

I couldn't let my emotions keep me  
from being the parent that I wanted to be.

# As Tears Go By

BY LISA FIELDS

**WHEN MY DAUGHTER WAS YOUNG**, I borrowed the classic children's book *The Giving Tree* from the library to share with her, since I'd loved the story as a child. Unfortunately, reading it as a mom turned me into a blithering mess. Author Shel Silverstein—using simple black-and-white sketches and carefully selected prose—describes the tender relationship between a very loving apple tree and the young boy she cares for while depicting sacrifices that mothers make for children. My bottom lip quivered when tree and boy shared a hug, just before the boy grew up too quickly. By the time the tree selflessly offered the grown boy her apples, branches and trunk to make him happy, an enormous lump in my throat made it difficult to speak.



I managed to finish reading, but I was shuddering with sobs. Not exactly how I'd envisioned sharing the story. After composing myself, I decided that from then on, Daddy, not Mommy, would read "The Giving Tree." He'd simply be talking about a tree, not a mother's complex love for her child. That night, he read the story, nary a sniffle.

That's better, I thought. But I wondered: It's easier, but is it really better?

My thoughts drifted to another situation that I'd found too emotionally wrenching. In grade school, I'd loved singing "Over the Rainbow" from *The Wizard of Oz*, so my dad occasionally accompanied me on the piano. (I liked the lyrics's message that dreams can come true, and I yearned to have a great adventure like Dorothy did in Oz.)

Whenever my dad played it, I was overwhelmed by the sweetness of the father-daughter moment. I distinctly recall thinking—even as an 8-year-old—that one day when my dad was gone, I'd cherish our special moments at the piano. The thought made my throat tighten, making it hard to carry a tune. I always ended our sing-alongs prematurely, which I regretted.

One year, my daughter dressed as Dorothy for Halloween and wanted me to sing "Over the Rainbow" non-stop. So I obliged. Initially, I wondered if one day she'd recall such moments as fondly as I remember singing with my dad, and my eyes brimmed with

tears. But after countless requests and umpteen renditions, I could sing it without trouble.

I realized that if I wanted *The Giving Tree*—or any meaningful experience from my youth that I want to share with my children—to loosen its hold on me, I had to practice, practice, practice, like I did with Dorothy's song.

I bought a copy of *The Giving Tree* and vowed to read it to my daughter daily until it didn't make me cry. The first time, I tried distancing myself from the plot but still got misty. But repetition and persistence worked: After two weeks, Mommy was reading it the same dry-eyed, even-keeled way that Daddy did.

This was the second time that I trained myself to toughen up. Years earlier, when my sister asked me to be her maid of honor, I realized that I didn't want to stand before 100 people with runny mascara. So I decided to learn how to attend a wedding without crying.

Fortunately, I attended eight "practice" weddings before my sister's big day. During the first ceremony, I pretended that my friends, the bride and groom, were strangers. That helped, but I still shed a few tears. Gradually, I figured out how to create emotional distance between the newlyweds and myself and how to appreciate their loving looks toward each other and the officiants's comments without getting dramatic. Repetition helped,

so between ceremonies, I perused my parents's wedding album and watched videos of strangers's nuptials online. Success! At my sister's wedding, I stood before the crowd, beaming, as my sister and brother-in-law celebrated their love.

Recently, I wondered how often people train themselves to stop crying in response to uplifting yet embarrassing emotional triggers, so I reached out to Ad Vingerhoets, one of the few scientists to have studied crying. He confirmed that adults often cry for positive, sentimental reasons, not just about pain or loss.

"Instead of separation, you cry for reunion. Instead of defeat, you cry for victory," says Vingerhoets, professor of clinical psychology at Tilburg University in the Netherlands. "But all tears are, in some way, the same. Helplessness is very central, even with positive emotions.... Maybe it's a kind of being overwhelmed, a kind of positive helplessness."

I told Vingerhoets about my training, which thwarted tears during weddings and storytime, and was surprised when he said my approach was very uncommon. (Therapists use the technique to desensitize phobic people from things like spiders.) People who don't want to cry commonly look upward when they feel tears about to overflow, Vingerhoets said, although it isn't universally effective. For me, gazing heavenward might delay tears momentarily but not forever.

My emotions still sideswipe me sometimes: I'll realize that I'm reliving a poignant moment from childhood, this time as a mom, and I'll get maudlin. Or I'll borrow a library book with such a touching message that I'll sob while reading to my children. And I can't help but tear up at gay weddings; it's overwhelming to watch the first kiss when I've never witnessed my friends sharing tender moments. But now I know that with the proper mindset and training, I can face these situations head-on.

Case in point: After my dad recently began giving my daughter piano lessons, the three of us had an impromptu piano-side sing-along. Naturally, he played "Over the Rainbow." It had been years since I'd sung with him, but instead of getting weepy, I embraced my daughter, stood by my dad and sang as joyously as I could. A little part of me thought, wow, here are three generations harmonizing around the piano, and I'll look back on this moment one day...but I pushed the thought aside and decided to experience piano-time with my dad the way I should have years ago. After Dorothy's song, instead of escaping to nurse my tears, I asked, "What else can you play for a 7-year-old?" We lingered for a half-hour, singing and creating a beautiful moment at the piano: My father, my daughter and me.