

How To Be The Worst Parent In The World

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**We wish to thank our creative and brave authors
for sharing their humor, their insights and sometimes their
own heart-wrenching personal stories with us, and we hope that
you enjoy this potpourri of thoughts and words**

Compiled by Bookmice.com

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The Promise

Maynard Cowan

I have to admit that I have been guilty of the overuse of the words promise and guarantee. “I guarantee it!” and “I promise you...” are phrases that used to roll off my tongue with a high degree of regularity. I really never considered the meaning of the words to others. I knew that I didn’t really mean it in the literal sense. One early Summer day, that all changed.

When our oldest son started the fourth grade we had no idea how difficult a year it was to be. He was enrolled in a parochial school. His teacher was a Nun who believed, strongly, that if anything came easy it wasn’t worth having.

She indicated from day one that fourth grade, in her opinion, was critical with regard to future success in school. At the school’s orientation night, she said, “I will work hard to make sure your children work hard. They will not pass my class until they have demonstrated not just what they know, but how they know it. Learning how to learn is the important step that fourth grade will teach your son or daughter.”

As my wife Shele and I pulled out of the parking lot that evening, I said, “This is why we pay so much for our kid’s education. I guarantee you that this lady is just what the doctor ordered for Matt.”

Shele disagreed. “School has to be fun in order to really learn,” she said. “There has to be a balance between work and play. Otherwise

kids will tend to become bored with the whole process.” As far as Shele was concerned, the jury was still out with regard to the plans the teacher had for her class.

“Balance is important, of course,” I agreed. “But school isn’t about having fun, it’s about learning.”

“You have a lot to learn about education,” Shele replied. “I suppose you were all work and no play in school, right?”

“Well . . .”

She cut me off before I could answer, “That’s why your GPA was so high in high school. Don’t I recall you telling me it was a 2.8? Is that your idea of all work and no play?”

“Things are different now,” I protested. “Kids today face much stiffer competition than we did. There isn’t as much latitude given for poor performance.”

“Performance has everything to do with self confidence,” she said. “And self confidence leads to higher grades. But, that won’t work unless there is a balance achieved between play and work. Fourth grade is too early in life to make everything so important. I think this teacher is too tough. Is there another fourth grade class we can transfer him to?” she asked.

“Out of the question!” I responded. “Quitting just because it’s tough doesn’t do anything for you except make you a person who can’t handle adversity. I want our son to be tough. I guarantee he will not be a quitter, not on my watch!

“Quitting out of fear is one thing,” she said. “Quitting because it’s the prudent thing to do is another. Matt isn’t a fearful child.”

“I guarantee that Matt doesn’t even know what to expect from

this teacher,” I said. “Let’s let nature take its course. I promise you he will thrive.”

As we pulled into our driveway, we both agreed that we would say nothing to Matt about the teacher’s plans and let things happen as they might. Shele was convinced that it was not the right thing to do. I was equally convinced of the opposite. We called a truce and agreed that we could always transfer him to another class if Shele’s theory proved to be correct. I was sure that it wouldn’t.

The teacher wasn’t kidding. Matt’s homework load was more than I remembered having in high school. (Then again, with a 2.8 average, I obviously didn’t do much homework.) He was spending almost two hours per night, and sometimes more, on assignments and projects. It appeared to me that he was stepping up to the challenge, taking on everything the Nun could dish out and then some. I was encouraged.

When the first grade report came out at the end of the first nine weeks of the semester, I was surprised to see Matt’s grades were C’s and D’s. I truly expected something better.

Shele pointed out to me that the box, “parent meeting requested”, had been checked by the teacher. She called the school the following day and set an appointment with the teacher.

Nuns have always intimidated me somewhat. I’m pretty sure they have a better in with The Big Guy than I do, so I have always gone out of my way to stay out of theirs. To say I entered the meeting with Matt’s teacher without some degree of trepidation would be a clear

misrepresentation of the facts.

The meeting took place one afternoon after school. Matt sat in the hall, while Shele and I talked with the Sister.

“Matt is a good student,” she began. “He is always interactive in class, participates in every discussion and does well on the tests.”

“We’re glad to hear that Sister,” I said. “Why then does he have C’s and D’s on his report card?”

“That’s why I asked for this conference,” she said. “Matt isn’t doing his homework.”

I almost bit off my tongue trying not to say that I watch him do it every night, two or three hour’s worth. I wondered how she could think he wasn’t doing his homework?

“Do you insist that he does his homework before any television or play with his friends?” she asked.

Shele answered, “Yes, of course.”

“Do you sit and watch him do it?” queried the Sister

“Well we don’t necessarily sit and watch him,” Shele replied.

“We have another child in the house and we can’t always sit with Matt.”

“That may be the problem then,” said the good Sister. “When you’re not looking, he does something else. Has he always been this easily distracted?”

“I’ll guarantee he’s not distracted,” I said.

“Do you require any chores of him?” she asked. “Does he have something he must do for the family on a regular basis? Take out the trash? Do the dishes? Clean his room? Make the bed? Take care of the pets, perhaps?”

“No, I don’t suppose we do on a regular basis,” said Shele.

“Well there you go then,” said the Nun. “We have discovered the problem,” she proclaimed. “Matthew is totally unaccountable for his actions. No wonder he doesn’t do his homework.”

The guilt trip she was laying out was weighing heavily on me. I could see the headlines in the paper the next day. **YOUNG FOURTH GRADER FAILS. FATHER’S LACK OF PAYING ATTENTION IS TO BLAME. CHILD IS UNACCOUNTABLE. VALUES NOT BEING TAUGHT IN THE HOME.**

Before we left the classroom that day, the good Sister made sure we had a plan of action. Our action plan included either Shele or I sitting with Matt while he did his homework, along with a “duty” list of things he had to do around the house every day. Either Shele or I had to check off the duties on the list as they were completed. Matt was required to bring the completed list to the good Sister at the end of each week.

Shele was a little embarrassed, I think, but she also was impressed with the efforts of the teacher. “No public school in the world would make this kind of effort for a student. They would just let him fail,” she declared. “I’m happy we decided to spend the money to send him here. I think the Sister’s plan is good. We can make this work, can’t we?”

I nodded my head in the affirmative, while in my mind I was doing a slow burn. Who was this woman (albeit a Nun) to dictate to me how I should run my household? I had a different agenda, and it included a “come to the mountain” session with Matt. I was beginning to wonder if Matt’s year in fourth grade was going to be the longest year of my life? It was well on the way to being.

That evening, after dinner, Matt and I had our “come to the mountain” meeting. This is what we called meetings where I played my role of chief inquisitor and decision-maker regarding family problems that needed a male solution. I don’t get to play the role often because, more often than not, Shele’s wisdom prevails in family matters. Thank God!

My first question was brilliant. “Why haven’t you been doing your homework?”

His response was equally cerebral, “I don’t know.”

That answer has always been like someone writing on a chalkboard for me. It goes right through me! “Matt, that is not an acceptable answer,” I said. “Let me ask the question a different way. What have you been doing every night, for two hours, besides doing your homework?”

“The homework is too hard,” he replied.

“I didn’t ask if it was too hard,” I said becoming agitated. “What I want to know is what you do for two hours every night when your mom and I think you’re doing your homework?”

“Sometimes I draw. Sometimes I just think. Sometimes I watch TV. Sometimes I do some of the homework and sometimes I just sit there,” he said.

“Do you understand that this is the reason you are getting lousy grades?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” he said

My response was on the borderline of brain dead. “Are you stupid? What kind of an answer is ‘I don’t know’?”

“I don’t know,” was his reply.

Being the proactive father I am, I chose not to lose my mind. “I think I know the answer to this problem,” I said. “From now on, your mother or I will sit with you and help you do the homework. Once you understand the importance of it, and we can again trust you to do it without our supervision, you can then do it on your own again.”

“Okay,” he said excitedly. “That might be fun for you to do my homework while I watch.”

“I’m not going to do it,” I said. “I’m going to help you do it.”

“Oh,” he said. “Well, it will be fun anyway. Are we starting tonight?”

“Shele,” I called to my wife. “Matt and I have come up with a solution to the homework problem. It starts tonight, and you’re up.”

After about ten minutes of discussion and a plan of action being developed, Matt and I retired to his bedroom to begin the process.

The whole family got behind this project. Even though I felt I was being punished by Matt’s teacher, I made sure to check off the duty list each week and made sure he took it with him to school. Either Shele or I worked with Matt on his homework every school night and he appeared to be making progress. We were, for the first time, talking about his schoolwork rather than about his school day. It was actually refreshing.

Approximately four weeks into this process, as we arrived home one evening, there was a message on our answering machine from the school. The good Sister, Matt’s teacher, wanted us to call her. I assumed she wanted to praise us and the good work we were all doing to help Matt succeed. I couldn’t have been further from the mark.

