an event at the National Cathedral that day, but he soon learned they were all there to pay their respects to Tim.

"It had the full ensemble of the American quilt," Luke said, "meaning President Bush stopped by, as well as the short order cook who is an immigrant from Sierra Leone from the diner near *NBC*. So, it was really a beautiful thing to witness and see all these people come through."

We...are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. (Romans 12:5)

*May we support each other in times of loss,
Father.*

Look For Me There, Part 3

Luke Russert was heartened by the huge turnout for his father, Tim's, wake. During a *Christopher Closeup* interview about his memoir *Look For Me There*, Luke recalled, "I ended up staying for nine hours and shaking everyone's hand because I felt a sense that I was helping. I was bringing comfort to people. But then, I was also getting strength from people as they walked through."

Looking back on this period, Luke realizes he was being strong for others, but he never processed his own feelings of grief. He took a job with *NBC News* shortly thereafter, partially because it helped him stay connected to his father. And though he demonstrated both a hard work ethic and natural talent in being an on-air correspondent, there was an element of Luke's career that remained grounded in pleasing his father.

It wasn't until Luke had an encounter with an unexpected source, acting like an Old Testament prophet, that he reconsidered what he was doing.

**You have pain now; but I will see you again.
(John 16:22)**

Give me strength during times of grief, Jesus.

Look For Me There, Part 4

After several years of working as a correspondent for *NBC News*, Luke Russert got called in to meet with Speaker of the House, John Boehner, one day. Luke thought he was going to get chewed out for some negative coverage, but instead Boehner questioned whether Luke was really happy with his job.

“I’ve seen people that are here 20, 30, 40 years in the cycle that is American politics,” Boehner said. “You might benefit from...[getting] out of Washington to see how the rest of the country lives, the rest of the world lives. Just do something that affirms that you actually want to be here for the long term.”

Boehner’s observations became an eye opener for Luke, who said, “I believe that God has messengers out there. And I think in that case, [Speaker Boehner] was somebody who had a very similar upbringing to my father: working-class Catholic family from the Rust Belt...It was worthwhile advice, and it ended up being a catalyst for me to do some self-evaluation and decide that I needed to take a step away to figure out, who am I independent of all this and what am I about?”

**Test everything; hold fast to what is good.
(1 Thessalonians 5:21)**

Send Your messengers to guide me, Creator.

Look For Me There, Part 5

Luke Russert knew he was privileged to be able to travel around the world on his voyage of self-discovery and processing grief. Though his mom, Maureen, joined him for a few trips, he mostly ventured to foreign lands alone.

“I believe in something called the power of aloneness,” Luke explained during a *Christopher Closeup* interview about his memoir *Look For Me There*. “I am into community...We are better together. But I do think there is a time for aloneness, where you block out the rest of the world. This is why we see so many retreats in our own Catholic faith, especially silent retreats. Or Jesus, 40 days and 40 nights.

“There is something to be said about taking a moment for yourself...and being perceptive, thinking about what the Jesuit Examen [says]: What did I do well today? What did I do bad today? What did I learn today? Where do I see myself fitting in today? I realized that traveling was going to open up some of that by the environment being new—and me being curious and away from the comforts of home.”

The human mind plans the way, but the Lord directs the steps. (Proverbs 16:9)

Teach me to be more perceptive, Abba.

Look For Me There, Part 6

During his travels around the U.S. and the world, Luke Russert came to a new appreciation of his Catholic faith, experiencing elements of it like never before, especially pertaining to the communion of saints, the Catholic belief that we are still spiritually connected to our departed loved ones.

For instance, a friend suggested to Luke that he could still talk to his father, even though he wasn't physically present anymore. That sounded odd to Luke at first. "It wasn't until I got off the hamster wheel of work," he recalled, "and it wasn't until I got to a place of deep, meditative peace through prayer that I realized you can communicate with your lost loved ones.

"You can have these deeply spiritual, impactful meditative sessions where you can imagine conversations. You can go through the sort of things you went through in the day and imagine what they would say to that or how they would approach it...There's a real component of that in the communion of saints, and there's a reason why it's so prevalent in our faith and why so many people are affected by it every single day."

We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses. (Hebrews 12:1)

Lord, may I remember that love can transcend even death.

