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PLAINS SPOKEN

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Plains, Georgia

“What should I do?”

These were the words his daughter sent to him.

She was in jail.

As a father he was sorely tempted to answer her question. But that ship had sailed many years before. He knew better than to make what would end up being a futile attempt to reprise that role twenty years after the fact, after he had been unceremoniously fired from the position. He had been warned in no uncertain terms by experts in this field: After so many years of being in forced exile from Father-ville, there was nothing he could do to save her now.

At one time, he knew the right thing to say to his child. But she wasn't a child anymore and he had no experience fathering an

adult woman. Still, he had a nagging thought in the back of his mind that there *was* something he could do.

He just didn't know what it was.

He so wanted to give her a lecture of some sort but was way out of practice even if he could somehow regain the skills at fathering he had honed so many years before. She was only nine at the time. Even her mother (who hated him with a passion that burned furiously for the next 20 years) admitted he did a good job in his previous position, bitterly denouncing him by saying “the only good thing about you is you are a good father.”

It was the highest compliment she could have paid.

He suppressed the urge to give his daughter the sermon she really needed to hear, but he failed miserably. The result: his sublime effort to communicate with her in a meaningful way came out way too abstruse, making things even worse than they already were.

“Note to self,” he found himself actually writing down in his journal afterward. “When there is nothing you can do, that is exactly what you do. Plus, remember that a father speaking in parables is a

poor substitute for giving simple instructions on how to get out of jail or, better yet, how to stay out of jail in the first place.”

He decided to forgive himself for making the failed effort to reach his daughter. When she was little, he had regaled her with stories of life on the farm when he was but a child. The stories had hidden messages of morality, the merits of hard work and of having a family where everyone pitched in, doing their part to make a place more of a home than just your basic, regular old farmhouse.

“Tell me another story,” she would plead. Was she just buying time so she wouldn’t have to go to bed, not wanting to miss out on all the fun and games the grown-ups would be having?

Little did she know the type of intense drama she was spared when she was nestled in her bed with her stuffed animals, fast asleep and far away from the looming storm clouds gathering in the living room, gathering steam, building momentum for the inevitable angry torrent of fear and recriminations that were to come.

Life was so much simpler on a farm. Not to say easy – quite the contrary. But the point of a farm is to survive, to make do with what you have, which is plenty if you work hard enough for it. That

is not the same thing as saying you only work with your hands, living “hand-to-mouth” as they say. There are other soils to till using both your hands and your words.

Take his grandfather, for instance.

His grandfather was a farmer and a preacher. His hands became gnarled and deformed from working in the fields and the forests. But they were supple enough to let words flow through them and onto the page. He was a man of letters as much as a man of the cloth and, of course, the plow.

Reverend Scott was a student of the scriptures who became a teacher of them, to his grandson and to others in the hill country of Ohio, where farmers would come in from the fields and listen to his words, their eloquence not lost upon them, even when their meaning may have been.

He would never forget that time his grandfather brought him to a children’s bible study class where he got to read scriptures out loud, as if to practice for some day when he would be giving his own sermon, one maybe worth listening to.

Today was not that day.

How could he lecture someone else about what to do when he was himself still trying to figure that out for himself? He was still searching for meaning to his existence in faraway places, or in his own fields of grass and trees that tended to him more so than he did to them. He tried valiantly to share this with his daughter, trying to teach her how she needed a vision quest of her own but, alas, she hadn't a clue what he was talking about.

She just wanted some straight answers.

He decided to go and find some - for both of them.

He sought out a very old wise man who taught Sunday school classes in Plains, Georgia. The wise man was himself a farmer and a man of letters who tried to lead a nation in her hour of need, when she needed deliverance from a corrupt and twisted man who was anything but an enlightened man of letters, or of the right words - words that gave the kind of spiritual nourishment the people needed, even if they didn't know it. The people, it turned out, didn't want to hear a sermon. They just wanted simple answers to even the most complex of problems that were facing the world.

They didn't know these were problems of the human soul.

From the plains of Georgia came the answer, in the form of a question, to the questions his daughter and he both had:

“When to say ‘no’.”

He was sitting in the crowded church when he heard the wise man ask this question. He envisioned himself standing up to explain his effort to say “no” to the question his daughter had asked when he refused to provide to her the means to set her free from that which confined her.

But he said nothing.

He could barely articulate anything coherent in his mind let alone give it form and shape in words that would do his dilemma justice, or, for that matter, to make any sense of it at all.

Maybe what was revealed to him was not delivered in a sermon of words but what was left unsaid – but could be seen.

Here was a wise man giving his sermon as his wife, who just celebrated her 91st birthday sat patiently at his side, figuratively and literally, for all those years – then and now. They were devoted to one another and to the small town of country folk who listened and sometimes heard the words that they needed to hear – words that

they needed to sustain their souls as much as the sustenance for their mortal flesh from the bounty they reaped in the fields they worked.

A Few Days Later
Mount Enotah
(a/k/a “Brasstown Bald”)

After Sunday school he retreated from the church and the sun-soaked glare of the plains, travelling to reach even higher ground in the shadows of a mountain in northern Georgia, the highest he could find. There he found the sanctuary of another man of letters who had to work a farm for his family to survive.

He had no companion at his side.

The Farmer Poet also found himself delivering sermons to a flock of other farmers who worked the fields. But the sermons did not deliver him from the farmhouse and fields where he composed his thoughts and missives. They were to him as confining as the jail cell from which a forlorn daughter wrote hers to her would-be father.

The sermons of the Farmer Poet were heart-felt yet simple for such a complex man, the most profound of truths often being those grounded in just a few, simple observations made in answer to

seemingly simple questions such as “why do things grow?” or “why am I stuck here in a place I don’t want to be?”

The answers may be easier than you think.

But that is not much of an answer for a daughter sitting in a jail cell whose ready retort was “I am asking you to tell me what to do and all you can do is sit there, speaking in riddles.”

“Why do you keep answering my questions with questions?”

“Good question” he replied.