



# Full-immersion baptism

by Kathleen M. Basi

she “suffers from Down syndrome.”

Now, you could argue that Julianna suffers from many things: a propensity to land in the ICU, a pair of brothers whose life’s work is to steal whatever she’s playing with. But one thing she does not suffer from is Down syndrome.

*She’s half girly-girl, half wildebeest, hurtling through life, delighting in everything.*

In my mind’s eye, my daughter wears big red boxing gloves and pummels life with gleeful abandon. Her baptismal font escapade was classic Julianna: Grab life by the horns and wrestle it until it surrenders, begging for mercy. She’s half girly-girl, half wildebeest, hurtling through life, delighting in everything. Buses, music, swings, books — all children love these things, but I’ve never seen anyone throw herself into expressing joy the way Julianna does. Every muscle in her body contracts and then explodes outward in an ear-rattling shriek of joy.

She likes nothing better than a crowded mall. She tears ahead fearlessly, shouting and waving to everyone she passes.

School pickup? Heaven! She wiggles away from me and charges toward a circle of complete strangers. If I’m too slow to intercept her, she

flings her arms around their legs and tries to lift them one by one, by way of introduction.

What’s most amazing is how people respond. One day, while attending a groundbreaking with her grandmother, Julianna started flirting with the corporate executive who’d flown in from a thousand miles away. He picked her up and held her throughout the ceremony. A few weeks later, we received three Barbie dolls and a note thanking her for being the best part of his day.

These moments used to slay me. But I’ve ceased to be stunned, because it happens so often. Julianna is a one-woman Cupid arrow aimed at humanity from heaven.

Yet I wonder if the love affair can last. What’s cute at 3 is taboo at 20.

But why is that? Why do we feel compelled to hold others at a distance? To walk through malls without making eye contact? To utter banal pleasantries? Why don’t we throw ourselves, heart and soul, into all our relationships?

Maybe this is what Jesus meant when He said that to enter Heaven, you must be as a little child.

Julianna’s delays are no fun, and worrying about her future even less so. But that’s our problem, not hers.

Suffer, my child does not. And I sometimes think that if I make it to heaven, it’ll be because Julianna grabbed me by the hand and hauled me along for the ride. I know she knows something I don’t. I just hope someday, I figure out what it is.

Fine, I admit it: I wasn’t paying enough attention.

With my husband out of town, I was playing single mom while facilitating a CCL meeting at church. But I really thought I’d taken the necessary precautions. I’d brought toys and closed off the escape routes, and besides, she had playmates. Surely we were safe.

Then the youth minister walked in, hand in hand with my very wet 3-year-old daughter. Wet, as in water cascading off her clothes and pooling on the floor of the parish hall.

Yes, I said water. As in holy water. From the full-immersion baptismal font.

Now, that’s what I call experiencing a sacramental.

People really don’t know how to talk about my daughter. Do you say she “has” Down syndrome, as if it’s a disease in need of a cure? Do you call her a “Down’s kid,” as if her chromosomal giftedness is her only noteworthy trait? Or perhaps you say