Look For Me There, Part 7

One piece of wisdom Luke Russert learned during his travels around the world has to do with the nature of humanity. While it might seem Pollyanna-ish to say we are more alike than we are different, his experiences confirmed that belief.

During an interview about his memoir *Look For Me There*, Luke said, “I traveled to over 67 places, and I didn’t have any bad experiences. I wasn’t attacked by anybody, I wasn’t discriminated against. Most every interaction I had was decent enough. And I went to places where America, at least in their government stance, is not an ally. It’s not liked.”

“If people feel respected and...that you’re trying to be understanding of them, you’re trying to be kind to them, they’ll open up a little bit. They will try to put their best selves forward. You’re always going to run into mean people. You’re always going to run into some people that unfortunately are bad people. But I would say the vast majority, all they’re looking for is a semblance of respect. And if you give off respect and kindness, it’ll come back to you. I’ve lived it, and I’ve seen it.”

In everything do to others as you would have them do to you. (Matthew 7:12)

May I treat all people with respect, Savior.

Look For Me There, Part 8

Though Luke Russert's memoir, *Look For Me There*, was mostly inspired by the loss of his father, *NBC News's* Tim Russert, his mom Maureen Orth's influence also plays a major role.

At the time she graduated from college, the main career options for women were nurse and teacher. But Maureen felt called to something different, so she joined the Peace Corps and worked to build rural schools in Medellin, Columbia.

"It was a deeply impactful moment in her life that I kind of say is her origin story," Luke explained during an interview with *The Christophers*, "because it was there where she literally was living out the gospel. She was doing God's work, if you will.

"She always saw that as the most important work she ever did. She went on to become a very accomplished writer at *Newsweek*, and now *Vanity Fair*. But she saw that helping people and trying to bring a sense of virtue to as many people as possible was why she was on Earth. I described in the book that she had the passion of a fiery Jesuit priest."

We are what He has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works. (Ephesians 2:10)

*Lead me to do Your work serving others,
Father.*

Look For Me There, Part 9

Luke Russert admits that he found his mother's passion and purpose difficult to deal with when he was growing up because she was always pushing him towards doing more and gaining a wider perspective.

He realizes now that she was trying to convey the message, "You're living this life of comfort [and] privilege. You're in this bubble. You might see how Americans live, but Americans aren't the only people in the world. There's a huge spectrum of poverty, of suffering, of a lack of opportunity that you need to be mindful of and carry with you."

In light of his travel experiences, Luke does now carry that understanding with him and has gained a deeper respect for his mom as well. He has also discovered the peace he was looking for by finally coming to terms with the loss of his father.

Luke knows that Tim's message to him would be akin to, "Don't be angry. Do good. Live life to the best of your abilities. Be happy. Don't be sad. And go forward living. Take the lessons we've given you, and do the best you can with them."

Be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God. (Romans 12:2)

Abba, guide me in using my gifts in the best way I can.

Everyone Can Contribute

A teenager getting his or her first job is a rite of passage in most families, but for Amy Julia Becker's daughter Penny, who has Down syndrome, it was even more meaningful. Society doesn't always accept that people with Down syndrome can live rich, fulfilling lives, but the fact remains that they can absolutely do so when given opportunities like everyone else.

Writing on her Facebook page, Becker explained that Penny started working at a local café and bakery for four hours a day, three days a week. It is part of a jobs program in the state of Connecticut, which involves coordinating "with local businesses to find summer jobs. The local business pays minimum wage. The state provides a job coach. Everyone wins."

When Becker dropped Penny off on her first day of work, Penny told her, "Mom, this is a dream come true." Later, a happy Penny returned home with traces of flour, sugar, and chocolate on her clothing. Becker concluded, "This is what it looks like to assume that everyone can contribute, everyone belongs, and everyone can find ways to make their dreams come true."

**I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord...
to give you a future with hope. (Jeremiah 29:11)**

*Creator, may society welcome the contributions
of all.*

Breathe Deep the Oxygen of Life

“In the unlikely event of an emergency, if you are traveling with children, place your own oxygen mask on first.” Jennifer Hubbard had heard that announcement numerous times when traveling by plane with her young son. But now that her son was off attending college, she viewed it from the perspective of an empty nester.

