

What a House Holds

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About four years ago, I was speaking at the public library in the small Maine town where my children grew up, a town I have not lived in since 1977. Afterward, a little girl about ten came and introduced herself to me. She lived in the same house where I had once lived. She described that when her family bought the house and moved in, they removed wallpaper that had been there for a long time, and found messages and drawings on the bare plaster underneath.

I laughed, remembering it. We too had removed wallpaper from that room, and before re-papering, I had allowed...more than allowed, encouraged...my children to leave messages on the wall.

I seem to recall that my oldest, a daughter, wrote something lengthy in another language...maybe Latin. My youngest, a son, was skilled at cartooning, and I can almost figure out the year this was – probably 1973 - because I remember him doing a cartoon of Richard Nixon holding up his hands with his fingers in Vee's. It was Watergate time.

My kids were 15, 14, 12, and 11 when they wrote on the wall. They all grew up as time passed, and they departed from that house to create their own adult lives.

One of them, a son, died in the cockpit of an F-15 when he was 36. I remember him writing me from Saudi Arabia; he had flown that day over the burning oil wells of Kuwait, through thick black smoke, and he said in his letter that he was flying over and looking down at human tragedy.

Today I heard that the father of the little girl - she is now 14 - who lives in that house has died in Afghanistan. He was 41, a policy advisor to the Maine House of Representatives who had been a 20-year member of the National Guard, who had grown up a Quaker and had opposed the war, but went willingly when he was called.

Sometimes it is complicated to figure out how to think about things. How, now, do I think about the history of that house? Is it a house permeated with loss, with the memories of people – young men with wives and children, both of them - who were honorable, and committed to justice, and who tried to serve those causes, and died in the trying? Or is it, instead, a house that holds forever the happy memories of young men and their busy, worthwhile lives?

It's both, of course. Life is always both.

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