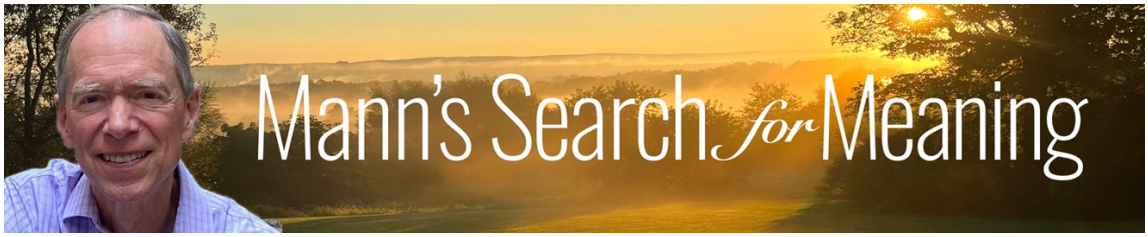

"I promise! I swear! I won't ever turn ten!"
— Maurice Sendak *

Dear Faithful Reader,

One evening, some years ago, Ana and I made a delicious dinner of tacos with all the trimmings: chopped scallions, shredded cilantro, minced jalapeños, crushed garlic, grated sharp cheddar, and toasted tortilla shells steaming from the oven, heaping with fresh-cooked black beans.

Lots and lots of black beans.

That night as we lay in bed, we turned off the lights, kissed each other, said "I love you," and settled down to sleep.

The room was quiet as the midnight sky.

After a minute or two, a subversive sound emerged from my side of the bed: the soft squeak of passing gas.

We lay side by side in silence, in the dark. And then, in my best Paul McCartney, I softly crooned:

> "Black beans singin' in the dead of niiiiiight…"

We both collapsed in a cloud of giggles, and soon dropped off with smiles on our faces.

What a way to fall asleep.

What a way to live.

In *The Go-Giver Marriage*, Ana and I wrote:

> "For years friends have been asking the two of us, what was our secret? What kept our love so fresh and alive? We'd both been through plenty of hardships, both in our own lives and in our life together. Yet through it all, our love and happiness has grown only stronger. As one friend put it, 'What's your secret sauce?'"

In the book we did our best to bottle that secret sauce, calling it “the 5 secrets to lasting love.” But here’s something we didn’t say in the book that may be at the heart of it:

There’s something in each of us that brings out the 6-year-old in the other.

Some nights, our last words before falling asleep are the sort of goodnight declarations I imagine happen every night around the globe. We say, “I love you,” or, “Sleep well, sweetheart,” or, “Sweet dreams.” But fairly often, our last waking words are some sudden inspiration of a ridiculous joke (often by me, usually at roughly kindergarten level) and we both dissolve in quiet giggles.

“Let not the sun go down on your wrath,” advises the apostle Paul in his letter to his oh-so-serious followers in Ephesus, meaning, “Don’t go to sleep mad.”

Even better: go to sleep laughing at a fart joke.

Laughter isn’t the only thing that keeps the child in us alive. Another is curiosity. There is something thrilling, even rejuvenating, about *learning something new*.

Ana is the most avid, skillful researcher I know. When she’s hot on the trail of new knowledge she becomes enthralled, exhilarated, enraptured. I do my best to keep up.

My friend Dan Burrus, the futurist, has for decades had a practice of choosing one new skill to learn each new year. One year it was highboard diving, another, sailing, still another, standup comedy. Flying. Filmmaking. The flute. And so on.

Dan is one of the youngest-at-heart humans I know.

If you ain’t laughin’, you ain’t livin’ — and no matter what your age, if you ain’t learnin’, you’re already old.

In the great Maurice Sendak’s last book, *Bumble-Ardy*, Bumble, an orphaned pig who lives with his aunt, has never had a birthday party. The day he turns 9, while his aunt is out, he throws himself a bacchanalian bash with nine invited swine who gorge themselves and smash the place up. When his aunt returns, horrified at the mess, she exclaims:

> *Okay smarty you’ve had your party!*
> *But never again!*

And Bumble replies:

> *I promise! I swear! I won’t ever turn ten!*

In an interview after the book’s publication, Sendak said this was his favorite line in the book:

> "There's something so poignant and extremely funny about his answer, *I'll never turn ten*. It sums up my life. I won't pretend that I know exactly what it means. I only know it touches me deeply."

In the story, Bumble is actually promising not to go wild again (as Max did in *Where the Wild Things Are*). But it's also a declaration of eternal innocence and the transformational magic of childhood.

As Jesus told his disciples (and I'm paraphrasing Matthew here), the kingdom of heaven belongs to those who retains a child's capacity for wonder.

> **I have a question for you: What keeps the child in you alive? (If you trust me enough to share this, REPLY HERE — I would love to read your answer!)**

Eckhart Tolle opens his book *A New Earth* talking about how flowers have historically served as messengers of enlightenment, a sort of bridge between our manifested world and the infinite.

> "Seeing beauty in a flower could awaken humans, however briefly, to the beauty that is an essential part of their innermost being, their true nature."

