

On Life and Meaning

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Episode 64 – Kathy Izard – Do Good Love Well

The Starting and Finishing of Things

And now a personal word,

I read *The Hundred Story Home* over the course of a week at the end of long work days, twenty-minute sessions at time, taking note of the words of praise from readers at the beginning of the book, of the copyright page, of the quotes at the beginning of chapters, of the chapter titles, of the reader's guide, of the book club questions and acknowledgements at the end of the book, and of every word of story in between before falling off to sleep. I would wake up the next morning rechecking my bookmark. So much of the book impressed me.

The book took me into Kathy Izard's life with such clarity that I was right there with her. Kathy is a natural storyteller, or at least a writer who works hard to tell her story with ease. I was there at her birthday party when she was six years old when her mom was first taken to a psychiatric ward. I was there when Kathy met the man who would become her husband standing beside a keg of beer. I was there when she ladled soup for homeless men and women. I was there when she heard a challenge to accomplish a task that seemed completely improbable to do. I was there at the celebration of Moore Place when it becomes a home.

I was impressed by her candor about religion. Kathy wrote about her struggle with attending church. She avoided platitudes about faith. Her language about things greater than ourselves was honest and inclusive. She leaves it for the reader to find their own way.

I was impressed by her kindness and vulnerability. I wondered as I read it whether she fashioned herself a likable and relatable protagonist, plucky and earnest, always deflecting praise, and crediting everyone around her but herself. But the more I read for an off-note, the more her voice remained consistent and true.

I was impressed by so much more, by her search for meaning, by her commitment to social justice, but this is what took hold of me. Kathy has a chapter in her book called "Failure Is Not an Option." She talked about how she decided early on in life that if she couldn't succeed quickly at something, she would throw in the towel. She felt there were two reasons to quit: if failure was likely because she didn't have the innate talent to measure up or if it wasn't fun. She talked about playing tennis as a child every weekend

with her dad where from across the net he would tell her that “everything in life is about hard work, Kathy, hard work and practice.” She won a citywide under-thirteen doubles competition, and her dad said, “I told you! You can do anything, Kathy, really anything!” But Kathy quit tennis. She wasn’t that good. It wasn’t fun. She stopped playing with her dad.

But the chapter goes on. Kathy jumped to a moment in her forties when the phone rang and her dad informed her that he had cancer, an acute form of leukemia that would not give him much time to live. Kathy hung up the phone, shattered. She talked about how he fought to survive, how he wore a T-shirt that proclaimed “never, never give up,” how he persevered through his many treatments until he no longer could. Kathy ended the chapter reflecting on his passing, on the life lessons he could no longer share. She wrote: “There was so much Dad had tried to tell me, too, that I could not hear. I wanted to listen now. I wanted to play tennis with him now. I was ready to play the game now. I wanted him to see that I could work hard at something and never, never give up.”

That is the story of the book for me: the love of family, the sharing of values, the taking on of tasks. Kathy’s overriding trait is that she perseveres. She commits and does what she sets out to do. Hour after hour, day after day, she stays with it. She raised millions of dollars from hundreds of people one contribution at a time. She wrote a book at her kitchen table one page at a time. She has moved on to even bigger challenges one action at a time.

Kathy reminds us of the power of completion, of the making and keeping of promises, of the starting and finishing of things.

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