Shele called her the next day. Following their conversation, she called me on my mobile phone. “Well, what did she want? Was I right?”

“No, you weren’t” she said. “In fact, she told me that she was pleased that Matt was doing daily chores and that we were making him more responsible and accountable, but he still isn’t doing his homework.”

“What?” I half-screamed into the phone. “That’s impossible. We do his homework with him every night. Did you tell her that?”

“Of course,” she said. “He evidentially isn’t turning it in every day. Although he is turning in the duty list every week.”

This news called for drastic measures, not just a “come to the mountain” meeting, but a “come to Everest” meeting. Matt would know that this meant a crisis of major proportions.

When I got home from work that evening, Shele had already prepared Matt with the “Everest” warning. He had a plan of his own cooking as well. It was getting to be close to the holiday season and he had his eye on a new bike he had seen in a magazine. Before I could summon him to the meeting, he presented me with a brochure about the bike. He had found a coupon in the magazine and requested the information.

“Isn’t this the badest bike you’ve ever seen?” he asked as he handed me the brochure.

“Well yes, I guess it’s pretty cool,” I said. “But you and I have more important things to talk about right now. Did your mother tell you what your teacher told her? I think this is a pretty strange time to be talking about a bike. Don’t you?”

“No,” he said. “I wanted to talk about something happy before we had to get sad.”

This kid has always had a knack for taking the wind out of my sails. I looked at him and said, “This is not about being sad. This is about helping you figure out why you aren’t doing what your supposed to be doing in school. Why, please tell me, have you not been turning in all your homework?”

“I forget it sometimes,” he said.

“You forget it?” I parroted back to him. “Well then, where is it?”

“It’s in my backpack,” he said as the tears began streaming down his face. He grabbed the backpack from the floor, unzipped it, and poured out the finished, but not submitted, homework. By this time he was sobbing. I knew better than to ask the next question, but I did it anyway.

“Why?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” came the reply that I would have bet my last dollar he would say.

I held my temper while I thought about the problem at hand. As my thoughts wandered my eyes focused on the brochure with the picture of the bike. It was a pretty nice bike after all, I thought. It looked like it could have a pretty nice price tag as well. I picked up the brochure as Matt’s tears turned to sobs. It was a mountain bike with all the latest features, including a gear structure beyond my imagination, a special seat, an attached pump and water bottle and some type of special shocks. The package even included a bike rack for the car and a helmet. At that point I seized what I thought was a great opportunity.

“Do you really want this bike?” I asked.

Still crying, he looked up at me and said, “Yes, but I probably don’t deserve it. Do I?”

“I think you just might,” I said. “But you are going to have to earn it.”

I had his attention at that point. He fought back the tears and listened intently as I outlined my plan. I told him that if he would, starting tomorrow, remember to turn in all his homework every day, plus the duty list every week, I would be willing to make a deal. He would also have to raise his grades from now on. Nothing less than straight A’s in all his subjects would be acceptable for him to keep his side of the deal. My side would be to buy him the bike.

“You mean you will buy me it for Christmas?” he asked.

“Oh no!” I said. “You will have to do this for the rest of the school year.”

“The whole year?”

“The whole year!”

He picked up the brochure and looked at the bike, weighing the possibilities. “Do you promise?” he asked.

“I promise,” I said.

“Then I promise too,” he said. “We have a deal!”

Given Matt’s track record, I was convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that he could not come close to meeting the criteria I had laid out for him. But, I was also relatively sure the net result would be a marked improvement in his performance. Turning in his homework every day would be enough to make me happy and keep the good Sister off my back.

Shele actually agreed with me on what I considered to be a solution just short of genius. She believed he would do it. I believed his efforts might last until just after Christmas when he would forget about the deal and fall back to his bad habits.

“No Everest meeting then Dad?” said Matt.

“No Everest meeting, son. I love you. Work hard at this and maybe you will have that bike after all.”

He picked up the brochure and took it to his room where he taped it above his desk so he would see it every time he sat down to do his homework. Over the next several weeks more copies of the brochure appeared on the refrigerator and the door to his room. He was serious.

“Matthew is a changed child,” read the note the good Sister sent home with Matt right after the January grade reports were issued. “His efforts to improve his grades are nothing short of great! I am pleased with his progress.” He had earned straight A’s since the “warning” notice we had received at the four week level of this grading period.

That evening, at dinner, both Shele and I couldn’t praise the child enough. He was making more of an effort than he ever had. To say we were proud parents would be understating what we both felt about him at that moment. I was encouraged to say the least. Part of me believed he would achieve his goal, while another part of me wondered if this was just a fluke.

“Do you remember your promise, Dad?” asked Matt.

“How could I forget with all the pictures around here?” I said smiling. “Yes, I remember.”

That night before we went to sleep, Shele asked if I had checked

any stores where the bike might be purchased. “He’s going to make it, you know,” she yawned.

“I’m beginning to believe he will, too,” I said.

Over the next few weeks, it became crystal clear that Matt had every intention of reaching his goal. He was not to be denied. His homework was number one priority. Every afternoon it was the first thing he did after he got home from school. He asked either Shele or me to proof it, made corrections if necessary (there weren’t many), and then stacked it beside the front door to make sure he would remember to take it to school in the morning. He even did homework on Friday afternoons so his weekends would be free.

In early May of that year, I decided I better find out where to buy this bike. Matt was going to reach his goal and I fully intended to live up to my side of the bargain. I called a local sporting goods store and was told that they didn’t carry the type or brand of bike that Matt wanted. The salesperson suggested I call a bike specialty store, which I did.

The salesperson at the bike store was very enthusiastic about Matt’s choice. He told me the shop didn’t inventory that brand but he would be happy to order it for me. “This is the best bike on the market today,” he said. “The company usually ships within two to three weeks. I can order you one today, just give me a major credit card number.”

“How much are we talking about here?” I asked. I anticipated up to \$400.00, since he had indicated it was the best bike on the market. I was floored by his answer.

“With the total package, including the rack, the helmet and the other small attachments, \$1,250.00 before tax,” he said. “Can I order it

for you today?”

“Ah... no, not today,” I stammered. “Let me call you back, I need to talk to my wife.”

“Good morning this is Shele,” she said as she answered the phone at her desk.

“DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW MUCH THIS BIKE IS THAT MATT WANTS US TO BUY HIM?” I half-yelled. “IT’S ALMOST \$1,300.00! WE CAN’T AFFORD THAT! I WOULDN’T SPEND THAT MUCH ON A BIKE FOR ME, I’M CERTAINLY NOT GOING TO SPEND THAT MUCH ON A TEN-YEAR-OLD!”

“Whoa, hold on a minute,” she said. “What are you talking about?”

“I checked out the bike he wants, and it’s more than \$1,000.00. That’s ridiculous for a kid’s bike. Nobody carries it. It has to be special ordered. I’m going to have to talk him into a different one. We just can’t do this,” I whined.

“You should have checked this out long before now,” she admonished me. “He’s counting on that bike. Let me make a few calls around the country and see if we can find it cheaper. I don’t think he needs the bike rack and special attachments, so maybe that will bring the price down. We’ll talk about it tonight.”

Shele is amazing. She can find anything faster, cheaper, and better than any other person I’ve known. Within a couple of days she had found the bike at a dealer in Kansas City who was willing to sell it to us without the bike rack, etc., but including the helmet, for \$850.00, and he would pay the shipping. She gave me his phone number so I could call and order the bike with a credit card. I didn’t do it.

I didn't do it because I was convinced that I could reason with a ten-year-old that spending \$850.00 of the family's hard-earned money on a bike was not smart. I was sure that he would be satisfied with a nice bike from Target or Wal-Mart in the price range of \$150.00.

The final day of school occurred in late May. Matt brought home his report card more excited than I had ever seen him. He had reached his goal of straight A's. "Can we get the bike today?" he asked breathlessly. "I can't wait to ride it. My friends will think I am so bad!"

"Sit down, son," I said. "First let me tell you how proud your mother and I are of you and your accomplishments. I never thought you could actually make straight A's. It's not that I think you're not smart enough. It's that it's so hard to do. You did it, and you deserve to get the bike like I promised.

"Can we go to the store now, Dad?" he excitedly asked.

"Hang on just a minute," I said. "This bike you want is really expensive. It's almost \$900.00. Plus it's too much bike for you. This is a special mountain bike that is used only by the most experienced, professional bikers."

"I know," he exclaimed. "How cool is that?"

"Well you're not a professional and you've never tried to ride a bike in the mountains, it's really hard to do," I said. "Besides, I know you don't want to spend the family's money on stuff we can't afford."

"But it's only \$900.00," he said. "Don't you have checks?"

"Well of course I have checks, but..."

"Then just write one!"

"It's not that simple, Matt," I said.

