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Kayleigh's Australian Adventure: A Story for Children

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THE CARL AND WINIFRED LEE HONORS COLLEGE
CERTIFICATE OF ORAL DEFENSE OF HONORS THESIS

Diane Wetmore, having been admitted to the Carl and Winifred Lee Honors College in the fall of 2007, successfully completed the Lee Honors College Thesis on August 14, 2012.

The title of the thesis is:

Kayleigh's Australian Adventure: A Story for Children

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Scott Friesner", is written over a horizontal line.

Scott Friesner, Lee Honors College

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Judith A. Rypma", is written over a horizontal line.

Judith A. Rypma, English

Introduction to Thesis

By: Diane Wetmore

My decision to write a children's story for my senior honors thesis came after I wrestled with many different topics and media. As an elementary education major, I often found myself writing with my third grade students during my internship, which reminded me that I have always loved creative writing. Although I had not had much chance to do anything of this nature throughout most of my collegiate career, I thought the honors thesis offered the perfect opportunity to engage in such writing. It also seemed like a valid way to show my understanding of reading material, both leveled and a suitable topic, that would be appropriate to use in my future classrooms.

More importantly, I had just returned from studying abroad in Sydney, Australia. I had learned so much and wanted to share my newfound knowledge with others. A children's story seemed like the perfect outlet that would allow me to share my experiences with not only family and friends, but also peers and students. I particularly liked the angle of having a young narrator, as the delicate topic of Aboriginal culture seemed to require the innocence, respect, and insight children tend to offer.

In many respects, Australian culture is very similar to American culture. My friends and I were genuinely perplexed when a girl we knew went home after a month because Australia was "too different" from the United States. One valid difference is that their advancement through some historically challenging social issues is similar yet different than those faced by Americans. In particular, the Australian history with the Aboriginals allowed for much comparison and contrast with our own relations to the Native Americans.

In my Introduction to Aboriginal Studies class, I learned the history of how the British colonists originally came to Australia and got along with the Aboriginals. The British

colonists wanted the Aboriginals to live among them in “civilization”. The Aboriginals denied this new lifestyle in favor of their own traditional ways, and disputes began, eventually leading to fighting. The British firearms easily overpowered Aboriginal spears, and the British began treating the Aboriginals worse. They pushed many of them into the Outback, areas with land that was practically uninhabitable. The British justified their actions by using the work of Charles Darwin to conclude that the Aboriginals were an earlier species of human evolution. Since they deemed themselves more highly evolved, it was only “natural” for them to rule over the Aboriginals. They took several measures to ensure the genocide of the Aboriginal people, such as taking children away from their homes and raising them in Christian boarding schools where they were forced to learn English and forget their Aboriginal ways. Every Australian state wrote similar laws, mandating that Aboriginals had to have children with white partners, in order to eventually “breed out” their Aboriginal traits. The Australian government went as far as to initiate the “White Australia Policy,” which only allowed people with fair skin to immigrate into Australia.

Despite all the horrendous acts of the past, the current government is working toward reconciliation. Former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, who was only recently replaced by current Prime Minister Julia Gillard, actually made a formal apology to Aboriginals and to the “Stolen Generations” (those who were taken away to the Christian schools). The Aboriginals also have an embassy in the capital now, the result of their protests through the “Aboriginal Tent Embassy” on the front lawn of Parliament House. Today a few tents remain on the lawn as a reminder that the Aboriginals are still fighting for many rights.

Because of all the past prejudice and acts of the Australian government, a profound economic disparity exists between Aboriginals and non-Aboriginal Australian citizens.

Aboriginals have a very high rate of poverty and all the troubles that accompany it: a much

lower life expectancy, lack of access to healthcare (in a country with free public healthcare), poor performance in school, and poor school attendance rates, to name a few.

Most interesting to me was the difference between what I learned in my Aboriginal Studies class and what I actually experienced. The first scene in my story is based on a real event that I watched happen to friends of mine. My friend Brie¹ accidentally knocked over a record player where some Aboriginals often sat and drew chalk pictures in front of the Woolworth's across from Town Hall. The woman who owned the player became very offended and slapped Brie so hard she still had a red mark on her face a few hours later. Our friend Dan¹ was quite upset with what had just taken place. He explained that it was an accident and asked the woman to apologize to Brie. One of the Aboriginal men who had watched began arguing with Dan and eventually punched him in the face, giving Dan a bloody nose. Dan and the man were in a full-fledged brawl by the time police officers showed up. Unlike my story this event took place quite late at night, so it is doubtful that children experienced the scene.

