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circa 1935

BOOK ONE: TEMPLATES

"There's a thread you follow. . . .
it doesn't change.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread."

William Stafford "The Way It Is"

Preface: On Being Special

Blessing and lament

In many ways, every human is a unique combination of genetic material, family, history, dynamics, environmental forces, and societal variables. Parents often tell their children how special they are.

Some children are encouraged to think of themselves of as special because of features or circumstances contributed by family members. For example, parents and/or relatives might be particularly proficient, accomplished, and/or awarded/recognized at an activity; say, sports, music, mathematics, science, teaching, medicine, politics, the law, or a trade. The child is thereby special because of the opportunities afforded to the descendants of people with special talents—via inheriting DNA, physical/mental aptitudes and attributes; perhaps particular looks, sizes, shapes and, of course, familial conditions and habits.

Certain children are encouraged to think of themselves as special because of the position(s) that their family holds (or has held in the past) by way of, or lacking, congenial environments and established "connections." For instance, the family may be part of the leadership class. The child is thereby special because of the opportunities afforded the members and/or descendants of families holding positions of societal and/or institutional power. Children without the advantages of privilege might be told that they are special because they have unique opportunities to rise above their station and its expectations.

Parents can encourage their children by empowering the child with notions that focus on the child themselves rather than legacies from others. In cases such as these, children are motivated by being told that they are free to become anything they want to become, to do

anything they want to do; that they make their own lives and future, set their own destiny, and that they have the encouragement of friends, family and society in their pursuits. Along this line of thought, children can become as special as they want to be, as they aspire to be, as they work at being. This freedom sometimes comes with a dash of "fate" in that being special challenges the child to live up to their full potential while noting that structural circumstances, or lack of effort, could impede their progress.

A number of these approaches were part of the messages that my parents delivered to me when telling me that I was special. However, none of them fully captures the essence of that message in my case.

I was special because I was chosen: I was adopted. I was not merely created by the physical manifestation of parental love as were all other "regular" children who came to parents without active and careful selection. Those children were not carefully chosen; they just happened. To the contrary, I was special because my parents picked me. From the time I was old enough to listen to and understand words (and perhaps earlier), my parents reminded me of this essential fact: They didn't just end up with me, they selected me. And part of how/why they picked me was tied to my being special: I stood out from other children that they could have picked. Further, since they were unable to produce children the natural way, I was a "special blessing" to their lives.

And the rest, the implications of being special in these ways, is the story worth telling. Why? Because I'm special, of course!

Moving through the lives of the people who first bestowed me with the label "You're Special" lends appreciation for the magic that issued from that incantation. The crux of the

matter might reside in the specific circumstances of my adoption; this story eventually returns to that key moment. However, jumping to that moment, and the assumptions and realizations therein, lacks the depth of understanding provided by examining family history.

Though influenced by my father, Roger, I am, and always have been, turning into my mother, Evangeline.

Threads is a work of creative non-fiction.

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