

Taming the 5-year-old in me

By Jessica Martin

"Why did you do such a dumb thing?" I scolded my 12-year-old.

Kathie shrugged her shoulders. "I didn't mean to."

"You shouldn't have been fooling around with this," I continued as I looked down at the tangle of tape in her hands. "We'll never be able to play this tape again and it was our favorite."

"I'm sorry, Mom," she said, her eyes brimming with tears.

I sighed. "I just don't understand you. Sometimes you act so grown up and other times you act like a 5-year-old."

Later that day I was forced to admit that there's also a 5-year-old in me.

After fighting a mob of people in the grocery store and waiting for an interminably long time in what turned out to be the slowest check-out line, I threw bags of groceries in the car and slammed the door. I gave the empty cart a shove and then had to go running after it before it banged into someone else's car. I had an adult temper tantrum!

Rushing to put away groceries (including several broken eggs) and fix dinner, the phone rang. I hate solicitation

calls but I couldn't even talk back to this one — it was a recorded message! I slammed the phone down.

That evening I ranted and raved trying to balance the check book. "This new statement is impossible. Why don't they give me something I can understand?" I grumbled, suddenly realizing how much I was sounding like my 8-year-old when he is struggling with his homework.

Another phone call — this time with a real person — got me annoyed. We went around in circles for half an hour until I finally made an excuse and hung up. "They can forget about me being involved if they're going to run it this way," I complained to my husband.

You mean you're going to take your marbles and go home? an inner voice whispered.

I didn't feel very good about myself when I finally crawled into bed. I had accused my 12-year-old of acting like a 5-year-old when I was even more guilty. And today wasn't an exception! More frequently than I care to admit I respond to situations in an immature way and end up taking out my frustration on my loved ones. I say things I wish I could take back. I yell and scream instead of

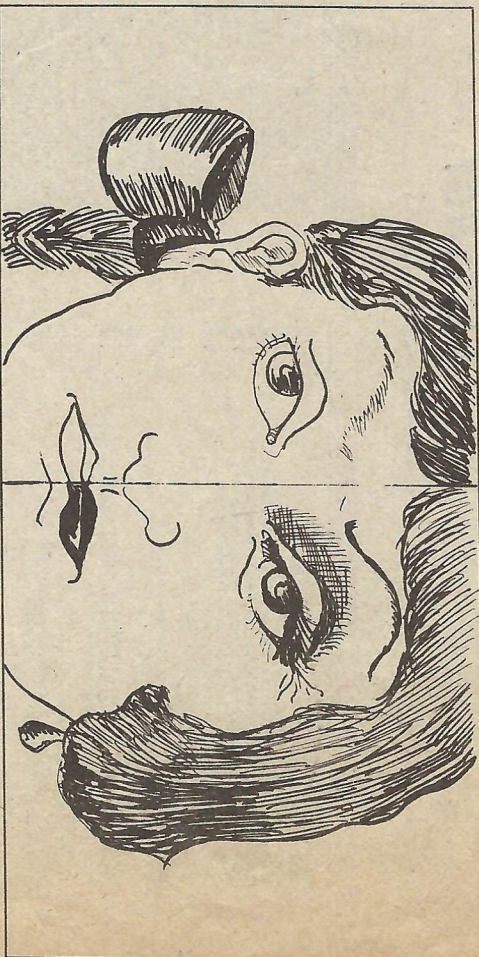


Illustration by Angela Grimes

dealing with situations quietly and rationally.

"Forgive me," I prayed. "Please help me to grow up — to set a good example for my children."

I still haven't outgrown all my childish behavior. Like Saint Paul, I don't always understand myself or why I do not do what I want to do. Why I tend to do the exact opposite.

But I am learning to apologize to my children when I fall short and to be more patient with their 5-year-old behavior. I'm also learning to let them know they are not the cause of my irritation when

someone or something else has made me angry.

"Mommy is going to have an adult temper tantrum," I warn them. Sometimes that is enough to diffuse my anger.

