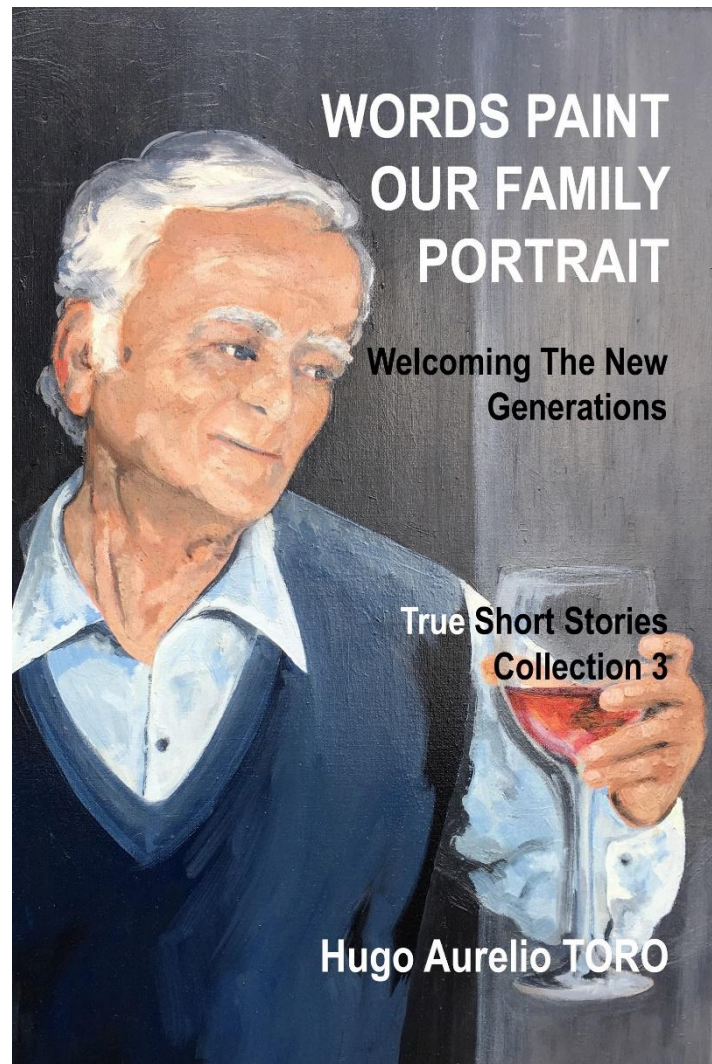


A short story from this collection.



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3.6) Anecdotes - A Village Raises A Child

A short story by Hugo Aurelio Toro



Penny and Nikolina by the side of the road meeting cows – Canberra 2015.

My niece Drina is often heard saying that ‘it takes a village to raise a child,’ and there is a great deal of truth in that statement. Parents struggle to raise children in isolation, and this concept reaches into past village community values.

In 2013, my niece, who had accompanied me to Machu Picchu on the Inca Trek, moves to Canberra, close to my home. Her marriage to her high school sweetheart sadly failed, and she found herself a working single mum with two children, Nikolina a one-year-old, and Marko a four-year-old.

My niece is wise and a strong and protective mother. She puts faith in the village to give her children a broad and healthy upbringing.

Grandparenting

It becomes a regular occurrence, for me (granduncle Hugo) and my partner Penny, to babysit the children. We perform our responsibilities gladly, and we have fun doing so. Penny has enjoys bathing the baby in the laundry tub and it is playing time in the water.

Let me state up front, that changing nappies is never glamorous. Nikolina approaches me, pulling on the front of her nappy.

‘Poo in nappy,’ she says, in her best possible baby English.

‘There is no poo; go away,’ I say to her since I checked her recently.

She turns around and walks down the hallway towards the change room. Minutes pass and she returns holding her nappy in both hands, arms stretched out and sunny side up.

‘See, poo!’ she says calmly. Yes, there is poo, she got me.

