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Trailing Clouds of Zombies

Eric d'Evegnée

*“And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come”*

—William Wordsworth, “Intimations of Immortality”

In the darkened room, the only visible light comes from a computer screen. I hear a soft, muddled tapping. My stomach tightens. Then I hear it. The light fingernail strokes on the floor and hushed guttural groans that seep into the room from under the door.

“They’re here,” my wife whispers. We know what’s coming; we know it’s the end.

The tapping on the door escalates to thumping.

“It’s over,” I say, daunted. I rise and turn off the computer. I slowly reach to turn the handle on the door when it violently explodes open.

They rush the threshold and scatter like roaches into the room. One of them hurtles at me. Another, oozing from the mouth and nose, lunges at my wife. Groaning, with tears streaking down his face, one captures her leg and arm.

“Hey, guess what? Hey, guess what? Hey, guess what?” another yelps, sapping my remaining energy. There is no escape. I sink to the ground, enveloped now by two more of them as another wails about not being the first one through the door.

“Make it quick,” I grumble as the soft carpet cushions my head.

This is how I imagine most people see my life with six kids twelve and younger—a twisted, George Romero-directed remake of *Cheaper by the*

Dozen. But I didn't always see my life as a zombie horror film—it was having kids that did it to me.

Before I was confronted by life with six young children, the appeal of the horror genre baffled me. In high school, I yawned through Romero's zombie film *Night of the Living Dead* one weekday night because I had homework to avoid and a busy signal from my only form of social media. Watching legions of once-human compost piles sauntering in slow motion toward victims trapped in a farmhouse made memorizing French past participles downright chilling by comparison. Sure, there were swarms of dead people craving the brains of the living, but at fifteen I thought those who couldn't outrun moldering monsters with rigor mortis probably deserved to die. The listless fray around the farmhouse crept onward as I chose verb conjugation over the seemingly monotonous conclusion of the film.

In an effort to enhance the action, some recent films have more rapacious monsters, but these Super Zombies seem to miss the point in the same way I did in my younger, childless days. The terror from the original movie doesn't come from the zombies possessing superior speed or athleticism—it comes from the characters' deliberate decisions about how to survive the sheer number of pervasive and persistent undead. Choosing the best method of survival in a house surrounded by zombies resonates with me now like I'm one of those poor souls enclosed in a farmhouse, suffocating with fear. Now I understand that slow-moving, sluggishly eerie dread. I know the terror of ubiquity—I have six children under twelve. None of them were “mistakes” or are poorly behaved; they ask to be excused from the dinner table and help out around the house. But they are pervasive and persistent, and they outnumber me significantly. And I'm afraid my wife wants another one.

But how much different is seven from six, really? I already worry about the bewildered stares as we trundle out of our Suburban, like circus clowns out of a Volkswagen, or as I see people scan the kids at a restaurant to see who is the birthday boy or girl at the party. Having six kids is still more than most families, but six children feels more like a quaint antiquated idea, like naming a child Eben or Mabel. Seven kids seems like we're trying to make a point. It's the difference between having a home and having a compound. I sense the need to provide people who stare with an explanation for my wife's seemingly unrestrained fecundity. People already ask me at the store on Saturdays about my party this weekend as they look at our overflowing shopping cart.

“Nope. Just for the family,” I say, speculating if the subtext is that I have too many kids or I need to lose weight or both.

I tell myself a seventh child is simply one more child than I have now, as if adding more children to a family is only a matter of more noodles to a pot or another hamburger on a grill. But it's another life, another desire for Dad among six others. Another voice joining the chorus clamoring for what I can give of my love. One more who deserves paternal perfection. If only they wanted to eat my brains, but they need love, attention, rides, birthday parties, practices, bikes, braces, compassion, and help from someone who must do the same for six other children.

This panic over number seven, I fear, is similar to drowning in a rising tide of lumbering, muttering zombies. Can I make it? Do I have enough to get past the swarming fears? Like the people trapped in that farmhouse, I must consider whether to withstand the onslaught within the boarded-up house with seven children or run past the yard of writhing, undead paternal fears toward the freedom of no more diapers or tantrums.

As I contemplate the horror movie that is my attempt to father seven children, I wonder what it is about taking on encroaching hordes of the undead or hordes of children that attracts people to zombie movies and to parenting. The horror genre had always left me hungry for the sort of transcendent epiphany I'd find from something like Caddie's mournful presence in the lives of her brothers in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*. Horror movies just seemed like a succession of involuntary amputations and bloodlettings without any real purpose other than survival. For those who zealously haunt movies depicting homicidal maniacs or genetically altered cannibals, I wondered what it is about car crashes, job loss, flesh-eating diseases, and parenting that isn't terrifying enough. I envisioned these fright fiends as the overexuberant toddlers they must have been, eating shiny, colorful objects under restaurant tables and cramming different sized beans and pebbles up their noses, gleefully taking their continued survival as a challenge rather than a relief. But I've realized maybe there's something of a fright fiend in me too, something in my reaction to what both terrifies and compels me that keeps me from refusing to have a seventh child.

In zombie apocalypse movies, each decision could lead to death—choices as routine as turning to the left or running through a darkened doorway. The trepidation heightens and intensifies the significance of every decision, of every move. Zombie movies restore meaning to the minutiae of the mundane: the endlessness of life's inanity transformed into the stuff of life and death. And the same is true of having seven children. That I could fritter away most of my life with errands, glazed eyes fixed on computer screens, and mowing lawns is the truth of my everyday. But my children give me the choice to find meaning.

This is the Zombie Epiphany. The moments of panic trapped in our home, the overscheduled children, the carousel of illnesses, the cries in the middle of the night all help me see the importance of the moments I rush by on the way to living my life. With six children, I don't only think of love as just seismic events like weeklong vacations to Disneyworld or camping trips in the Grand Tetons. Love, even for seven children, can exist in the moments I forget to notice, moments I absentmindedly toss aside like loose change in a kitchen drawer only to lose them later when I need them—those small, negligible moments I'd ignore if it weren't for the people who want to share them with me. The washcloth that tickles dirty summer feet, the cracked autumn leaves newly gathered and scattered by flung little bodies are transformed into something unequalled by the horde of children who crave such moments.

Like fear, parenting has the ability to heighten and intensify. I can go through a day with vomit and sores and sleeplessness, and then a child cries in the middle of the night, her voice concentrated with fright. I open her door and see her arms outstretched, and I know they're reaching for me. That space between her arms is the place where only I fit. A space carved out from all my attempts at patience. All previous struggle, all previous fatigue, and all previous fears about my capacity disperse in the shadows of the room. But they do not altogether disappear, because I realize the kind of love I feel for those children, the kind of hug I get in the middle of the night is not despite but because of what's been done in the middle of that long day I thought would never end. Parental love sometimes requires both unnerving and banal sacrifices and, after having required them, hallows those imperfect offerings by beleaguered believers.

This avalanche of seven children precipitously poised above my life is overwhelming when contemplated in its totality, but my daily life gains meaning in its shadow. I understand better now that those who stare at the eight and soon to be nine of us and gasp are not just prying gawkers but people who, like me, gain some pleasure, and even some meaning, from what shocks and scares them.

This essay by Eric d'Evegnée received an honorable mention in the *BYU Studies Quarterly* 2012 personal essay contest.