The pressures of adult life will bring out the 5-year-old in all of us. There will be days when we all fail miserably — when our behavior will cause us to feel a keen sense of disappointment and embarrassment in ourselves. But I'm getting fewer skinned knees as I'm starting to put childhood behind me. I wonder how I'm going to cope with adolescence? ■

highly than you ought," Paul counsels in Romans 12:3 (NIV). Dealing with the head lice my two youngest children brought home from school was my number-one learning experience in this area.

While I knew I hadn't "arrived" in terms of being a Christian mother, I felt pretty good about my expanding capability to be patient and self-controlled. That I still had much growing to do became obvious, however, as God revealed to me through tiny lice a number of big problems I needed to deal with. These problems went far beyond getting rid of my unwelcome visitors.

As I washed and combed heads, did load after load of laundry, and vacuumed all the rugs and furniture, I found my patience growing thin. My self-control had already vanished.

"Stand still while I comb your hair," I yelled at six-year-old Robbie as he tried to scramble out of my grasp.

"Don't wear that sweater! I haven't deloused it yet," my volume increased a few decibels as I screamed at Debbie, my seven-year-old daughter. "I told you I have to wash it before you can wear it. Do you want to get those awful lice back and miss another day of school?"

When my teenage daughter moaned about how she would "just die" if her friends found out, I wasn't too compassionate in my reply.

Increasingly through that long day I found myself returning to old habits I thought had been broken through years of being a Christian. To my horror, when the comb I was trying to sterilize melted in the pot of boiling water I heard myself using language I hadn't used for a long time. And, as my children cried and carried on



about having to miss school, my words and actions were far from kind and gentle. One would have thought they had deliberately brought head lice home from the way I ranted and raved.

Why me? I wondered. "I don't need all this work."

I realized that if I exemplified those fruits of the Spirit—kindness, gentleness, patience, and self-control—only when things were going well, they weren't really a part of my life. Just as the head lice had gone unnoticed until I looked carefully, I be-

came aware of things deep inside that I hadn't been seeing either. Yet they were things that needed to be brought out into the light of God's forgiving love and cleansing power.

As I called the mothers of the children my two had played with, the Lord taught me another important lesson. While it would've been easier not to say anything, my covering up the problem would have caused the lice population to expand.

It is only as needs are honestly confronted that appropriate action can be taken. Only as I am real with

others—and share my hurts and feelings—can problems be dealt with before they become more serious. I discovered too that by uncovering my feelings to others, I also enabled them to be open and honest with me. It was amazing how head lice opened the door to new and deeper friendships as all of us began to remove the masks we'd worn with one another.

I learned something about humility too. As I swallowed my pride and told other mothers that my children might have spread lice to theirs, I felt something good happening in me. Though I was humbled, I was not humiliated. Rather than losing face, I discovered I was being respected for having the courage to say what needed to be said.

Exhausted, yet still too keyed up to sleep, I finally crawled into bed. It was then that my mind began to indulge in the "what ifs." "What if I haven't gotten all the nits out of the 80,000 to 100,000 strands of hair on my children's heads?" "What if all their friends get lice from them?" "What if our dog and cat get the lice?"

As is the case with most of my "what ifs," I was letting my fears get the best of me. The next day the druggist assured me that only humans get lice. And as to whether or not my children still had them—or had passed them on—I knew I had done all I could do. Now I needed to trust the Lord.

"Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks." This is what Paul reminds us of in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18. In a new way I discovered that as I keep my eyes on Jesus and look for the good things He is teaching me, I really can rejoice. I learned to rejoice, even in something as lousy as head lice.

Rejoice



Illustration by Steve McInturf

The Wrong Speed

The harmony was wrong and the rhythm was terrible!
By Marlene Bagnu

For months we had been looking forward to vacationing at a state-park cabin nestled in the Endless Mountains of Pennsylvania. The Loyalsock Creek offered excellent game fishing for my husband and me and swimming for our two youngsters. Wooded trails and breathtaking vistas awaited us. There would be time to play and to relax, but getting there and making it happen was another story.

