

Explores one man's life journey through moments as a parent when he was not his best self, reflecting upon those times with humor and tenderness as he continues his travels in discovering himself.

SEVENTEEN: Lessons From My Children

By K. B. Sanders

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K. B. Sanders

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Table of Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Prologue</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Chapter 1: Robin Hood the Married Man</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Chapter 2: Daddy's Habit</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Chapter 3: Fancy Ketchup</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>Chapter 4: Hide and Seek</i>	<i>23</i>
<i>Chapter 5: Oh Gracious Master</i>	<i>31</i>
<i>Chapter 6: Door Number 3</i>	<i>45</i>
<i>Chapter 7: The Math Lesson</i>	<i>49</i>
<i>Chapter 8: The Cheap Father</i>	<i>55</i>
<i>Chapter 9: My Big Back Yard</i>	<i>59</i>
<i>Chapter 10: Real Pain</i>	<i>71</i>
<i>Chapter 11: Daddy Watch This</i>	<i>75</i>
<i>Chapter 12: Death of the Cassette Tape</i>	<i>81</i>
<i>Chapter 13: Ninjas On Parade</i>	<i>91</i>
<i>Chapter 14: Bikinis in February</i>	<i>101</i>
<i>Chapter 15: ESPN</i>	<i>111</i>
<i>Chapter 16: Rio Bravo Country</i>	<i>117</i>
<i>Chapter 17: The Philosophical Debate</i>	<i>127</i>
<i>Chapter 18: Self Portrait of the Artist</i>	<i>131</i>

Chapter 19: The Right Time to Curse.....	137
Chapter 20: Numerical Value of None.....	143
Chapter 21: Seventeen	149
Epilogue.....	159

Chapter 1: Robin Hood the Married Man

I was 30 when Betsy and I married. I had been living mostly on my own for years. I was, you might say, a creature of habit. I ate the same thing at breakfast every day. I ate the same thing at lunch every day. I had the same meal every Monday. The same meal every Tuesday... well, you get the picture.

I went to the grocery store on Saturday mornings at 8:00 and bought the exact same things in the exact same quantity — I knew exactly how much I was going to eat. I had a pantry in my house with the shelves and freezer nicely stocked to withstand a three-week lapse in grocery shopping. We lived in Florida and hurricanes do, indeed, happen. Can labels faced forward and were arranged in alphabetical order by food type, on the shelves. When I brought in new stock, I cycled the old stock forward. As I said: a creature of habit.

Then Betsy and her daughter, Brittney, walked into my life.

Betsy and I met when she was in college, attending as a non-traditional student. ‘Non-traditional’ is a broad, antiquated descriptor for someone over the age of 22, or who has children, or who is working

to support her/himself, or, in Betsy's case, all of the above. And I was a faculty member where she attended. Now before you protest the inappropriateness of this situation, you should know that although she had taken a half-semester course from me, she was not in my academic program and would never again face the unfortunate misfortune of taking a class from me. She would, however, take me up on an offer to babysit.

I had no life outside of work. Seven months prior, I had made the decision never to wed, despite the fact that throughout my life I had wanted to be a father more than anything else I could imagine. Nevertheless, despite my romantic fantasies of fatherhood, I had decided to forego that dream and throw myself into my work. I worked from 6:00 a.m. to 11:00 p.m. Monday through Friday, Saturdays after my grocery shopping was complete, I worked until 11:00 p.m., and again on Sundays until 11:00 p.m., after I had finished my four loads of laundry.

Betsy was tolerant of and slightly amused by my slight tendencies toward minor OCD, although she was never able to grasp the life and death necessity of toilet paper hanging over the roll — but that is a conversation for the next chapter.

Brittney loved my house and cared not about the pantry because the house was trimmed in her favorite color — black. I should note that for whatever pointless reason I found black to be an inappropriate favorite color for a five-year-old. I spent three, perhaps four, completely fruitless minutes trying to explain the color wheel of the additive system of color and the color cone of the subtractive system of color to Brittney in order to persuade her to choose another favorite color. Thirty years later, black remains her favorite color.