I experienced a few other negative interactions with Aboriginals, including pick pocketing as well as one event where some friends got their hair pulled and were scratched and hit because a young Aboriginal girl wanted a cigarette lighter from them. I also had many pleasant experiences with Aboriginals, such as my Aboriginal Studies tutor, a tour guide on a trip to the Blue Mountains, and volunteers at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra. Unfortunately, it always seems that the negative anomalies stand out. My conclusion remains that there is no easy answer, and there will be a lot of pain to solve this problem, but it must be resolved. The Australians are going to have to sacrifice some things they want to keep, especially land, in order to make peace with the Aboriginal nations.

¹ Names changed out of respect for individuals.

As a teacher, I am always looking for ways to integrate subjects around a common theme. My story lends itself to many different core and enrichment curriculum objectives. As a story, many language arts concepts are addressed. Students can practice descriptive writing by using the story as a model. Kayleigh describes the Three Sisters when she visits them. I envision students writing about a time they visited a landmark or other natural wonder. Many other writing prompts can be derived from the story, like how students felt while visiting or moving to a new place, or writing a Dreamtime story. The general vocabulary is kept to an independent third grade level, as the focus of the story's new words are on Australian vocabulary, such as "didgeridoo" and "Tasmanian devil"

One of my main goals for social studies is to bring about discussion in upper elementary classrooms. The subject matter is appropriate for older elementary students to discuss with a knowledgeable adult. The ability to discuss troublesome ideas is often easier when taking an outsider's perspective of a situation. Discussing European colonization of Australia allows students to discuss sharing land, which relates directly to our own history with the Native Americans and, to an extent, many other complex racial relations.

Among the many topics I would choose to discuss with students, I would begin with their emotional response to the story's concepts of taking land from the Aboriginals. Even young students can relate to feelings of having something taken away from them unjustly. When prompted, older students are also able to begin thinking about the complexity of this kind of situation. Much like Kayleigh does in the story, students can ponder the practicality of different actions the Australian government can take.

I would also encourage a comparison and contrast between the United States' history of colonization with Australia's. British colonists in New England initially got along with Native Americans, only to end in disputes of land ownership. Depending on the dynamics of the class, I would also encourage research of economic disparities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians as well as disparities between minority and white Americans. To see the lasting impact

of a history of racism is eye-opening to students who have not investigated such explanations for inequality.

To integrate math, I would focus on the time Kayleigh and her parents spend at the zoo. The plaque about the lyre bird discusses dimensions in centimeters. This is an opportunity for discussing standard versus metric measurements. Students could convert the centimeters into inches and learn about other measurements of length.

The zoo trip also lends itself to studies in biology. Australia and the island Tasmania are home to the highest concentration of endemic animals and plants. Students could do their own independent project on an indigenous Australian species. Reports are a great way to teach students technology skills, such as word processing or Power Point.

I also see many opportunities for integration of art, teaching students the Aboriginal-style of painting with dots and natural colors like black, red, yellow, and green. Students could also make their own chalk drawings of North American animals in unusual colors. Music can be incorporated by teaching about the didgeridoo and other Aboriginal instruments.

I would be surprised to find a teacher who uses all these ideas and more with a single book, but the fact that my story can be integrated across the curriculum means it is invaluable to any classroom library. It lends itself to many educational needs, and the fictional aspect makes the story enjoyable for students.

Kayleigh's Australian Adventures

A Story for Young Children

By

Diane A. Wetmore

Photographs by

Diane A. Wetmore

“38, 39, 40,” I counted the steps up to the street.

As Mom and I turned left to head to Woolworth’s for groceries, we saw a huge crowd of people. We had only been in Sydney for two weeks, but I could tell there were too many people gathered for a Tuesday afternoon. Mom tightly squeezed my hand, weaving among the swarm of people. As we neared the entrance, I had trouble making sense of what I was hearing.

“We didn’t say a word to *those* people!”, I heard a woman’s high-pitched voice shout.