There was laundry to do, clothes to pack, food to buy and prepare, and all our "fun" equipment to gather. In addition, I needed to pack half my kitchen; the cabin had a stove and refrigerator but no cooking utensils. There was so much I needed to remember and to do, added to a schedule that was already jammed. Switching into high gear, I worked faster, determined not to lose any of my precious vacation time in packing.

"Why can't you help?" I yelled at the children for the umpteenth time as I caught them watching television or trying to sneak out the door to go play with their friends. "Why do I have to do everything? I'm going to be too tired even to enjoy our vacation."

Silently I scolded myself for waiting until the last minute to get things done. But what else could I do? There were

never enough hours in the day to accomplish even half the things on my "to do" list. I was tired, so very tired, of constantly rushing.

One of the tasks on my list was making tapes of some of our favorite stereo albums to play in the car. I had trouble getting the tape recorder to work, but finally I managed to get one tape made. Somehow everything else also got done. Not quite as bright (it was raining) or early (it was 10:00 A.M.) as we had planned, we left on vacation.

With a sigh I flipped on the tape and settled back for the long ride. I glanced at my husband, puzzled by the strange expression on his face. Suddenly he began to laugh.

"What's so funny?" I demanded.

By now the kids were also doubling over.

"Your tape," he choked.

"Oh, Mommy," my little girl giggled. "Your music is playing too fast."

"I don't believe it!" I groaned as I realized what I had done. "The stereo must have been set on the wrong speed when I recorded the tape." Then I, too, began to laugh. Julie Andrews did sound like a chipmunk. The hills were alive with music all right—music that was playing as fast as I had been rushing.

"But it didn't sound funny when I recorded it!" I exclaimed.

"Of course not," my husband replied. "You were going at the same speed."

Everyone continued to rock the car with laughter. I sat there half laughing and half crying, knowing I'd never live this one down.

There was time on our vacation for relaxing and reflecting. The Lord used that tape to show me how He had wanted me to slow down so He could speak to me. But I had been too busy—throwing things into suitcases and throwing orders at my children—to listen to Him, or to my husband when he tried to tell me, repeatedly, that I didn't have to do everything or be everything to everyone. My rushing had made me so uptight and irritable that it took two days for me to unwind and begin to have a good time.

"God, forgive me," I prayed, as I saw how I had allowed time pressures to squeeze Him into an increasingly smaller corner of my life. The results were the same as when I played that record at the wrong speed. The beautiful harmony and rhythm that He wants to bring to my days was lost.

I've kept that tape. Sometimes I still play it as a reminder of how God got my attention.

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It Takes Two to Tangle

Marlene Bagnall

What a way to start the day! Why, Lord, do we always seem to have those verbal skirmishes?

"I told you to finish the dishes last night!" I shouted at my teenage daughter, as the plastic bowls came tumbling out of the cabinet I had just opened.

"I did," she retorted defensively.

"You call this a decent job!" I said, pointing at the bowls all over the floor.

"That's not my fault."

"You put them away, didn't you?"

"Yes, but . . ."

"And you didn't wash all the pots either."

"They're soaking."

"I have news for you, Sharon, they are *not* going to *soak* for a week like the last pot you left."

"It wasn't a week."

"Yes, it was."

"Well, I washed it, didn't I," she said sarcastically.

"That's not my point. You could have saved both of us a lot of arguing if you had done it right

away like you were told to."

