

Good for You

What Makes a Happy Family?

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MY WIFE AND I, BOTH IN OUR LATE THIRTIES, have a friend named Patricia who lives by herself in a very small apartment on Manhattan's Upper East Side. Her taste is Japanese. Patricia is the mother of another good friend, a woman more or less our age—which makes Patricia more or less our parents' age—who has lived the past several years abroad, first in Cape Town, South Africa, and then, until very recently, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, where she and her husband adopted a three-legged dog they named Peggy. When my wife had surgery last summer to remove cancer and reconstruct her chest, this friend returned to New York for several weeks to offer support, for instance, by cleaning our kitchen to the extent my wife likes it; on a few occasions when we asked, throughout the summer and fall, Patricia took care of our son, who was three, while we spent days at the medical center for my wife's chemotherapy treatments.

I often think, now that I'm approaching middle age, that having older friends is a comfort in part because it reveals, concretely, how long a life can forestall death. The comfort Patricia offers is of another sort and has something to do with our similarities and not with what strikes me as one fundamental difference—that, all things being equal, I'll outlive her. Mainly, it's heartening to see that she still possesses youthfulness in so many of its entangled and incongruous expressions, with so much contained in a sweep of her darkened hair and a flash of her white teeth. Patricia's independence

is both fierce and occasionally sharp. She also maintains what seems like an intense curiosity that can, in moments, come off like teenage guilelessness. "I don't understand," she'll say. "Explain what you mean." And when you do explain, she'll say again, "I still don't understand. Explain what you mean."

This past Mother's Day, basically a year beyond my wife's diagnosis and six months after her last infusion of chemotherapy, we visited Patricia with the promise of a dinner out to celebrate. We also wanted to thank her. Her own daughter was still living abroad, and this was not the only time we'd filled in for her this way, as surrogate children. I'd made reservations at a restaurant near Patricia's home, and she invited us to her apartment before dinner for champagne and raw asparagus stems and olives. We talked easily and said goodbye to what had been a frightening and terrible year. Our son was home with the sitter.

In the process of being diagnosed, my wife endured weeks of medical tests, spending hours in waiting rooms and waiting in hospital gowns. We told doctors we'd been planning to begin to try to have another child. (A French friend has an encouraging way of describing what it means to begin to try: "You have to fuck a lot.") Had things gone according to plan, in fact, as they had with our son, that Mother's Day my wife would have been extremely pregnant. When it was explained to us that the treatment she was agreeing to would make it impossible for her to viably carry a

child for upwards of five years—this following the previous month of breast exams, a mammogram, an MRI, a PET scan, the biopsy, the second opinion and the third—her surgeon’s suggestion of fertility treatments and egg harvesting seemed like one step too far. We shook our heads. We’d see where we were in five years. We could decide then.

This was the scenario I described to Patricia, who knows our son, has the one daughter of her own, and wondered why, after all that had gone on this past year, we were still thinking about having another child.

“It would be good for him,” I said, referring to our son.

Patricia looked at me. She smiled. “I don’t understand. Explain what you mean.”

THERE ARE STUDIES TO SUPPORT THE CLAIM THAT siblings are good for children. I don’t doubt these studies. There is a thing called “sibling science.” Siblings are good for learning to socialize, for staving off obesity and allergies and autoimmune disorders. Siblings can help each other manage divorce or the death of a parent.

My wife and I may be lucky that our son seems to get along well with other people; we’re also probably lucky that he’s not grown fat, though we live in a fifth-floor walk-up apartment and agreed long ago not to carry him. We’re certainly lucky he has no allergies, though on this point the theory goes that younger siblings benefit from their older siblings, not the other way around, perhaps because a first pregnancy affects the womb in ways that strengthen the immune systems of subsequent children, or perhaps because with first children parents tend to leave fewer germs around the house and these kids are not properly exposed to those things that build immunity. I feel especially lucky my wife did not die last year. It would have been difficult for him to cope.

The truth is, though, that I had no idea what I meant when I told Patricia I thought a sibling would be good for my son. I do know that none of these things—not allergies or obesity, not his

social life or a life without his mom—crossed my mind when I said what I’d said.

Studies show kale is good for you. It staves off obesity. Dogs are good for you, too—they reduce cardiovascular risk. So do sports, which are also good for socializing. Prayer is good for you. You’ll be healthier and live longer if you pray.

In my family, we eat kale and own a dog; I’ve played sports my whole life and have spent many, many hours in prayer. And in various ways—some of which I’m now embarrassed by—I’ve considered how good all of these activities might be for me, or more often, how good I might be for making them part of my life.