"I know that I promised I would buy this bike for you if you got

straight A's," I said. "You did it and I'm really proud of you. But, we just can't afford this much money for a bike. I didn't know it would be that much when I promised to buy you this bike. I will take you to Target tomorrow and you can pick out any bike they have in the store, but I can't buy you the bike in the picture."

"But you promised," Matt's eyes were filling with tears.

"I didn't know what I was promising," I said. "I'm sorry."

"But you promised," he said again through the tears. "If you promise then you have to do it, you just have to."

"I'll buy a different bike for you. Any one at the store you want," I said

"I don't want any other bike," he screamed. "You promised! If you won't buy me the bike like you promised then I don't want a bike. You broke your promise."

"You're spoiled, son," I said. "I will buy you a bike, right this instant if you want, but I am not buying that bike for you, promise or no promise. I'm sorry."

Matt could not understand why I couldn't bring myself to spend that much money on a bike. He left the room crying and spent the rest of the day and night in his room, refusing to eat dinner and refusing to talk to me.

Shele and I experienced one of the biggest fights of our married life. She felt I should buy the bike that I had promised to buy. In fact, she thought I had already done it since she had found the best price on the planet and given me the phone number to call to order it.

I had created a real tough situation in our family, but I truly

believed that I was doing the right thing. Our budget would simply not allow an expenditure of that magnitude for a plaything. We simply could not afford it. I stood my ground, offering to buy Matt a bike at Target or Wal-Mart on a moment's notice. I was sure he would finally agree. He didn't.

Five or six days later, I was talking on the phone to a client who owed me a substantial sum of money and had not made any effort to pay the debt for 60 days. "Listen, when you make a deal and a service is delivered, don't you expect to be paid?" I asked. He answered in the affirmative. "Then why won't you do for me what you want your customers to do for you?" There was silence on the other end of the phone. "I will expect your payment in the mail tomorrow," I said as I hung up the phone.

I didn't realize that Matt was standing just on the other side of the wall and heard the entire conversation. He came into my office, looked up at me and said, "Dad, did that man break his promise to you?"

I found the number of the bike shop in Kansas City and ordered the bike.

The lessons young people can and do teach us about life everyday should never go unnoticed. I was as wrong as a person can be to make a promise and then try to weasel out of it. Matt taught me that words mean things.

Since that time, I have almost quit using the words promise and guarantee. My family now knows that when I use the word promise, I mean it. If your word has no value, then what value do you have?

About The Author

Maynard Cowan is currently the chairman of a non-profit organization, Focus Foundation which he co-founded in 1988, along with his wife, Shele, and two individuals with whom he worked in the adult motivation and training industry. Through the last decade of the 20th century, Mr. Cowan served as the Executive Director of the organization, taking over as Board Chairman in 1999. The main mission of Focus Foundation is to help young people succeed in living up to their potential. This mission is accomplished through programs that assist teens in "discovering" their personal value system. The programs also provide an atmosphere where students learn from each other's experience about the importance of being more character and principle centered.

As a result of the success of the youth programs a demand grew for adult programs emphasizing the same principles. Mr. Cowan wrote a program titled Focus On Effectiveness, and in that program developed the Character Management Maxims as the centerpiece. At the same time, he began to write and publish The Character Chronicles, a weekly report regarding successes and failures in living a more character-centered and value-driven life. It was through this work that **Character-Centered Living in a Character Starved World** was conceived and written. If you enjoy the work of William Bennett and Stephen Covey in ethics and teaching moral living to young people, you will enjoy Maynard's insightful book.

You can read more about Maynard and this e-book by visiting

www.bookmice.com/character.htm

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The Gate Builders

Darrell Bain

The following events happened almost twenty years ago, back when I still had delusions that cowboys were born, not made, and when I was still drinking Coors instead of Gatorade.

Randy, my son from a previous marriage, who was eleven or twelve at the time, was visiting me. It also happened to be a time that some of our cows (which would very shortly convince me to go into another line of business) had learned to bypass the cattle guard I had designed and built and no comments on that, please. We're talking about a gate. The very same gate, in fact, which I was putting up to replace the defective cattle guard. Randy was eager to help and I was pleased to show him my expertise in gate building. Every Dad likes to show off to his son and I'm no exception. At least I used to.

The first thing Randy and I did was extend the fences along the road inward past the used culvert now masquerading as a cattle guard and a little ways on each side of the road. This in itself was a two day project but it turned out all right, unlike the first fence I built but that's another story. Now for the gate. First we got two huge 10" diameter creosote posts, one to hang the gate on and one to fasten the other end to. We used post hole diggers to dig the holes, not wanting to wrestle with the mechanized auger for two little holes. In fact I don't want to wrestle with the auger ever again regardless, but never mind, that's another story, too.

I huffed and puffed and let Randy huff and puff and we finally

dug two holes. Next we bought cement, hauled water and a wheelbarrow to the prospective gate and cemented the posts in, deep enough and wide enough that a Mack truck couldn't knock them down. Darned if I was going to have a leaning gate like some I had seen around the countryside. This gate, by the way, was going to be one of those fourteen foot aluminum jobs, unwieldy as heck to put up, even with Randy helping.

Posts in, we rested and I bragged. "See how simple this is?"

"Right, Dad," Randy said. He was nothing if not agreeable since I was paying him two dollars an hour for a job which a real cowboy would have finished in a couple of hours but which we had been working on three days. In fact, a real cowboy would have built a cattle guard that worked and would have had no need for a gate but I was still delusional at the time.

The next day, cemented posts standing as firm as steel pilings, we made ready to hang the gate. Aluminum gates, by the way, do not come with instructions, though they do have several parts. The first thing I figured out after having a few beers with which to reflect was that I had to attach some thingys to the post that the gate was to swing from. These thingys consisted of long screws with the end bent into a solid cylinder at right angles from the screw parts. The gate hinges had similar gadgets except they ended in hollow rings, the theory (as I eventually figured out) being that the rings on the hinges slip over the upright cylinders once they are attached to the fence post. Simple. Once you get the thingys in the posts.

It would have been very simple to have measured and marked the posts while they were still on the pickup and used my brand new electric drill to get holes started for the gizmos but I wasn't bright enough--I

mean I wanted Randy to see how a brace and bit worked, without electricity, like in the Olden Days. First I had to go buy one, though.

You would be surprised how hard it was to find a real brace and bits, even twenty years ago but we finally located one after two days of looking. Randy examined it with a critical eye. “Where’s the extension cord?” he asked.

“It doesn’t have one,” I told him. “You operate it by hand, like this.” I proceeded to stuff what looked like the right sized bit into the brace. It fit but I didn’t recognize the doohicky which tightened the bit in the brace. What I was actually doing was imitating--or trying to imitate--something I had seen my dad do when I was about three years old. The brace turned. The bit fell out.

“Can I tighten it, Dad?” Randy asked.

I handed it to him. Two seconds later the bit was fitted tightly into the brace, ready to begin drilling.

Smart alec kid, I thought. “Just checking to see if you were alert,” I said out loud.

We proceeded to drill some holes in the posts about where I thought the thingys should go.

“Why are we drilling these holes when the thingys have screw ends?” Randy asked. “Couldn’t we just screw them in?”

Too big for his britches, I thought. “Sure,” I said aloud, “but I wanted to show you how a brace and bit works.” *This kid will go far if someone doesn’t kill him first*, I reflected.

I decided that some more precise measurements were in order after finding out that the original eyeball judgments I had insisted on weren’t going to line up the cylindrical ends with the holes on the hinges.

First though, we went to town and bought a tape measure.

“Back again?” The clerk asked.

Smart Alec clerk, I thought. I bet he never hung a gate in his life.

With my superior attitude in tact, I paid for the tape measure and back to gate-hanging we went. Measure, measure. Screw, screw. Nothing to it, I thought as I gave the thingy one last turn to really fit it tightly in the post. In fact, I was using a giant pair of vise-grips clamped onto the thingy for leverage to make sure I got it in tight.

“Is that it, Dad?” Randy asked.

I wiped sweat off my brow and chugged some beer. “That’s it, son,” I said. “Now we hang the gate.”

With Randy helping and only stumbling and bruising my behind once or twice, we lined up the gate hinge holes with the upright cylindrical ends of the thingys. The gate slid right on, by golly, surprising me so much that I had to sit down and have another beer while admiring our handiwork. A little breeze came up. The gate swung in the breeze-- and stopped halfway to the post it was supposed to attach to. Somehow, while hanging the gate on the other post I had neglected to check the lay of the land. The road tilted, preventing the gate from closing. By a good two feet of earth.

“The cows will get out if we leave it like this,” Randy said.

Dern kid. I knew that. I chugged some more beer, thinking hard.

A light bulb popped into being over my head, figuratively speaking.

“No problem, son,” I said. “I’ve been wanting to test out that little dozer blade for the tractor. We’ll just grade that part of the road back to even, then the gate will close.”