Writing at *Aleteia*, Hubbard reflected, “In not breathing deep the oxygen of life intended for me, I had starved my heart enough to make it barely recognizable.” Hubbard chose to focus on herself for the following year. She trained for and ran a half marathon, and became a patron at a local art museum.

The primary lesson she learned, however, was not about herself, but about God. That’s because she carved quiet time into her daily routine and “discovered that the oxygen my identity desperately required was from the One who breathed it into my lungs in the first place. Instead of searching for me, I should seek Him. Perhaps if I can understand His love for me, if I can claim myself as He sees me, if I can comprehend how He loves me, my heart will respond in kind.”

**The breath came into them...they lived.
(Ezekiel 37:10)**

Father, breathe life into our bodies and spirits.

Grandma Hosts Unique Birthday Parties

A birthday party is supposed to be a joyous occasion, but for kids with special needs, it could be devastating if no one shows up. That's what happened to Ronie Williams's grandson Jakob, who is on the autism spectrum. This inspired her to create unique parties for children with special needs.

Ronie told Michigan's *WPBN* that children with special needs sometimes don't get invitations to birthday parties, let alone have guests show up to their own. Therefore, she "decided to get together and throw big parties, and celebrate everybody's birthday, not just Jakob's, but everybody's birthday."

The community parties are held at local parks and have themes such as Spider-Man, with the superhero himself sometimes making an appearance. They've seen anywhere from 25 to 50 kids show up, and Jakob was all smiles at his own unique party.

Williams says that each of these children is unique, just like the parties she creates to spread joy to all children on their birthday.

I praise You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. (Psalm 139:14)

God, thank You for creating us all unique and loved.

Shoplifter Makes Good

Many years ago, the mayor of Boulder, Colorado, received a letter containing an apology and four hundred dollars.

The anonymous note came from a shoplifter, who was hoping to compensate the city for several items he had stolen in the past for his children.

The letter also contained a list of various shopkeepers, a description of the items taken from each merchant, and the money to cover reimbursements.

Referring to this honest admission, the mayor said, "It's a good day in Boulder when something like this happens."

It's a good day anywhere when you make amends for the mistakes you made. That will not only help you deal with guilt, it will brighten our world with hope in the goodness of human nature.

First be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. (Matthew 5:24)

Give me the strength to admit and rectify my mistakes, Father, and believe in Your forgiveness.

Teacher Makes Every Child Feel Loved

Julie Guenther feels like she has two families: one that she lives with at home, and one that grows larger at the start of every school year. Having worked as a teacher for more than three decades, she has taught more than 900 six-year-olds and continues to share her faith with them.

In 2023, Guenther received the Archdiocesan Elementary School Teacher of the Year award. As an educator at School of the Incarnation in Gambrills, Maryland, she is blessed to be able to share her life and faith with her students, and believes strongly in the Catholic education system.

One key part of her teaching curriculum is sharing the importance of prayer. As she observes students throughout the year, she says that they come to “understand what it is to pray for somebody.”

“I have opportunities every single day to strengthen my own faith with the children I teach, and with my colleagues,” Guenther told Sharon Crews Hare of the *Catholic Review*. “I see God as being part of everything we do.”

Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his disciples. (Luke 11:1)

*Loving Father, I give thanks for all teachers.
May You continue to lead them as they guide
our children.*

Baseball Manager Motivates High Schooler

After two seasons managing Major League Baseball's New York Mets, Buck Showalter was let go from the team, much to the dismay of many of his players. Journalist and radio personality Tony Paige also lamented Buck's loss, especially since he experienced firsthand the baseball veteran's kindness.

Writing in New York's *Daily News*, Paige recalled interviewing Buck in 1995 when he was managing the Yankees. Buck asked Paige if he had any kids, and Paige responded that he did, but that his oldest son, Dante, who was in high school, "wasn't pushing himself to succeed."

To Paige's surprise, Buck invited him to bring Dante to the Stadium, so he could have a talk with him. Naturally, Dante agreed, and after his conversation with Buck, the youngster gained the motivation he needed to focus on his studies.

When Paige talked to Buck again during his Mets' tenure, he reported that Dante had become "an IT wunderkind," now working for major companies. Buck was pleased that the young man's story had a happy ending. Paige concluded, "[Buck] will always be special to me for what he offered."

**I will counsel you with My eye upon you.
(Psalm 32:8)**

*Help me offer guidance to those who need it,
Paraclete.*