

# When a calling comes full circle

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*Mama, do the Our Father in French tonight.*

He whispers his request as he burrows under the comforter, eyes flashing bright in the dim of his bedroom draped in night. Of course, I agree. And in an instant we're off. I close my eyes and start to sing, and for a moment I drift back.

The cold stone church, frigid even in summer. The rows of plain wooden chairs with ancient woven seats. The prayers of the Mass turned to poetry in another tongue, the words I committed to heart to keep from flipping through my missal every moment like the obvious outsider that I was, even after a year.

I've forgotten so many words from that time—the names of strange vegetables at the market, the polite way to ask for directions, the slang on the corner-store magazines. But still the language lingers, if not on my lips then deeper.

## **Even when I thought I'd left it behind.**

Some choices seem definitive. I dropped the journalism minor when I fell hard for the humanities. I left the English major behind when art history flared its passion. But I could never quit the French. Even when it was impractical, indulgent, unemployable—save for the doctorate too many professors tried to push me towards.

So when I finally had to admit to myself that there was a turning, that the longing was no longer for language, that the tug was towards theology—the deepest of the humanities, the heart of the cultures I loved, the Word before all other words—I had to grieve the loss.

There were dreams—of a Parisian address, of doctoral programs abroad, of years spent pouring through poetry—that I had to let slip away.

Maybe somewhere deep down I wondered if it might bubble up again, if I could come back to the conjugations and the circumflexes and pick back up where I'd left off.

But I never really thought it would happen.

People would ask sometimes: *you're teaching the boys French, right?*

And I'd look up at them with dark circles under my eyes from bedtime battles and midnight nursing and early-morning rising to tug soaked sheets off the crib again, and I'd think to myself: *you're kidding, right?*

But then little by little, it started to creep back in.

A nursery rhyme here, a church hymn there. A few cooking words in the kitchen while we'd bake. A simple grace before meals. Then one rainy afternoon I taught the oldest *Notre Père* and we were off.

Suddenly he was digging out the children's dictionaries and asking me to tell him words-in-French from his favorite books and correcting his little brother's toddler version of *Frère Jacques*.

How did we get here? I'd wonder.

I'd only grabbed the church bulletin out of habit, something to read for the 30 seconds between strapping the last kid in a car seat and starting the car to drive home. But that Sunday a small notice in the corner caught my eye: *French translators needed*.

Turns out our sister parish in Haiti was sending a team to visit us this fall. Since they didn't speak English and our folks didn't know Creole, everyone's non-native tongue was the only way to email back and forth.

You're kidding, I thought to myself. I could actually help them with this from home?

So here I am now, the giant black French dictionary back on the desk, the dusty *Micro Robert* off the shelf to check verb tenses, even the Google Translate cheat to look up words that didn't exist a decade ago in my college texts. I'm back in the world of delighting at what translates well and laughing at what's impossible to culturally correspond, back in the world where we reach across differences through the power of language, back in the world where words matter deeply.

And with each e-mail request that pops in my inbox, **I remember how much I love this world.**

Would I have had the courage, the confidence, even the chutzpah to blow off the dust and start the rusty wheels squeaking again, if it hadn't been for these little boys who dragged me back first? It's a terribly humbling thing, to spend years of your life perfecting a language and then fumble for the most basic turns of phrase years later.

But my son's Montessori teacher talks over and over about synapses, about stretching out the tiny tendrils of a preschooler's mind so that years from now, when he comes across *rhombus* or *ovoid* or *quadratic equation*, the synapses will already be reaching out across the divide to let the spark jump that much quicker.

**Maybe callings run across these same impulses and energies.** When we spend years chasing one dream, plowing into the work and sacrifice it takes to strive for a worthy goal, then even when we turn and take up another direction, the pathways do not close completely behind us. There's still electricity waiting to leap across the now-dark abyss.

In all the work I've done [on vocation](#), these are my favorite stories. Not *I knew I wanted to be a doctor from the time I was 5 years old*. Not *I stumbled into this work, though looking back I can see God's hand*.

*But I had this dream once, and I thought I let it go, I thought my life turned in a very different direction, but then it turned out that years later, I did get to follow that dream after all.*

So when he cuddles under the quilt and asks me to sing *Je vous salue Marie* again, I always say "yes."

**You never know where "yes" will lead.**

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