I had already had vast experience with getting heavy implements

on and off the tractor so the dozer blade was not any trouble, even after putting it on upside down the first time. With Randy helping. In fact, Randy managed to live a lot longer by being silent while I removed the pins from the three point hitch and kicked the arms loose. With both of us in action it wasn't much of a problem to turn the blade over and get it back on the tractor. That should have warned me but it didn't.

You see, it turns out that there is a direct correlation between hardness of earth and size of earth moving equipment needed to move it. To put it in simpler terms, that road had been packed so hard that it would have taken a ten ton bulldozer to make a dent in it. The blade sticking out from the rear end of my little tractor bumped and skidded along behind me for a half hour, accomplishing nothing. Well, perhaps I did finally manage to move a tuft or two of grass between the ruts but that's about it. And all the time Randy was watching as I moved back and forth on the tractor between the two prospective gateposts, stirring up dust with that little bitty dozer blade. In fact, the longer I tried to use it the smaller it got. Or so it seemed. I would have given up sooner but by this time I was busy trying to figure out what to tell Randy when I climbed down. Finally I had it.

I got off the tractor. "Well, son," I said, "it's obvious that an engineer is playing a joke on us. He designed this dozer blade to move grass and soap bubbles, not dirt."

"Damn right," Randy said. He was just learning to cuss. "The engineers screwed it up."

That's my boy. If something doesn't work, always blame the engineers. However, we still needed a gate even though my mental processes were already trying to suggest that by leaving things as they

were all my cattle could probably manage to get run over within a week and I wouldn't have to worry about the pesky dern gate. I might have done it, too, except that every one of the cows had started off as a cute little calf and we had named every one of them. Rosy. White Stockings. Gertrude. Elsie. Not only could I not turn them out on the road, we never could kill one to eat like we planned on to begin with. Never name cows. It just leads to trouble. *Hmm...I wonder... No. Kids need names.*

"What do we do now, Dad?" Randy asked, tilting back a coke with the same motions I used to drink Coors.

"Well, it's a cinch we can't move the road," I said.

"Yeah, the damn engineers screwed up the road, too, didn't they Dad?" He had caught my gleam of approval when we agreed that the engineers had messed up the dozer blade. If you got a good thing going, hammer on it, I always say and Randy picked up on this real fast.

"Right. So we'll just have to move the posts."

"Can we do that?" Randy asked dubiously.

"Sure. They're not that heavy," I said.

"Yes, sir. But all that cement..."

"Hmm. Well, no sense giving ourselves back strains pulling them up." I swallowed some more beer, wondering what to do.

"Why don't we move the thingys to the other post, Dad?"

Smart alec kid. If he doesn't watch it he'll grow up to be an engineer himself. I just thought that but didn't say it. However...

We took the gate off, then in a little while I gave Randy some new cuss words to practice with. Getting those thingys screwed in was ducksoup compared to getting them back out again. They didn't want to unscrew. I knew how to take care of that, though. I had already found

out in my short ranching career that a hammer will solve a whole heap of ills. Randy and I took turns and the thingys came out but the post and the thingys were a little the worse for wear after banging the cylinder portion of them around and around, practically standing on our heads at the bottom portion of the circle. And then we had to put them into the other posts. Rats. I had another beer. I don't think I was at all unsteady on my feet by then but somehow that badly engineered road caused me to fall down on that aluminum gate and bend one of the crosspieces.

“Aw heck,” Randy said.

“Yoush can do bettersh than thatsh,” I said.

“Aw hell,” Randy said.

“Thatsh better. We'll fix the gate later. Right now you hold and I'll twist. We gotta get thesh thingsh in before dark.” (Later on I found a long iron rod and used it to keep the crosspiece from bending more. It worked but then somebody swiped it. By that time it didn't matter, though--the cows were gone).

Randy extended his life span even further by carefully not mentioning that I had forgotten to measure distances on the new post and one of the thingys had to come out and go in again. I chose to move the top one. We screwed it in with Randy doing most of the work. Then we hung the gate again. Then we took the gate down again. There was too much room under the bottom of the gate. A calf could crawl under. Heck, anything could crawl under it was so high. Back to the thingys. Randy didn't say a word. He may live to be a hundred and ten, he learns so fast.

Finally, by golly and by heck, we were ready to hang the gate for the final time. I was amazed. The female parts slipped around the

cylinder male parts of the thingys with the greatest of ease. I let go. Randy let go. The gate hung there, glittering in the sunset.

I stepped back to admire our work. Randy did, too. But then he sort of squinted into the sun. He walked up close to the gate. He turned around, I think so he could get off to a running start in case I got violent. He said, “Dad, why is the lettering on this gate upside down?”

(Censored)

Randy crawled over the gate, getting it between me and him.

“It’s all right son. It’s just the engineers again. They put the lettering on upside down.”

“Can we fix it?”

“Well, we could take off the lettering and glue it back on,” I said. I walked up to the gate. The lettering was stamped into the metal. My gosh, a whole factory was messed up. Either that or we had hung the gate upside down. I’m sure it was the factory and Randy had the good sense to agree with me when I told him that.

“We’ll have to take the gate off, turn it over and re-hang it right side up--I mean hang it so that the factory error won’t be obvious.” I said.

We took the gate off. We turned it upside down. We hung it back up.

“Are we finished now, Dad?” Randy asked.

“Yes, my son. We are finished,” I said.

“What are we going to do tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow? Oh, yes. Tomorrow we have to build a gate for the chicken yard.”

“We have to build it ourselves?” Randy asked with a touch of

apprehension in his voice.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “It’s as simple as hanging a gate.”

Randy got extremely homesick during the night and I had to take him home the next day. All the way back, he kept apologizing for not being available to help me build that chicken yard gate. I guess he thought I couldn’t do it without his help. I never did tell him how it came out. Or anyone else for that matter.

Randy was on the cusp of adolescence then, still malleable but rapidly approaching the age when a parent has to hope they have instilled lasting values, such as not pretending to know more than they do about various subjects--building gates, for example. That was the last time Randy visited us at the farm for another five years--and then it was a futile attempt to dry up a crack cocaine addiction. His mother had asked me to talk to him about drugs several times when I went to see him and my folks in Louisiana. I did, but he paid little attention--perhaps remembering that I was prone to exaggerating my knowledge. Would that three day comedy with the gate have made a difference if I had admitted I didn’t know a blasted thing about the subject? Probably not, but I’ll really never know. A year after Randy came to the farm for the last time he was arrested and charged with murder one from a drug deal gone bad.

Betty and I spent our savings on a lawyer and Randy wound up being sentenced to only twenty-one years at hard labor when he could have gotten life--or possibly the death penalty. He will be released on parole in two more years, having completed half his sentence. In the meantime, through correspondence and visits we have grown closer than ever we were while he was free and living with his mother. I never again

told him anything but the truth and he began asking my opinion in many areas where I did have some expertise.

I believe Randy has finally broken his drug habit and will make a productive citizen in a couple more years. In fact, he is very productive now. He is one of only a handful of Louisiana inmates whose behavior has earned him a paying job. He is contributing a third of his salary in room and board, saving a third of it (amounting to more than *I* have saved now) and spends most of the rest on college courses and books.

If ever your child asks for your opinion, be truthful. When you show him or her how to do something, don't be afraid to admit that you might not have the last word on the subject. Don't blame others for something you did wrong. Set the best example you possibly can. Not doing these things may have well-nigh unbearable consequences in your child's future.

About the Author

Darrell Bain and his wife Betty live on a Christmas Tree Farm on Santa Claus Lane in Texas where he has been growing trees and writing fantasy, fiction, humor, mysteries, non-fiction, romances, science fiction and thrillers for over a decade. As a writer, he has a unique ability to take the everyday acts of everyday people and turn them into hilarious misadventures of the inept.

Some of Darrell's crazy anecdotes are presented in **Life on Santa Claus Lane** and **Tales From A Texas Christmas Tree Farm**. These two volumes of misadventures could only happen to people who actually live on Santa Claus Lane - and own a Christmas tree farm - in Texas. On Santa Claus Lane we meet Darrell as the lazy, mechanically inept Husband who loves his hard-working but sometimes naive spouse. These stories and anecdotes are funny enough to make Al Gore laugh.

