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A mother reflects on 'The Giving Tree'

By FAITH GONG

"You know that book 'The Giving Tree?'" my daughter asked the other day. We were on our way home from her two-day class camping trip.

"Yes..." I replied, warily. I do know "The Giving Tree," Shel Silverstein's bestselling 1964 picture book about a boy and the tree who loves him. We'd been given the book early on in our life as a young family, but I'd gradually become so disturbed at the type of relationship "The Giving Tree" modeled for my children that I'd expelled it from our bookshelves.

"Lil read it to us on the trip," my daughter continued, "and I was crying so hard. It's so sad; it's like a metaphor for everything."

"What touched you most about the book?" I asked.

"Well, at the end, the boy and the tree both have *nothing left to give*, but they're just together..."

"That's true," I acknowledged. "What do you think that's a metaphor for?"

"A lot of things. Parenthood."

"Parenthood?!?" I yelped. "Do you

plan to strip me of everything and then sit on my dead body?"

"Well you wrote once about how you should die slowly for the people you love!" she countered.

Not for the first time, I had mixed feelings about intelligent children who read my columns.

For those who haven't encountered "The Giving Tree" or read it recently: The story begins with an apple tree who loves a little boy. The boy visits her daily to gather her leaves, climb her trunk, swing in her branches, sleep in her shade, play hide-and-see, and eat

her apples.

This first section concludes: "And the boy loved the tree...very much. And the tree was happy."

But things change quickly. On the next page, we see the boy as a sulky adolescent leaning against the tree's trunk. The boy is getting older, "[a]nd the tree was often alone."

Then one day the boy shows up as a young adult. He's too big to play anymore. He tells the tree: "I want to buy things and have fun. I want some money. Can you



FAITH GONG



Three graces

FOUR-YEAR-OLDS Pepper Bright, left, Abbie Berry and Penelope Mendenhall take a break from a period of outdoor play at the Bristol Family Center last week. And on the cover of this section, Theia Ronark begins a plunge down the slide at the Bristol center, while Ila Demars waits her turn.

Independent photos/Steve James

give me some money?"

The tree explains that she doesn't have money, but she has apples. "Take my apples, Boy, and sell them in the city. Then you will have money and you will be happy."

So the boy takes away all her apples, "[a]nd the tree was happy."

Thus begins a heartbreaking pattern.

After a long absence, the boy shows up

as a balding, paunchy middle-aged man. Apparently he's too busy running his apple empire to play: Now he wants a wife and children, so he needs a house. The tree offers her branches, which the boys cuts off and carries away to build a house. And... you guessed it: "[T]he tree was happy."

Another long absence follows, and the boy arrives as an old man holding a

(See *Giving Tree*, Page 4)



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Giving Tree

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suitcase. He describes himself to the tree as “old and sad.” The implication is that the wife-and-children plan didn’t work out. (Maybe they got tired of living in a house made of apple branches?) Now he just wants to get far away, so he needs a boat.

The tree offers him her trunk to make a boat. I’m not sure that applewood is optimal for boatbuilding, but old man cuts down her trunk and carries it off, leaving the tree nothing but a stump.

Here’s where the pattern changes: “And the tree was happy...but not really.”

At this point, I always start to feel hopeful. *Does the tree realize that she’s been used?*

Apparently not. It seems that she’s sad because the boy has sailed away; when the boy returns as an ancient, bent old man with teeth too weak to eat apples, too tired for anything except to sit and rest, the tree is thrilled that, as an old stump, she can still offer him a place to sit and rest. The book ends with the old geezer sitting on the tree’s stump. And, once again, “...the tree was happy.”

My daughter was not wrong in her assessment that the book is moving because in the end both boy and tree have nothing left to give but are together. I simply disagree that this should be held up to my children as a model of sacrificial love.

It turns out that I’m not alone: A

quick internet search on The Giving Tree reveals that the book is steeped in controversy. According to Wikipedia, it’s been described as “one of the most divisive books in children’s literature.” To my knowledge, Shel Silverstein has not commented publicly on his interpretation or the motives behind his book.