A year passes and Nikolina is a happy and playful child. When she can reach the family room sliding door lock, she decides to play a trick on me. I walk outside to take food scraps to the compost bin, and she slams shut the glass sliding door, instantly pressing the lock mechanism. She instantly realises that she has left a finger trapped in the sliding door.

An ear-piercing yell fills the house. I’m locked outside, so I can’t help. With frantic sign language, I get her attention for a moment and point to the lock. She took a deep breath and unlocked the sliding door. Lucky, no blood, and no broken fingers. There is just a red mark on a tiny finger and a frightened child. A long cuddle makes things better.

Marko is a mischievous little boy, who likes to take things from his sister to watch her reaction. Nikolina is a sharp little girl, who in turn finds a weakness to tease Marko with. These are both vastly different yet effective teasing strategies. I stop the arguments before the tears arrive.

‘Okay, who wants a smack?’ I ask in a calm and firm voice. I have no intention of spanking children; the warning is only to let them know that I’m not impressed.

They both freeze and look down at their feet. I do not follow up on the threat, of course, and their games become more tame and friendly.

The following weekend, we have the children again at my home. It is easier for me to look after them on the weekends since I’m still working full time. Taking them off mum’s hands means that she has time to herself. Nikolina is the one who shows a real interest in spending time with us. Marko also enjoys his stays, but other activities with his young friends are calling him.

I left them to play together for a while, and the same thing happens - the games transform into a disagreement.

‘Okay, who wants a smack?’ I repeat the old threat. Marko looks down again, responding to my authoritative voice. Nikolina with a mischievous smirk, points to Marko.

‘HE DOES!’ she exclaims.

That innocent betrayal brings a smile to my face every time I think about it. She had figured out that there was no threat, and she played a joke on her brother.

The years pass quickly as it does when you participate in raising children. We gather at the breakfast bar one mid-afternoon to bake muffins. The children are kneeling on the bar stools, glancing across at the mixing bowl with wide eyes. I'm mixing the ingredients and letting them take turns stirring. Out of nowhere, Nikolina starts a conversation.

'I know where babies come from,' she says casually.

'I know more than Nikolina,' Marko jumps in.

This is from a five-year-old and an eight-year-old, so my jaw drops. Before they have a chance to tell me, I give them my version.

'Me too,' I say. 'Mummy goes to the hospital and dad orders the baby from the stork. The stork flies to the hospital with a new baby and drops it off.' They both looked at me rolling their eyes.

'That is not it,' says Nikolina with arms crossed and unimpressed.

'Ask mummy,' I respond. That is a skilful hand pass to mum on my part, although I feel that I should have been prepared with a better answer.

I gesture towards the muffin mix, and we return to baking. We carefully pour the mix into the baking tray with the twelve slots and pop it into the pre-heated oven. Fingers then invade the mixing bowl and scoop off the excess raw mix with gusto.

A Child Friendly Street

During the thirty-years that we lived at the same address, there has been nothing but friendliness and genuine care amongst our neighbours. Generations of children have ridden their bicycles up and down our street.

Our house is at the end of a close, and we have a long red river gravel driveway leading to the carport. There is nothing the children in the street find more fun, than to come tearing down the street on their bicycles and slide stop into our driveway. Our cars are sprayed with gravel. I ponder if I have a right to feel upset about this. I resign myself to the fact that it is the price you pay for living in a bicycle-friendly location.

Over the years, we get to know the families living on our street. To the left of us, Lorne and his parents live in a modest three-bedroom house. Lorne is an engaging teenager somewhere on the spectrum, who is always happy to come over and talk when he spots us in the front garden. His sister cared for her brother but has married and is no longer at home. His father was a policeman who once protected a politician from harm in an altercation outside Old Parliament House. We attend the funeral to pay our respects to Lorne's father.

In the next house, a single mother and three pre-teenage girls move in. The father visits regularly and has good contact with the girls. He always waves at us when we are working in our large front garden, lush with plants. He is clearly a caring dad, and I can tell that the girls enjoy his visits. We conclude that dad must be a collector of sorts, because damaged vehicles find their final resting place on the overgrown front lawn.