"I have read a few humor books and have never laughed as much as I did with this one. Don't be fooled by thinking that this is just another guy trying to tell a funny story, this goes beyond that. The author definitely succeeds here. When you need a good laugh, chuckle or smile, grab this book, it will definitely provide one for you." -- Tracy Eastgate,

How To Be The Worst Parent In The World

[Under The Covers Reviews](#)

Read more about Darrell's antics on Santa Claus Lane at

www.bookmice.com/life_on_santa_claus_lane.htm

Just to show his versatility, Darrell has also published a children's book entitled,

The Dog Who Thought He Was A Cat

www.bookmice.com/dogcat.htm

and a delightful romantic comedy in the tradition of Damon Runyan's Guys and Dolls, entitled, **Hotline To Heaven**. Ed Tanner is a shady character with an unwholesome past. He's down on his luck and between capers, so he ends up at the Salvation Army shelter where he meets Violet, a sweet young thing too beautiful for words and as pure as a newborn day. In this amusing and unpredictable romance, she becomes the Muse to inspire Ed's biggest scam ever -- a Fan Club for God. www.bookmice.com/hotline.htm

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The Breakfast Battle

Brenda Ehrler

When my daughter was six years old, I could count on battling with her each morning. Sadly for me, she seemed to be emerging victorious every time. My battle tactics no longer contained the edge needed for success. It became obvious to me that I needed a new strategy. I reasoned reinforcement troops were in order. If I couldn't get Adryen to behave, surely a therapist could.

At the commencement of my new battle plan, feelings of justification consumed me as I explained my dilemma to Penny, our therapist. I explained to her that I had lost control over my daughter. Furthermore, I could no longer get her to do anything I wanted her to do.

Over the next three months, Adryen and I met with Penny separately. Penny conducted her session with her while going to and from the store to purchase ice-cream cones. Penny and I met at the counseling center where she asked me to describe my experiences. I told her that Adryen would not get dressed, nor eat her breakfast in the morning. I described her lackadaisically sitting in front of her oatmeal. She seemed to think she had all day. I, on the other hand, had to make every minute count. In between getting dressed and putting on make-up, I would pick out what she would wear. Each morning, I would say a silent prayer that she would feel okay about my selection and get dressed without an argument. Inevitably, I would end up helping her put on her

shoes and socks minutes before we were to walk out the door.

At the sitter's house, I would let a calm child out of the car. She didn't seem to have a care in the world. But I was thankful for the fifteen-mile commute that would give me time to unwind before I had to start work. I asked Penny to "fix" Adryen's stubborn behavior because it was causing me way too much stress!

Penny asked what would happen if I let Adryen leave the house in her Pajamas without breakfast. I found myself describing how embarrassed I would feel bringing a child to the baby-sitter without breakfast in her PJs. What would the sitter think? Penny reminded me that it really didn't matter what the sitter thought. She went on to explain that Adryen would soon learn from her own embarrassment and hunger pains, and would make her own decision to get dressed and eat.

But this would mean I would have to give up wanting my daughter to look a certain way. I had spent hours sewing little dresses and picking out matching accessories. I had ribbons for her hair and she and I spent many hours making sure that every hair was in place. Again Penny reminded me that Adryen needed to be the one to make the decisions regarding her appearance. Penny told me that even if she went to school with mismatched clothes, she needed to be the one to make the decision.

Penny never did come out and tell me it was my behavior that had caused the problem. She was smart enough to know I would have reacted defensively. Now that I think about it, I don't like anyone telling me what to do and trying to control me. What made me think my daughter was any different?

As you can imagine, once I let go of trying to be in control, things

changed considerably. Adryen went to the sitter in her pajamas without breakfast one time. She did not like missing breakfast, nor did she like being at the sitter's in her pajamas.

Much later in life I realized that with this bit of control I was forcing on my daughter, I was also taking on her responsibility. By giving up my efforts to control the individuals in my life, I experience freedom from consequences that were truly not my responsibility. The only control I should want is control over my own internal thought process. Internally I can decide to change my perception.

After reading the story above, you can see just how easy it was for me to take Adryen's decision-making power away from her, in the name of "good parenting." Seeing a child immaculately dressed with their hair neatly arranged does not mean that that child is experiencing a healthy upbringing. Perfectionism is dysfunctional behavior, too.

I realized much later what a valuable gift Penny gave to Adryen and me. No matter how hard I try, the truth is, I have no control over the lives of my loved ones. In the same way that I have lessons I am destined to learn, so do my children. Now, as I look over my life experiences, I can see that some of my grandest life lessons were manifested through an experience I had labeled as unpleasant. If I try to take the unpleasantness out of my own children's lives, I am only prolonging the inevitable. If I take those opportunities away from them, when the lesson comes back later in their life, I might not be there with the needed support. If I had always been there to take on their responsibility, my child might not be emotionally strong enough to learn the lesson easily.

With my perception of seeing discomfort as an opportunity to

grow, why would I ever want to take these precious life lessons away from my loved ones?

The breakfast battle took place over twenty years ago! Today I am very proud of my beautiful, healthy and successful daughter.

About the Author

Brenda Ehrler lived with her husband, a practicing alcoholic and drug addict for nine years until 1990 when he became clean and sober. The years following her addict's recovery have taught the author that there was more to her own recovery, than his finding sobriety. In her inspiring book, **Learning To Be You - An Inside Job**, she reveals what she learned about herself and combines the most powerful information from her experience into this moving e-book to help others find the peace, joy and happiness available through recovery.

Read more about Brenda's work by visiting
www.bookmice.com/learning_to_be_you.htm

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Evidence Not Required

Jack Daw

I had just lost my grade eleven high school science fair. Mr. Pollet, my science teacher, broke the news to me one-on-one in his classroom. I guess he didn't want me to cause a scene.

“But, sir, I don't understand. My project was the best one out there.” You had better believe it was the best! My project showed planning, dedication, hard work, and (most importantly) pure genius. I figured Mr. Pollet had called me into his office to tell me that. Instead, he told me—I lost?

Mr. Pollet ran a hand through his dark hair. “Jack, you have no idea how much it hurt me to pass over your project.” He barely resisted the urge to pull some hair out on the next pass. “I mean, it clearly shows planning, dedication, hard work, and (most importantly) pure genius.” Somehow, my ego wasn't better off for him saying that. “But science fair projects are judged on their adherence to the Scientific Method” — we both bowed our heads in respect.— “and it would take at least 200 million dollars to build, test, and fully evaluate your project.”

“Come on, Mr. Pollet! I'm 16 years old. If I actually *had* 200 million dollars, I'd be on some tropical island with lots of beautiful, naked women!”

Mr. Pollet laughed. “I've got news for you, Jack.” He placed his hand on my shoulder. “That dream doesn't change as you get older.”

He shook my shoulder a bit, expecting me to crack into a smile, but it didn't happen. Unlike the 'island women', winning the fair was a dream I actually *believed* could come true. He gave up, and sat down behind his desk.

"Sir, seeing that we're graded by the Scientific Method,"—we both bow our heads in respect—"which project did win?"

It was the first time I've ever seen fear on a science teacher's face (outside of Chemistry class, anyway).

" 'Do Fruit-flies Reproduce?', by Paul Mesh. What can I say? Sex sells."

Mr. Pollet braced for the tirade that was sure to come. I mean, honestly! Paul Mesh had used that exact same project for *five years running!* In fact, he didn't even bother with *real* flies anymore (he put plastic, novelty flies in his display)! Yet, somehow, his project won the high school, county, and regional science fairs each and every year! Apparently, this year would be no exception. Still, I managed not to explode.

"I guess what really matters"—bonus points for not screaming my head off here—"is who's the best at working over the system."

That's when I heard it— a sound inside my head like glass breaking, or a computer trying to divide by zero. I didn't expect to hear the sound until I had children, but there it was—I was beginning to go mad.

Mr. Pollet must've heard the sound as well, because he quickly reached into his desk drawer. He pulled out a gold medal on a red, white, and blue ribbon.

“Don’t go down that road, Jack.” He stood up and walked over to me. “That line of thinking only leads to madness and a teacher’s certificate.” He placed the medal around my neck. “I’ve created a new judging category just for your project. It’s called ‘Innovative Science’. You won first prize.”

I fought hard to keep my eyes from tearing up. According to the First Rule of Male Bonding, ‘Only the elder male is allowed to show a tear’. That’s the way it’s been since time immemorial, and I didn’t want to be rude.

“Thank you, sir.”

“You’re welcome. Anytime you’re being treated unfairly, just look at this medal. *You* were the one who really won the science fair today.”

I nodded my understanding. Outside the classroom, the final bell for the school day rang. Half mad, but feeling better, I headed for the door.

“Mr. Daw, one more thing.” I turned to give Mr. Pollet my full attention. “No matter how bad things get, nothing is worth dividing-by-zero for.”

I gave Mr. Pollet a genuine smile. Then I begin fighting my way through the after-school rush. I wasn’t worried about going completely mad. Sure, Paul Mesh may have turned a relatively stupid system against me, but no one else would ever do that to me again.

I was going to be pleasantly surprised. That fantasy actually held true until I got home.

I didn't even get a chance to show off my mercy medal. As soon as I walked in the door, my mother was ready.

"Someone ran up a \$400 phone bill." By the look on her face, I should've known that 'someone' was supposed to be me.

