

Neverland

One of my best childhood vacations was when I was 9 and it rained the entire time we went to the Outer Banks with 10 of my cousins. I devoured Roald Dahl's *Matilda* while my brother conquered *Ninja Turtles* on his Gameboy.

But our main pastime was gathering with our cousins around a TV the size of some computer monitors to watch *Hook* on VHS. In this story, the grown up Peter Pan has abandoned the child inside of him in favor of joining the regimented adult world in which he's chosen to be a workaholic lawyer. His son and daughter, whom he treats coldly, are kidnapped by Captain Hook and taken to Neverland, where Tinkerbell and the Lost Boys educate and encourage Peter to find the boy he once was so that he can rescue his children.



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The play button was pushed at the first hint of sunlight. We fought with swords we bought at a T-shirt shop while the tape rewound. Soon, we were reciting every line, laughing at the same jokes, taking turns playing roles, eating every one of our meals on paper plates in front of the TV so that we didn't miss a moment. We fell asleep watching *Hook* and allowed Peter Pan and Captain Hook to commandeer our dreams. We were the Lost Boys (and girls). This was the movie that defined my childhood.

Fast forward 20+ years. Unlike the Lost Boys, my cousins and I have grown into teachers, engineers, physical therapists, and musicians. We still love pirates and even throw occasional pirate costume parties. We've never forgotten that summer and how we refused to let a washed-out beach week threaten our fun.

This summer I took my own children to Ocean City. The weather was far from gorgeous. Friday night, after a delicious meal at Lombardi's, was the perfect kind of day to introduce Collin to *Hook*.

He sat down next to me on the love seat and was unusually quiet for the majority of the movie, as was I. It was the first time I had watched the movie since I was a child. The frightening part was that I saw so much of myself in Peter Pan, the father who was always on his phone (which is the size of a shoebox), fails to acknowledge his children when he's preoccupied by a seemingly more important task, and explosively loses his patience. How did I end up like that?

The shame I felt began to disappear when Peter became reacquainted with the Lost Boys. There's a scene when they're having an imaginary food fight and Peter begins

to remember who he used to be. At that point in the film, so did I. I thought back to myself as a teenager, babysitting for every kid in the neighborhood, making up games and songs, playing dress-up, telling stories. What happened to that girl? She was the mom I always wanted to be. I had to bring her back.

At the end of the movie, there were tears, but not mine. Collin held on to me, sniffing, his tears running down my arm. I didn't think a 5-year-old could sense the gravity of such a movie. I know I didn't before now. So, I asked why he was crying.

"Why did the baby in the carriage roll away?" he asked.

I hugged him, my heart pounding at the recollection of the image. It was more disturbing than I had remembered. I squeezed him tighter, brushing a hot tear from his sunburned cheek. "Ohhh, it's okay, Collin. Why are you worried?"

"The baby's going to get hurt!"

"The baby is fine. He rolled away because he didn't want to grow up, but he grows up to be Peter Pan."

"But, I don't want to grow up!" he said.

"We all have to grow up sometime," I told him, recording in my mind the softness of his skin and hair as I rubbed his head, knowing I would not be able to hold him like this forever, "but that doesn't mean we have to stop having fun."

I thought about my own words as they came out of my mouth. What happened to my imagination and how can I get it back? Could I postpone a phone call for five minutes so I can build a tall tower of blocks? Is it possible to get silly rather than getting angry over small things? How can I remember to pray for the patience it takes to address my children's needs?

Collin has made it clear that he doesn't like Hook and that's okay. Maybe he'll give it another shot when he's older, and he'll get something else out of it. I know I did.

***I began writing this piece after returning from Ocean City in July. On August 11th, I learned of Robin Williams' tragic death. Oddly enough, I didn't immediately associate the immensely talented actor with Hook until my cousin posted a photo from the film on Facebook and tagged my cousins, my brother and I. It started a conversation among us that took me straight back to that epic vacation when we learned the real meaning of the word "Bangarang!" Peter Pan was never Robin Williams to me. He was Peter Pan. That's what good actors do.

For me, Robin Williams' greatest talent was playing a father in crisis, who loved his kids so much it hurt, and who learned in big and little ways, through trial and error, how to be a better parent. I imagine that in the real world he was the same way. May his children be blessed. I thank Mr. Williams for helping me to see my faults as a parent and for guiding me toward what's really important when it comes to raising children.