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Tumbleweeds
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The Landscape of Summer

“There are only two lasting bequests we can hope to give our children. One of these is roots; the other is wings.” ~ Cecelia Lasbury

In the hopes of instilling deep roots in my three children, every summer since their births, I have packed the car to bursting and we have headed north to spend weeks on my parents’ cattle ranch in South Dakota.

In my kids’ earliest years, we drove all night in order to make the most of the relatively long stretches of time when the latest baby would sleep. My mom encouraged me to take more time on the drive, telling me it was the journey, not the destination, that mattered. After listening to an 8-month-old cry for hours on end, let me tell you, it’s *all* about the destination. There is only so much Q.F.T. (Quality Family Time. Sometimes there’s another F in that acronym) that one can stand....

When we finally arrived, we tumbled out of the car, along with endless piles of goldfish crackers, juice boxes, and art supplies. I’ve learned even the most enticing of coloring books holds the attention of a five-year-old for an average of ten minutes at most. When we lived in California, the drive took 28 hours straight. The 15 that it takes from Santa Fe now feels like a veritable hop, skip, and a jump.

From the time each child turned three, Wyatt, Luke, and Wynn have packed for themselves. I check only to make sure they have their cowboy boots, jeans, and hats. Beyond that, it is up to them. I discover what they’ve deemed necessary when we arrive

and they begin to unpack their suitcases. For years, the packed suitcases have revealed essential stuffed animals, a couple of favorite t-shirts and shorts, worn and tattered from the previous summer on the ranch, and usually an odd rope or tool. That's it. And it's more than enough. Clearly, every year I end up driving the 200-mile round trip to town to buy them underwear and socks, which have thus far have never once made cut.

The kids' time on the ranch is filled with exploring, horseback riding, swimming in the water dam—and what every ranch kid takes for granted and every town kid can hardly believe their luck about—driving. One day as we drove across the pasture, a four-year-old Wyatt sat driving on my dad's lap. Dad laid down the rule to Wyatt, “No driving on the highway until you're five.” My time on the ranch is spent saddling and unsaddling horses until I feel my arms might snap off.

As we find ourselves in summer, across the U.S. families are packing up for a sojourn home or elsewhere, and it has me thinking about how the landscape of the summers of our childhood shape and define us in so many ways and what does this mean for my own children?

I grew up on a cattle ranch in an area of southeastern Arizona called Cascabel, which means the rattle of a rattlesnake. (This is the statement where my kids eyes glaze over and they try not to yawn... I just can't stop myself from saying it, none-the-less. They haven't actually rolled their eyes at me yet, but my oldest is just entering his teenage years and I know it's coming....) Sand, rock, saguaro, ocotillo, and mesquite trees. My summers were spent walking behind a pickup and a trailer, picking up hay bales and tossing them up to be stacked on the trailer, walking in front of a tractor, tossing newly-turned up rocks that could damage the blades of the disc and throwing

them into the front bucket, and painting the corrals with creosote to protect the wood against water and bugs, until my parents saw a piece on the news that creosote is a carcinogen and called me in mid-stroke. And riding, endless riding. I try, I really *try* not to tell my kids these stories too much. I always fail miserably. They ring even in my own ears along the lines of “And when I was your age I walked five miles through the snow to the school bus!” It doesn’t help that we didn’t have a phone when I was growing up. We really didn’t. Don’t even get my kids started on *that*....

Which brings me to one of the main ideas I’ve been pondering as I study the landscape of my kids’ summers, divided between the open prairie of the ranch and the juniper and piñon studded red earth around our Santa Fe home. In previous generations, the landscape of summer for young people meant there was always work to be done—meaningful, relevant work that contributed to the overall family. In my childhood, the bales had to be picked up, the rocks removed from the field, the cows checked. The vast majority of kids raised in town, mine included, spend their summers going to the swimming pool and attending camps. They don’t experience that real work and sense of contribution to the family. What does that mean for them?

Every summer when we arrive on the ranch I mentally, and without giving it any thought, switch gears to the modes of being and doing on a ranch. And every summer I am caught off-guard when my kids don’t make the same immediate mental switch. Everyone contributes to the greater whole. Period. If kids don’t listen the first time and react immediately, they could be hurt or worse. There is a part of me that looks at them and thinks, “What, you think we’re here on vacation?! We’re here for you to develop

roots, yes, of course, but we're also here so you learn how to work!" They return my gaze with eyes that ask, "Who are you and what have you done with our mom?"

How can those life lessons that come naturally on a ranch or rural context be woven into the fabric of life in town? I've noticed my generation (I was born in 1968. My parents said they missed free-love by two weeks) has become a generation of parents who focus on keeping their kids entertained, and our kids are a generation that has come to expect it.

As I poured over the summer camp schedule in the spring, hurrying to sign my kids up before the camps filled, I glanced up from the desk in my study to see a picture of my great-grandmother as sixteen-year-old orphan bride on the ranch. My eyes returned to the pages of camps, seeing them through a different lens. How could I bring some of the lessons I took from the landscape of my childhood and apply them to the vastly different terrain that composes my childrens' experiences?

As I pencil in the different camps, I think of my friend, Jennifer, who along with scheduling different summer camps for her kids, creates a list of chores they need to do every day, giving structure and meaning to what can be long summer days. I vow to do the same. I incorporate one hour of time alone reading for everybody in the early afternoon, giving a much-needed pause in our days. A garden, *a garden*, provides hours and hours of time together outside in the summer. A tiny spot of land yields structure and discovery into long summer days. The kids love seeing what has mature and grown that day. And there are the chores that go with it! You wouldn't believe how many joy-filled hours it can take searching for the biggest and juiciest tomato worm on the vines.

As I sit with my calendar and try to bring some clumsy semblance of coordination to the many movies pieces of three kids, I try to pencil in these other aspects, as well—the chores that give kids the sense that they are needed, contributing members of a greater whole of our family, structured time to just “be,” time alone with the world of a book, which will hopefully provide a sense of calm and foundation beneath our feet in the wave of camps and activities that sweep us along, untethered and floating.

And perhaps, just perhaps, if I’m able to pull this off, and not run screaming into the night searching in desperation for a field of hay bales for my kids to pick up, *heavy* ones depending on my, or their, mood, these structures where they contribute, instead of being entertained, will help set a solid foundation in their own landscape of summer, roots that they’ll carry forward into life.