My daughter was also not wrong in remembering that I’d once written about sacrificing for the people you love: She even located the exact column, written in 2017 and titled, “When You Feel Like Your Family is Killing You.” In it, I reflect upon the sense that all the sleepless nights, answering questions, and physical and emotional exertions of parenting young children are slowly killing me, but conclude that sacrificial love is still the best kind of love.

I am finding that the great truths can rarely be narrowed down to fit on a greeting card, but so often my children take what I say as if I’m offering pithy quotes.

I had this conversation with my daughter on the eve of Mother’s Day, so as a Mother’s Day gift to my children I would like to clarify my thoughts on the topics of parenthood and sacrificial love.

I absolutely believe that we must love

sacrificially, to be willing to put others’ needs before our own. I find, oddly, that I thrive the most when I am the least selfish; when I am loving my friends, husband, children, and community. And nowhere am I called upon to do this more consistently than in parenting.

But sacrificial love isn’t a simple concept. Here are two crucial qualifications:

1. *Sacrificial love doesn’t mean complete denial of your own needs.* Obviously, if I spend all my time serving other people instead of eating or sleeping, I will very quickly be of no use to anybody at all. There are some situations in which it may be very clear that you’re being called upon to become a lifeless stump: Leaping in front of a moving car to

save your child comes to mind, or fighting against great injustices. But in general, taking reasonable care of your own basic needs — for food, rest, occasional solitude, joy and beauty — will only enable you to love others better. “Love your neighbor as yourself,” assumes that you love yourself.

2. *Sacrificial love isn’t really love if it’s actually bad for the person on the receiving end.* Herein lies my real beef with “The Giving Tree”: It’s not just that the tree’s form of giving was bad for the tree, it was also bad for the boy. By allowing the boy

to take selfishly everything that she had to give, by encouraging him to believe that money, love, and travel would ultimately make him happy, the tree enabled that boy to become a sad, tired, broken, lonely old man. (Notice that only the tree was happy throughout the story.) Love doesn’t mean always saying “yes;” sometimes the most loving word we can utter is “no.”

In my own version of “The Giving Tree,” when the boy first arrives and wants money, I’d have the tree say, “Well, money won’t make you happy, but you do need some money to live. So here’s what I suggest: Take seeds from my windfall apples, study gardening, and plant an orchard. Save up for a down-payment on a house built of something other than apple branches and commit yourself to bringing the same love and joy to other people that I’ve brought to you. I’ll still be here, growing, putting out apples every fall, whenever you need to sit in my shade. Come visit anytime.”

I’m grateful for all those — mothers or not — who offer unconditional love so that others might thrive.

Faith Gong has worked as an elementary school teacher, a freelance photographer, and a nonprofit director. She lives in Middlebury with her husband, five children, assorted chickens and ducks, one feisty cat, and two dogs. In her “free time,” she writes for her blog, The Pickle Patch.

I am finding that the great truths can rarely be narrowed down to fit on a greeting card, but so often my children take what I say as if I’m offering pithy quotes.

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Vt. celebrates World Breastfeeding Month

BURLINGTON — August is World Breastfeeding Month and the Vermont Department of Health along with communities around the Green Mountain State, are showcasing the important health benefits breastfeeding has for both infants and parents, and the supports available to make it an easy choice.

This year's global celebration will highlight the theme *Enabling Breastfeeding—Making a difference for working parents*, and how breastfeeding-friendly employers and communities are key partners in building a healthy Vermont where people want to live, work, and raise a family.

The Health Department encourages breastfeeding (also referred to as chestfeeding) for the health benefits and bonding opportunities it provides for the lactating parent and the baby. Breastfeeding reduces the risk of breast and ovarian cancers and postpartum depression among adults, and promotes health, nutrition and growth benefits for babies — including enhanced cognitive development and a reduced risk for chronic diseases. Breastfed babies also have a reduced risk of severe lower

respiratory disease, ear infections and Sudden Unexpected Infant Death Syndrome.

