

Night Walks, Night Talks

BY JOY IMBODEN OVERSTREET

I've always envied parents who after a long day at work can muster up the energy and enthusiasm to spend some good time with their children before putting them to bed. By "good time" I mean reading a story, playing a game, helping with homework or just talking for a bit without distractions.

Ten years ago I was lucky if I could get the dinner dishes done and the front door locked against the night before I ran out of steam. Quality time had to wait till the weekend—I just wanted those pajamas put on FAST so I could collapse.

My excuse for exhaustion was legitimate enough: My husband had recently died of cancer, leaving me with a son, three, a daughter, six, and the prospect of endless lonely evenings. The children had a good babysitter during the day, but they needed an attentive mother at night, so I couldn't just put up my feet after work and lose myself in a book. How could I boost my flagging spirits enough to fill the mothering role?

Luckily, the Great Spaghetti Disaster forced me to deal directly with my evening blahs and, in the process, create a special time with my children that has become a family institution.

On the evening of the Great Spaghetti Disaster, I had been "resting" on the

couch while the children were eating dinner, and was awakened by strange "pfft-thwack, pfft-thwack" sounds and much hilarity coming from the kitchen. Investigation revealed the children in the midst of a spaghetti-blowing contest. Spaghetti dangled from the pot rack, clung to the walls and draped over the edge of the kitchen counter. The sauce imbued the children's faces and clothing with a rosy hue.

I didn't trust myself to speak. I yanked the culprits off their stools, plunged their well-sauced arms into jackets and maneuvered us all outside.

"We're taking a walk," I said through clenched teeth.

"But it's pitch dark," said the older one.

"It's cold," said the other.

"Yup," I said.

I grabbed a sticky little hand on each side and we started walking. By the time we'd gone two blocks I was feeling significantly better. By the time we'd covered three blocks, the children had let go of my hands and begun to explore. By the time we got back to our front door half an hour later, we were singing, the Spaghetti Disaster momentarily forgotten.

We took a walk again the next night, and another a few nights later. Beyond the prospect of some fresh air and a little

physical activity, I had few expectations, so I was surprised at the children's enthusiasm for these nocturnal ramblings. The same children who would lag and whine on daytime walks leaped gaily up the street after dark.

Perhaps they liked the naughtiness of being out at "grownup time," when most children were getting ready for bed. Perhaps they liked the flaunting of convention—their pleasure actually increased when it was raining. They belted out, "It's raining, it's pouring," as they brandished their umbrellas at the sky. They sloshed their boots through puddles, disturbing the reflections of streetlights. Sometimes they even removed all rain gear in order to get soaked.

Perhaps the anonymity of the dark appealed to them. In the dark we all seemed the same size, the same age—just three pals without faces. It was all right to be silly and it was all right to be sad. After all, nobody could see us.

At first we didn't travel very far on our night walks. There was too much to discover—the smell of night-blooming jasmine in the summer, the crackle of dry leaves underfoot in the fall, the cloud formations after sunset and then the first stars, the different kinds of car headlights, the strange shapes of bushes in

the dark, the glimpses into the lives of our neighbors through their glowing living room windows (especially at Christmas when we could see their trees).

Walking seemed to fuel talking; discovering the night world soon took a backseat to discovering each other. The effort of propelling ourselves up the mile-long hill on which we live unshackled our minds and loosened our tongues. The conversation jumped about more than it might have indoors at the dining room table because it was easy to retreat into private thoughts for a while, bringing back an entirely new topic from the reverie.

~~My~~ Silence, though rare, was acceptable and comfortable; the children wanted to talk. They took full advantage of my attention because they often had to share it with the vacuum cleaner or the stove. I didn't usually say much beyond an "Mm-hm," "Really?" or "So then what happened?" every now and then to let the speaker know I was really listening.

Some aspects of our night walks have remained unchanged over the years—spontaneity and unpredictability and the special pals-in-the-dark feeling. However, now that the children are teenagers, we cover greater mileage and more-sophisticated subject matter.

Until I remarried, four years ago, both children came on every walk. Our ambulatory conversation ranged over school news, gossip, jokes, book and movie reviews. I frequently walk with only one child at a time now, which permits more intimate sharing. My daughter, who is 16, has always been reluctant to communicate her innermost feelings, but on night walks she tells me about the fight she had with her best friend, her thoughts about sex and birth control for teens, her tribulations and triumphs in English composition. In the light of day, if she hadn't been scared back into silence by the rapt attention I give such subjects, she would also have had to suffer through my advice. Maybe she speaks so freely on our walks because she knows my "good ideas" have a way of deserting me in the evening air.

My 13-year-old son has always been a chatterbox, so when it's his turn he loves the opportunity to have me to himself. He explains to me how the derailleurs work on his new bike, offers his analysis of why seventh-graders give parties and eighth-graders don't (the eighth-graders have learned from giving parties the previous year that hosting is hard work and one's

guests are harsh critics), and describes the design of his dream house. I will listen to anything but blow-by-blow movie reruns: "OK, so he goes into the house. Then he sees Harold, ya know, and he tells him let's get out of here and Harold says OK, ya know, so they, like, go back outside and . . ." Brief reviews, yes; endless plots, no.

Increasingly, as the children have gotten older, I share with them my thoughts and concerns. They particularly appreciate the opportunity to give me advice or moral support. They also enjoy hearing stories about my life at their age.

The exercise has been a side benefit for us all. During the day the children get little physical activity; the bus has supplanted foot travel. For me the walk is a way to get my blood moving, my head cleared, and that piece of pie metabolized instead of stored.

In the early years of our night walks the children often managed a distance of two miles without complaint, particularly if we made a stop at the halfway point for an



ice-cream cone. These days we may travel three or four miles in a brisk hour, without ice cream.

Safety has always concerned me, but we walk in well-lighted neighborhoods, where the nearest house is no more than 50 feet away, and we stay together. In recent years we've brought along our dog—not for protection (she's a coward), but for her pleasure and exercise.

My husband and I sometimes leave everyone at home and take a private night walk of our own. This gives us a chance to catch up on the day's activities, discuss weightier matters and enjoy each other's company without being distracted by the children.

The youngest family member, our 18-month-old son, is currently an apprentice night-walker. He can easily handle half a mile on his own, then lurches it from a backpack on our return trips. The other night, as he tugged at my sleeve, he delivered his first complete sentence: "Mommy, go walk?"