We share our fresh eggs with the family and our garden vegetables. The girls like to visit to feed our five backyard chickens.

Their mother is seriously ill, so we do not see much of her, and one day we find out that she has passed away. We felt for the girls, yet we can see a high level of resilience in their spirits. They are surprisingly strong considering their loss.

On the same side of the street lives an older single father and two mature boys. The father is a retired park ranger.

I was in the front garden on a sunny weekend, cutting down three medium sized Casuarina trees. I was making space for a double carport and a shed on that long gravel driveway.

I hired a small electric chainsaw from a hardware store. The extension cord was fully stretched up and over the front garden bushes. The ranger and one of his sons walked down the street towards my house holding a massive petrol chainsaw. He was coming to help.

‘That is not a chainsaw, this is a chainsaw!’ I could imagine him saying as he approached. He did not in fact utter those words, but it all sounded immeasurably funny in my head.

I stood aside, and within thirty minutes, they had cut down the trees. They stacked a neat pile of timber for us to burn in our fireplace next winter.

Across from the kind-hearted ranger, lives a family of four. Mum who we see most often in her front garden, is friendly and always prepared to talk. Their youngest son Ben aged six, is a ray of sunshine. He is an amiable child visiting us to say hello and belting out his stories of the day at the top of his voice.

‘YOU KNOW, JACK PLANTED A BEAN AND IT GREW THROUGH THE CLOUDS,’ he announces. I nod with interest, but I’m already familiar with the fairy tale.

Ben opens his mouth wide to continue the story, and Penny steps in at that precise moment.

‘Keep it down Ben, you are too loud,’ says Penny. The story continued at half volume with an eye on Penny for volume approval.

A few years pass and Ben has developed a solid build for an eight-year-old. Jumping dirt mounds on the nature reserve at the back of our house, he tumbles off his bicycle. We are inside the house and still hear his cry for help. When we reach him, we see a badly sprained ankle. Penny and I form a fireman’s armchair and carry him home. What an effort it was with a heavy boy.

The boy grows up and introduces us to his girlfriend Taryn, when they start dating. She is interested in drawing and brings her drawings along for us to see. Since art is an interest of mine, we discuss art at length around our breakfast bar. Penny and I note what a lovely and gentle couple they are.

When we decide to go on a holiday one year, we ask them to house sit for us. I consult with Ben’s parents first to see if they have any objections. They are delighted that we trust their son.

When the young couple marry, Penny and I are delighted to receive an invitation. With a clear sky overhead, the wedding party and guests gather by the shores of Lake Burley Griffin for a lovely open-air reception. The chairs have been placed in neat rows on the freshly mowed grass, facing the picturesque lake. The guests enjoy the mild midday sun as they gather and talk. The reception is fairy tale like, intimate and full of love.

We then all move inside the Yacht Club marquee for a late lunch and music. Penny and I comment to each other on how the couple's open personality has brought together a varied mix of family and friends. We also observe that young women are pleased to call themselves Ben's friends. It is heart-warming to witness and be part of true friendship.

A year or so later, the couple bring over their baby boy for us to meet. Here once again is a lovely little boy with a curious and enquiring mind.

Coercive Control In The Village

The children play in the street and join the younger children there. They are sociable and make friends quickly. The eldest boy has a caring heart and looks after the little boys who can barely stay on their miniature bicycles with trainer wheels. The girl bonds with the three girls two houses over, who have recently lost their mother. They all play in the street, chasing each other until they are exhausted.

After play time, the children sit with us to have dinner around the dining table. They are encouraged to eat at the table and share family time. Perhaps a dated concept but a good one. Children do not hide their feeling, and they want to share with us something that is affecting them. They were cautious with their description of events, wanting to protect mum from any negative consequences. Other grownups have proven to be judgemental, so they are hesitant. We just listen when children speak.