In those days I sported a pencil-thin mustache and tiny goatee, á la Errol Flynn in *The Adventures of Robin Hood*; my favorite film and undoubtedly the greatest cinematic masterpiece of all time. I had a copy of one of the production stills from the film of *Robin Hood* sighting down an arrow as he was about to dispatch one of the Sheriff's henchmen. Did I mention this was my favorite film?

For reasons unknown even to me, I kept that photo in my office desk drawer. On the day I met Brittney, this beautiful, shy, child with an old soul and tender heart, she could not bring herself to call me by my name. Or to speak for that matter.

I leaned in toward her and asked, “You won’t speak to me because you don’t like my name — I can tell.

It's all right, though, my feelings aren't hurt. Because Kenny isn't my real name."

"It's not?" she replied.

"No. Would you like to know my real name?"

She nodded.

"My real name is Robin Hood."

Her eyes widened, and her mouth slid agape, so I slid open my desk drawer and showed her the production photo.

"See — it is me."

The wonder of a child and the lies we tell.

"So, you may call me Robin Hood. Only you."

And she did.

A few weeks after our Robin Hood encounter, Betsy needed a babysitter she could not afford, and I had no life, so I volunteered. She turned me down because she thought I must be a pervert of some kind. Eventually Betsy took me up on a trial basis and Robin Hood must have done something right, because four or five nights a week for the next three

or four weeks, I got to watch Disney movies and play Barbies (don't get me started on this subject), and generally see life through the eyes of a four-year-old. Less than a year later Betsy and I were married. And, to Brittney, I remained Robin Hood, the most wondrous title I'd earned to date.

About three weeks after we married, we had a new routine of starting our day by dropping Brittney off at pre-school at 6:30 when it opened so I could arrive at work at the ridiculously late hour of 7:00, already an hour behind in my day. But worth every minute of it, I might add. On one particular ordinary morning, Brittney came to me in the garage as I was loading the car, and said, "Robin Hood, may I ask you a question?"

"Of course, you may, sweetheart."

"Robin Hood, may I call you 'Daddy'?"

"Yes, you may. I would be honored for you call me 'Daddy'". My heart filled with a warmth beyond description.

She turned, and simultaneously running and jumping into the kitchen as only a child can, she yelled, "Mommy! Mommy! He said 'Yes'! He said 'Yes!'"

I had just earned the greatest title of my life.

Lessons

1) We are what we have earned. I've been called by many titles in my life. I was 'Master Kenneth B. Sanders' when I was growing up in the 1960's in conservative, traditional Kentucky. When I turned 18 I became 'Mr. Kenneth B. Sanders' simply because I got older. Other titles I earned in my life. I earned the title of "Kentucky Colonel" because the Kentucky Legislature passed a resolution and then Governor Martha Layne Collins declared me so based upon the resolution. I earned Assistant Professor and later, Associate Professor, because I met certain professional criteria. I was given titles of 'Director' and 'Dean' and 'Associate Provost,' because I was able to convince people to hire me to certain positions. I loved the title of 'Robin Hood' because it instantly made me a hero. But I never really earned that heroism.

As we pass through this world we may carry many titles, either by age, accomplishment, or position. We should maintain the modesty and judgment to know which titles are earned, however, and which we simply hold. The ones we earn stay with us. The ones we hold are temporary, fleeting. Titles like 'Spouse,' 'Partner,' and 'Friend' all take work. We are what we have earned.

2) We earn through investing in others and ourselves. We become parents by a simple act of biology or legal documentation. Two folks take a roll in the hay or microscopic bits have a party in a Petri, but nevertheless, it is just a simple act of biology. And a miraculous act it is. So, carrying the title of parent — particularly father — requires more biology and less accomplishment. However, the responsibilities of holding the titles of ‘parent,’ ‘father,’ ‘mother,’ ‘Mommy,’ or ‘Daddy’ are unwavering and massive in scale.

