

Life in a Trunk

By C. Forrest McDowell

I am a serious person by appearance. Just take a look at me as I sit here relaxing in my easy chair by the window. My dark eyebrows seem to hover like a furry bridge on the brink of collapsing over my eyes. Or perhaps someday these same brows intend to pour into the deeply furrowed gap at the bridge of my nose between my eyes. One must wonder how that furrow got there. And what about those deeply etched lines circumscribing my nose, like gutters plummeting down my cheeks, through my moustache and beard, to disappear somewhere below my chin — what’s that all about? Then, look at that broad forehead where deeply etched lines seem to present a horizontal code. How did those runes get inscribed?

There is something in a face that is a story itself, written in the code of creases, furrows, wrinkles and dimples. As infants we are born with our skin smooth like a *tabla rosa* that eventually gets inscribed by the experiences of life. I seem to have been born with the struggle of childbirth written on my face — the frenetic attempt in post-birth to get the umbilical cord unwrapped from its tight knot around my neck, my blue face struggling for that first gasp of air. I have often pondered that my lifelong love and preoccupation with “watching my breath”, as when feeling its heaving during heavy exercise or its soft wavelike motion during meditation, is a consequence of those initial chaotic moments of emancipation from my mother’s womb. And my serious facial features have told the story for decades, revealing my struggle to understand the meaning of life.

Frenetic childbirth aside, my venture into the serious side of life was dramatically etched in my mind by a frightening experience in a trunk. Perhaps I should add that that is also when I had my first good talk with God. Well, maybe it wasn't so much a talk as a request. Okay, so I prayed frantically for help. You see, I was about 7 years old and visiting my grandmother's house where my half-brother, Ron, lived. Ron was about six years older than me, so I trusted him. Of course, any adult could have seen our co-dependent relationship for what it was worth — I desperately needed a playmate on such visits, and Ron desperately needed a sucker for his pranks.

To put it bluntly, Ron was mean. He was always into something devious. On one visit he showed his demonic thrills by torching a whole army of my favorite plastic soldiers that I brought to show him. On another he displayed his delight in throwing rocks as far as he could down the neighborhood's long row of backyards hearing them clank on metal objects or crash through glass. He showed me how to

stage train wrecks on my grandfather's amazingly complex (and beautiful) model train layout. He gleefully put dead mice through the wringer washing machine (in the early 1950's there were no automatic washers, so the water was wrung out of clothes by placing them between rollers manipulated by a hand crank).

Oh, and then there was the visit when "Ron the Magician" greeted me at the front door and quickly whisked me out to the screened patio fifty feet or so from the house. All of which brings me to *the trunk*. Ron said that he could escape from a locked trunk, just like the famous illusionist Houdini. He proceeded to demonstrate by removing his cape and top hat, getting into the trunk and having me close the latches. He then instructed me to turn around, close my eyes and plug my ears with my fingers, and count to a hundred, at which time I would shout "Presto!" I must admit to believing I had incredible responsibility for the outcome of this trick, and in fact, could feel the tremendous power Ron had given over to me just in the use of the word, "Presto!" But you know, it worked! Somehow, Ron managed to escape from the trunk before my eyes, or should I say, *behind* my back.

Now it was my turn, and little did I know it was to be the last time I ever trusted Ron, or had the desire to play with him again. Sure, I confidently got into the trunk, and yes, I heard him close the latches assuring me everything was going to be all right. But I never heard him count to a hundred or yell out, Presto!, at which time I would be magically emancipated from the trunk and standing next to it. In fact, after a few minutes in absolute darkness, and finding no secret escape door or latch during desperate groping, I had the distinct feeling something terrible was going to happen to me. I pounded and yelled but to no avail. Scared witless and sweating profusely in the stifling trunk, I just knew I was going to die. Call it a gut feeling.

