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Name your treasure and pass it on

Melissa Musick Nussbaum | May. 28, 2013 My Table Is Spread

At a family wedding in Cleburne, Texas, Aunt Baby showed me how to tell the difference between a real diamond and a fake one. She took me to the hotel window, drew back the curtain, and scratched the glass with the sizeable solitaire on her left ring finger. I was 10 years old.

I've never used that bit of familial wisdom, but I remember it well. Aunt Baby was passing on knowledge she believed every young woman needed to have. Born in a time when a woman typically had no means of support save her father and then her husband, the worth of the wedding jewelry might mean independence for an abandoned wife or escape for an abused one.

Most of the advice we give graduates is economic. Like Aunt Baby, we think that the how-tos of building the cash stash -- in size and security -- is *the* knowledge we need to pass on to the next generation. And it isn't unimportant. What I now wish I knew is the story behind Aunt Baby's demonstration. What experiences prompted her to initiate me so early into the cubic zirconia-detecting circle?

In terms of economic advice, I think my husband's counsel to our children remains the most useful: "Find your passion," he told the kids, "and then figure out a way to make a living doing it."

Maybe we talk to graduates about jobs and down payments and 401(k) plans rather than faith because we're comfortable talking about money. Or maybe we talk to them about money because we hold nothing higher, including God. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is blunt: "For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be."

Those of us giving advice to graduates need to name our treasure first. This is a harsh exercise. If faith is our treasure -- or, at least, one of our treasures -- we need to name it and be as direct and memorable as Aunt Baby in passing it on. Thinking of it as etching glass. Make it a lasting mark.

Here are some of the things graduates need to hear, things they need to hear from us:

It's time to understand God and your parents are not one and the same being, and to forgive them both. One of our daughters spent her teen years as a devout ABC (Anything But Catholic). From Baha'i to Buddhism to a local seekers' church to orthodox Indigo Girls fan, she rebelled against the faith of the household. After an ugly exchange, she stopped and asked me, "Does it hurt your feelings when I push you so hard?"

Yes, yes, it did. It was hurtful sometimes, and always exhausting. But that's not what I said. What I said is this, "You take everything Papa and I have taught you and examine it. Shake it. Throw it against the wall. Stomp on it. What falls off will be our prejudices and preferences. But if it's true, it will stand. There's nothing you can do to damage or alter or destroy what is true."

Then set about learning who God is. Your parents may have fashioned a household god in their very own likeness, a god with strong opinions on hip-hop and tattoos. It's an eternal human propensity to form an opinion

and ascribe it to God. (See: "I'm pretty sure that thing about the tree of life is a fluid concept.") But it's the responsibility of young adults to acknowledge this tendency, name it for what it is and move on.

Read. There are books I read as a young adult that have shaped my life. *The Screwtape Letters* and *Surprised by Joy* by C.S. Lewis; *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* by Fr. Alexander Schmemann; and *Philemon's Problem: A Theology of Grace* by Holy Cross Fr. James Burtchaell. Others will have different lists, but if the books changed your life, share them and encourage graduates to find their own.

If you are dissatisfied with the state of the world, pray. One who prays daily for the poor is formed in concern for the poor. This is not through desire, particularly, or even intent. It is because the daily prayer of the church includes the psalms. One cannot read or sing the psalms day after day without being formed, like a rock in a stream, by the celebration both of God's mercy and God's grief over human violence, faithlessness and cruelty.

One who prays daily for the poor is formed in concern for the poor. The Latin root of the English word "concern" is *com* plus *cernere*, or "to mingle with." The daily prayer of the church, its fundamental practice, calls us out of singularity and isolation to mingle with, to be joined to, the life of the world.

When I was the Catholic campus minister at Colorado College, I told my students to come sing vespers. I didn't say, "want" to come or "be enthusiastic" about coming, just come. Sing the psalms and you will be changed, and become one who affects change.

If you are dissatisfied with the state of the church, join a parish and volunteer. Children wait for adults to feed them and dress them and drive them to school and remind them to clean their rooms. Adults do these things for themselves. Or they don't. But if an adult refuses to wash the dishes or make the bed, the adult alone is responsible for the mess.

Do you wish your parish had a Bible study? Start one. Do you wish your parish were more welcoming to strangers and newcomers? Become a greeter (and while you're at it, suggest a new name for this ministry, one that doesn't sound like the man who doles out the carts at Wal-Mart). Did you hate your youth group? Never, ever want to see another kid take a "trust fall" or endure "team-building"? Volunteer to work with the youth in your parish. Do you hate the music? Join the choir or the liturgy committee.

Remember your true name. You will forget your name. You will come to believe your name is "bill-payer" or "taxpayer" or "new hire" or "laid-off." Some will be happy to tell your name is "fat" or "bald" or "hottie" or "cute." It can be even more dangerous if you come to believe that your name is "equity partner" or "owner" or "a BMI of 20." All of these names are transitory, speaking to the fleeting nature of looks and power and riches. In the same teaching where Jesus talks about treasure, he talks about treasures on Earth -- all of them he says, liable to moths, decay and theft.

Your true name is the one given to you at your baptism. As sure as diamond marks glass, baptism engraves an identity on the flesh: "welcomed," "known," "blessed," "forgiven," "washed," "anointed," "loved," "bathed in light," "temple of God's glory," "dwelling place of the Holy Spirit," "new life in abundance," "enlightened by Christ," "forever a member of Christ," "priest, prophet, king."

We cannot accompany our graduates into the world. They must make their own way. But we can remind them of their true names. The names go with them. We can hope the names will keep them in times they are tempted to live false identities, under false names.

And when the Lord comes, may we all -- old and young, the new graduates and we who send them off -- go out to meet him with all the saints in the heavenly kingdom.

[Melissa Musick Nussbaum lives in Colorado Springs, Colo., and is host of thecatholiccatalogue.com [1].]

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