

## The Story of My Life

There's an old folksong that was popular back when I was part of Liberal Religious Youth (the LRY) as our high school movement used to be known. We'd sing it in our church basement, sitting around on the floor, with somebody who knew three chords strumming the guitar. I was probably in 9<sup>th</sup> grade the first time I heard the lyrics. And I'd done a little smooching by that stage, but just enough to know I wanted to do some more. Written by Pete Seeger and Lee Hays of the Weavers, the title of the song was "Kisses Sweeter Than Wine."

*When I was a young man and never been kissed  
I got to thinking it over what I had missed  
Well, I got me a girl and I kissed her and then  
Oh Lord, I kissed her again.  
Because she had kisses sweeter than wine ...*

The lyrics describe how the guy begs and pleads like a natural man for his sweetheart to marry him. She gives him her hand, and then by the time the third verse rolls around "Oh whoops" he finds himself father of twins. I especially like the "Oh whoops" part. Because that's usually the way fatherhood starts out, I think. As unplanned parenthood. Ready or not, life happens.

In our case, the plans went awry. I found a girl I liked to kiss in college, and we'd planned on starting a family after we finished graduate school and both had jobs—the sensible way to manage baby making. But then, oh whoops, I got sick. I had kidney failure at the age of 29, fresh out of divinity school and settled just a few months as the pastor in my first church. The illness wasn't entirely unexpected. Like my dad, I was born with just one kidney and inherited the same condition that took his life when I was a youngster. I was a little luckier, living in an age of dialysis machines and kidney transplants. In fact, I was a lot luckier. My mom donated one of her organs, which worked out great. Thanks mom! But then again, oh whoops, I discovered that the same anti-rejections drugs I was taking had rendered me completely infertile, according to my doctors. I could never become a father.

That was tough. That wasn't part of the song I'd learned to sing, with the three part harmonies, with all the children and grandchildren who had multiple sweethearts knocking on the door. For several years we struggled, my wife and I, with all the *whethers* and *what ifs* that confront infertile couples before finally deciding to adopt a little boy who'd just been born in Korea, whom we named Noah. And just about the same time that Noah came into the world, oh whoops,

my wife got pregnant. Turned out the doctors were wrong. I was a modern medical miracle, the father of twins, practically! Suddenly I had one infant needing midnight feedings and a spouse throwing up in the toilet at the same time.

Now maybe some of you can remember back to 1969, when Led Zeppelin released their first album. Track 9 was titled "How Many More Times," and it contained this verse, in homage to the Weavers:

*I was a young man, I couldn't resist  
Started thinkin' it all over, just what I had missed ...  
Now I got ten children of my own ...  
And I'm in constant hell.*

Well, not hell exactly, but there were devilish moments back in those early years, when the diddy service would deliver their usual 168 diapers, one for every hour of the 24, seven days a week. They say your own kid's poop doesn't smell but that's not true. Yet the other things they told me about fatherhood were true. For instance, it doesn't matter whether your child is adopted or arrives via the biological route. It's love that makes a family. And it's also true, what they said: parenting is matter of long days, and short years. The sweet memories are the ones that tend to linger: teaching the kids to ride a bike, the year my son decided to be Cotton Candy for Halloween, the canoe trip I took with my daughter after she dislocated her knee and couldn't go to summer camp as planned. Holly was always dislocating things, falling out of trees, falling in the water. Oh whoops! But that canoe trip was on the Illinois River, the same river the LRY used to float down when I was a kid, only now I'm a dad, doing the same river with this gorgeous young woman who looks a lot like me paddling in the front. Like the chorus in a song, life repeats itself. So now I find myself closer to the last stanza than to the first:

*Well now that I'm old and I'm a'ready to go  
I get to thinkin' what happened a long time ago  
Had a lot of kids, a lot of trouble and pain  
But then, whoops oh lord, well I'd do it all again.*

Whoops, and I'd do it all again. That's the story of my life.