“World Breastfeeding Week is a perfect opportunity for people to learn about the available supports for working new parents,” said Deb Kitzmiller, a public health nurse with the department's Brattleboro Local Health Office. “There is a lot to manage when you are a new parent. Expectant and new parents can take comfort in knowing that they can reach out to their local health and WIC office, the Children's Integrated Services (CIS) team, Parent Child Center, or can simply dial 2-1-1 to be connected to the help and supports they need.” People can find these local resources at HealthVermont.gov/Breastfeeding.

Vermont is a leader in breastfeeding initiation. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 91.5% of babies in the state receive human milk shortly after birth. However, by the age of six months, the rate of babies who are exclusively breastfed drops to 36.8%. This coincides with the time many parents return to the workforce.

Jackie Lindamood is a registered

dietitian nutritionist and international board-certified lactation consultant with the Springfield Local Health Office. “Returning to work is a huge factor in one's initial decision to breastfeed, and we know that returning to the workplace is known to decrease breastfeeding duration. Fortunately, we are a state with supportive employers,” Lindamood said. Vermont employers can support their staff by signing up as a Breastfeeding Friendly Employer. Visit HealthVermont.gov/Breastfeeding-Friendly-Employers to learn more.

Breastfeeding in places of public accommodation, such as schools,

restaurants, stores and other facilities serving the general public, is protected by state law. In 2008, the law was amended to include protections for employees, and in 2022 President Biden signed the PUMP Act (Providing Urgent Maternal Protections for Nursing Mothers), ensuring that nursing employees are entitled to adequate and paid pump breaks with access to a private space that is not a bathroom, and are protected against discrimination.

Learn more about breastfeeding in Vermont, visit HealthVermont.gov/Breastfeeding.

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Will your Vt. born make it to the big leagues?

What are the chances that your baby will grow up to play professional sports? Well, if you are reading the Addison Independent, the statistical chance is probably pretty low.

That is according to new research from Casinos.com that looked into the birthplace of every athlete across the four major sporting leagues in America and compared it to the current birthrates in every state. The results showed that Vermont ranks as the state with lowest chance of becoming a sports star with an average of 0 athletes per male births across the four major leagues: National Football League, National Basketball Association, Major League Baseball and National Hockey League.

For many kids, growing up to be a professional athlete and playing in one of the four major sporting leagues in the U.S. is a dream that lives with them forever, even into their adulthood when they have kids of their own and they begin to hope that their child will become an athlete one day. However, this dream is a very unlikely one as the odds of making it and becoming a sports star are extremely low — but in which state is your newborn baby most likely to

become a sporting superstar?

In comparing the birthplace of every male athlete across the major sports leagues and their birthplaces, casinos.com determined that baby boys born in five states in the Deep South have the top instances of playing in those four professional leagues. The top states, in order, where Louisiana (3.97 pro athletes per 1,000 male births), Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi and Florida. Minnesota, which is heavily represented in the NHL with 52 pro hockey players, ranks sixth.

The state with the most male athletes in pro sports is California, with 528 across the four pro leagues.

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the four pro leagues.

When looking at the state with the least representation in those four pro sports leagues, Vermont — with zero pro athletes in those sports right now — is dead last. West Virginia, with three NFL players and one MLB player is second to last; followed by Idaho, Alaska and Montana. The bottom 10 all of eight of fewer professional athletes.

The research does not speculate on any connection between the fact that the bottom states also have the smallest number of births.



Up she goes!

ABBI BERRY, WHO is in the class with 4- and 5-year-olds at the Bristol Family Center, is almost airborne during a session on the swings at the center Thursday.

Independent photo/Steve James



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Take steps to get your home ready for baby

New parents face a host of new and unique challenges when they bring their babies home for the first time. Lack of sleep and dirty diapers are two well-known challenges parents must confront when caring for newborns. While those hurdles must be cleared after babies are born, other potential issues can be dealt with while parents are awaiting the arrival of their children.