He then points out that a similar quality exists in all forms of newborn life:

> "…babies, puppies, kittens, lambs, and so on. They are fragile, delicate, not yet firmly established in materiality. An innocence, a sweetness and beauty that are not of this world still shine through them. They delight even relatively insensitive humans."

There is something magnetic about babies, puppies, kittens, and lambs.

They have not yet turned ten.

This was the tragedy of Susan Pevensie, the elder sister of the Narnia Chronicles. In *The Last Battle*, the epic's conclusion, three of the four Pevensie children are killed in a train crash and at the same instant transported to Aslan's Country, where they are exhorted to go "further up and further in." They have arrived, in essence, in paradise. But their sister Susan isn't with them.

"Susan," says Peter cliply, "is no longer a friend of Narnia." As C.S. Lewis wrote in a letter to a young reader:

> "Haven't you noticed in the two [books] you have read that she is rather fond of being too grownup? I am sorry to say that side of her got stronger and she forgot about Narnia."

Susan Pevensie lives on as a cautionary tale: *Don't ever turn ten*.

On the other hand, I give you industrialist Richard B. Mellon.

Mellon and his older brother Andrew were close as children and loved to play tag. They both grew up to have massive careers in industry and finance, Andrew serving as Treasury Secretary for three consecutive administrations (including the disastrous Hoover years), Richard as president of the Mellon bank and later the Alcoa company. Nevertheless, the two managed to keep their game going for seven decades running.

In his seventy-fifth year, after a prolonged struggle with cancer, Richard lay on his deathbed, attended to by his big brother Andy. As the dreaded moment drew near, Richard crooked a finger and beckoned to his brother, asking him to draw closer.

Andrew leaned in.

Richard touched him and whispered his final words: "Last tag!"

At age 75, Richard Mellon had still not turned ten.

I like to think he departed for Aslan's Country collapsed in a cloud of giggles.

My April wish for you: that you take time every day to be engaged, enthralled, and enraptured by whatever it is that sparks alive the child in you.

*** ABOUT THE WRITER**

Maurice Sendak is a fascination of contradictions.

The legendary champion of children and childhood, the man who wrote and illustrated what have been called the most influential children's books of the 20th century, the artist who could draw pictures of such tenderness and exquisite, loving detail that they captured the hearts of entire generations of readers and devoted fans…

Was terrified of childhood.

And here's another contradiction:

In many ways Maurice Sendak understood the interior life of children better than anyone else of his time. As the *New York Times* declared in its obituary, he single-handedly "wrenched the picture book out of the safe, sanitized world of the nursery and plunged it into the dark, terrifying and hauntingly beautiful recesses of the human

psyche." A *Times* art critic once dubbed him "one of the most powerful men in the United States" because he had "given shape to the fantasies of millions of children."

Yet (like C.S. Lewis, another legendary children's author) he had no children of his own, and in fact (*unlike* Lewis), children were simply not a part of his life. Said his friend and fellow author E.B. White, "I don't think [Maurice] has ever been within two feet of a child." Sendak himself put it this way:

> "I am trying to draw the way children feel — or, rather, the way I *imagine* they feel. It's the way I know *I* felt as a child."

Sendak embodied yet another contradiction, too, one which endured to the end of his life. But I'll save that one for last. (We'll get there shortly, I promise.)

Born in 1928 to a family of Jewish Polish immigrants, Sendak was delivered on the family's kitchen table in Brooklyn. His grandmother made him a little white suit (much like Max's wolf suit in *Where the Wild Things Are*) to fend off the Angel of Death, since, according to her, only angels wore white.

Fending off death and danger became a theme that haunted Sendak's childhood. A fragile, sickly child, he was regularly confined to his bed. Murray, as his parents called him, hated school with a passion. His escapes were gazing out his bedroom window, drawing, and story-telling.

Phillip Sendak would tell his son stories from the Torah, but embellished with racy details. Little Murray was sent home from school more than once after retelling his father's "softcore Bible tales" to his schoolmates.

On the morning of the boy's Bar Mitzvah in 1941, his father got the news that all his relatives had perished in the camps. The elder Sendak was too traumatized to attend the ceremony; from that day on, his son was haunted by the specter of the Holocaust. The family home became a gallery of mourning, its walls covered with photographs of relatives in Poland, including newlyweds and babies, who had been sent to die in Hitler's gas chambers.

The Lindbergh kidnapping, too, though it had happened when Sendak was only 4, hung like a pall over his youth. As he later recalled:

> "My life in Brooklyn was in constant danger. [As a child] you learn very quickly that parents can't protect you. It leaves a lurking fear."

The only way a child could protect himself, said Sendak, was by playing with his imagination. He became a self-taught virtuoso.

The year Sendak was born also happened to be the year that a mouse named Mickey first emerged from Walt Disney's pen. The very first drawing little Murray ever made

was of Mickey, and Walt's fearless mouse became his lifelong love and companion. (As an adult, his three gods were Mickey, Melville, and Mozart.)