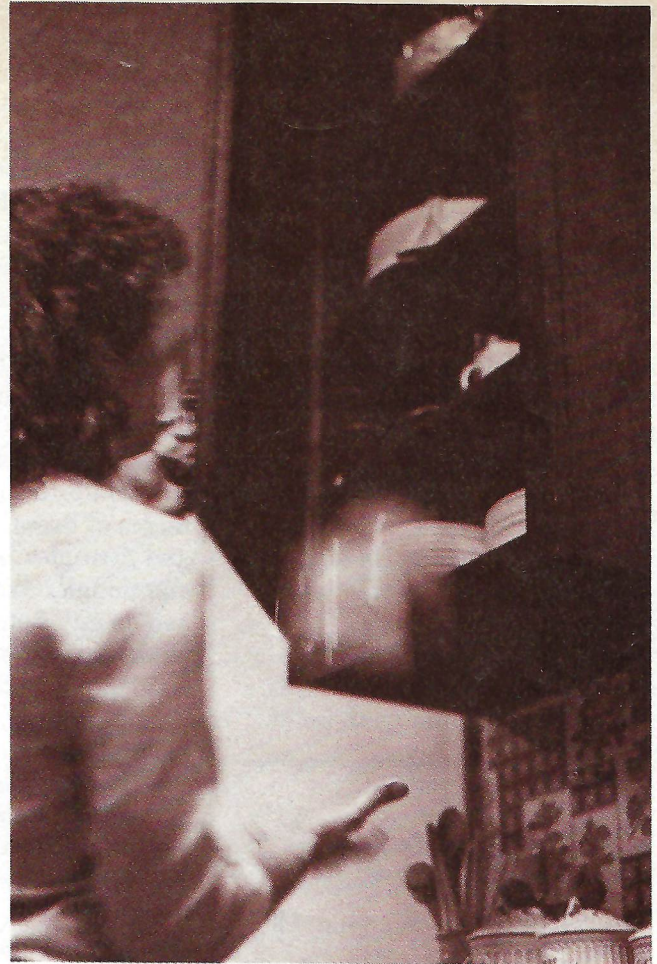
What a way to start the day! After Sharon left for school, I sat down with a cup of coffee, feeling exhausted. I would have preferred to go back to bed, but that wouldn't have solved anything. Besides, I was too uptight to sleep.

Lord, I'm so tired of arguing with Sharon, I prayed. Is this what living with a teenager has to be like?"

It seemed Sharon and I had been clashing lately on everything—her friends, activities, school work,

Sharon and I had been clashing lately on everything—her friends, activities, school work, clothes.

clothes. Even everyday conversations about things that didn't really matter were turning into debates. While Sharon was entitled to her own opinion, I didn't feel she was entitled to talk to me like she would to another kid. And when I



needed to confront her about chores she had neither done nor completed, she either made excuses or gave me her "who cares" attitude.

Who cares? I thought. I care. I care about the attitude my daughter projects to me and others in authority. I care that she grows up to be a responsible adult. I care that she learns how to follow instructions so that she'll succeed in school and on a job. I care so much that I want to be the one who brings her up in the right way—God's way.

I leaned against the chair and brushed away the tears. It won't help to get down on myself, I reasoned. But I'm trying so hard, and I just don't know what to do anymore.

As a reflex I reached for my Bible. How often I had found answers and hope in its pages.

"I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation," I read in Ephesians 1:17 (NIV).¹

This thought flashed into my mind. "It takes two to tangle."

Flipping the pages of another Bible, another verse caught my eye. "If you are angry, don't sin by nursing your grudge. Don't let the sun go down with you still angry—get over it quickly; for when you are angry you give a mighty foothold to the devil" (Eph. 4:26-27, TLB).²

I thought of the times I had spent an entire day nursing a grudge because of something Sharon had done. By the time she arrived home from school, it didn't take much to start an argument between us. An especially sad thing about those arguments was that I usually said far more than I intended or meant. I had attacked frequently my daughter's sense of worth rather than saying, "I love you, but I don't like what you are doing." While I may have apologized later for my harsh words, I realized how much better it would have been if I could have avoided beginning those arguments in the first place.

"It is hard to stop a quarrel once it starts, so don't let it begin" (Prov. 17:14, TLB). I was beginning to see that arguments hold too much potential for damaging relationships, and causing hurts that cannot always be forgotten easily or healed by just saying, "I'm sorry."

"To your knowledge add self-control" (2 Pet. 1:6, GNB).³ I realized it was not enough for me to be aware of the damaging results of our arguments. I needed to do something to prevent them. I may not be able to control what Sharon says and does, but I am responsible for controlling my responses to her.

"A man without self-control is as defenseless as a city with broken down walls" (Prov. 25:28, TLB).

