

## Columnists

### The Baird Facts

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BEVERLY, MASS. –  
By Esther C. Baird

I'm typing this column from temporary housing because we haven't found a new home yet. In some ways it's liberating to be living with a stripped down version of things: the girl's mattresses are on the floor, we have four total plates, one mixing bowl, one pan and no microwave, there is no cable or internet or even (gasp!) a remote control. Of course in other ways it's highly and deeply annoying, especially with no end in sight.

So let's move on to topics that actually do have an ending firmly in place. Take for example my recent graduation from seminary with my master's in divinity. Regular readers may recall that I've meandered my way through the halls of theology and ancient Greek and Hebrew and hospital chaplaincy and Biblical history for nearly a decade. So, when my graduation weekend came a few weeks back, I was beyond excited. Finally. Finally!

The morning of graduation, I entered the "staging area" and found my name on an assigned seat. We gownned up and received the lengthy, detailed and slightly stupefying processional instructions.

"I know you all think this is overkill," intoned our dean of students with her slight Spanish accent, "but trust me people, you can have all the degrees in the world . . . they're not gonna help you if you get up there and walk the wrong way. So listen up!"

I listened. . . sort of. Mostly I had my eyes on the windows where it was getting suspiciously dark outside. This was a bit alarming since we had an outdoor, quarter-of-a-mile, walk from the staging area to the actual ceremony. It quickly went from suspicion to fact in the form of torrential rain.

I had pictured graduating for years. I envisioned walking across perfectly manicured collegiate lawns, strolling about and taking pictures with friends and professors, and generally frolicking in the sunshine wearing my billowing master's gown.

And yet, when the dean finished relaying the processional algorithm, she took a deep breath.

"People, we prayed for sun. But God, in his infinite wisdom is providing rain. So *we're* gonna provide you with trash bags."

Wow. Really? Trash bags?? How was I to frolic? I mean, wasn't there a better way? I began to feel cranky and petulant when the dean continued.

"Don't think you're too good for a trash bag. You're not. You've all worked hard at your degrees and you've been diligent, but don't forget *what* you did it for and *who* you did it for. You worked hard so that you could go out and serve others. And if you can't march across campus in a trash bag, well then, you're not ready for serving. Some times in life you gonna have to get dirty if you want to work in God's kingdom and this will help you remember that!"

She had a point — a rather clarifying one at that.

I took my trash bag, thankfully a large translucent one, and with as much grace as I could muster I put it on over my mortarboarded head. Then I ripped a small hole for my eyes and nose to poke through so that I didn't add asphyxiation to the ways in which my graduation was not going exactly as planned.

And thus, like so many plastic ghosts, we marched out of our staging area into the pouring rain. Instantly our shoes were soaked. Fairly quickly the lower portions of our gowns were wet. Hair frizzed, rain splattered mud onto our ankles and legs, and our hoods hung limply.

Yet on we marched. And as thunder rumbled, we began to laugh. When we bumped into a shrouded trash bag in front of us, or stepped into a deep soaking puddle, we snickered. It was a complete fiasco, a total and utter wash-out, but it was ours. We were so thrilled and nervous and excited to finally walk across that stage that we no longer cared what we looked like.

When our walk was done, volunteers quickly took our wet bags and scooted us towards the ceremony where a full orchestra was trumpeting our arrival. Smelling slightly like wet dogs, we processed in to cheers and applause and a great deal of pomp despite the waterlogged circumstance. I saw my family

and my husband and my two little girls waving and yelling and blowing kisses to me. It wasn't the graduation I dreamed about for nine long years . . . it was better.

Temporary housing isn't what I dreamed about either. Sometimes the endings we get aren't the endings we imagined, but they might be the endings that are infinitely right for us.

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