

Barbara Kay: Looking for mother's helper, at least 15 years old, able to swim

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Jonathan Kay
"Chrissy" and Barbara Kay, in 1988

When my children were toddlers, I advertised for a mother's helper (as we then called them) who could provide me with summer- long help, stipulating that candidates must be at least 15 and able to swim. An older teenager, Diane, called on her younger sister Susan's behalf. Susan was 14 and couldn't swim, but Diane's touchingly earnest brief for Susan's compensating virtues overcame my hesitation to interview her.

O lucky day when I hired Susan! My kids were not easy. Susan was a godsend: gentle but firm, patient, mysteriously mature and nurturing. This calmness of spirit was especially admirable given that Susan and her two sisters were virtual orphans, almost literally raising themselves in a section of Montreal. Susan didn't seek out the babysitting job for disposable income; she needed it for life's barest necessities.

A few years later, the youngest sister, Chrissy, took over as our weekend and summer helper. She was equally responsible and competent, equally lovable to our children and us.

Later in life, Susan embraced the Baha'i religion. She is now a university professor in Ohio, mother of three accomplished daughters. Chrissy chose military life here in Canada. She joined the Reserves to earn enough money to put herself through junior college, living with us for months at a time in Montreal, even when my children could take care of themselves. Then she joined the regular Forces.

Moving up the ranks over the last 30 years, she has been posted all over Canada, not to mention nine months in Kandahar. She has a son and daughter from a first marriage, and two daughters from a second marriage to a professional chef, who cheerfully supports Chrissy's peripatetic career wherever necessary.

This past weekend, I attended the marriage of Chrissy's eldest daughter Jordan, in rural Nova Scotia. Two years ago, a certain Patrick fell into conversation with a young man at a laundromat, who invited him to a Baha'i meeting. He liked what he found and adopted Baha'i as his religion. Jordan, not officially Baha'i herself, but well- attuned and sympathetic to the tenets of her aunt Susan's faith, turned up at one of the meetings. Their eyes met across the room.

These days, modern brides and grooms usually are older than they were in my day. They're already cohabiting in many cases. But Baha'is are old- fashioned about such matters. And so, only two years after Jordan and Patrick met — she 20, he 23 — here they stood, throwbacks to my own cultural era, when marriage was the bright line behind dependent youth and independent adulthood.

The circle is unbroken. Working her way through McGill University, Jordan has been helping care for my granddaughters, who adore her just as my kids adored Chrissy. And so Joanne's two little girls were the flower girls at Jordan's wedding, just as Jordan had been the flower girl at Joanne's wedding 16 years ago.

This sun- drenched garden wedding was a wonderfully old- fashioned, family- oriented affair. Chrissy made my granddaughters' dresses; Jordan's bridal gown was made by a close friend; the bridesmaids' dresses by Chrissy's sister Diane. Chrissy's husband Scott cooked the wedding dinner, which was held at the nearby military base mess. The bridesmaids picked wildflowers and made the bride's bouquet. Decorations, music, photography: all made or executed by family and friends.

As is the Baha'i custom, the couple's public vows established the marriage; no clergy presided. Awed by their transformation, they awed all their witnesses. We're still feeling the glow.

These exceptional women have been a blessing to us, and in their industry, humility, family solidarity and unwavering strength of character through periods of duress, inspiring role models to our children. And to think we would have missed all that, if 40 years ago I had said to Diana, "Sorry, she has to be 15 and able to swim ..."

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