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Children of the Beach

Shell Stories

Cheryl Somers Aubin

His skinny, tanned, powerful legs propel him down the beach in front of me. He's covered in sun-screen and wearing his favorite Mickey Mouse hat. His big toddler belly pushes down the waistband of his red-and-white swim trunks, which in turn hang down below his knees. Covered in sand and smiling, one of those radiant smiles that comes so easily to children, Charlie turns and holds up a shell for me to admire.

I am the holder of the bucket, the keeper of my son's treasures. When we set off down the beach along the Chesapeake Bay he told his dad, "We're going to go get some angels!" I'm not sure where he came up with this name for shells.

I wonder how much instruction to give my son about the art of shell collecting. I am a veteran, having searched different shores and seas for perfect shells, collecting them for my home, to keep memories of the sea close to me. During long winter days I often hold a shell in my hand, feeling it warm as I close my eyes to remember where I found it. The memories of sun and beach and sand and wind and smell come flooding back.

I consider sharing my expertise with my son. Do I describe for him the most desirable shells—the whole ones, round and translucent, with perfectly symmetrical edges? What about the shells formed with surprises of beautiful colors inside? Should I encourage him toward the prettier ones and away from the broken, imperfect ones—the ones he so readily picks up now to add to his collection with such incredible joy? Should I train him to value only perfection? Is this the truth I want for him?

Or should I tell him the truer truth: that there is beauty in the brokenness—stories in the rough edges? The shells that have washed up on this shore will again and again be a part of the miracle of the water and the making of sand. Will I encourage him to look past the beautiful, seemingly perfect ones, to instead follow the lessons of the shells and seek the stories? Will he later remember this truth as he encounters the people who will come into and through his life?

I find that I seek sea glass now. Shimmering bright under the water, the broken, once-sharp edges are smoothed now by the sea and waves and sand. These are my treasures—the smoothed rough edges I desire.

There is a peace and a balance and a sense of rightness to be with my son near the water, the eternal water that calls us, just as my womb calls still for my son—missing him inside me, where he was safe from the disappointments of life.

But my son knows no disappointment now, along the shore. He squeals and shows only joy with each find, as the bucket I carry gets heavier. I know that I will call on this memory this coming winter: Charlie looking down, picking up a treasure, and handing it to me for his bucket. When we are trapped in the house together by cold, rain, or snow, we'll take out his angels and be warmed by the memories we are making today.

Cheryl Somers Aubin is a writer and a memoir-writing teacher in the Washington, D.C., area. Her writing has been published in the *Boston Globe*, *Elan Magazine*, *The Journal Newspapers*, and other newspapers and periodicals, and she is working on a collection of essays.

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