

Fate puts us in unexpected places; we're on our own from there

BY MELISSA FAVARA
CONTRIBUTING COLUMNIST



Melissa Favara teaches English in Vancouver and lives and writes in North Portland, where she parents Ramona, age 5, hosts a bi-monthly reading series, and counts her husband and her city as the two great loves of her life.

I've been lucky enough for the last five years to write a monthly documentary column on my ever-changing kid Ramona for Metro Parent Magazine. Basically, it was a parenting column by a non-expert parent who was (and is) going at it blind, but with good intentions. Recently, I had the opportunity to move here to Street Roots, where I'll be moving from What to Do With Your Kid this month to talking through trying to raise a socially conscious child, among other things.

To start, I'd like to talk about a recent trip to New Seasons. Yes. The grocery store. Maybe the last place you'd connect with a philosophy of life and parenting, but it's an important place. When I was a young, unattached, drifting, and quite depressed person and not nearly yet a married, fairly happy, college-English-teaching mother of one, a friend connected me to his own mother — an 80-something suicide-attempt survivor who gave me two pieces of sage advice: One, get used to the idea that you don't like yourself, and maybe you won't have to react to it so much. Two, when feeling lost, go to the grocery store. Sometimes it's about finding the right place to be.

Why the grocery store? It's brightly lit. All of the various humans moving around that place are, no matter what's hurting them or giving them joy, doing what they must — getting the supplies to keep going. And it is a place of color, bustle, and a lovely order. The oranges stacked in radiating pyramids. The cereal boxes printed with their messages of health and wellness lined in rows. Milk jugs standing in regiments in an air-cooled case, waiting to go home and build bones. It is a place of living.

That occurred to me about a week ago after I dropped off my kid at Ockley Green School and then met another parent in the New Seasons dining room for coffee and planning a charity auction. Julian's Mom and I, Ramona's Mom, as we're commonly

known, were debating who to have emcee the event and what to put in the slideshow when I glanced up and saw a one-year-old boy who was seated in his mother's cart pull one leg out of the (leg-hole?). He was smiling. He was studying on an adventure that involved getting out of the cart. And when he pulled out the other leg and stood up, his big curly head that is a baby's center of gravity was a good five feet above the cold stone floor below. His mother was across the room getting water from the spigot. Her back was turned.

Have you seen Twilight? I admit that I have — all of my students love Twilight, and I wanted to remain culturally relevant to them (that's what I told myself, anyway). So, much like Edward saving Bella from the van that's about to crush her, I found myself suddenly all the way across the room, my chair clattering to the floor behind me, grabbing the baby by the rib cage just as that pendulous head tipped forward into thin air and toward what I wouldn't like to imagine. Right place, right time.

I didn't think, obviously, because there wasn't time to. When I do have time to think, I think a lot about how to explain our family's position in the world, in Portland, to Ramona (now 5 1/2 and very curious about things like why that man is standing at the end of the I-5 exit with a sign isn't at home, like we're about to be), as in how lucky we are, and what our responsibilities — as people who are doing OK in the world — might be. My friend's mom helped me when I was young and lost. Who can we help, since we are doing OK? And how?

Ramona, at her young age, actually has a pretty good head start on being a person who does what she can. She kicked down half her piggybank to the Home Again project to house families experiencing homelessness last Christmas. And she's a brilliant political canvasser, too. She gets that from her dad, who I only ended up being married to because he was wearing a jacket I once owned and donated to Goodwill in 1998 — that's why I tapped his

shoulder in a bar nine years ago. Which is why I had a kid at all — meeting the person who I could do that with. Fate puts us in unexpected places, and once we're there, it's on us to perceive what we ought to do.

As it happens, I got to catch a baby spiraling toward brain damage. As it happens, my friend's mom was able to talk me down. As it happens, Ramona's dad has a history of being politically active in Portland, and our Kindergartner thinks politics is fun to do.

Last Saturday, a friend of ours who is running for mayor (all of the candidates are good, we just think our friend is the best) asked us to canvass and ask people what they want their next mayor to prioritize. Before we left the coffee shop where our family juiced up, Ramona pocketed about 10 dog treats from the dish on the bar.

We had a good day canvassing. Several doors opened, lots of flyers handed out, lots of recording email addresses, etc. A couple of no thank yous, etc. It was Ramona's job to knock on doors and tuck the flyer under the doormat if no one answered. At one house where no one answered the door, we heard a dog barking inside. As Ramona put the flyer down on the porch, she weighted it with one of the dog biscuits from her pocket. "They can give the treat to their dog!" she announced.

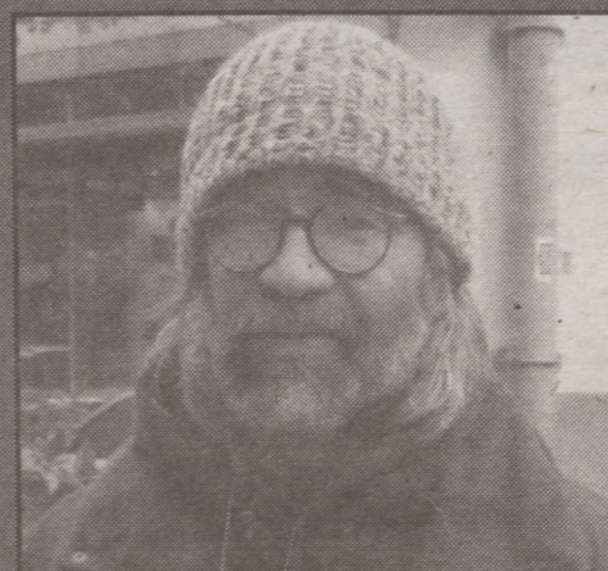
Indeed. That's how we start. Keep our eyes and ears open. Be involved, and try to listen. Look for opportunities. Offer what we can.

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