"Hi, Mom. Look what I—"

"—Don't try to play innocent with me, Mister! I did some investigating." You can't imagine how fast my heart sank whenever she said that. Let me put it to you this way: Dividing-by-zero was looking very tempting right about then.

"Mom, I haven't made any long distance calls. I promise."

Mom gave me that patented 'I gotcha!' look. You know, the look parents are required to master for their licensing exams (they do have to have a license to raise a kid, right?).

"They weren't long distance calls, Jack. They were calls to the 'Call Us Now Teen Crisis Helpline', at \$2.95 a minute! Apparently, someone wanted to discuss their 'problems'."

"You know, Mom, there is another teenager in the house."

Mom was in my face faster than you could say, 'Hyper-space fold'. Somehow, she managed to levitate the seven inches to make up for our height difference.

"You better start remembering who you're talking to, boy."

"Yes'm." Fearing for my continued safety, gravity pulled Mom back to the floor.

"Before I was so rudely 'interrupted', I was going to add that a few of the calls were made on Saturday at 11:30. *You* were the only one

home at the time.”

“A.M. or P.M.?” I asked innocently.

“Don’t try any of your games, Jack. It doesn’t matter.”

“It *does* matter, Mom.” Somehow, I just managed to keep the frustration from my voice. “I’m *innocent*! If we could just take a look at the phone bill—.”

“—*We*? In case you’ve forgotten, *I’m* the parent here and *you’re* the child. What, you think you live in some kind of democracy?”

“That’s a trick question, right?” Mouth opened. Foot inserted. Mom levitated.

Five seconds later, I was in my room. If there was one good thing about being a teenager, it was that Mom didn’t spank me anymore. She also didn’t try to take any of my ‘privileges’ away either. It turned out that all of my interests were actually school related. Well, not my interest in Ellen Swanner, but Mom didn’t know that (of course, now that I think about it, neither did Ellen).

So, the most that happened to me was that I got sent to my room. It was still humiliating, though. Especially since I could hear my sisters snickering at me through the bedroom door. Wait a minute! I’ve been framed! One of those three giggling brats was actually getting away with the crime. But which one?

Cinnamon Daw was six years old. She was the youngest. Always had a distant, empty look on her face (you know, like veterans have after a gruesome battle). She didn’t talk much. It couldn’t be her.

She was the ‘baby’ of the family. She got whatever she wanted. What ‘problems’ could *she* possibly have had?

Next was Karen Daw. She was eight years old. I didn’t particularly know that much about her. She tended to blend in with the surroundings most of the time. Not that it mattered, the calls were all made to a ‘teen’ hotline, not a ‘kid’ hotline. Besides, the few times that I noticed her, Karen seemed to like me well enough. It would do no good for her to frame me. That couldn’t be said for the final suspect, however.

Christine Daw was thirteen. She was three years my junior, and it just ate her alive that I was the eldest. In fact, Christine actually launched a two-year campaign to try to convince Mom I was adopted! This same Christine, who made all “A’s” in school, only to hear Mom talk about how super-bright I was. And when Christine pointed out that my grades were lousy, Mom simply quoted my teachers: “Jack learns the lessons the *first* time. He then feels insulted when he then has to do homework. I mean, just look at his test scores and you *know* he understands the material!”

Oh, yes. I should’ve realized it was Christine from the start. But, unlike Mom, I wasn’t going to make a formal accusation until I had undeniable proof. The quest had begun!

I strode out of my room with my head held high. My sisters immediately tattled to Mom, but I wouldn’t be deterred. I marched into the kitchen with the knowledge that Justice herself was on my side (yes, as a matter of fact, I do read comic books. Why do you ask?).

I heroically looked up the ‘Call Us Now Teen Crisis Helpline’ in

the phonebook. I valiantly dialed their number. I even listened to the other end pick up with a stoic courage women have catfights for. Let's face it, knights everywhere were taking pointers from *me*!

"Hello, is anyone there?" Oops. Almost forgot about the phone call.

"Yes, I'm a teenager in trouble." In more ways than one, actually. Mom was then levitating right beside me. Blissfully unaware of that, the 'counselor' on the other end urged me on.

"Please go ahead. We deal with all kinds of problems here."

Mom was then breathing down my throat. "Well, you better," I said. "especially at \$2.95 a minute."

"Oops! I just got another call. Let me get back to you." Click, and Dial-tone! It occurred to me that I wouldn't get much help from the helpline. Too bad, I really needed that help right then. I slowly put the telephone down.

"Johnathan Tigerlilly Daw!" Mom was now hovering six inches above me. I took a wild guess that she wasn't happy with me. "I thought I told you to go to your room!"

I had to stand firm, Justice is on my side. Well, only figuratively. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Justice making a beeline for the front door (it's odd that, even blindfolded, she didn't trip over anything on her way out).

"Well, answer me!"

Even alone, I was willing to face this. I squinted my eyes, and dug the balls of my feet into the linoleum no-wax floor.

“I was gathering more evidence. I want to know who the *real* criminal is.”

“Jack, you’re not helping the situation one bit.” At that point, righteous indignation took over.

“Of course not, Mom. Heaven forbid I try to confuse the situation with *facts!*”

Three seconds later, I was in my room. Christine was again laughing at me through the door. It was as if she had planned on me trying to clear my name. ‘Know your enemy’, if you will. But that’s okay. One day, I’ll have my revenge. I could see it...

It’s Christine’s wedding day. She’s standing with her groom in the chapel, ready to take her vows. Then the priest says those fateful words., “If anyone gathered here knows any reason why this man and woman should not be wed in holy matrimony, let them speak now, or forever hold their peace.”

That’s when I crash through the ceiling (to land gracefully in the aisle). I stand up slowly, letting my black cape—with green trim—flow to full effect. I pull back the hood to reveal my identity. The look of panic on Christine’s face is priceless. I give her a roguish smile and look to the priest.

“Father, I know a reason why they shouldn’t be wed.” The gasps from those assembled punctuate my flawless, baritone voice.

A voice so much nicer than Christine’s, as she squeaks to her husband-to-be: “Honey, please don’t listen to him. It was just an *accident!*” That, of course, prompts ‘Honey’ to give me his full,

undivided attention.

“I testify...”—again, in that flawless, baritone voice—“...that Christine Applesauce Daw did hereby run up a \$400 telephone bill. She then wickedly blamed the crime on *me!*”

Oh, yes. The total silence would’ve been reward enough, but there’s more. Christine’s secret is out, so she immediately tries to sway Honey’s feelings of disgust and betrayal, but it’s no use.

“Christine, I’m leaving you!” Honey walks out the chapel in righteous indignation, but not before shaking my hand on the way out. “Thank you, Jack. You saved me from a fate worse than death!”

Unfortunately for me, the fantasy broke down at this point. It didn't occur to me that the bridesmaids would all be Ninjas who, within seconds of Honey’s departure, would pummel me into cat food.

You know what? Maybe I won’t do the wedding thing. Not only will I live longer, but I’ve also got better things to do with my time (like getting Ellen to talk to me, for instance). No, Christine’s day of reckoning will come, but not anytime soon. Probably when I’m older and wiser, I decided.

Eight years later, I’m older and wiser. I can appreciate that ‘family’ is what’s most important in life. I find out that Cinnamon wants to be a family therapist (I can’t imagine why; our family has never been the least bit dysfunctional). Karen isn’t sure what she wants to do with her life. Meanwhile, Christine has taken up some technical field with electronics.

During a recent phone call with Mom, I showed her that I have

matured well past our petty squabbles and disagreements:

“Mom, I didn’t run up that phone bill! You have to believe me!”

“I know, Jack.” Yes! Vindication at last! “Karen made all those calls.”

“What?” It couldn’t have been Karen. I mean, what possible ‘problem’ would’ve driven an eight-year-old to call a teen helpline?
“Mom, there must be some kind of mistake.”

“No mistake. She made those calls. One night, she just confessed about all the frame-ups she’s ever made against you, Christine, and even Cinnamon.”

“I had no idea.” Well, I guess that solved it. “At least justice is now being served.”

“Jack, what are you talking about?”

Sometimes, I get this ‘inner sense’ that tells me to avoid asking too many questions. Right then, it was warning me to drop this matter before it was too late.

“I’m talking about the punishment you’re giving Karen.” No response. “You know, for deceiving us all these years?” Still no response. “You *are* punishing her, right?”

Mom managed some nervous laughter.

“Jack, Karen confessed to all those crimes about five years ago.”

“You mean you’ve known I was innocent for *five years*? Why haven’t you told me?”

“It didn’t matter, Jack. All that was important was that ‘discipline’ was maintained.” That trace of nervousness was gone.

Mom was comfortably back in ‘Parent’ mode. “Children brought up without discipline turn into maladjusted adults.”

I wanted to ask Mom if she was speaking from personal experience, but that would’ve been rude (the woman gave birth to me, after all; she deserves *some* courtesy).

