

MY ADVENTURE IN ODYSSEY

“Okay, Amber, we’re ready for you. Let’s head on back to the recording studio and get you set up.”

I hopped off the stool where I waited for my cue and followed the engineer into the soundproof recording booth.

“Have a seat right here, honey. This microphone is for you,” he explained, walking over with me to help me get situated. I placed my script on the music stand in front of me and plopped myself down in the chair.

“Here are your headphones. Just put them on your ears like this,” he continued, as he adjusted the wide black strap across the top of my head and placed an earphone over each ear. They felt like a pair of winter earmuffs, only much heavier. My head bobbed at the weight of them, and the suction they created around my ears muted all sound, causing the world to go silent.

Then a loud, clear voice from within the earphones broke the dead air. The sound came from a man on the other side

of the glass where the engineers sat in front of their mixing boards, ready to record.

“Okay, Amber, let’s test the microphone. Do you have your script?”

“Yes, but I already know my lines.” I smiled with pride.

“Alright, then here we go!”

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I was a home-schooled third-grader. When most kids visit their dad at work, they go to an office, or a storefront. I, on the other hand, was in a recording studio at the Focus on the Family headquarters in Colorado Springs where my dad worked as an executive. The script on the music stand in front of me was to another episode of the popular kids’ radio drama, “Adventures



Will Ryan (Eugene Meltsner) and me

in Odyssey.” Venturing into the world of Whit’s End with characters like Mr. John Avery Whittaker, Connie Kendall, and Eugene Meltsner, a “world of discovery, imagination, and excitement” awaited all who listened.

I listened multiple times to every episode ever made. I knew them all by name, which cassette or CD package to find them on, and the story line of each. The episodes of “Adventures in Odyssey” helped me fall asleep at night, gauged the time remaining on a road trip, and made cleaning my room a little easier. The excitement of playing one of the characters was only matched by seeing the details of how the episodes were created. I loved watching the actors record, listening as the voice parts were mixed with music to create smooth transitions between scenes, and seeing how foley (the sound-effects) made the whole story come to life. But the “world of discovery, imagination, and excitement” didn’t just live within the fantasy of Whit’s End; it also lived within my everyday life—especially my home life. From the time I was very young, I was taught the utmost importance of one thing: family.



“Cherry Coke, Daddy! Cherry Coke!” I begged as a toddler inside the nursery of our home in Kalispell, Montana. I pulled at my dad’s pant leg and looked up at him until he relented. Smiling down, he picked me up, threw me up in the air, and caught me. I’d giggle and say, “Again, Daddy! Again!”

For as far back as I can remember, I was the apple of my father’s eye. From butterfly kisses to Saturday-morning cuddles to Cherry Cokes, we shared a special bond that can only be created between a dad and his little girl. He delighted in me as his

only daughter, and with a twinkle in his eye, often made a point to tell me, “I’m so proud of you, Am.”

My parents worked hard to incorporate values that James Dobson and Focus on the Family deemed important, which really came down to two foundational commands: love God with all your heart, and foster a godly family. Family was the ultimate gift and should reflect Christ in all aspects. Principles like the sanctity of marriage, the belief that every life is valuable, and the fact that children should be raised with morals grounded in biblical principles all pointed back to loving God. That’s how you focused on your family.

My parents modeled many of these things well. With the belief that family is more important than work, they made it a priority to be present in the lives of me and my younger brother, Daniel, as we grew up. Thankfully, working at Focus allowed my father more leeway than many when it came to being an active parent. Always tucking me into bed at night and praying with me for sweet dreams and protection, my dad often sang:

*You’re the spirit of Christmas, my star on the tree
 You’re the Easter bunny, to Mommy and me
 You’re sugar and spice, you’re everything nice
 And you’re Daddy’s little girl!*¹

I never doubted that I was loved.

But leaving our safe home near relatives in Montana to accept a job at Focus and discover life in the outskirts of Los Angeles was a risk for us. Years later my dad told me that when we arrived in California, he was so frightened by what he saw

1. The Mills Brothers, “Daddy’s Little Girl,” 1950.

that he wanted turn around and head straight back to Montana. This was *not* where he wanted to raise his family. But trusting God's providence, he stayed, and now thirty years later my dad is still employed as an executive at Focus.

However, he was grateful in 1991 when Focus relocated to beautiful Colorado Springs. Anxious to get away from the inner-city feel and into a smaller town, my parents purchased a home in a quiet neighborhood on the north end of the city, only a short drive from the new Focus headquarters. The epicenter for many major Christian ministries, Colorado Springs quickly felt like home, and we put down new roots.

