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When Freedom throws a party

Thinking her son is intrigued by freedom, a mother struggles to explain the concept in 5-year-old terms.

By Lockie Hunter / March 21, 2011

The night lights are on, the turtle and the frog sending their green glow into the room.

We begin our nightly routine. My 5-year-old son bows his head as he says the alphabet, a hybrid version of prayer and the ABC song, naming something he loves with each letter. " 'A' is for Avery," he says, and I recall the cute brunette in his preschool. "B" is for Baseball, while "C" is for Cameron. "D" is Dinosaurs, and "E" is always for Elephant, his favorite animal. " 'F' is for Freedom," he announces. This is new. Freedom. Wow. I wonder if Asheville Montessori is studying democracy.

I want to acknowledge this moment and say something profound. I want to say how freedom safeguards values. "Freedom is very important," I say instead while he nods and continues with "G" for Gingerbread.

The next evening we have the same routine and this time he shouts, " 'F' is for Freedom!" I'm prepared now, having consulted Webster's for a child-friendly definition, and I tell him that freedom is liberty, as opposed to slavery. "Do you know what slavery is?" I ask. He shakes his head. "Slavery is where you're not free to do what you wish. So if you wanted to play soccer or go to a movie or even go to school, if you were a slave you would not be allowed to do these things."

His little head turns and his eyes narrow. I imagine he's soaking in the idea. "But you don't allow me to eat a sweetie before bed or jump from the bunk bed to the ceiling fan," he says. "Am I your slave?"

I should have seen this coming. "No, sweetheart, but you are my little boy, and those rules are to keep you safe."

"But does freedom have to follow the rules?" he asks. His little face glows with urgency, and his brows furrow. I'm uncertain how to answer the question, and I stumble out that freedom makes her own rules.

"Awesome!" he says.

I retreat to the kitchen and the buttery smells of my husband frying eggs for his late dinner. My husband has a degree in philosophy, and I'm tempted to ask him to act as adviser during my son's bedtime routine, to explain the concept of freedom to our 5-year-old, but I'm determined to do this myself. I shuffle to my home library to find a book of quotations.

Freedom has a thousand charms to show.

That slaves, howe'er contented, never know.

That next night I read the quote to my son and tell him it's by William Cowper.

"What's a charm?" he asks, and I explain that a charm is something lovely and wonderful.

"Oh, freedom has a lot of those!" he says, vigorously nodding.

"And we are not slaves, so we have so many lovely, wonderful things to discover," I add.

"And it's all because of freedom?" he asks, sitting up in bed in a squat that mirrors his frog night light.

"Yes! It is. It is all because of freedom!" I practically shout.

"Cool," he says and sinks back to bed. I fluff the covers, and as the blue blanket softly lands on my prone child I feel a sense of victory in my new role as part-time-philosopher-mommy.

The invitation that comes in the mail the next day takes me by surprise. On the front is a photo of a cake with pink frosting and five lit candles. Inside, the card announces in bold cursive print that "Freedom is turning five!"

We are invited to her party at Avery Park, Saturday at 2 p.m. We arrive early, bearing a stuffed animal as a birthday offering. A blond girl bounces over, her crooked curls and toothy smile sweetly disarming.

"Hi, Freedom!" says my son, and he disappears in a blur of 5-year-old energy as he chases after Freedom. And, like most young girls, this Freedom does have a thousand charms to show.



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