“They was stompin’ around on our things! Knocked ‘em right over!” The voice was deep and hoarse, but it definitely belonged to a woman.

As Mom continued to lead us towards the gathering, I was distracted by bits and pieces of what looked like a painting on the ground. I could make out an eye and wavy green lines next to my right foot. When I bumped into a tall man, I looked up, trying to make sense of the voices I was hearing. I saw a young, Caucasian girl to the left of a pair of police officers. She had a wad of tissues pressed to her forehead, and they were stained red. A young man had his arms around her, rubbing her back. Why was she bleeding? Was this the woman with the high-pitched voice?

To the right of the policemen, I saw an African-American woman sitting on the ground. Then I noticed the chalk drawing in front of the building. The curved lines of pale colors were the same lines I had just been stepping on. This drawing was huge! Would the woman be mad that we had stepped on her drawing?

The more I saw of the chalk drawing, the more I was sorry for walking on it. She had created rolling, green hills and every kind of Australian animal I have ever heard of: kangaroos, koalas, wallabies, a Tasmanian devil, a platypus. There were some other things I thought were animals, but I had never seen anything like them. One looked like a porcupine, but it had a long snout. Another was kind of like an ostrich, but it was not black and white. In fact, all of the animals were in crazy colors, like a red kangaroo and a blue koala.

The woman on the ground still had a piece of chalk in her hand, and many other pieces were scattered about on the sidewalk. Two older men with greying hair and beards were standing next to her. One of them had blood on his knuckles. Then, I heard the woman bark in that hoarse voice again, “What about our rights?”

Mom yanked on my shoulder and turned to lead me away from the scene and back down to the train station. “Let’s go to a different Woolie’s, sweet pea,” she said. “We’ll be home in time to make dinner before your dad gets out of work.”

The smell of sausages sizzling on the barbecue made my mouth water. Mom handed me a loaf of bread, mustard, and tomato sauce to place on the table. I wasn't quite used to putting a sausage on a slice of bread—not a bun—and covering it with “tomato sauce”, which Mom said was just what the Aussies call ketchup. But it didn't taste the same. I kept pestering Mom all afternoon about the scene in front of Woolie's, but she said that we would not discuss it until Dad got home.

The second I heard the door slam and Dad singing “Honeys, I'm home,” I rushed to the entryway. Pulling Dad by the arm, I led him to the back porch and pulled out his chair for him, so we could all talk.

“Daddy, we've been waiting for you all day!” I said.

“We saw something quite interesting outside Woolie's today,” Mom stated.

“There were these people shouting, and a huge crowd, and police officers!” I added.

“I'd like to tell Dad about it, if you don't mind,” Mom said.

In between bites of dinner, Mom told Dad about the two women and the men who were with them. She described the chalk drawing and the blood and how she thought it would be best for us to leave and let the police officers handle things. She used a strange word to describe the older woman and men. She called them “Aboriginals”.

“What’s an ‘Aboriginal’?” I asked. “I thought they were African-Americans.”

“Well, African-Americans are people who live in America and have African ancestors. These people don’t live in America and their heritage is not African, even though their skin is really dark,” Dad said. “They are like Native Americans in the U. S., but they live in Australia.” Seeing my wrinkled brow, Dad tried to explain again.

“The Aboriginals have lived in Australia for a very long time. Most people think it’s at least 6,000 years, but some think it might be as long ago as 10,000 years. About 200 years ago, British colonists came to Australia to explore it and claim it as their own land, even though the Aboriginal people were already here.”

“Like how the Brits treated the Native Americans badly when they arrived in America, even though the Native Americans were here first!” I was starting to understand.

“Exactly,” said Mom.

“Well what does that have to do with the people on the street today?” It still did not make sense to me.

“Do you remember when the Aboriginal woman asked the police officer about ‘their rights’?” Mom asked me. I nodded, so Mom continued. “Because the Aboriginal people were here first, they believe the land is still theirs. They feel they have rights to the land that was taken from them.”

“Well don’t they?” I remembered when Sarah Parker stole my headband from my desk last year. She still has it, but I sure feel like it’s mine.

