

Watching for Survival

Category: A Turn for the Better

written by Pamela Adelstein | August 26, 2024

While I was driving to work on a sunny Friday morning many years ago, the opening music for the StoryCorps broadcast streamed from the radio. I raised the volume and listened. A daughter asked her father how he'd made it out of a psychiatric hospital where he received shock treatments. He had been committed for insanity at age 22. He replied simply that he watched television to see how "normal" people acted and mimicked what he saw. Eventually, the staff released him.

The interview ended. I lowered the volume on the radio and reflected on this man's smarts and the deplorable state of inpatient mental health in the 1960s. And then I started bawling.

I cried because for the first time I understood: I, too, am an observer, and watching those around me has helped me figure out how to survive in this world. I think my closest role models when I was young were also trying to figure this out—and that left me to fend for myself.

As a child, how I wished I were part of worlds I saw on TV and read about in books! I wanted to be the Keatons' daughter in *Family Ties*. I yearned to climb trees dressed in repurposed curtains with Maria and the children in *The Sound of Music*. I dreamed of being Anne Shirley's best friend in the *Anne of Green Gables* series.

As a teenager and later as an adult, I unconsciously observed everyone around me, searching for instructional clues to better understand how to be. I felt woefully unprepared and lost in my roles as friend, student, medical resident, and community member. I was fortunate to find vital role models, therapists, and friends whose support helped me navigate my doubts about who I was so that I could grow comfortable with myself.

Today, I am a grownup—a parent, preceptor, teacher, physician, and leader. I've become a better me and have figured out more of who I am. I still pay close attention to the world around me. Now I try to use my observations to help others grow—my children, patients, supervisees, and anyone else who needs a little boost.

Reflecting on that commute years ago, I grieve for the uncertain little girl I once was, for the shadow of old sorrows still lurks. Mostly, profound gratitude washes over me for how I have grown, what I have learned, and the opportunities I have to share what I can with others.

Here I am.

Pamela Adelstein
Boston, Massachusetts