To a Mouse: Lessons in Compassion
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"An cozic here, beneath the blast
Thou thoughts to dwell....
That wee-bit heap o' leaves an' stibble
Has cost thee minnie a weary nibble!" —Burns

My father was a man of the soil. He could coax the most precious commodities from the ground. But it was his respect for all God’s creatures that taught me some of life’s greatest lessons.

Springtime is a season of wonderment, more so when growing up on a farm. It was always a busy time of year for my father, but he was never too busy to teach my brother and me principles of hard work, compassion, and. more importantly, sheer joy. I remember one spring morning almost fifty years ago; I can close my eyes and smell the freshly turned earth; I can see my father striding across my grandfather’s field, his hat pulled down just enough to shade his eyes from the morning sun. He whistled, swinging his arms in his usual confident way. I ran to meet him from where I had been playing beneath the snowball bushes, their branches drooping under the weight of blossoming clusters of white laced with delicate green beans. I asked why he had stopped the tractor in the middle of the field. He rumpled my hair and replied, “Breakdown.” He rounded the corner of the house and entered the garage where his tool bench stood solidly attached to the north wall. It was a large, wooden bench carefully handcrafted by my father and fitted with numerous little drawers and shelves. These held a multiplicity of nails, screws, wires, nuts, bolts, and tools the combination of which could repair a tractor, car, washing machine, or a baby doll. When I was six years of age, it seemed to me that my father could repair anything when standing at that wooden altar.

I stopped my play for a moment, my attention drawn to the gulls that had followed the furrows sliced through the rich, black earth by my father’s plow. I watched as these noisy harbingers of spring dove and squealed into the freshly turned earth, searching for worms and other insects. Suddenly, I heard my father’s voice. “Sister, come and see what I’ve found.” I turned and entered into the cool darkness of the garage. At first, I couldn’t see my father; it took my eyes a moment to adjust to the dim light. Then, I saw him standing at the workbench before an open drawer. I moved toward him, and he lifted me in his strong arms and pointed to a tangle of fluff and grass laying there among the nuts and bolts in the drawer. There, I saw what appeared to be five little pink, wiggling fingers. The tiny creatures were strange and unappealing, and I drew back, rather frightened, into the safety of my father’s arms. “Baby mice,” he told me. “They are hairless and blind now, and that is why they look so strange. In a few days, they will begin to change. Their eyes will open; they will grow hair; and then you’ll recognize them as tiny, tiny mice. I must have left the drawer open just enough for the mother to squeeze in and build her nest.”

I searched my father’s tanned face and wondered what he would say next. My mother was deathly afraid of mice. I knew that, and my father knew it also. Rarely would one find its way into our basement, but when a mouse did make that fatal mistake, my mother would immediately call Macarthur, our black cocker spaniel, to “seek and destroy.”

My father carefully closed the drawer, leaving it slightly ajar as he must have mistakenly done weeks before. They’ll grow fast and move into the field,” he said more to himself than to me. “We’ll leave them alone,” he paused and continued quietly, “After all, the outdoors is their domain, not ours.” I saw my father grow large at that moment. His compassion for those tiny mice will live forever in my mind. He smiled, his bright blue eyes sparkling in that dim garage as he said, “Don’t mention this to Mom; she never comes out here.” He smiled again and set me down.
Together over the next few weeks, we visited the mice several times. They grew rapidly as my father had predicted, and then one day they were gone. I watched from my seat on an overturned bucket as my father cleaned out the drawer and then closed it tightly.

“Wee, sleeket, cowan, tim’rous beastie, 
O, what a panic’s in thy brestie!” —Burns

Years later, as a mother, I had a similar experience with a mouse and my youngest son. It was spring, and he was five years old, exploring life and the field behind our home. I watched from the window as he chased dragonflies. I remembered a time when I was fortunate enough to be occupied in such activities. Suddenly, the back door slammed, and I heard his footsteps as he entered the house. I stepped into the hallway, smiled and asked, “Hi, Sweetie, what are you doing?” I noticed that his little hands were cupped carefully together almost in prayer. “What do you have?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he replied quietly, and his face searched mine for answers to questions yet unspoken. Now any mother knows that the word “nothing” is a red flag. If a mother asks what a little boy is carrying in his hands or pockets, and he replies “rocks,” “bugs,” “spiders,” “dirt,” or “caterpillars,” the mothers say, “Be careful and don’t make a mess,” and she goes right back to what she was doing, but if he says, “nothing,” then a mother stops and inquires further.

“Honey, what’s in your hands?” I asked again. He spread his thumbs just enough for me to peer inside and see two diminutive eyes peering back at me. My son’s beautiful eyes brimmed with tears as he blurted out, “The kitty was hurting him.” I looked at my son, and I could see myself years earlier in that dim garage, standing in front of that tool bench and looking into that drawer of tiny mice. My son’s hands were now that drawer. I could hear my father’s words, “The outside is their domain.” I knelt down and took my young son by his quivering shoulders. “Let’s take him out to the field and release him. He needs to find his family,” I said. He nodded, and a relieved smile broke across his face. We walked slowly together through the sweet-smelling hay until we came to the far ditch bank, far away from Midnight, the cat. My son hunched over and gently opened his small hands. The mouse blinked, its eyes adjusting to the sunlight then suddenly jumped from those small, protective hands and scampered into the field.

“Still thou art blest, compar’e twi’ me
The present only thouches thee:
But Och! I backward east my ’e,
An forward tho’ I canna see
I guess and fear.” —Burns

I have been proud of my son for many things as I have watched him grow—proud of good grades and touchdowns and tackles on the football field. I have been proud of his attaining the rank of Eagle Scout, but I will never be prouder of him than that day when I saw the compassion in his eyes for one of God’s smallest and most insignificant creatures. My hope is that his compassion will extend into his future and be shared with all mankind.