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Column Outnumbered: Creative Anxiety

Audrey, my two-year-old, wants to wear a bear costume. No, a mouse costume. No, a penguin costume. Wait, you know what she really wants to wear? A pirate hat and skull-and-crossbones cape. And two eye patches. Or—ooh, how about this?—the pirate things *over* the mouse costume! She's a mouse-pirate! Or *actually*, instead of *that*, she thinks she'll be a boy, which involves borrowing shorts and a tee shirt from her brother's closet. Oh, and a necktie. Two neckties. And a ball cap.

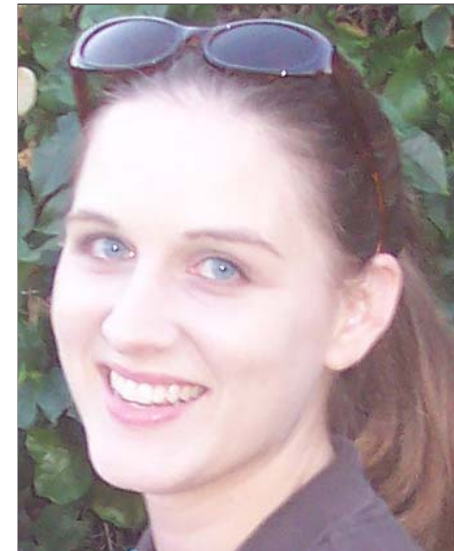
She runs off to join her brother and sisters. Abigail is eight years old, Owen's five, and Sadie's one. They're dressed as woodland elves and a puppy. I'm left with the mound of cast-off costumes at my feet and a strong desire for a cup of tea. Unfortunately, to get to the teapot, I will have to navigate not only around the dress-up heap, but also through the play kitchen, which has been reinvented as a pet shop. There are stuffed animals sitting in mounds of paper shavings in every basket, on every shelf, and in the play sink. Also in the play oven, now that I look inside.

In related news, there are sketchbooks splayed over the kitchen table, along with watercolor pencils, markers, and india ink pens. Owen was drawing animals, which led to the idea to makeover the play kitchen, which led, logically, to the need for costumes, even if the costumes of choice have little to do with the pet shop play, which in any case is now being abandoned in favor of sailing an imaginary sinking ship in the playroom. The kids are gathering supplies to take with them to the desert island where they imagine they'll be marooned.

I choose a caffeinated tea.

I could call the kids back to shovel the dress-up things back into bins, recycle the paper bits, and sort the writing implements into baskets, but a) I hate to interfere with their

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play before they've finished, and b) not five minutes will pass before Audrey's ready to be a penguin-mouse with an eye patch again.

I don't want to squelch their imaginations. But the four of them do move through the house like a compact tornado, changing direction faster than I can track. I'm living in a pit of creative playthings, and there's nowhere to set down my teacup.

"Mom!" Owen is yelling from the other room. "The sea is rising! Hurry and get on board before the sharks get you!"

"I'll be okay," I say. "The sharks can't get into the kitchen. There's a barrier reef." I'm not even sure what a barrier reef is.

Abigail is the most practical of the children. "Can you just come get Sadie then?" she asks. "She keeps trying to climb the mast. And would you bring us some island food?" By the time I slice a couple of apples, the kids have built an imaginary bonfire out of play silks (for the fire) and paper towel tubes (for the fuel), and they're all sitting together on the playroom couch, listening to Abigail read a library book aloud. Apparently what you do on a desert island is pretty much the same as what you do at home.

I pick my way past the ship parts (namely a broom handle, which was the mast, and a blanket that was the sail). Possibly I sigh a little. I don't want my kids to grow up to be the kind of people who always have to color inside the lines. I just want to be able to see the floors every now and again.

I love how imagination is integrated into everything the kids do; creativity isn't part of life, it *is* life. I want them to feel free to make surprising creative leaps and to take chances. I don't want their mental space to be cluttered with compartments—one for creativity, one for educational activities, one for household responsibilities—but mine is. Cluttered, I mean. Both my mental space and my actual space. I look around and think: do we need more room, a bigger house? There are signs all over town: for rent, for sale, open house! We could separate out play space and art space and living space.

But is that really the lesson I want to teach my kids—that everything needs to be segregated, not naturally interconnected? Do I need them to operate within limits I deem reasonable, or are the limits artificial, just waiting to be shattered? Do I teach them to bloom where they're planted, or to rebel against boundaries that restrict? When does the ideal (follow your dreams!) collide with the practical (just don't leave muddy footprints as you go!)? And why am I feeling this existential before ten a.m. on a Tuesday morning?

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Audrey careens back into the room in slippery socks, ready for a wardrobe change. She's brought a chain mail hood for me to pull over her head. "And Mama?" she asks. "Also would you make me a bag to carry my knight stuff?" She holds up her little wooden sword, three colored pencils, and a stuffed rooster.

"We can find a bag for those," I say, but that's not what she has in mind. My sewing machine is sitting right there on the kitchen table, just past the sketchbooks. Fabric and thread, ribbons and trims are stacked on shelves along the wall. Yes, in the kitchen. Maybe I haven't learned to compartmentalize, either.

Now Audrey is rifling through yards of fabric: red with white robots, blue with swirls, white with polka dots. "Actually," she says, holding up a green-and-purple paisley, "Will you make me a skirt with this one? And a pajama with this other one?" It's black corduroy.

"I don't think that would make comfortable jammies," I say. "But hey, let's put these dress-up things away. Abigail? Owen?" I call. "Put away your shipwreck, and then you can keep reading."

I hear them get up from the couch. They poke their heads out into the hallway, where I can see them. "Would you be interested in having me put away the stuffed animals?" I ask.

"Yes," says Owen. "But leave the sketching things out. I'm still working on those."

That sounds like a plan I can live with.

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