“That seems like the fair answer,” Dad said, “but it’s not as simple as just giving them back their land.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Well, other people live on that land now.” Mom said. “Millions of people live in Australia. Many of them are not the descendents of colonists. Their families came here recently, like us. How would you feel if tomorrow the Australian government came to our front door and said we needed to pack up and leave the country by Friday afternoon because they were giving the Aboriginals their land back?” asked Mom.

“I guess I wouldn’t want to move,” I said guiltily. “But why are the Aboriginals so upset anyway? I think Australia is great! Why aren’t they happy living here?” I asked.

“That is a great question,” Dad assured me. “I’m not really sure. Why don’t we check it out online?”

“Okay!” I exclaimed.

“Let’s put the dishes in the dishwasher while your dad starts Googling,” Mom said.

“It’s amazing how quickly you do your chores when there’s something exciting to do,” Mom called to me as I ran to the office. When I got there, Dad had a website ready and waiting as I plopped onto his lap.

“I’ve done a little reading myself on some other sites, but this is my favorite so far.” Dad read aloud to me from the website.

It told how there are thousands of Aboriginal languages and cultures, just like Native American tribes. What they have in common is their belief in the Dreamtime, their myths of how Earth was formed.

Beings called “the Ancestors” lived underground in the dark, but one day they decided to come above ground and then everything was light. On the Earth, they shaped all the mountains, valleys, rivers, and other landforms. The Ancestors eventually sank back underground, but left their spirits in certain places on Earth. Today, these places are sacred to Aboriginals and can only be seen by people the stories have been passed down to.

“We could go visit one of those formations if you’d like to,” Mom said. “There is one not too far outside of Sydney.”

“Really?” I asked. “That’s so cool!”

“Let’s go this weekend,” suggested Dad. “We could drive up for the day and do some hiking. The site is called The Three Sisters. It’s up in the Blue Mountains.”

Saturday morning we woke up bright and early to drive to the Blue Mountains. It was my first time out of the city, and just driving through the winding country roads felt very different from being home in Michigan. The highway was lined with tall, skinny trees with a light grey bark. Dad had called them “eucalyptus” trees. The yellow road signs warning of animals did not have deer on them. Instead they had pictures of kangaroos or big fat rodents Mom called “wombats”.

My ears popped as we drove higher and higher up the mountains. After two hours, and a little catnap for me, we finally reached Echo Point where we could see The Three Sisters. I hopped out of the car and ran to the edge of the fence. There were only mountains as far as I could see. To my right was a thin waterfall, with water falling down to the river in the valley hundreds of feet below. To my left was a strange looking mountain.

Instead of a cliff where the rock stopped, there were three big rocks that seemed to be sitting on the mountain ledge. Mom and Dad had caught up to me now.

“That’s the Three Sisters,” Dad said, pointing to the three big rocks I had noticed.

“What? It’s just some lumps of rock. Where are the three girls?” I asked.

There was a sign near us that some people were reading. I squirmed around them so I could read, but it had too many big words, so Mom gave me the gist of the story:



“Long ago,” Mom began, “there were three sisters, Meehni, Wimlah, and Gunnedoo, whose father was a witch doctor. “

“What’s a witch doctor?” I asked.

“It’s like a sorcerer or wizard,” Mom explained.

“The girls were in the mountains one day and accidentally awoke a monster called a “bunyip”. To save his daughters from becoming the bunyip’s breakfast, the witch doctor used a magic bone to turn them to stone right where we see those rocks now. But the bunyip went after their father, so he turned himself into a lyre bird. Unfortunately, he lost the magic bone while he was escaping.

“What’s a lyre bird?”

“It’s just another kind of bird that you can only see in the wild in Australia. Today people can see the stone sisters watch the lyre bird searching for his magic bone.”

“Is that true?” I asked Mom.

“The Aboriginal people believe it is.”

“So this is one of those sacred places for them?”

“Yes. Remember what that old woman said the other day at Woolie’s? About someone stomping around on her things?”

“Yeah,” I replied. “She was really upset that her painting was getting messed up.”

“I think it might be more than that. She was upset about her chalk drawing, but the Aboriginals have been upset for a long time that people came onto their land. If you thought the lyre bird was really a person and those stones were really people, wouldn’t you want to protect them?” Mom asked me.