I can’t say, however, that I’ve considered well enough what I’ve meant by “good,” or what all this collective goodness was supposed to do for me. The dog was good for getting through heartbreak in my early thirties, but my dog has long outlived her usefulness in that regard. Indeed, when I met the woman I would marry while still shaking off this heartbreak, my jealous dog tried to ruin everything by eating her shoes and the buttons from a coat. Is the dog good for me now? I don’t really think about it.

I’ve stopped praying in the ways I used to. No more asking for things. No more speaking to the dead, imagining they can hear me and harboring the hope that one day, when I’m in their place, I’ll be able to listen in on life down here as it goes on without me.

Sturdy greens I include in soups when, after a few days without them, I have the hankering. In soups they are part of the comfort. But do I think about their essential goodness or, short of that, how they will keep me alive? Certainly not while I’m eating them.

There’s a passage in Karl Ove Knausgaard’s *My Struggle: Book 2* where he addresses this particular quality of food considered to be good for us. For Knausgaard, it’s water, he writes, drunk by women in “such vast quantities it was coming out of their ears, they thought it was ‘beneficial’ and ‘healthy,’ but all it did was send the numbers of incontinent young people soaring.” And even children, he says, must be subject to the bewildering crazes inspired by what’s good.

Children ate whole wheat pasta and whole wheat bread and all sorts of weird coarse-grained rice that their stomachs could not digest properly, but that didn't matter because it was "beneficial," it was "healthy," it was "wholesome." Oh, they were confusing food with the mind, they thought they could eat their way to being better human beings without understanding that food is one thing and the notions food evokes another.

The mere notion of goodness, contained in abstractions like "beneficial" and "wholesome"—words that don't have to be abstractions but somehow always are—had for a long time appealed to me, mainly in the days when I committed myself to a way of eating designed to make me better, more disciplined, more holy than other people (*All is vanity!*). I called it veganism, but it wasn't that, exactly. I was not philosophically opposed to the suffering of animals. I simply lived such that I didn't have to think about it, eating only a few select foods. I rode a stripped-down, fixed-gear bicycle everywhere, and, together with this food and the body I was left with, thought I'd turned out good.

How I had really turned out, though, was invulnerable, and therefore unlovable and alone. Looking back, I realize I'd confused food not with the mind so much as with the soul. I hadn't reasoned my way into goodness; I'd groped my way there, religiously. Nowadays, though, in a time when I no longer pray, the mind and the soul, both useful terms, are essentially the same thing, bound up as consciousness, or subjectivity, what Marilynne Robinson calls "the ancient haunt of piety and reverence and long, long thoughts."

Beyond the confusion Knausgaard describes, and I ended up living, is the fact that our consumables are consumables in the corporate sense, too, advertised as "good for you" by a company pursuing profits for shareholders and competing for your dollars by inspiring fear that without fake butter or other "healthy" choices, you'll die sooner, or worse, look ugly to the people you desire. This is how enriched white bread and cane-sugar soda might be considered good for you. We've been sold a notion

of goodness. And often what's good for you—even kale, sold to us in plastic bottles as a superfood, a vital green, love and goodness itself—is what's good for the corporation.

THIS PAST SUMMER, NOT LONG INTO A FAIRLY STRENUOUS hike in the woods of Kamakura, Japan, in the moments after climbing into a giant ancient Buddha, I told my son, who was complaining about the steepness of the slope, that the hike—and its strenuousness—would be good for him.

My wife looked at me. Ever since I'd found myself at a loss for words on Mother's Day, imagining another child but not knowing why, we'd been trying to stop saying this.

I'VE READ REASONABLE AND COMPELLING ARGUMENTS against having any children at all, though these arguments are often diminished by editors who provide headlines like this: "Having kids is terrible for the environment, so I'm not having any." I've seen eight- and nine- and ten-point lists in recent years that explain why not having any children is the best life choice a certain person has ever made. This seems like an exaggeration designed for the internet, but who am I to say? I don't know these people. Many of the reasons people often give for not wanting to have children—and I'm not making the opposing argument here—have to do with the way that they shut out certain other options in life, which children do. And just as I don't doubt sibling science, I don't doubt, on its face, either the soundness of the thinking or the soul-searching involved in coming to these conclusions. I don't tend to care whether other people have children or not.

The claim from a couple of these writers, though, that they are "not afraid to be alone," strikes me as brave to the point of absurdity. Knowing older and dying people has suggested to me that we cannot anticipate the aloneness of our dotage well enough even to know what to fear. And it has not been my experience that a child alleviates the terror of what's to come.

