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Kindling

Melody Warnick

My daughter's tantrums are ballets in miniature, frenetic little dances of temper and passionate refusal. Barely two years old, she lets her no's choreograph our daily mother-daughter *pas de deux*: I proffer applesauce; Ella flings it onto the floor. I try to set her in the grocery-store cart; she arches her back and wriggles, fishlike. I draw the water for her bath; at the sound of the splashing, she hurls herself against the couch cushions. Such defenses seem to have slipped into her arsenal naturally, as the rightful inheritance of many generations of toddlers, and at this point in my parenting I am used to her outbursts, more or less.

But at the library, where she had spent a pleasant-enough thirty minutes scattering books and coloring a photocopied ladybug with the worn-down nubs of public crayons, her tantrum was less ballet than wildfire—a hot, quick-spreading burn. It was, I told her, time for us to go home; to eat peanut butter sandwiches for lunch, and at that pronouncement Ella bolted, disappearing into the stacks. For a long moment I considered the possibility that we would simply circle the library eternally, but I finally found her charming an elderly couple who had stooped to gurgle at her. “She must be yours,” they exclaimed when I approached. “What an angel!” I smiled indulgently, but when I tried to hoist Ella onto my hip as a counterweight to my armload of books, she pulled away from me, almost pulling me with her. Somehow I managed to keep my hold on the books. I set Ella down on the floor, then knelt next to her to muzzle her screaming with my cupped hand.

Somehow we made it outside. Without enough arms to haul both books and child, I left Ella on the grass by the library, crossed the parking

lot to throw the books in the trunk of my car, then chased my daughter around the side of the building to where she had hidden. As I picked her up, she screamed and struck at me with hard knobs of fist.

I have read that there are ways to survive these situations, ways to staunch the flow of tantrum energy. I should have removed Ella from the situation immediately, shedding library books like scales behind me. Or I should have been gentle but firm, telling her in no uncertain terms that her behavior was unacceptable but that, P.S., I still love you. Or I should have ignored the whole thing, allowing my daughter safe haven for the anger to flash-flood its way out of her system—the briefest of storms before the re-emergence of sun.

But because Ella's tantrums don't occur in a vacuum, I am virtually always a participant in my daughter's rage rather than a passive observer of it. So I buckled Ella roughly into her car seat and stared stonily as my daughter, now mollified, cried out, "Bus!" She had forgotten everything—the library, the screaming, the crying, the refusal—except the existence of a public bus driving by in front of us as I waited to turn out of the library's parking lot. "Bus," Ella chanted, "bus, bus." It was our long-practiced dialogue: I was supposed to confirm her suspicions—"Yes, that's right, it's a bus." I was also supposed to remind her that she was smart and pretty and a big girl.

Rage, however, had stolen my urge to speak, and I stayed silent until eventually Ella lost interest and turned away to the other window. In whatever part of me was still amenable to objectivity, I could recognize that I was the one being childish now. Nevertheless, it was a full five minutes before I reached back, rubbed my hand over Ella's thin, pale leg, and said, "I love you." Unspoken was my apology: *I'm sorry. Forgive me.* So often Ella's tantrums end that way, with her anger burning itself out and simultaneously kindling mine.

My daughter is, I believe, a normal two-year-old, which means that she slathers me with passionate kisses, scrambles into my lap for dramatic readings of *Hop on Pop*, and embraces a life that is little more than pleasant domestic routine. But normalcy for a toddler means that she's also subject to a cyclical anger, which from time to time disturbs the smooth sands of her personality and fills her with a sudden, nameless rage. When Ella is angry, she kicks and hits. Worse still, she whines, the high trill of petulance ascending her throat like the curling smoke from a chimney. And when that happens, we become simply a scientific reaction: she is stimulus, I am response.

Anger, I have come to believe, is my birthright or, at least, my mess of pottage. My own childhood tantrums were executed with a toddler's modicum of meanness and vicious creativity. Once, sent to my room for some offense, I found a pair of sewing scissors and carefully snipped holes in all my nightgowns. Other times I slipped on my patent-leather Sunday shoes before kicking the walls, the black scuffs on the wallpaper forming souvenirs of my rage.

When I was eleven, my mother, defending herself against some argument or other, told me that she had no happy memories of my childhood, that my long years of tantrums and tirades were for her a time of the barest emotional survival. My mother was herself an angry woman, a shouter prone to spanking with a ping-pong paddle or a hairbrush, whatever was at hand. But we both saw ourselves as victims, innocently tossed about by the weather of the other's fury. I had never considered that our unhappiness was reciprocal—that her anger caused my anger caused hers.

