

A Friend in Ordinary Time

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

Bingo was his name.

Those who knew me in my youngest years know that the first object of my affection -- after my family -- was a stuffed dog named Bingo. This may come as a surprise to all who know the cat-loving adult I have become.

But, the photos of my third Christmas show me in a plaid dress, clutching a bright yellow stuffed dog filled with childish pride and joy. Bingo's plastic eyes were bright, his stiff stuffed ears stood straight and alert, and his snout was soft and fluffy.

He became my constant companion, cherished playmate, and the star of many childhood dramas I concocted. Bingo won my heart for inexplicable reasons, and without him my early childhood would not have been quite the same. I imagine many adults can also recall a privileged plaything that has pride of place in their childhood memories.

Alas, a glance at Bingo now gives very little hint as to who he was in his prime. I have saved him all these years because abandoning a toy so cherished seems unthinkable to me. But, Bingo is almost unrecognizable -- a victim of all the love showered on him by my younger self. His bright yellow fur is now a faded tan or grey -- it's hard to tell. He is patched up with bits of yellow cloth that my mother and grandmother used to mend him with painstaking care under my concerned supervision. His eyes have lost their shine after his many trips through the washing machine. His head is now attached to his body quite precariously. The stuffing that once filled his snout is gone, and his now-flat face lacks the alert expression he once had. He is tattered and frayed almost beyond recognition.

Yet, I think I have something to learn from my dilapidated old friend. He is as he is because, unlike my other childhood relics in more pristine condition, he was deeply loved. That love wore him out.

When I look at what it cost him to be so cherished, it calls to mind the many ways in which I see so many people with generous hearts spend themselves so completely out of love. Certainly this analogy to real love is far from perfect. Despite what I may have thought at age three, I know Bingo did not love me back and that he did not make any voluntary sacrifice for me the way the people who love me did and do. Yet, this limp worn scrap of a toy reminds me of the far greater signs of real love that I see in people who wear themselves out in the service of love.

I see it in the dark circles under the eyes of a parent who stays awake all night with a restless child -- and in the similar circles under the eyes of a child who stays awake all night with a hospitalized parent.

I see it in the roughened hands of men and women who spend their lifetimes in the labor that keeps food on the table for their families.

I see it in the wrinkles of worry on the faces of those whose love for others brings them angst, and in the creases around the eyes of those whose love for others brings them laughter.

I see it in the stooped postures of those who carried children in their arms and loads on their back.

I see it in the scars of burns from baking bread, cuts from mechanical mishaps, and blisters from repetitive labor -- the burns, cuts and blisters of those who sustain their loved ones in so many ways.

I see it in the older clothes worn by those who give their best to their well-dressed teens, and in the tired eyes of those who stay awake late at night reading to their toddlers.

I see it in the slower walk of a widowed elder who has lost some spring in a step when a loved one is no longer holding an empty hand.

I see it in the worn out knees of parents who played for years with their children, and the aching shoulders of children who help their elderly parents in and out of bed each day when they can no longer do that for themselves.

The truth is that those who really love give it their all. They do not hold back and save themselves from the scars, the exhaustion and the sacrifice that love asks of them. But in return, I hope that they have the joy and the peace that comes from knowing how well their lives are led.

Like my cherished Bingo, they are living, tangible proof of the glory and the cost of love. May God reward them, as only He can, for the greatness of their love. And, Bingo, thanks for being an old friend in the earliest days of my ordinary time.

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