Defenseless—yes I did feel defenseless when I got into arguments with Sharon. Somehow, when we began to scream at one another, I lost my position of parental authority and respect. As I became helplessly caught up trying to defend my own feelings, I found myself unable to think with clarity or maturity. Obviously I needed to exercise self-control. But how could I when it was not one of my inborn virtues?

If I would yield myself to the Holy Spirit, I knew he would help me diffuse my anger.

"When the Holy Spirit controls our lives he will produce this kind of fruit within us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23, TLB). That was it! I could find self-control only by relinquishing control to the Holy Spirit. Yet, in a practical sense, how was I to do this?

The psalmist prayed, "Help me, Lord, to keep my mouth shut and my lips sealed" (Ps. 141:3, TLB). How often had I stopped to pray when I found myself getting into an argument with Sharon? God's help was always available to me. My problem was that I often forgot to ask for it.

If I would yield myself to the Holy Spirit, I know he could help me find ways to diffuse my anger and more effectively deal with the problem. Perhaps he would lead me to write a note to Sharon instead of getting into a argument with her. I thought of a friend who wrote a note to her teenager: "The Board of Health came to inspect your room today. I covered for you—this time—and told them you were not at home."

At other times the Holy Spirit could help me not to get involved in "stupid arguments" (Titus 3:9, GNB). Did it really matter who was right about the name of the actor in the show we saw last week? Or whether or not the cake fell because the oven door was slammed? How many senseless arguments about the differences between Sharon and me could be avoided if I would only allow the Holy Spirit to control my critical attitude?

It was time for me to start giving Sharon some room to develop her own ways of doing things. Perhaps I could even learn some things from her.

I thought of how many arguments developed because Sharon didn't finish her chores properly. I could sense the Spirit showing me that Sharon

and I could do those things together. Before the days of dishwashers, cleaning up after meals was often a shared task between mother and daughter. One would wash and the other dry. And how many things were discussed in front of the kitchen sink that might not have otherwise been shared?

If I allowed the Holy Spirit to take control, I might get more rest at night. When I spent my days—and half of my nights—pushing to accomplish more things than was realistic, how could I expect to have the strength necessary to find creative and godly ways to deal with my differences with Sharon?

I thought of how God always kept his word, and how poor I had become at meaning what I said. Our arguments were usually centered around Sharon trying to get me to change my mind—and succeeding far too often. I remembered when my mother said *no* I knew that she meant it. That knowledge had prevented many arguments. She had also been consistent in giving me only one warning, and then doing what she had threatened to do. My husband was like her in that regard. He often said, “I don’t threaten. I promise.” I needed the Holy Spirit to control my tendency to back down and give in.

I thought also of how God always listens to me. He hears me out—doesn’t interrupt me—even

when he doesn’t agree with what I am saying. He never forces his opinion on me, or shouts at me. I needed the Holy Spirit to be in control of my habit of jumping in with my opinion and *right* answer, instead of patiently and silently allowing Sharon to reach conclusions for herself.

Finally I thought of my need to allow the Holy Spirit to help me build Sharon up, rather than tearing her down. I thought of Colossians 3:21 (TLB): “Don’t scold your children so much that they become discouraged and quit trying.” “Don’t keep on scolding and nagging your children, making them angry and resentful,” Ephesians 6:4, (TLB) states. Sharon’s need was for affirmation and loving discipline.

In my own strength I possessed none of these capabilities, but in a new way I realized that my Heavenly Father does. With him as my model, and his Spirit as my enabler, there are going to be fewer arguments between me and my teenager. I am ready to allow him to make the changes that are necessary—beginning with those that are needed within me. LWT

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A Summer’s Gift



*You’re sixteen now
And all summer long
You’ve been practicing
Your driving
With your father;*

*And all summer long
Although I really knew,
I pictured you
Sitting on your father’s lap
Being allowed to hold the wheel.*

*Today you drive,
Your father reads the road map,
And I sit in the back seat
Receiving your gift of growing
Remembering how
All summer long
I grabbed your hand
At street crossings
And how all summer long
You let me.*

Christina Buhler