Early on, my mom made home-schooling my brother and me her passion. Not wanting us to attend the below-average public school in our neighborhood, and not being able to afford private school, it seemed like the best fit for raising "godly" children. Home-schooling was popular among Christians in Colorado Springs, so we continued to flourish in that environment. Networking and doing co-ops with other home-school families, my mom picked out curriculum for each subject and prepared a detailed schedule to keep us on task each day. Our mornings always started with individual quiet time with God, followed by getting dressed and being ready for family breakfast and devotions at 7am.

Our days were highly structured, but after lunch Danny and I could be found lying on our beds, listening to "Adventures in Odyssey." Like a Christian Disneyland for the ears, the twenty-five-minute radio programs kept us occupied and engaged, while teaching us Christian morals and values like honesty, integrity, and service to others. Although it was a nice break in our day, my mom knew that allowing time for us to listen to an episode



My first day of school

wasn't just entertainment; it was another avenue for us to learn the morals she and my dad were trying hard to instill in us. They used the episodes as a springboard to teach us an overarching family value. For instance, in the episode "Fences," when Connie Kendall is upset that her father cancels his trip to Odyssey, the theme emphasized throughout the story is dealing with disappointment and the importance of communication. In "Treasures of the Heart" when the Barclay family holds a yard sale to clean up their cluttered attic, but finds keepsakes that hold varying degrees of value for them, the lesson is setting proper priorities on material things. Some episodes also highlight a certain historical character or event, like the three-part series "The Underground Railroad" or "Pilgrim's Progress Revisited."

Each episode we listened to taught values like manners, respect, and the importance of cultivating your own relationship with God—values my parents hoped we would pick up on and incorporate into our own lives as we grew up.

When “Adventures in Odyssey” celebrated its tenth year, Focus on the Family headquarters hosted a special event where an episode of the show was recorded in front of a live audience. Key actors were flown in from Los Angeles and my brother and I both played a part. Families from all over were encouraged to attend, which meant lines were long, the house was packed, and people buzzed with excitement.



Paul Herlinger (Mr. Whittaker) and me



*Recording the 'Adventures in Odyssey' live episode
for its tenth year anniversary celebration*

When everyone was in place and ready to begin, the theme song played and the lights went down.

“Hi, this is Chris. Welcome to Adventures in Odyssey!” The famous first words of the show came through loud and clear.

Each of us bantered through our lines together and music played to transition us from scene to scene. A couple of guys on the side of the stage did live foley throughout the show so you could see how the sound effects were actually created. The crowd was fully engaged.

Following the recording, we all sat behind a long table as people lined up to collect autographs. They bought T-shirts, CD packages, and the newly released book, “The Complete Guide to Adventures in Odyssey,” and worked their way down

the line so that each of the actors could sign their mementos from the day.

“Will you sign this for me?” a cute little girl in pigtails asked, with her *Odyssey* T-shirt in one hand and her doll in the other.

“Of course,” I said with a smile. “What’s your doll’s name?” I asked as I personalized her T-shirt for her. I was an early teenager at the time, but remembered my doll-playing days well.

As a little girl, I loved dressing up my dolls and playing house. I dreamed about my future with a husband and family of my own to raise on the same Focus foundation I was reared on. I did not dream that I would be married to a woman and that my dad’s position at Focus would divide me from my family rather than keep us focused on it—but that’s what happened. I got married to my wife Clara in 2014 without any family present



Signing autographs at the ‘Adventures in Odyssey’ tenth year anniversary event held at Focus on the Family

to support me and with my relationship with my parents hanging by a thread.

When Clara was five years old, she already knew she was attracted to girls—but not me. When I was five, I innocently played with my Cabbage Patch doll named Holly Dolly and imagined a future family very similar to the one I was being raised in. It included a good husband, a cultivated family environment, kids with a home-schooled upbringing, and loads of holiday traditions.

My parents worked hard to model a healthy relationship and were conscientious about not arguing in front of us kids. I imagined a marriage that looked very similar to theirs. Looking back, I'm very grateful that I didn't grow up in a house of disension. I'm grateful not to have memories of my parents yelling at one another or at us. I'm sure that is something they worked hard for.