At age 12, after seeing the newly-released Disney film *Fantasia*, Sendak decided he would become an illustrator. While still in high school he got a part-time job filling in backgrounds for book versions of the Mutt & Jeff comic strips. His first full-blown professional illustrating gig came at 19, when he supplied the drawings for a book on atomic energy written by his high school science teacher. As the *New Yorker* put it:

> "He drew molecules doing the Lindy Hop and made a hundred dollars [well over $1200 in today's money]."

The following year he got a job decorating storefront windows at the famed New York toy store F.A.O. Schwartz. One of the store's buyers introduced him to a respected children's book editor at Harper & Row named Ursula Nordstrom, whose first publishing project was E.B. White's *Stuart Little*. (Later Nordstrom books included *Goodnight Moon*, *Charlotte's Web*, *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, and scores of other classics.)

Ursula Nordstrom got Maurice his first children's book commission illustrating Marcel Aymé's *The Wonderful Farm* in 1951. (He had taught himself to draw animals in visits to the Central Park Zoo.) His work was soon noticed by another Harper author, Ruth Krauss, who enlisted him to illustrate her book *A Hole Is to Dig* (1952), which in turn led to a string of book projects, including the first five books of Else Holmelund Minarik's beloved *Little Bear* series.

"Ursula," incidentally, means "little bear."

On a personal note: When the first *Little Bear* book came out in 1957 my mother bought a copy and read it to me. I was 3 years old. *Little Bear* was the very first "I Can Read!" book, and true to its designation, before long I could read it, too, and I did, over and over again. *Little Bear* is the first book I remember reading by myself.

Today *Little Bear* is still one of my very favorite books.

(Fun fact: Maurice Sendak and I share the same birthday, June 10.)

It was Sendak's 1963 *Where the Wild Things Are* that launched his career and cemented his place in history. Sendak's effort to portray how children actually feel — messy, complicated, intense — the book sent shock waves throughout the literary world and revolutionized children's books forever. It was awarded a Caldecott, the illustrated children's book equivalent of a Pulitzer, for the best American picture book of the year. It has since sold over 19 million copies. (And check this out: twenty-two of his books have been named *New York Times* "best illustrated book of the year.")

The "wild things" in the book are themselves caricatures of the aunts, uncles, and other relatives Sendak vividly recalled from his childhood, at once terrifying and sad, hovering over him and pinching his cheeks till his face hurt.

In too many ways to count, Sendak's books all reflect the terrors and fantasies of his own childhood. The first book he both illustrated and authored, *Kenny's Window* (1956), evoked those lonely, dreamy childhood hours gazing out his bedroom window.

In *Outside Over There* (1981), goblins steal up a ladder and carry off a baby whose face, Sendak pointed out in interviews, was "an exact portrait of the Lindbergh baby." The book even included the haunting image, taken directly from Lindbergh kidnapping press photos, of a ladder leaning up against the house.

In the Nutshell Library, stubborn little Pierre is eaten by a lion and then, like Jonah resurrecting from the whale, is spit up again. Pierre's refrain, "I don't care," transmutes to his closing line, "Yes, indeed I care!!"

And that right there is the other contradiction I promised to tell you about. Because that pair of contradicting declarations — "I don't care!" and "Yes, indeed I care!!" — captures Sendak to a T.

Always fierce and opinionated (he called Salman Rushdie "detestable—I called up the Ayatollah, nobody knows that," and said of Roald Dahl, "I know he's very popular but what's nice about this guy?"), in his later years Sendak was famously cantankerous, even caustic.

Toward the end of his life he walked with a stick. Privately he insisted, "It's for hitting people."

The director Spike Jonz, who idolized Sendak, said:

> "He's sad, he's enraged. He gets frustrated. When he gets angry, he bites back. Conversation with him is raw."

Yet his friends were devoted to him with a passion.

In 1967, when Sendak suffered a near-fatal heart attack at the tender age of 39 (residual heart damage from childhood illness), Else Holmelund Minarik sat down and wrote *A Kiss for Little Bear*. According to book editor Michael di Capua, Minarik believed that if she wrote another *Little Bear* book, Sendak would survive. And evidently she was right, because survive he did, for another 45 years.

Asked in an interview the year before his death whether he thought much about dying, Sendak replied:

> "Constantly, constantly. It's time to go, it's time to get the f*** out, it really is…"

And in the next breath added:

> "But look how pretty it is here!"

For all his trauma and woundedness and irascibility, Sendak had an inexhaustible capacity for the sheer love of life. In the middle of another interview he suddenly declared:

> "What I love is reading. And air. Air when at night you open the window by your bed and the curtain lifts."

In another one of his last interviews he told *Fresh Air*'s Terry Gross:

> "Right now, as we speak together, out my studio window I see my trees and my beautiful, beautiful maples that are hundreds of years old, they're beautiful.
>
> "And you see, I can see how beautiful they are. I can take time to see how beautiful they are. It is a blessing to get old.
>
> "I'm finding out as I'm aging that I am in love with the world."

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