

**The Doorstep Baby**  
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**July 8, 2018**

Because I've never stood before the entire congregation to share my personal thoughts, I was relieved to at least have a theme upon which to work. Doors – what a rich metaphor, one that can lead, literally, anywhere. But, I found myself quickly reflecting upon how I could share the symbolism of doors that is most meaningful to me.

A variety of items have traditionally been left at the front door of a dwelling. In some places mail is delivered straight to the door. Newspapers, for years the main way for learning more or less factual current events, are traditionally thrown towards the front door. The dietary staple milk and sometimes other dairy products or eggs were once commonly delivered to doors. And even today, who doesn't smile to open their front door and see a package waiting there.

But not all things left at doorsteps are ordered and purchased. Leaving aside pranks and pamphlets, I am focusing on the most precious and profound of all packages found at the door. We may think that it is as rare as the fresh milk in glass bottles these days, but we can still conjure the image just as easily thanks to popular culture. Perhaps in a basket, or box, or just wrapped in a blanket – societies the world over are familiar with the concept of the baby left at a door for someone to find. Hence, we even have a special name for these anonymously relinquished children: foundlings.

It is with good reason that this concept is so universal. Babies have been abandoned probably for as long as babies have existed. And while it may seem like a shocking rarity in the modern United States, trust me when I say it is still a daily occurrence especially in less fortunate parts of the world – places with fewer resources, less support, harsher decisions. But I don't want to dwell on the utter tragedy that leads a mother, or father, to abandon their own offspring. Today, I'd rather share what I think that door represents to that mother or father. It represents hope.

I'd like to believe that door represents the hope that their child will find shelter, will find the resources they cannot provide, and, if god or fate is especially kind, even find love and happiness. Otherwise, why choose a door at all? Surely, there is a lot of hope for what lies on the other side of that door.

It's a potent image. So much so that despite the fact that today foundlings are most often left at a hospital, or perhaps a public place or a legally-sanctioned drop-off location – the bundled baby left at a door is the image most commonly found in our culture. And wow is it found. The "doorstep baby" is literally rampant in literature. It's a trope of television and a mainstay in movies. I'd be willing to bet that given the chance every single person in this room could name at least one foundling from popular culture. Of course, before long we'd have digressed into a

variety of diverting debates like, “Does Harry Potter still count even if it wasn’t his parents who left him?” or “Was the Moses story the actual first ‘Moses story’?”

I never really thought about how prevalent foundlings, orphans, and adoptees are in popular culture until I began training as an adoptive parent. But it’s a phenomenon that all parents are bound to have noticed. Quick, think of a Disney movie where the hero’s parents aren’t dead or missing or single parents. There are a few good ones – Let’s hear it for *Mulan*, *Brave* and *Moana*. Now before we start mentally inventorying Dream Works and Pixar, and all your favorite book series, and comics and everything else, we need to back up. Because when you start to notice how common the parentless child is in popular culture, you are led to the obvious question: Why?

Why, when the fabric of our society is structured around the nuclear family, are we so obsessed with stories that tear that fabric apart? It just so happens that I’ve done some reading on the subject. I’ve had *Adoption at the Movies* bookmarked ever since being triggered by an abandonment scene in the middle of *Kung Fu Panda 2*. Plus, I minored in English and have dabbled in writing fiction. So, the sensible conclusion I have drawn from all of this is that the foundling or orphan firstly makes an appealing protagonist because they immediately draw on the sympathy of the reader or viewer.

I suspect this is something that many of us at UCH can relate to very much right now. I could easily discuss the upswell of sympathy and outrage many of us felt learning of the anguish of undocumented minors being forcible separated from their families upon crossing our borders. But that situation deserves its own discussion.

When I first conceived of this topic, I was instead thinking of this congregation as we continue to find ourselves without a settled minister. I suppose we’re more of a group home than a baby at a doorstep, but the sense of abandonment is a valid reaction when no one answered the call to settle here despite all the devoted work of the search committee. This calls to mind an aspect of the orphan narrative not always properly illustrated – the need to grieve loss no matter how vaguely remembered or tenuous.

I have never attended UCH at a time when we had a settled, permanent minister. But, I can attest to the caring and capable guardianship of three interim ministers in my time here. Their nurturing has been crucial, but I sometimes feel like a troubled youth passed from one foster home to another, as each moved on. One of the reasons I took so long to sign the membership book was the hope that I could do so in more stable and certain circumstances. Eventually, however, I came to recognize that I have formed attachments here – strong ones that I believe will be lasting even if we were never to get a settled minister. And, even if no one has committed to us, I, like all of you, have committed to this church and its works.

This brings to mind the other, and in my mind, the greatest, reason why the orphan or foundling is so prominent in our cultural consciousness. In storytelling, when a young protagonist lacks the

guidance of parents, they must become innovatively self-reliant regardless of whether their figurative doorstep opens to a blessing or a curse. They tend learn the truths of their world from their own experiences rather than what they are told to believe from birth. Along the way they may find their own mentors and their chosen bonds of love and friendship become all the stronger due to their preciousness.

Alternately, tempered by loss, the foundling or orphan may grow to become a fearless adventurer because they have nothing else to lose. No matter what door these characters may have been placed upon, they drive their own stories. Because by being unrooted, they tend to have what others more firmly wrapped in their family trees and conventional beginnings might lack – agency. Whatever the protagonist becomes – a wily street urchin, a discerning governess, a hero who saves the entire world – their loss leaves them free to seek their own fortunes.

Of course, even in fiction, not every doorstep baby becomes a hero. Some travel a darker path. Despite being adopted into royalty, Marvel's Loki definitely still has issues. Likewise, in our real world, lives that begin with abandonment or other profound loss certainly do not always end happily ever after. Some people never find the nurturing and love they need and as result grow to embody the negativity in which they are surrounded. Some people are never given a doorway to hope. And, even if they are, the ramifications of early trauma are persistent even in the most ideal of circumstances.

Loss can make us all wary. Less willing to trust. Less willing to hope. We know, after all that life is not fair. And, we are reminded of this every day. Every time we unfurl the newspaper or turn on the news we are reminded that the world is a disappointing if not terrifying place. In the current political climate, I find myself feeling like even more of an outsider. Lately it feels like our world has abandoned its ideals along with many of its people. It's getting colder and colder on this doorstep.

But, I am blessed to find that I'm not alone on this doorstep. And, the wonderful company I find myself surrounded by today continues to remind me that I still have the agency to be a protagonist in my own story even if I feel disempowered. I do not aspire to be a great hero, but I know that I am loved and that I can serve, even if just a little. I know that I can seek the truth and help others, even if just a little. Even though I may sometimes feel like I've been abandoned in the dark forest filled with wolves and witches, when I am here, I feel like I have been lovingly placed at a promising doorstep. We have one another and we are no babes in the woods. We need only have the agency and the inspiration to reach up, open the door ourselves, and hope.