But this also created an aura of perfection and didn't provide the opportunity for me to learn that conflict is normal. Since their disagreements always took place behind closed doors, I never got to see my parents model healthy disagreement and resolution. As a result, I grew up believing that a normal life meant a happy life without conflict.

As I grew, I noticed even more that strong emotions—especially negative emotions—weren't welcome. We were taught to be happy, blessed, and respectful. There was little tolerance for laziness (the early bird gets the worm), messiness (cleanliness is next to godliness), or grumpiness (God never gives you more than you can handle). We were taught that everything happens for a reason and that having enough faith and praying more were the answer to all of life's problems.

In time, these limits on expression stunted my emotional growth. Without freedom to experiment with or vocalize other emotions like sadness, disappointment, or anger, I internalized those feelings. My parents' subtle disapproval of my emotions squelched my chance for healthy development.



Once a year, our church hosted a father-daughter dance. At the age of nine, I'd been anxiously waiting for this night for weeks. I was excited to dress up and have a night out with my dad all to myself. But peering out the window, the once-thin blanket of white had now tripled in depth and the storm showed no signs of slowing down. I got anxious, fear threatening to deflate my bubbly spirit.

Then the phone rang. I could hear my mom talking in the kitchen, but couldn't make out what she was saying. Still, I knew. Soon, she knocked on my bedroom door.

"Come in," I mumbled sadly. Mom opened the door to tell me the news she knew I didn't want to hear: the dance had been canceled due to inclement weather. I blinked back tears.

"Sometimes it's just better to not get your hopes up about things at all, Amber," she said. "That way you're not disappointed when they don't work out."

I know she meant well, grasping at whatever she could to make me feel better. But telling me not to get my hopes up or express disappointment caused me to withdraw, and left me feeling depressed rather than encouraged. Moments like those communicated to me that emotions other than happiness and joy are best kept inside, and from early childhood, I began compartmentalizing what I felt.

Excitement, though, was usually an acceptable emotion—especially around the holidays. My mom had a gift for making the holidays meaningful, special, and full of symbolism. With fall as her favorite time of year, her love for cool, crisp weather and vibrant aspens across the Rocky Mountains sparked the beginning of our Great Pumpkin Dinner tradition.

We went trick-or-treating in our younger years, but as we got older trick-or-treating was replaced with the Great Pumpkin Dinner. Gathering together in our home with friends, we started the festivities with the annual pumpkin-carving contest. Spreading old newspaper across the picnic table in the backyard, we each chose a pattern and took careful time and pride in crafting our designs. Once the carving was complete and candles glowed within them, we lined the pumpkins up for the ultimate display.

When the winner was announced and the applause subsided, we gathered around the table for a big fall potluck. Joining hands and offering a prayer, we then enjoyed a feast of apple cider beef stew (often cooked inside an actual pumpkin), pumpkin bread, orange soda, and anything else pumpkin-themed we could come up with. Later in the evening, we watched *It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown*. Sitting around the fireplace with caramel apples and hot apple cider in hand, we watched in anticipation as Linus sat in the field awaiting the Great Pumpkin's appearance. It never got old. In fact, it created such wonderful memories for me that it's a tradition my wife and I continue to hold to this day, each year hosting a new group of friends in our home to experience the Great Pumpkin extravaganza. I still always look forward to it. But fall is a bittersweet time for me. I think of my mom every year as I set the table for this event. I



The Great Pumpkin Dinner my wife and I hosted in 2015

wish she could see it. It's a tradition I enjoy upholding, but that joy is always accompanied by lingering sadness in my heart.

Christmas was always my favorite holiday of the year. My dad disguised himself as Santa Claus and came to visit us in his red suit each Christmas Eve. Pushing nostalgia as long as I could, I begged him to continue the tradition until I was twenty-two. As a kid, I never figured out why Santa always came at the exact time that my dad ran to the store to get 7 Up for the punch. But as we grew, we loved sitting on his lap for an annual photo and counted on the matching pajamas he brought in his sack for me and Mom, and likewise for Daniel and Dad. We went to bed each Christmas Eve snuggled up in new flannel warmth, smiling at the fact that Santa had come for yet another year. Trying hard to create a family bond and also fond family memories that we would look back on for years to come, Mom would often tell me, "Amber, friends will come and go, but your family will always be there for you."

I believed what she said. Trusting it, I shaped my view of the world around the concept that Cherry Coke and Santa Claus moments would always be there, and believed that focusing on my family should take priority above all else. I had no idea that in the future, my family would teach me something very different.