Prior to getting pregnant, parents expecting for the first time may not have given much thought to how safe their home is for children. But with a baby on the way, safety must be the utmost priority at home. Home injuries pose a bigger threat than expecting parents may realize, as Stanford Children's Health reports many children are hurt in injuries sustained at home. Thankfully, many home injuries can be prevented. Expecting parents can get a head-start on being moms and dads by taking various steps to make their homes safer before their babies are born.

• **Conceal cables and cords.** Cables and cords pique kids' curiosity. Pulling on cables and cords can put young

children in the path of falling objects or increase their risk for injuries involving electrical wires and outlets. Cable and cord concealers are inexpensive and easily installed. Often used to cover cords hanging down from mounted televisions, concealers also can be used to hide cords coming from computers, lamps and other items that can pose a threat to young children.

Some parents may be tempted to let their children sleep in the same crib they slept in as kids decades ago, but it's safer to eschew nostalgia in favor of products that meet the latest safety standards.

• **Avoid, or at least inspect, hand-me-down kids' furniture.** When furnishing a children's nursery, it's best for parents to avoid hand-me-down furniture. The older a piece of furniture is, the less likely it is that the item will meet current safety guidelines. Some parents may be tempted to let their children sleep in the same crib they slept in as kids decades ago, but it's safer to eschew nostalgia in favor of products that meet the latest safety standards.

• **Get rid of potential choking hazards.** The National Safety Council and the National Center for Injury Prevention indicate that airway obstruction injuries are the leading

(See Safety, Page 8)



No mystery here

A FUN MASK doesn't disguise Nora Phelps, 4, who plays with Theia Ronark at the Bristol Family Center as these youngsters join others in burning off some energy this past Thursday morning.

Independent photo/Steve James

Rokeby Museum and Bixby join together in an event for children

FERRISBURGH — Rokeby Museum in Ferrisburgh and Bixby Library are teaming up this month for an event for families with young children.

Bixby, the Vergennes library that serves many patrons in the northwest quadrant of the county, has been holding its popular story times throughout the summer. The final event will be next Tuesday, Aug. 15,

at 3:30 p.m. at the Rokeby, which is just a few miles north on Route 7.

Families can grab a blanket and spread out under the locust trees at Rokeby Museum. Rain locations will be available. Storytime will consist of themed read-a-louds, sing-a-longs and an activity. Babies, toddlers, and young children are most definitely welcome.



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Safety

(Continued from Page 7)

cause of unintentional injury-related deaths among infants less than 12 months old. Prior to bringing their babies home, expecting parents can remove all small trinkets and other items that curious children may want to put in their mouths. When buying toys for kids, read the packaging to make sure each item is safe for babies and avoid buying or accepting any gifts with small pieces.

• **Store all medicines on high shelves behind cabinet doors.** Vitamins and medicines should be stored on high

shelves behind cabinet doors. If kids can see them, they'll likely try to grab them. In fact, the NSC reports that children ages 19 and under account for roughly 8,000 fall-related emergency room visits every day. Hiding medicines on high shelves behind closed cabinet doors reduces the risk that kids will be poisoned and suffer a fall-related injury.

Expecting parents will soon have a lot on their plate. Taking steps to safeguard a home before their babies are born can make the transition to parenthood that much easier.

— Metro Creative

Natural Beginnings

VICKI KIRBY RN, IBCLC,

Vicki is a board certified registered lactation consultant that offers home, phone, or telemedicine visits for mothers who are facing a variety of breastfeeding challenges in Addison and Rutland counties, and some areas in New York State. She also has a prenatal monthly breastfeeding class available on Zoom. Mothers can feel overwhelmed when trying to balance milk production, latching issues, nipple soreness, engorgement, pumping and returning to work, and much more. Vicki is available to help mothers during this transitional period – you are not alone.



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A: There is no "too young."

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