Nor had I ever considered that anger was something I could control. In matters of character, I subscribed to a kind of Calvinist notion of predestination and considered my temper a sign that I had been something less than faithful in premortality. I was not like my older sister, Heather, who was innately loveable and kind. I was just me: mean-spirited and angry enough that my mother had considered putting me in child therapy. Reading the Book of Mormon for the first time as a teenager, however, I encountered the Lord's explanation for personal weakness in Ether 12:27: "I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me." Then comes the promise: "If they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them."

So I could change, and I began to. As a teenager, I made efforts to crawl out of my own skin, which required heavy doses of self-control. I started biting back angry words, spoke gently when I wanted to shout, and forced myself into teeth-gritting niceness. For many years my role in my family had been defined by my ability to stir up ill will, and giving that up was a bit like losing myself—or at least the person I had known myself to be. But by the time I left for college, I had come to prefer living in relative peace. The Lord's promise, I thought, was realized in that I no longer had the stomach for open hostility.

By that time, my mother, in turn, became calmer herself, in part because of external circumstances—she left a draining full-time job to go back to college in a field she loved—and in part, I believe, because of internal changes

in me. Still, dysfunctional relationships die hard, and my family, having long expected only meanness from me, was the last to see my efforts. During the winter break of my sophomore year in college, I sat in a Hawaiian airport with my sister, Heather, waiting for the arrival of our family's misplaced luggage.

From a bench in the terminal, Heather and I watched a woman straggle from the baggage claim to the street, sniping at the little girl who followed her. "Hurry up!" she shouted. "You're so slow!" The girl's pink-handled Barbie suitcase banged a steady rhythm against her shins, and finally the mother whirled around and snatched the suitcase away from the girl, who began to cry. Once they had passed out of sight, I said to Heather, "I hope I'm not like that when I'm a mom." "You will be," she replied matter-of-factly.

At the time, I thought I had extinguished my impatience and anger through sheer force of will. They were gone from me, I wanted to believe. But my sister was prescient in sensing that those fires were only banked and cooled. All that was required to set me burning again was the proper kindling: A tantrum in a quiet space. Whining. The snail's pace of travel with a small child.

Like many mothers, mine cursed me to have a child like myself. It is the angry mother's hope of retribution: *You will one day experience the miseries I have experienced with you.* But the curse is realized in a roundabout fashion. Because I had an impatient mother and grew up impatient, I myself have become an impatient mother, and my toddler daughter is now taking on my irritation as her own. Perhaps it's the lack of proper role models, though I've learned to take my cues from friends like the even-keeled mothers of the toddlers in Ella's playgroup. But I wonder: if Ella and I could somehow disentangle ourselves emotionally, would either of us still be prone to our tantrums?

Because I am her mother, however, and doubly so because I care for her full time, there is no disentangling ourselves. We spend our mornings together and our evenings together, long days during which I sometimes feel myself unraveling. Ella manages to find the frayed ends of my patience, and with one decisive tug, she sends the whole skein spinning and thinning. The more she pulls at me, the weaker I become, until at her littlest flick of rebellion I lose myself. Our only time apart comes in the afternoons, after lunch, when Ella naps.

But several months ago, at nap time, Ella would not sleep. She pushed her pacifier through the wooden slats of her crib, tossed out the blanket

and stuffed giraffe for good measure, and began to scream in staccato bursts. We were both exhausted, painfully so, and the nap became the afternoon's quest. After plying her with cheese crackers and stories, I made one last effort to drop her back into her crib, but boa-like, she coiled her legs around my waist. She howled. And so did I.

I screamed. I screamed with her, I screamed at her. Setting her in her crib, I hurled the pacifier on the floor and slammed the door behind me, though I was not quick enough in my leaving to miss my daughter's reaction: wide-eyed silence, then a renewed, horrified bawling. I had frightened her.

I had frightened myself as well, and, in the hierarchy of emotional urgency, fear superseded anger. So in the kitchen I gripped the counter and prayed for patience—God's for me, mine for my daughter. After a few minutes, I returned to Ella's dim room, lifted my still-weeping baby into my arms, kissed her on the forehead, and told her I was sorry. We settled into the rocking chair and read *Olivia*, and then magically she was ready. Back into the crib she went, and after a few moments' whimpering, she slept. But her sleep was not, by then, a victory, only a moment's reprieve. And though I comfort myself with the idea that she, with her infant's instant memory reset, will never remember this incident, I have already filed it away in my permanent collection of guilt and grief.

Despite the seeming loneliness of such rage, I sense that anger is the vice and secret indulgence I share with most parents, or perhaps with most people in general. Even God, who fathered the Israelites through the wilderness, was driven to distraction by their whining: "And when the people complained, it displeased the Lord: and the Lord heard it; and his anger was kindled; and the fire of the Lord burnt among them, and consumed them that were in the uttermost parts of the camp" (Num. 11:1). I am heartened by this old-fashioned Old Testament rage, even knowing that God's is the perfect sort of discipline—in the Latin sense of the word, which derives from the root for *teach*—in a way that mine is not. The Lord's anger always has a purpose, because "whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth" (Heb. 12:6). When my anger is kindled, it tends to consume me as readily as it consumes my daughter's misbehavior, which is one reason my husband and I have decided never to spank our children as punishment. We fear to allow ourselves the license.