Indeed, if knowing older people turns the telescope around on death, sending it far into the distance, having a child swings it right back around, and sharpens the focus.

Reading the work of the poet Christian Wiman, who has written of his diagnosis with an incurable blood cancer, has me convinced, too, that, short of an instant death, there's probably no way to escape this fear of being alone, a chilling idea on its own and evidence of the limits on what our minds, in an effort to protect us, will allow us to imagine. "Though I have in my life experienced gout, bladder stones, a botched bone marrow biopsy, and various other screamable insults," Wiman writes, "until recently I had no idea what pain was. It islands you. You sit there in your little skeletal constriction of self—of disappearing self—watching everyone you love, however steadfastly they may remain by your side, drift farther and farther away."

DESPITE ALL THE WAYS A HIKE INTO A JAPANESE forest probably was good for my son—and we did continue on, he did seem to enjoy himself, climbed the split trunks of trees and jumped off; encountered a group of young Japanese students who wanted to practice their English with him and took our picture; ate a giant bento box lunch afterward—I know I said it would be good for him because it was something I myself wanted to do. I feel I did no harm. (I can't say the same of eating what turned out to be shark-fin soup at a restaurant in Yokohama's Chinatown a few days later.) But I've grown allergic to the phrase, in part because I've lived out selfish notions of goodness, versions of living that I believed set me apart from other people, above them and their fray. And in very real and sometimes painful ways, it did set me apart. I would hate to convince my son to be as self-centered as I once was, and sometimes still tend to be. My allergy also comes from the look my wife gave me that morning—she was in the lead, our boy between us—knowing I was saying something I didn't mean to say, because ultimately it was something I didn't mean. We make him walk up to our apartment on the fifth floor and we try not to lie.

IN EARLY OCTOBER LAST YEAR, MY WIFE AND I MET at the cancer center for consultations with her surgeon and her medical oncologist. These are opportunities, now five or six months apart, for the doctors to check their work, look for signs of disease in her body and her blood, and discuss the future.

My wife's health, even after she discovered the cancer, has always been basically good. Surgery required its own recovery time, the emptying of drains, pain medication, and lots of sleep. In the weeks following the surgery, as soon as it was safe to travel, we spent some time on a California beach we love, where she thought she might recover best. She took long, solitary walks and considered her next steps, even while we both knew that, because of me and our son, she'd been stripped of choices that veered too far from what the doctors had prescribed.

It's not that I insisted, in so many words, on chemotherapy, what the surgeon described as "carpet bombing" (she also referred to herself as "the general"). Had my wife stopped her treatment with the surgery, she'd have left everyone wondering whether she'd done all she could do. She had a child, after all. When she suggested on the beach one day, our son digging in a hole in the sand, that I wouldn't opt for the treatments she had to choose from if I were in her position, I stood my ground and swore otherwise. She was just goading me, sort of, responding, she later told me, to the resentments that sometimes occupied her on those long walks through the surf—that *she* had to face the infusions, the sickness, and the hair loss involved with treatment, in part because of me and this unspoken trust I had in medical intervention. That it was her body, not mine. And worse, perhaps, that the cancer itself might be related to her having a child, with me. In any case, I stopped myself short and we went to the water together.

After we returned home she began chemotherapy according to plan. What I might do in a similar, hypothetical situation lost all meaning in the face of her real one.

But I would do what doctors told me, because it seems like a way to stay alive. There's

comfort in that. And part of me now thinks she took some comfort, too, knowing that once the doctor had offered her opinion of the best way forward, that she would follow through, to stay alive, and because of me and our son. Because, if nothing else, doing all this might be good for us.

That afternoon in the clinic, my first return to the cancer center in the many months since the end of chemotherapy (my wife had been making monthly visits for leuprolide injections), we waited as we had often done before: Sometimes we'd talk or look at our phones; we've spent afternoons side-by-side playing Words with Friends. But on this day, an older man in a striped sweater and a newsboy hat was scrounging on the coffee tables for something to read that wasn't, he said, about his health. *Bicycling* was of no interest because he hadn't ridden a bicycle in decades.

He introduced himself as Paul. He said he had scanned the room and that we were the ones he'd decided to talk to. We must have seemed at ease, but based on appearances it wasn't clear to him which one of us was the patient; in other words, for one of us, the cancer center had done good work.

He asked if we were married. He asked who was the patient. My wife lifted a hand and laughed. I volunteered that the doctors here had done a remarkable job.