Enter God. Of course, that is a figure of speech because I don't think there was enough room for both of us. I really had no concept of God up to my trunk experience, except through my evening prayer ritual. You know the ritual I'm talking about: Before being tucked in at night you kneel as a child next to the bed for the first time in the day you know you really have to be good. Then there is the peculiar rhyming invocation that talks about things like sleeping, dying, waking, keeping and taking. I am certain you remember the prayer; it goes something like this: "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep; If I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take; God bless . . ." and then you start naming family members, relatives, friends and pets; or perhaps you ask for things to happen.

Nonetheless, it is amazing how, in moments of desperation, we replace words like "Help!" or Mommy and Daddy, with the ultimate "God" word. And when you have been locked in a dark trunk outside of earshot of mortal beings for more than an hour or so, all sense of playfulness, joy, and humor you had toward life gets whittled down to a couple basic behaviors: gibberish crying and frantic prayer.

No matter what you call it, the call is a desperate plea for God's help. Of which, and to whom I pleaded. Okay, maybe it was more like begging. Heck, when you're desperate for air, and realize now you will *never* make the Little League team, you are darn well not going to reflect on whether you are talking, requesting, praying, asking, or begging to get God's attention. You simply scream bloody murder for His help!!

Needless to say, God did arrive in time. But not until I bargained away some of my cherished childhood thrills (you know the repentant cry: "I promise never to do this or that . . ."). For me, I promised never to jam electrical slugs into gumball machines, in place of coins, and then complain to the store clerk that I never got a gumball for my penny. I also promised not to teach my sister's parakeet to bark like a dog, among at least another dozen revered pranks. Believe me, if there is one thing I learned about God in that trunk, it is that He is a tough bargainer. He never said a word, which told me He wanted as much as He could get from me in return for my life. But I guess that's fair. In truth, I was getting kind of bored with the gumball routine, and there is only so much you can take from a barking parakeet, so I was sort of glad to trade stuff like that just to have my life back.

I will never forget the most incredible smell in my life when Mom finally tracked down my yells and opened the trunk lid. It was the sweet, intoxicating fragrance of none other than fresh air. Never before had I inhaled an aroma so life affirming (which meant the smell of cookies baking in the oven finally had to assume second place in importance as critical to the life support of a seven year old), and it still goes today.

Perhaps you can understand how my trunk experience hit a serious vein in my soul. For the first time in seven years, my brain had to deal with some pretty heavy issues — truly hating somebody (my half-brother, Ron), dealing with impending death, pleading with a silent God, giving-up hard-earned pranks, and realizing the full value of air and breath. Sure, there was immediate joy in seeing the light of day, not to mention my mother's radiant loving face, but any show of outward joy seemed outweighed by a type of embarrassment in knowing that I lost something on the inner plane: some type of childlike inner joy that was destined to be stifled to some degree or other with the mood of seriousness for the rest of my life.

It would be inaccurate, of course, to declare that I lost all sense of joy in life as a tow-headed, seven year old lad. But for the most part, I would say my tendencies toward seriousness would be well watered for years to come by the daily behaviors of life in a dysfunctional family. However, on another level I have often thought that my eventual serious outlook toward life was also fostered by a general lack of showing appreciation to God for saving my life, and so I had to pay a price to the Big Man. After I popped out of the trunk's dark and death-like womb into the light of refreshing air, I soon forgot God

had anything to do with my salvation at all. Maybe the price we all have to pay for not being truly sincere in our momentary relationships with God, at any age, is to wear the cloak of seriousness in our life's endeavors until we are finally ready to replace it with the cloak of sincerity.

At age fifty-eight now, I know my friends would accurately validate my serious appearance. However, I am certain they would also talk about my lightheartedness — my love for wry humor, puns, and very bad jokes. And they are right; there is also a jester who lives inside this wrinkled skin, an eternal boy who survived childbirth and childhood traumas and who is always looking for playful distraction from the serious work of life (as long as those distractions are not in a trunk!). So, when you see me — this serious-faced, middle-aged man — sitting here by the window with my cup of tea, you should know that every other *thump* of my beating heart is that of a little boy sincerely in love with life. And, every *other* thump tells the story of . . . well, that's something else to share on a dark and stormy night!

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