The titles of ‘Daddy’ or ‘Dad’ are entirely different matters - neither biology nor a legal document is necessarily required. We earn those two titles. Through the accomplishment of investment. Through the love, energy, and time we invest every day.

3) Investment is a funny thing. There is no guarantee on return. The success of investment is incremental over time. In other words, we’re gonna get better at this over time. Like an uphill rollercoaster ride. Lousy analogy as no such rollercoaster exists, but that is what we are building with our investment in our children — something that has never before existed. Brittney told us she wanted to be called ‘Sissy’ when she became a big sister. And so, her nickname became Sissy. However, the lesson she taught us was, in turn,

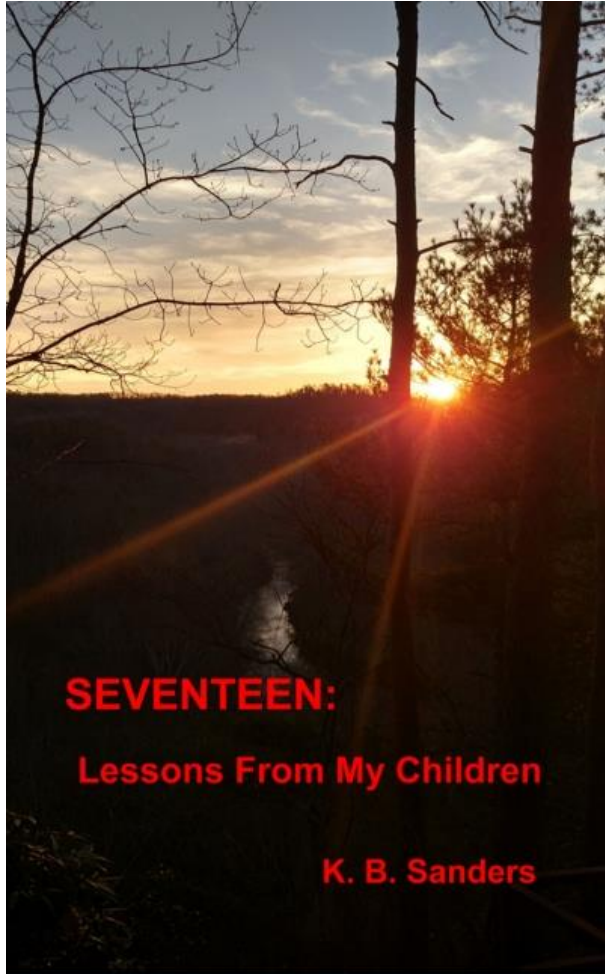
taught to her through our investment. Sissy is a title she earned and continues to earn nearly thirty years later.

4) Everything has a cost. Each and every decision we make in life, no matter how grand or how grand in scale, has some sort of cost involved. That cost may be in time or in money or in physical effort or in emotional effort, or some combination of all four. The costs and their consequences may be immediate, delayed, momentary, or have lasting, perhaps permanent effects. Even the passivity of choosing to do nothing comes at a cost.

When we fail to make the investment of ourselves in the ones we love, we may retain those once-earned titles, but they will become hollow as their true meaning is lost. Children want and need adults in their lives who are willing to work at it, to continue to earn love and respect. As a parent, as a father, as a daddy, I must work to earn those titles every day. Some days will be good ones. Other days I'll suck at it like green slimy pond water. Every once in a while, I have one of those rare gemstone kind of days and I feel all googly-eyed inside.

Whether your child is biological or comes to you through adoption or by way of a spouse/partner's prior relationship, as did Brittney, you are a part of their life. When you take another person into your

life you take their *whole* life. Your responsibilities include making investments of your love, time, energy, effort, and, yes, money, in the lives around you. Earn who you are.



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