“I see.” Do not divide-by-zero. *Do not* divide-by-zero. “Did Karen mention ‘why’ she did all those frame-ups?”

“Karen was the ‘middle’ child. She just wanted attention.”

Okay, that made sense. No, wait a minute.

“How could Karen get attention, if no one knew she was the one doing all this?”

Mom didn’t even try to hide her sigh of exasperation.

“Jack, she may have wanted the attention, but that didn’t mean she wanted to get *in trouble* for it!”

I thought about that for a moment—“Silly me.”—and then just went ahead and divided by zero. I mean, it wasn’t as if I wasn’t half-mad already.

Oooh, look at all the pretty colors!

Since then, I hold my science fair medal whenever I have to think about the whole ordeal. It helps to keep me grounded in this reality (just like the men in their nice, white coats).

Overall, my recovery has been slow, but steady. Still, I can’t help but feel that Mom could’ve handled this matter better. In fact, to this very day, I don’t think she understands where she screwed up.

Karen, I know you're out there. I want you to know that I'm not angry. I'm older and wiser now, and I've matured past such childishness. But until justice is served (*truly* and *honestly* served), I have just one thing to say to you: Nah-nah-nah-Nah-nah!

Now, the healing can begin.

About the Author

Jack Daw is a computer programmer who credits the works of Judy Blume, Douglas Adams, and Charles Shultz for maintaining his sanity while growing up. "After seeing the world through their eyes," he'd tell you, "everyday life isn't half as crazy as TV makes it out to be."

Like the other authors previously mentioned, Jack is very committed to the ideal of children's fiction being of the highest quality possible. In other words, it should "let them have fun, without trying to spoon-feed them a `moral to the story'."

A self-styled "Amateur Mad Scientist" -- not unlike one of his storybook characters-- Jack works to understand the nature and history of all manner of machines; especially those of vehicles and small-scale appliances. Mr. Daw lives under an assumed name (the assumption being that his mother gave the name to him) in Arizona, USA.

Jack's first published work is a hilarious sci-fi adventure series for children starring Jackie Stevens and her sidekick HUGO, a reconditioned vacuum who used to be a combat unit...

Read more about their antics in **Behind The Hidden Door** and

One Flew Over The Kitchen Table

by visiting www.bookmice.com/hugo.htm

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The Killing Of A Frog

Gail Ylitalo

During the Summer the children are allowed a certain amount of freedom. We let them do the things that we did as children and, for the most part, they enjoy it. They like staying up late and sleeping late. They rent movies and go night swimming. The above ground pool isn't the same as a club pool but, since it's all they've ever known, it's special. You could say Summer is a time where the adults get to mingle with the youngsters. It's also the time when adults can make many a blunder.

My big blunder, one which will always be remembered, occurred a few years ago. My sister had asked me if her two children could stay for a week. She and her husband were going to take a much needed vacation away from the children. In other words, they were getting far away from the popcorn crowd. I agreed to keep them since Whitney and Andy were about the same age as my children, Ashley and Robert.

It was a week to remember.

They arrived on a Sunday evening and instantly paired off. The boys went one way and the girls promptly set up headquarters in Ashley's bedroom. I'd planned an evening of movies and games but they quickly passed on that. The boys got their sleeping bags and set up their base camp on the back deck. They had the two very spoiled dogs, Copper and Sheba, as their guards. It wasn't long before the cries of, "Put them up...get off my sleeping bag," rang out. I banished them to the backyard. All things considered, I thought everything went well. The

next day was another story.

Robert and Andy were typical boys. They would get along for a few hours and then start pushing and shoving. I would break up their altercation and threaten to ban them from the pool. This would work for awhile. On the other side, the girls wandered between the pool, the phone and video games. They never stayed with anything for long. By the end of the day, wet towels were scattered all over the house. Trying to be the understanding but firm adult, I would tell them to pick up the wet towels and bathing suits and hang them on the clothesline. They did make a few attempts at this.

Kids must have some kind of radar because every child within a mile of the house went swimming in our pool. According to Robert and Andy, they were all new, good friends. The girls, aged eleven and twelve, showed no interest in this newly formed crowd. They were tired of the pool and wanted to go rent movies. I told them we would do this after the sun went down. The boys were planning to go frog hunting that night. They knew the girls wouldn't want to do that. I didn't see any harm in it as long as they let them go when they were finished. They caught twenty frogs that night. This was to become a nightly challenge as they tried to catch more than they had the night before. "Maybe", our old cat, watched all of this from the porch. She was not amused and resented all the confusion. She let me know this by leaving a 'gift' on the rug by the back door.

I've never liked handling anything that wears a coat of slime. Frogs, for me, fell into that category. The boys took great pride in their nightly hunt. I had to reign them in a few times when they decided to chase the girls around the yard with the frog bucket. The old cat silently

watched this, her tail taking pleasure in this nightly ritual.

Andy wanted to cut one of the frogs open. He told me that it would be a learning experience. The girls told him it would be gross and I gave a flat out “NO!” Robert didn’t seem interested in hurting any of them so that notion was quickly shelved.

Day three was not as difficult as the day before. The rules were obeyed and all the neighborhood visitors had become bored with the pool. I was beginning to think that this wasn’t bad after all. My skills at domestic engineering were improving.

I was fair with them and did not nag. I firmly told them what I expected and they seemed to be content with this. A thunderstorm that evening stirred them up but I told stories and, once the storm had passed, went out with them to frog hunt. The girls tried to catch fireflies. The fireflies were smarter than we thought. They had taken the night off. Ashley said it was nature’s way of protecting them. Robert said they probably all drowned during the storm and they’d have to wait on a new batch to be born.

It was a good time for frog hunting. The little guys were everywhere. I stalked through the garden and every few minutes called to Andy and Robert to come and get them. The girls acted as spotters. They would find them and yell for the boys. By the time it was over, they’d caught sixty frogs. Robert and Andy wanted to wait until morning to let them go but I told them that would be cruel. The night was their feeding time and I was fairly certain they’d worked up an appetite jumping around in the bucket. They reluctantly agreed.

The next day, the halfway point of the visit had arrived. There

had been a few altercations. Whitney and Ashley got into a shoving match while deciding on a movie to watch. Andy became entangled in the wisteria and broke most of its limbs. They all fed the cat and the consequences weren't pretty. Robert left the gate open and Copper and Sheba promptly fled the premises. We spent the afternoon chasing them through the neighborhood. All four got into a tomato-throwing contest resulting in a red, sticky mess. Fortunately, my garden was loaded with tomatoes in various stages of growth. They had to listen to my lecture on world hunger and were punished by missing their swim.

“Do you understand what I mean by world hunger?” I asked. They were all seated around the kitchen table.

“Yeah,” said Andy, “It means that there are a lot of people who would've liked those tomatoes.”

“I don't get it,” said Whitney. “It's not like you were going to pack them up and send them to China.” They all laughed at this.

I sighed for effect and patted her hand before answering; “Another remark like that and on top of no pool there will be no further video games. The point that I'm trying to make is this...you should think before you act. I like to take extra vegetables and give them to the neighbors. I do this so they won't go to waste.”

“I thought tomatoes were fruits,” said Ashley, giving her cousin a nudge and a wink.

“That's not important,” I said.

“It is to my science teacher,” said Robert. “We're supposed to know stuff like that.”

“We didn't have plants this year,” said Whitney, “We were into

the Solar System.”

“Do you think there are ET’s, Auntie?” asked Andy.

“I think there are space guys out there,” answered Robert.

“People, we’re getting away from the topic,” I said firmly, determined to make my point. Of course by this time, I wasn’t sure where my point was going. “Okay, we all agree that there will be no more playing in the garden or playing with the vegetables in the garden. Right?” They all nodded before getting up and dashing out of the room. I sat there and wondered if all of this had been worth the aggravation. I heard their shouts and knew they’d gone to the pool anyway. I would have about an hour of solitude before hunger pains would bring them in.

The big blunder occurred the next day when I glanced out the window and saw Robert and Andy tossing a frog up in the air and letting it flop to the ground. The poor little thing bounced like rubber. Ashley and Whitney were laughing and acting as if the boys were doing some kind of circus show. I was so angry at their cruelty that I didn’t think through my actions. I slammed out the door and demanded to know just what they thought they were doing. Ashley and Whitney eased away. The boys stared at me as if I’d gone nuts.

“It was already dead,” declared Robert. “We weren’t hurting it!”

“Don’t lie to me! I saw you! I looked out the window and watched you toss it like a ball!”

“We took it away from the cat...Maybe must have killed it! I didn’t want her to eat it,” said Andy.

“Don’t lie to me! I’ve never seen a cat kill a frog! Maybe is too old to catch one!”

“It’s the truth,” they both asserted, their eyes filling with tears.
“We’d never hurt one.”

