



**May 2024**

**Carefully placing the moments that shape us**

“What did you think of the game?” I asked nine-year-old Addie at the dinner table. For the past ten weeks, I’ve been coaching my daughter’s soccer team as they compete with other international schools. In this particular match, we did not play well. Actually, we played so poorly, I wondered if I should retire from coaching.

“Well,” started Addie (*I leaned in, curious to hear her assessment*), “during the game, a girl on the other team said to me: ‘That man is creeping me out, (*peering at a man on the sideline*) ‘He looks like a criminal.’”

“That’s my Dad,” came Addie’s response to the expat girl, who then felt embarrassed and said, “Oh, I am so sorry.”

Addie continued her reflection on the game with, “...I think she said it because of the hat he was wearing.” Shelvis wore athletic attire and a knit beanie to the sporting event.

“If Cary’s grandmother wore the same hat, do you think the girl would have said the same thing?” I asked.

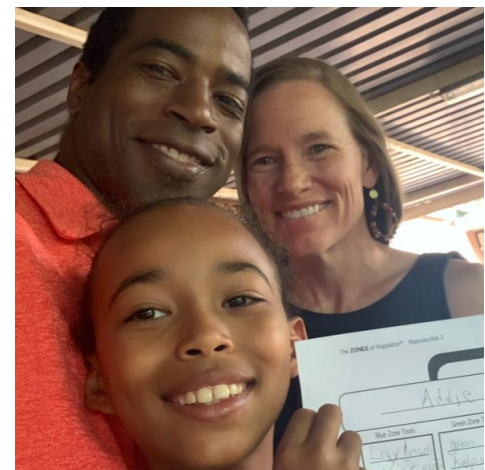
“No, she’s old,” Addie discerned.

“What if I was wearing the same hat?”

She got my point.

The dinner table conversation with my three daughters turned into a discussion about stereotyping instead of soccer. Their ages range from three to nine, so we kept it simple: seeing a whole group of people in the same way (rich, mean, kind, dishonest, etc.) will never be true for each person in that group. Broad, sweeping statements can be very harmful.

After the kids went to bed, I tried to put myself in Addie’s shoes. I imagined my nine-year-old self, excited to play a match in front of my friends at school. In the midst of the game, a player tells me my dad looks like a criminal. Her comment jolts me out of my fun-filled experience of the game... *Why did Addie have to deal with that?*



*9-year-old Addie with her biggest fans*

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At my ordination service over a decade ago, the preacher described my life as a scrapbook. She highlighted images captured on the pages; the parts of my life I will always remember, the ones that make me...me.

Since that milestone moment, many images have been added to my scrapbook. For example, four different hospital pictures of Shelvis and me holding newborn babies... One ultrasound image of the baby we never got to hold...

Lots of photos of “firsts” (first step, first birthday, first day of school, first lost tooth...).



*Nicole learning to walk; Jordan's first lost tooth, and Daddy's 40th birthday; Alice's first solid food.*

Young Addie wrestling with the depiction of her number one fan as a criminal will go in the scrapbook section with one of 3-year-old Jordan's US classmate refusing to play with him based on his skin color. And, the same pages will soon hold Shelvis' graduation photo, a testament to his overcoming incredible obstacles to earn a PhD.

I have learned to be intentional about adding images to my book, which became “our book” a long time ago. Seeking to live in a faithful way means adding hopeful and brave images to our narratives. It also means our faces show up in the stories of others.

Images and stories shape us. They form our past and present, influencing what lies ahead. With this in mind, I am equipping myself to tell stories more effectively, focusing specifically on the craft of curriculum development. I am grateful the PC(USA) contributed continuing education funds towards my online training on this topic. Maybe these skills will be helpful to our South Sudanese partners as they develop a peacebuilding curriculum to address the ethnic tension in their context. Maybe these skills can help foreground grace in a divided US landscape. Definitely, they will impact our family. They will help us intentionally challenge negative stereotypes and give us unique perspectives on themes that shape us. From many different angles, we will focus on images and stories that help us see each other more fully.

*May we carefully arrange the stories of our lives to honor significant memories. May divine Creativity help us frame emotional pictures with transformative meanings. May all our pages be bound together with the thick, holding love that withstands time, and may their life-giving and overcoming messages pass down from generation to generation. Amen*

Nancy and Shelvis Smith-Mather