



## **TABLES TURNED**

By Susan Vogt

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“Do you know how much a college education costs these days?” wail parents who have been out of school for a score of years. Yes, it can be shocking but we parents invest in our children. We not only invest in college educations, we invest countless hours chauffeuring them to practices, lessons, and parties. We help with homework, get them tutoring and braces if needed. We grow gray with worry over whether they will make the team, learn how to deal with the bully, use good judgment about drinking, driving, and sex, and keep the faith. It takes a lot of time, money, and emotional stamina.

But it’s worth it. Or at least it feels that way when they are young and look at us as almost God. When they become teens and we become instantly clueless it may be harder to praise God for their crude or rude ways. The best I could sometimes muster was, “OK, God, I guess you’re trying to purify me and teach me long-suffering. Isn’t there an easier way to learn these virtues?”

But somewhere along the line the tables seem to turn upside down again – not completely but noticeably. I thought of this the other night when our just out of college son in his first year of teaching said, “I think the teaching is going pretty well. Everyone in my class is passing except one. He’s driving me crazy. I tell the class exactly what will be on the test. I give them opportunities for extra credit work. I talk with this student privately and try to help him, but he doesn’t seem to get it.” A year and a classroom ago, I couldn’t imagine those words coming out of our son’s mouth. He’s on the other side now.

On a more dramatic level our daughter, Heidi, lived in Mali (West Africa) for two years as a Peace Corps Volunteer. She had already told us in letters about her life in a rural village – no electricity, no running water, temperatures reaching 130°. Being masochists at heart we decided to visit her for a month anyway. It was partly concern, partly adventure.

What we ended up experiencing was probably one of the highlights of our parenting career. We went prepared for camping mode. Yes, it was true. There were no modern amenities in her small village. What we didn’t expect, however, was how we were replaced as parents – and it was a good thing. The village chief gave her his family name “Ngoiba” and the first name “Maimouna”. The village people all acted as if they had adopted her.

What was even more striking was the experience of being parented by our daughter. She guided us in French while in the capital city but by the time we got to her village she was speaking two different African languages. We were helpless without her. She gave us food, shelter and helped us find our way in the dark. Although we certainly didn’t need diapering, she showed us how to go to the bathroom when there wasn’t any – at least not a western style bathroom.

This has all got me to thinking about other ways our children are carrying us into a new world. We all know about the parents who call their child to program the VCR or to install a

new computer. I recently had to learn how to use our cell phone from our 16 year old. I used to carry babies around effortlessly on my hip. Now I ask that baby to unscrew a jar or lift my suitcase. In the future there are bound to be health limitations when I am the one who needs someone to take me to the doctor or help with dressing or walking. I won't even touch the memory thing.

So what's this got to do with faith? May I suggest that Mary of Nazareth had the tables turned on her by Jesus too. She started out with dreams for her child as any parent does. She even had prophecies of his being the redeemer of Israel. I wonder what she thought as she followed Jesus, the itinerant preacher. Certainly he worked miracles and was a charismatic speaker. Perhaps she was proud of him and awaited the time when his teaching would lead him to political power. Then the tables were turned. Instead of glory and salvation he was crucified as a criminal. But then the tables turned again. The resurrection surprised even those who believed in him.

What a crazy, mixed up world we live in. People of great generosity and self-sacrifice coexist with evil and terrorism. The baby becomes the adult becomes the child. Sometimes the parent takes care of the child and sometimes vice-versa. Parenting is not an easy vocation and if we can learn anything from the Holy Family it might be that we need to keep taking care of each other, and we never know when the tables are going to turn.