Mom took a lot of pictures, and then we ate a picnic lunch at a nearby park. We were about to go for a hike down into the mountains to see the lyre bird and some other wildlife, when I noticed the cool, wet feeling of raindrops on my nose. Dad put his jacket over my head as we walked back to the car.

“I thought it wasn’t supposed to rain till tonight,” I said, disappointed our trip was being cut so short. “I want to see what that lyre bird looks like. Can we come back tomorrow?”

“It’s a bit far to drive here two days in a row,” Mom told me, “but there are some other places we’ve been wanting to visit, too.”

“How about we visit the Taronga Zoo tomorrow instead?” Dad asked me. “That’s much closer. We can take a ferry from the city.”

“Will they have the lyre bird there?” I asked.

“They will have all kinds of animals there,” Mom assured me.

“Hold the lift!” a man shouted in my ear as we got off the train at Circular Quay (which Mom had told me was pronounced like “key”). He ran past us onto a nearby elevator, dragging his rolling suitcase behind him.

“How can you hold a lift?” I asked.

“That’s just what Aussies call an elevator, sweet pea,” Mom told me. “The Brits say it, too.” There were so many new words in Australia, I was beginning to wonder if we really spoke the same language.

“Let’s head on down to see which dock our ferry will be waiting at,” Dad suggested.

We rode down the escalator, slid our tickets into the gate, and walked out onto the pier. I smelled a combination of salty sea water and sweet-roasted nuts. I saw crowds of tourists snapping pictures and surfers running onto the ferry that said “Manley Beach”. Then I heard an unusual sound. It was a steady beat with a buzzing hum, deep like a bassoon.

“Is that a didgeridoo?” Dad asked Mom.

I was about to ask Dad what in the world that word was, when Mom beat me to it. “A didgeri-what?” she asked. Dad just chuckled and took our hands to lead us toward the music.

A man with black skin was sitting under a scrappy-looking tent. The tent was just a few tree limbs with a bunch of dried leaves on top. The man's face had white paint on it, and he was holding a tube that went far past his feet and had a round end like a trumpet. The tube was thick and covered with painted zigzags and wavy lines. I think it was made out of wood, but the paint made it hard to tell.

"See that thing he's holding?" Dad asked Mom and me. "That is a didgeridoo. It's an instrument that some Aboriginals play."

The music stopped and the man spoke into a microphone. "Thanks for stopping by today. We've got CDs for purchase, just ten dollars. Feel free to come on up and get your picture with me."

Mom and I walked up to the tent and sat on a short bench. Dad snapped a picture of us and Mom thanked the man for playing his didgeridoo.

We watched for a few more minutes, listening to the didgeridoo. I loved the sound it made. It was like a really deep kazoo.



We walked on down the pier and found where the Taronga Ferry docked. When the boat pulled up, we hopped aboard and the ferry took off into Sydney Harbor. I stood at the front of the boat while Mom and Dad pointed out different landmarks: the Harbor Bridge, the Sydney Opera House, and Cockatoo Island.



After our short trip across the harbor, we took a bus to the top entrance of the zoo. Mom wanted to see the penguin show, and Dad the seals, so we saved the Australian animal exhibit for last.

“The Superb Lyrebird is a ground-dwelling creature that grows about a metre long for males and 80 cm for females from beak to tail. Their small, rounded wings make them poor fliers,” Mom read from a sign.

I watched with disappointment at the short, fat, grey lyrebirds with long tails like peacocks. “I thought the witch doctor turned into a lyrebird in order to fly away,” I said to Mom.

“Well, that’s what the story tells us,” Mom said.

“But how could they do that if they live on the ground and can’t fly very well?” I thought for a few moments. “Maybe lyrebirds could fly better back then.” I had learned a little bit about evolution in school, and how some animals changed little by little over thousands of years into what they are now.

“Perhaps,” Mom said. “The Aboriginals believe the lyre bird flew to get away from the bunyip, but I don’t

think many other people believe that. I don’t believe in magic so I find it hard to believe, even though it is a fun story.”



A “fun story”? I thought everything Mom and Dad had told me was true, but they did not actually believe any of it.

“So it’s not true then?” I asked.

Dad had joined us by the lyrebird exhibit. I will never forget what he told me next. “The truth to you is whatever you believe. If you believe what the Aboriginals do, then it is the truth. If you believe what your mother and I do, then it is just a story. You have to decide for yourself.”

