



Kermit and Me

by Rita K. Farrelly

"It's not that easy bein' green," sang Kermit the Frog.

I realized that a few decades ago when a new boss announced his management philosophy: tolerate ambiguity. It's unlikely that scientists mapping the human genome will find an Irish ambiguity gene. It was not in evidence at St. Brendan's Grammar School, nor at home or on the streets of the northwest Bronx. There was a lovely certainty to life.

It began with the Baltimore Catechism. The general editor must have been Pythagoras, who taught that everything in the great chain of being could be traced to a number. There was one God, two great commandments, three persons in one God, four cardinal virtues, eight beatitudes, and so on. Seven was the age of reason, and at 59, you were excused from Lenten fasting.

On a good day, I can still work my way well up the ladder of double digits, and have a simple canon for life. Even priests validated this rational number concept, by regularly assigning three Our Fathers and three Hail Marys as Penance. Who ever got two or four?

At home, rituals took the place of numbers. Maeve Binchy remembers hearing the Angelus bells toll at noon and six o'clock, thinking they were summoning her to meals. In the Bronx, we needed no bells. There was a Monday-Friday schedule, and a

weekend one, and that was that. Holidays and holydays never shifted.

My banker father proposed on Lincoln's Birthday and married on Columbus Day, "So I'd always have the day off." Good Friday had its own ironclad rule: no music or TV. A highlight of my young life was visiting a friend's home for a Good Friday sleepover. We watched Edward R. Murrow interview Marilyn Monroe. Oh, joy!

Then came the '60s, when nothing was as it used to be. It was all change and ambiguity. To this, my friend Eileen said it simply and best, "I hate change." Still, a life and career were in the balance. A little ambiguity and change couldn't hurt, right?

I started with mundane things: tea instead of coffee at breakfast, chocolate ice cream along with the vanilla, a different pew at Sunday Mass. In jig time, I loosened up, went with the flow, and, along with Simon and Garfunkel, felt groovy.

At work, I dumped as many rules as possible, and managed a growing staff with flexible guidelines. When Vatican II came along, all hats except my baseball cap went in the trash, and I never ate fish again. Life was good.

Then, as the third millennium approached, the New Age crowd took over. What we need, said they, is a great "paradigm shift." First came sharing, still another gap in our education. I was still operating under every Irish mother's mandate, "Keep it in the family." But that was mild

compared to what was to come.

Now, we're told to live in the moment, listen to your body, boost self-esteem. Best of all – "become the CEO of you!" Asked what her Irish-American mother's reaction might have been to that one, my friend Mary Ellen said: "Good, now here's a broom, go clean your room."

In September 1999, though, an extraordinary African-American washerwoman died in Mississippi. Oseola McCarty, with no formal education of her own, had given "of her need" to help others. At her death, she'd donated a life savings of \$150,000 to strangers to get the college education she'd never had. By then, she'd also carried the Olympic torch through Mississippi and pulled the switch to drop the ball on Times Square on New Year's Eve. Said she, of self-esteem, "It seems pretty basic to me. If you want to feel proud of yourself, you've got to do things you can be proud of. Feelings follow actions." I could hear my late parents and all those teachers from the past, cheering from on high.

So Kermit, you were right. It's not easy being an Irish-American. But those "days of gladness" still limn my soul, and you know what? I wouldn't want to be anything else.

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