An adult male friend has joined the family, and all is not rosy.

'Mummy's mobile was thrown across the room and smashed on the wall above her.'
They talk in unison.

I met this fellow; he seemed stern to me. He is likable when calm. During a scene, where he was agitated about something, I intervened and did my best to calm the fellow down. I invite him to sit and talk. He refused, preferring to pace the room.

For this granduncle, coercive control is too dangerous to ignore. I discuss the fellow openly with mum and she acknowledges her situation but has invested significantly in this man. I report him to the Police on two occasions with solid evidence. In both instances the Police listen to me patiently but act with a soft touch approach. Perhaps they are not appreciating the risk.

"Is anyone hurt?" They automatically query. The police seem to be conditioned to respond to a crime rather than danger and prevention.

"No not real physically harm, but the children are distressed, is that not enough?" I asked confused.

Nothing of this nature is resolved quickly and it is heartbreaking for mum. Several years pass and gradually, the fellow retreats to address his issues on his own.

The Village Is Sparse

In this era of internet connectivity, relatives live in different parts of the country or perhaps even in other countries. Technology and easy travel keeps people in touch.

Penny's daughter Emma resides in Northern New South Wales with husband George and two children, Kiko and Inda. It is a long distance by car, over a day's drive, yet they stay connected. When the grandchildren were young, Penny would travel interstate to babysit and spend treasured time with them.

On occasions, the young teenagers travel on their own or with parents to see us in Canberra. Emma makes sure that her children have regular contact with relatives in Canberra, Melbourne, and the Solomon Islands. That is all part of socialising the children with broad family contacts. In our home, we welcome them at any opportunity. They visit grandmother when they can, and the teenagers are lovely young people.

Kindness shines through from granddaughter Inda, who is a fun-loving child. In her early teens, she discovered The Beatles music. Inda's personality is calm and open such that reaching into the past for musical taste and fashion is part of her charm. We share that musical interest although my experience is firsthand in a way, having discovered The Fab Four when they were still together in the late 1960s.

The boy, Kiko, has always been quiet and likes to read for long periods of time. We watch this wise boy extract knowledge from the pages of books. He is sociable but seems more attracted by the written world. Naturally, he does well at school and is accepted into university. Emma and Penny are immensely proud of him and they arrange to help him with study expenses.

Saying Goodbye

A reality is that children grow up and adults move on, and with these changes come the goodbyes. In 2020, as Covid-19 struck, my workplace shutdown to avoid spreading the virus and I'm sent home with a laptop to work from home. Time at home is welcomed because I have the flexibility to mix work and life activities while remaining productive.

My niece Drina is working full time and terribly busy, and the children are still attending classes at their primary school. We agree to share the school run in the morning and afternoon.

On my afternoon school run, the children like to stop at the popular Café Injoy. This gives mum time to get home from work and do housework without the children being at her feet. At the café, the children are engaging, and the waitress enjoys seeing her friendly regular clients. There, we order a hot chocolate, milkshakes, and nachos to share. At the table we discuss what is important in their lives. We share a laugh, discuss the routine, and speak freely about what is on their minds.

It is at these joyful meetings that I announce that I am moving away. In October 2020, having turned sixty-years-old, I officially retire from work. Penny is already retired. We are looking forward to a 'sea change'.

Our Canberra home of forty years is put up for auction. The house was maintained in good order and the large garden is fresh and lush in late spring. There is one serious offer, and it is a good one. A blended family with five children want the house. This is welcoming for a family friendly home. We are incredibly relieved to discover that the new owners also want to keep the healthy backyard chickens.

In January 2021, in the middle of the pandemic, we say goodbye to family and friends, but with a promise to visit regularly. The neighbours in the street drop by with a card and a bottle of bubbly.

My niece's children ask mum, *why must everyone in their lives leave*. It is a hard lesson in life for them. We treasure the memories of helping to raise children and conclude that without doubt, those are wise words - a village raises a child.