In the New Testament, some of the sternness of the Old Testament ways yields to a new gentleness and mercy, which is what signifies proper parenting to most people. It is the kindness of kisses in Ella's hair during church; the sweetness of quietly singing "I Am a Child of God" to my worn-out daughter at night; the gentleness of Ella sprawled in my lap to

watch a cartoon. Sometimes, however, my shows of affection are motivated by regret. They become a way to repent for some past loss of patience. I lose my patience and my temper, then gather them up again in lavish shows of affection.

This, then, is the double bind of parenthood—that as surely as birthing a child mingles the binaries of pain and joy, strength and delicacy, my mothering of my daughter will likely always involve both desperate love and terrible anger. In a way, the same mother love that allows me to read a *Curious George* board book five times consecutively or be fastidious about car-seat safety can also, oddly, transmute itself into impatience and anger. My occasional fury at Ella is in some ways simply a form of passion, rooted in love. It is love turned on its head.

Ella's fury, on the other hand, is the most elemental of articulations. Her tantrums speak of her frustration, hunger, sadness, sleep deprivation, desire, or disagreement. Watching my daughter, though, it is hard to tell how much of her lashing out is prompted by age (the notorious Terrible Two's), innate personality, or her frustration with my sometimes-sternness. Because Ella is my only child, I am forced to believe people in the know—grandparents, next-door neighbors—who tell me that she is actually a blessed and blissful girl. How happy she is, they sigh. How sweet. My daughter seems to sense when these compliments come, and she smiles lopsidedly from beneath wisps of white-blond hair, as if to confirm the diagnosis.

And indeed, there are days when she is all sweetness, days when she leans quietly into the slope of her stroller while I chat with a neighbor or pluck books from the library shelves. On those days, I thank her profusely for her patience with me. "You're such a good girl, Ella," I whisper. "You're such a nice girl." I hope that her calm represents a sea change, and that from now on I will be calm as well. I will not yell, throw, curse, or in other ways be pulled under by the riptide of my daughter's toddler personality. But mothers with three or four children dampen my hopes when they tell me that I'm lucky to have just one. Translation: I can expect no future ease.

So I am left to my own devices—mostly. Because for every time I lose my temper, there are other instances when I find it. The toddler fussiness that once put me in a fury does not today, for instance, or I manage a gentle response to repeated pleas for *Teletubbies*. These are moments when love becomes anger just long enough for me to recognize it and convert anger into love again.

The source of patience is so puzzling that I must believe that it's divine. So when I suddenly have the calmness and ease of mind to withstand Ella's clinging and crying without snapping at her, I recognize it as a true gift from one Parent to another. And I'm grateful.

Having a child is, to wrest C. S. Lewis's words, like swinging open the cellar door, for "if there are rats in a cellar you are most likely to see them if you go in very suddenly. But the suddenness does not create the rats: it only prevents them from hiding. In the same way the suddenness of the provocation does not make me an ill-tempered man: it only shows me what an ill-tempered man I am."¹ The petulant, demanding two-year-old in my house continually uncovers my weaknesses, evaporating all my pretensions at adulthood—which my husband defines as the ability to control one's emotions—and leaving me a toddler myself, frustrated, angry, and whining for help. But, happily, I am then open to the help promised in Ether 12, to the replacement of weak things with strong ones.

Ella's tantrums have evolved recently. Once short-lived and to the point, her crying now tends to perpetuate itself until she dissolves into hiccupping hysteria. Three times this has happened lately, and what normally might have worked to restore relative peace—placing her in her crib with a comforting pacifier or supplying graham crackers and a cup of cold milk—helps not at all. The third time, as my daughter sobbed uncontrollably, the fire of my anger threatened to ignite. And then, in the next moment, the kindling was gone; there was nothing to burn. Miraculously, my impatience turned into sympathy, and I found the voice to ask Ella if she needed a hug. To my utter surprise, she nodded, climbed into my lap, and clung to me for dear life. With her arms wrapped around my waist, her cheek buried in my chest, I could finally see that Ella was as uncomfortable with her raging as I was with my own. She and I were both struggling to find peace. In the rocking chair, we held each other for a few long minutes, and when my daughter extracted herself from my embrace, she was healed and whole again. And, for the moment, so was I.

Melody Warnick (melodywarnick@hotmail.com) received a BA in English from Brigham Young University. This essay won second place in the 2003 *BYU Studies* essay contest.

1. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001), 192–93.