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Toytown
by Jon Remmerde
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Toytown

I took a job as manager of a remote ranch in Northeastern Oregon when our daughters, Juniper and Amanda, were four and two. Our house had no electricity and only a kitchen sink and a pitcher pump beside the sink for plumbing. We didn't mind the lack of modern facilities. We were all thrilled with our opportunity to live in a place with large quietude and abundant wildlife.

Before Juniper was born, I read that children learned more if they didn't have toys, because they had to rely on their imaginations. I held forth for the idea of not having toys. Laura didn't think much of the idea, and she outvoted me. After we moved to the ranch, I watched our daughters build their collection of toys and play with them, and I was glad Laura had outvoted me. Our daughters' toys helped meet a wide range of needs, including their need for companionship and a community larger than our immediate family and the relatives and friends we saw occasionally.

Amanda and Juniper bought most of their toys second hand at the Salvation Army store when we drove down the mountain to town for supplies. Juniper and Amanda bought Bob Olink along with several other broken, small, plastic toys for a penny. Bob has no legs below his knees and only one hand, but that doesn't stop him from being an active and effective cowboy, boisterous, argumentative, and opinionated.

As soon as Bob joined the growing community of Toytown, he married, and then again, and again. Laura and I wondered aloud where the idea of polygamy came from, and we voiced our disapproval, but Bob Olink welcomed the opportunity to fly in the face of convention and went right on being Bob, with, eventually, seven wives.

Bob's brother, Lank Olink, also a small, broken, plastic cowboy tried to influence Bob toward more acceptable

behavior, but Lank wasn't aggressive enough to change Bob, and he retreated from his efforts and went about his business of being a cowboy with his co-worker, Maize Cowboy, in the stables, one of the sub-communities of Toytown.

Despite his outsized ego, Bob was a good man and would not intentionally bring harm to any individual nor to the community. His wives were not comfortable with his polygamy, but each of them entered the situation willingly and fully informed about Bob's marital status. A factor in their acceptance of the situation may have been that men were heavily outnumbered in the community.

Rabbit-eared girlie would not marry Bob. She cost fifty cents because she was in good condition and was a stuffed toy rather than plastic. She did indeed have long, rabbit ears. She opened a store where she sold anything Toytown could get by without, because the community needed money to operate. Though they didn't like to do it, sometimes the people of the community (and the horses who spoke English) conferred and decided they had to sell horses to keep money coming in. Of course, they sold only the less developed kind of horses, who did not communicate in words.

Rabbit-eared girlie didn't like Bob nor the way he lived, but she worked with him because he was an important part of the stables, and the stables were an important part of the community. Bob boasted that he ran the stables, but in fact, his horse, Silver did. Silver was diplomatic enough not to contradict Bob but to work quietly, mostly behind the scenes.

Silver was one of the talking animals. The idea that some animals could talk and participate intelligently in the community may have come from Amanda and Juniper's reading of C.S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia*.

Laura and I had no idea where many of the ideas came from that our daughters worked out in play. We didn't try very hard to find out, because we had no desire to inhibit their play nor their willingness, even eagerness, to share with us the latest news and sometimes strange antics of toys and the various interacting communities of Toytown.

Our daughters played with Toytown most during

Northeastern Oregon's very cold winters and largely left it on the shelves during summers when they played and explored outdoors. But even in the outdoor days of summer, they got Toytown out occasionally, so the resident toys would not feel too neglected.

We had read to our daughters from their beginnings. We all enjoyed reading together, and Juniper and Amanda were eager to enter the adventurous world of books on their own, beyond what Laura and I could read to them. They asked us to teach them to read, and when Juniper was six and Amanda was four, we taught them to read. Within a few months, they could read anything they wanted to read, with little help.

Toytown continued to expand. Some of their ideas for the community came from their reading, but many of them seemed to come simply from their imagination. Professor Mungo, a white, stuffed monkey, fancied that he was as adept at solving crimes as Sherlock Holmes, but he usually bungled his investigations in ways that gave rise to both laughter and some sympathy.

When they began to write, Amanda and Juniper started a Toytown newspaper that reported the new acquisitions of toys and many of the activities within the growing community, and that helped them learn to write well.

Laura and I were delighted to see the activity of Toytown and to have our daughters read the Toytown newspaper to us. Much of our experience with our daughters' play brought all of us laughter of delight and amusement, but some of Toytown was serious stuff, too.

I don't know how much Marilyn cost, because I was across the street buying tires for our pickup when they bought her. Her price didn't mean much. Her personality and her values meant everything.

Marilyn started an orphanage because there were so many young toys who had been abandoned. She charged a five-dollar adoption fee, and that helped the chronically short-of-cash community meet its needs. Perhaps Toytown's chronically short-of-cash existence mirrored our family's existence, always enough money to meet our needs but little for extras. As everyone in our family found joy in that condition, so the citizens of Toytown found joy in their

existence. Their chronic need for money did not interfere with their appreciation of life but gave them opportunities to bring their creativity to bear on their problems.

Toytown grew in complexity and depth as our daughters grew and learned more about the world. The toys developed complex relationships and activities. They displayed deep emotions and a high level of maturity and compassion when dealing with problems of the community or of individuals who lived in the community. The toys and the builders of Toytown operated with a well-developed sense of humor that took into account the sensitivities of all individuals involved.

Because we lived mostly away from the modern world, and because we didn't have electricity, we didn't have many of the distractions of the contemporary world, television, negative peer pressure, and distracting levels of noise and activity from the industrial, consumer culture. I think being free of those distractions and the fact that I worked close to home and was nearly always available to my family helped us be effective parents and helped our daughters, assisted by their very active imaginations and by their ever-present sense of joy, understand the world in very positive ways.

I left behind all concern about inhibitions to our daughters' imaginations when I saw them learn, partly through their interactions with their toys, to incorporate everything they encountered into a creative expansion of their learning and of their enjoyment of the world around them.