

Getting back to basics

It's time for families to find themselves again

BY MONICA SCALF

When I was in elementary school, once a year my Dad would pick me and my brother up at St. Ann's School in Hamilton, load us into his 1978 maroon and wood paneled Pontiac station wagon, and head down I-75 to our favorite vacation destination.

We behaved perfectly in the car even though there were no snacks, no portable DVD players, and only an AM radio tuned to 700 WLW. I bounced around the back seat brimming with excitement and occasionally stood and hung onto my Dad's headrest. My brother sat without a seat belt in the front, until he felt like climbing in the back or the waaaay back, which he did at will.

In the late 70s and early 80s, this constituted acceptable, if not mild, riding in the car behavior. I witnessed some of our more daring friends crank down gigantic car windows, hang the upper halves of their bodies outside of their family trucksters, and like dogs, pant in the 55 mile an hour wind. These were the same kids who hitched rides in the back of pickup trucks, even when there was room in the cab.

Because we were such good passengers, we would safely arrive at our destination in record time—30 minutes tops. And no, that isn't a misprint. The place that instilled so much excitement in us and became the backdrop for some of my best childhood memories is the (now demolished) Holiday Inn Holidome in Sharonville. A mere 15 miles from our home we got our fill of miniature golf, cannonballs, and quarter video games while wrapped in the pungent aroma of chlorine and the thick, humid air of an oversized greenhouse.

As a kid, trips to Florida and ski vacations weren't an option. In fact, they weren't even on the radar. Being raised in a blue-collar family during an economic downturn didn't allow for many splurges or indulgences. My bratty self once cried the whole 40-minute ride home from the mall because I was denied a pair of Nikes. (This might explain my current fascination with gym shoes.)

But one thing I was not denied was learning the value of a dollar and how working hard allowed you to keep things afloat, even if the vessel was a rowboat instead of a yacht. And if the kids had to do a little rowing to keep things on course, then so be it.

I also learned that you could create a meaningful memory just about anywhere as long as you had people you loved, a big bag of snack chips, and a creative outlook on life. In my childhood neighborhood, front porches provided a mix of entertainment, education and encouragement. I recognize now that intangible gifts were bestowed in those tight times: practical thinking, a vivid

imagination and a palpable sense of gratitude.

As our nation once again moves through less than perfect times, I'm thinking that my Disneyfied, resort raised children might benefit from the current economic climate. Their lives have been full of a multitude of experiences and a backpack full of gadgets that have been the definition of contentment since they were babies. They sense the tide changing. Essentials are now the priority and luxuries are, in fact, luxurious. I think entire families are seeing the benefit of getting back to the basics.

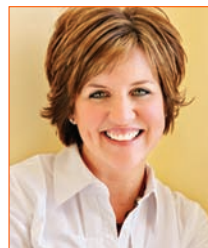
In the last decade of abundance, the parent-child relationship has, in the eternal wisdom of Emeril, been kicked up a notch. Up until now, we as parents have been pressured to give our kids every possible opportunity, and in return most of us set super high expectations. Academics, sports, and extra-curricular activities have a newfound intensity for both child and parent. After all, the term helicopter parent wasn't invented for folly. And I never remember my Mom signing a code of conduct letter to be a Little League fan.

Our parents were more like river raft parents. They would go with the flow, be right there beside us in the rapids, but never really make an effort to control the current. They let us fall out of the boat a time or two so that we could learn from our own mistakes.

In contrast, the recent myopic view taken by some parents includes analyzing and reacting to every single action our kids take. However, I think this is lessening with the changing times.

As an eternal optimist, I believe that along with the increase in financial anxiety there's also been an increase in appreciating the little things, in spending more unstructured time at home with family and in uncovering the essential ingredients of a life well lived. And it turns out that gourmet isn't necessary; the staples will do just fine. Love, attention, spontaneity, togetherness, kindness, and respect—the list goes on and on.

And whether going to a tropical island or camping in your own backyard, these things fit nicely in any kind of luggage. You just have to remember to unpack them from your bag on a regular basis.



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