Paul was in his midsixties, a little skeletal self. In the late 1970s, he told us, he played in a New York punk band. He grew up in a town in New Jersey that he didn't want to name because he believed we would have certain opinions about the place now that weren't true about the place then. In high school he'd always been friends with everyone, and was right about people—including us, he said—but never about himself. He worried now that his prediction about dropping dead by seventy was about to come true. He didn't have anyone. We listened to Paul, nodding, adding a word or a question when it seemed right. He didn't know what was wrong with him yet. "And I'm feeling a little nervous," he admitted.

After a while, my wife's name was called. We stood and said goodbye. I think I wished him

good luck. My wife turned to me when we were through a door on the way to the examination rooms and out of sight.

"Poor Paul," she said. There he was, an island.

There was more waiting, even in the exam rooms. Eventually, at the request of the nurse, my wife removed her shirt, tied up a gown across her front, and we talked. What I was doing there that day felt like an open question. Over the past year, I'd promised my wife that she would never be alone in a moment when she wanted me, but today was routine. And she was fine—better than fine, the doctors would say. It was my idea that I meet her here. I was the reason we'd ended up meeting Paul.

"Am I here because we want to talk with the doctor about another kid?" I asked. The thought had not yet expressed itself so clearly, or with such hope.

"Maybe."

The oncologist manages the medications, and she saw no benefit to my wife continuing with monthly injections. Done. She continued to prescribe the drug Tamoxifen, though, which is believed to cause birth defects, and she'll continue to prescribe this for years, until my wife is forty-two. I knew all along there would be no more children before then. But I was there because I still thought another child was more likely than it seemed when the oncologist shook her head (not unkindly, perhaps with sympathy) when she used the phrase "forty-two-year-old eggs."

I must have known it was a long, long shot, but what I'd said to Patricia on Mother's Day, with my wife in the room, had felt true in that moment. I know now it was not true in the expression itself—"It would be good for him"—but what was behind my saying it was honest. *It is still possible*, I thought. *It would be good for me*, I believed. I really meant: *It is something I want*. And more—much more—than I wanted a climb in the mountains.

Nothing her doctor told us that day surprised my wife. Because it was her body, she always knew better than I what was at stake, what choices we'd all but given up by going to the beach instead of a fertility clinic. And

even that choice—IVF—she knew, while I didn't, would have been a gamble, and expensive, and have come with a whole host of additional medical indignities, just as the rest were finally wrapping up. It seems that, for a long time, this was too hard to talk about. In these ways, and others, I've been reminded by her illness that we're all essentially alien to one another and that so much of our lives, even when we're together, are spent inside our own heads and bodies.

And while I might want more options than we have now, I'm not left with regret—because the beach was better, more good for her and us, than another clinic might have been in that terrible time. Which must also mean it was more good, better, for us than having another child, but only if such a thing proves impossible or if we should decide against even trying. But if we do have another kid, what then?

The beach will still have been good. The door will still have been open. But in that office, I was left with what my wife knew and felt long ago, a loss she felt while also fearing for her life, the loss that comes with another of life's closed doors.

This idea comes up in an essay by David Foster Wallace, one I often teach, and which, one day last fall, I'd read with students half my age, who found these lines distressing.

And I'm starting to see how as time gains momentum my choices will narrow and their foreclosures multiply exponentially until I arrive at some point on some branch of all life's sumptuous branching complex-

ity at which I am finally locked in and stuck on one path and time speeds me through stages of stasis and atrophy and decay until I go down for the third time, all struggle for naught, drowned by time. It is dreadful.

Home that night, reading from a chair to my wife on the couch, our son asleep in his room, I could hardly get through it—we couldn't stop laughing.

It's true, much in life—children and cancer, cures for cancer, too—curtails our options. We opened a door and closed it on Paul. But there was nothing else to do; or, there was something else to do—stay with him, take care of him, get a phone number, make plans—but we didn't do it. It is dreadful. And yet Wallace concedes, “if I want to be any kind of grownup, I have to make choices and regret foreclosures and try to live with them.”

Maybe we laughed at that child's word *grownup*. Maybe it was all my wife had done, and all we'd done together over the year, to try to live. Here was our youth bubbling up in all its incongruity, in all our middle age, at the simple idea that we cannot have it all, that some things that are good for you will preclude others that might be, too. The notion distresses young people because it seems unfair, and it would be for them. But it's mostly fun, and funny, to be a grownup, because there's pleasure and comfort in making choices, even hard ones, and when you do it enough you realize that you are where you are—reading to your wife on the couch, “finally locked in and stuck on one path”—because you've made them. ■