I could not decide right then what I believed, but I had thought of something. “Is that why the Aboriginals and the Aussies are fighting about the land—because the Aussies don’t believe it’s sacred, like the Aboriginals believe it is?”

“That’s what most people think,” Dad said.

“I bet the people at Woolie’s the other day probably felt that way. The Aboriginals felt their drawing was really special, and the Aussies probably just thought it was a sidewalk.”

“I bet you’re right about that,” Mom said.

“Could we go back to Woolie’s? I really want to see the drawing again. And I think I might recognize more of the animals now that we’ve seen them at the zoo.”

We rode the crowded train into the city with Dad the next morning. He got off at Wynyard to head off to work. Mom and I rode to the next stop to get off at Town Hall and head to Woolie's.

At the top of the train steps I darted over to the main entrance of Woolie's, but was stopped dead in my tracks. The chalk drawing was gone!

"Mom!" I exclaimed. "Where is it?"

"I guess the rain we had in the mountains must've made its way to Sydney, too," Mom said.

"Why don't the Aboriginals just make another one?"

"What do you think?"

"Maybe they were afraid it would cause another scene?"

"Maybe," Mom said. "Why don't we go to the park in Darling Harbor," Mom suggested, seeing my disappointed face.

Mom found a seat in the shade to read her book when we got to the park. I ran for the tire swing, but before I got there I saw some kids drawing hopscotch squares. They had a giant bucket of sidewalk chalk, so I walked up to them.

“Can you share your chalk?” I asked a girl who looked about my age.

“Sure, I guess,” she looked at me curiously. “Are you American?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “How can you tell?”

“You talk funny,” she said simply. “Do you want to play hopscotch?”

“Maybe in a bit. I really want to draw,” I explained.

“Oh, okay,” she said, and she went back to playing with her friends.

I had just gotten started on my drawing, when the girl and her friends came over to me.

“Can you say something?” the girl asked me. “My friends want to hear your accent.”

“Umm, hi,” I said.

“That didn’t sound weird,” said one of the boys.

“Of course it didn’t,” said the girl, “she just said ‘hi’. What are you drawing, anyway?”

“I saw a bunch of Aussie animals at the zoo yesterday, and they were so cool!” I said.

“Yup, you’re American,” said the boy, reacting to hearing my accent. “But why did you make the kangaroo blue?”

“I saw an Aboriginal drawing like this outside Woolie’s the other day. They drew the animals all different colors,” I explained.

“You know, we’re Aboriginals,” one of them said. I hadn’t even noticed their dark skin, but suddenly I was bubbling with excitement.

“I really liked that drawing!” I exclaimed. “Did you know the people who drew it?”

“My auntie knows some people who draw outside Woolie’s sometimes. It might’ve been them,” said the girl. “Can I draw with you? Sometimes I help the grown-ups,” she said with a smile.

I smiled back and handed her a pink piece of chalk. "You should make a pink echidna," I said. I thought I had seen a porcupine with a snout when I saw it in the Aboriginal painting, but the sign at the zoo told me it was called an 'a-kid-nuh'.

"My name's Binti, by the way," said the girl as she began to color.

"I'm Kayleigh," I replied.

After we started drawing, the other kids wanted to join in. They drew all kinds of animals I had seen in the zoo and the Aboriginal painting. One girl drew a big bird like an ostrich that was called an emu, and she made it purple. Soon we had a yellow wombat, a red platypus, a green cockatoo, and an orange Tasmanian devil. We colored all morning until Mom told me it was time to leave for lunch.

"Will you be here later?" I asked the other kids.

"Nah, we just come on Monday mornings," Binti said.

"I'll see you next Monday then! Is that okay, Mom?"

"That sounds like a wonderful idea. We can ride into the city with Dad on Monday mornings until school starts," Mom replied.

“1, 2, 3, 4...” I counted the steps down to the train platform, excited to play with my new friends the next week. Those Aboriginal kids were just like me, and even though I had learned about how complicated the situation was between the Aussies and the Aboriginals, I could not help but think that there had to be some solution. All of the grown-ups just need to remember that we can get along, like those kids and I did. That is what I believe. Like Dad said, that is my truth.