“Then why were you throwing it around?”

“Because it was already dead! You can ask Ashley and Whitney! They’ll tell you,” said Robert.

I called to the girls and waited until they’d come back to the scene of the crime before asking them what they’d witnessed.

“I didn’t see anything,” answered Ashley. “We were on the pool deck when we heard them laughing. Whitney looked to see what they were doing and said they were playing with a frog.”

“Whitney, what did you see?” I asked, losing patience with them.

“All I saw was a frog being tossed into the air.”

“Was it already dead?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she answered, “But we weren’t messing with the thing.”

“Okay. You two can go.” I turned my attention back to the boys.
“I’m so disappointed with you two. I thought you could be trusted not to harm the little guys. You know it’s cruel and just plain mean to treat one of God’s creatures like that. How would you like to be treated like that?”

“It was already dead,” whispered Robert.

“If it was dead then why would you toss it around like that?”

“I don’t know...it was lying there and the cat was by it so I figured it would be fun to play with it,” stammered Robert. “Andy only watched. He never really touched it.”

“Well, the frog hunting is over and there will be no more night

swimming. Now, let me get the shovel and we'll bury this poor creature."

I said nothing else and sent them in. Maybe was lying by the back door, unaware that she'd been blamed for this awful deed. I picked her up and rubbed her head. She purred and looked at me with such an innocent face. A fourteen-year-old cat simply didn't have the energy to kill. I couldn't remember the last time she'd actually caught anything. I was upset because Robert and Andy hadn't told me the truth. Dinner was a quiet affair. I could tell that the girls were on the boy's side. I remained stern and sent them to bed early. Ashley and Whitney went to the pool. They'd not been out there long when they came and got me.

"You have to see this," said Ashley, all excited. "You're not going to believe it!"

"I almost stepped on it!" said Whitney.

I followed them out and saw that dear old Maybe had actually killed a frog. She was sitting there beside it as if a great feat had been accomplished.

"They told me the truth," I said with an awful sinking feeling. Maybe was our murderer.

"Wow, Robert and Andy got into trouble for nothing," said Ashley, looking from me to the cat.

"Yeah, and Robert cried," added Whitney.

"They're really mad at you," said Ashley.

"I feel awful about this," I answered. "I should've listened to them. Let's take care of this and then I'll go talk to them."

“Can we listen?” asked Ashley.

“Why would you want to hear what I have to say?” I knew the answer. I was wrong and had to admit it. They wanted to witness me admitting that I’d jumped to a conclusion and had refused to listen to Andy and Robert’s explanation.

“I think it best if I go in alone,” I said. I walked into Robert’s bedroom feeling like the biggest jerk on the planet. Four very bright eyes met my meek demeanor. I was about to have a taste of humble pie. “Boys,” I said, clearing my throat. “It’s come to my attention that I made a mistake. You were right...Maybe killed the frog.”

“Did you catch her in the act?” asked Andy.

“No, but she’d placed her trophy by the back door. I think that was what she was trying to do when you found that frog this morning. It’s been so long since she’s killed anything that I’d forgotten that she liked to deposit her ‘gifts’ by the back door. I’m really sorry for not believing you.”

“I would never lie about anything,” said Robert. “It hurt that you blamed us.”

“Are you mad at me for acting like such a...mean parent?”

“I was mad at you but I thought you were just upset because it was dead. Dead things always upset grownups.” Robert said this with a child’s penetrating conviction.

“I did let my emotions get the better of me but it wasn’t so much that the frog was dead...it was the idea that you and Andy might have done it. I was afraid that you didn’t care.”

“I would never hurt anything,” said Andy. “They talked to us about that stuff in school.”

“I should have never doubted you,” I said. “I hope you’ll forgive me.”

“What are you going to do with Maybe?” asked Andy. “She’ll get another one...they’re all over the place.”

“Well,” I said thoughtfully, “I thought she was too old for hunting but she’s certainly proved me wrong. I guess I’ll keep her in and, when I do let her out, I’ll keep an eye on her.”

“I don’t blame Maybe,” said Robert. “If I were a cat I’d hunt stuff. I guess she has to go after them because it’s all she can catch. We can go night swimming and play video games...now that you know it wasn’t us?”

“Of course,” I said. “I’ll make it up to you. I know I hurt your feelings and embarrassed you in front of the girls. There’s a rule in some book, that I obviously haven’t read, that says you should believe your children.”

“I don’t know about that,” answered Andy. “I mean...sometimes I don’t tell stuff.”

“Like what?” Robert looked at him as if Andy had lost his mind.

“I don’t lie but if I don’t talk about it then I’m not hurting anyone,” answered Andy. He watched closely for some kind of a reaction.

I made a face and they laughed. “Well, to be honest,” I said, “is always the best policy.”

“Remember when you told us that story about the King who wasn’t wearing any clothes?” asked Robert. I nodded yes. “Well everyone went along with the lie because they were afraid they’d get in trouble if they told the truth. I always thought it was cool that a little kid was the one who blurted out that the King was naked. You told us that story last Summer when we put soap powder in the pool. I didn’t say we did it but you knew.”

“I remember. You caused the biggest mess; even the dogs had suds on them. The back yard was covered.” We laughed but I also recalled that their silence had infuriated me. It wasn’t like there was a long list of suspects. I’d told them the story about the King without the clothes to make a point. It wasn’t a very good example but at the time, it was the best I could do. At least they remembered it.

“You waited until we confessed,” said Andy. “You didn’t listen to us this time.”

“I know. I made a mistake and I regret it and I’m sure you’ll always remember it. Right?”

“I know I will,” said Robert. “But I’ll also remember that you said you were sorry. Yeah, it’s bad when grownups make mistakes.”

“Especially a big one,” I said. “So, it’s all worked out?”

“I guess,” said Andy.

“Is there something else?” I asked hoping I’d not made another faux pas.

“Robert, you tell her.” Andy gave his cousin a nudge before saying, “She can take it.”

“I don’t know guys,” I said, smiling. “This saying sorry thing is hard.”

“It’s not bad,” said Andy, “but we talked about it and you should know.”

“Okay, tell me.”

“It’s about those frogs,” said Robert.

“Not those frogs again!” I moaned.

“They’re not frogs,” whispered Robert.

“They’re not frogs?” I asked. “They sure look like frogs to me!”

“You’re a girl, that’s why they would look like frogs to you,” said Andy, very serious. “Girl’s aren’t up on things like frogs and bugs. You know, icky stuff.”

“If they’re not frogs, then what are they?” I asked.

“Toads,” answered both boys before laughing. “We didn’t want to make you look dumb so we let you call them frogs but Maybe really killed toads,” said Robert.

“Thanks for clearing this up. It’s important that I know the cat has a thing for toads not frogs,” I said dryly.

“I’m glad we told you,” said Andy. “Now you’ll know the difference.”

“Good point. So...you two go for a swim and I’ll worry about what to do with our wayward cat and her problem with amphibians.”

I watched them race out of the room and prayed that I wouldn’t make any more blunders requiring a meek apology on my part. It really is difficult to tell kids that you’re not perfect in this not so perfect world.

About the Author

Gail Ylitalo has recently had her first novel published, entitled **Blackberry Summer**. The summer of 1965, spent at their grandmother's farm, changes the lives of ten year old Carol and Tom, her nine year old cousin, in such a way that they will never look at life through innocent eyes. In this rural back woods community they discover the darker side of people, the secrets, the stories, the soft whispers and the gossip. They learn what real friendship truly means and that life should never be taken for granted.

Reminiscent of Harper Lee's, To Kill A Mockingbird, the works of William Faulkner and other Southern writers, the powerful writing of Ms Ylitalo tells a coming of age tale set against a veneer that thinly veils the prejudice and violence that lies so closely below the surface of a small town.

One Book Reviewer wrote: "Like the wild blackberries of my childhood summers, I found BLACKBERRY SUMMER bittersweet. And as I couldn't stop eating the blackberries in my grandmother's backyard, no matter the scratches, I couldn't stop reading this novel. My teenage son also read this book for review purposes, finding it compelling and thought provoking. We both were impressed with Gail's straightforward handling of violence and abuse, all the while tempering the negative with open-mindedness and compassion." -- Cindy Penn, [Word Weaving](#)

Read more about Gail's work by visiting

www.bookmice.com/blackberry.htm

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Top Ten Ways To Be The Worst Parent On Your Block

Deborah Gafford

- # 10 Tell your kids not to do as you do, only as you tell them to do. Then ask one of them to go get you a cold beer from the fridge.

- #9 When one of your kids whines about life not being fair tell him to show you his life is fair card or to just shut up about it. Then ask your wife, "Why do we have to go to your mother's house for dinner? You know I don't like the way she makes her spaghetti."

- #8 Remind your kids (again) of how far you had to walk to school when you were a child, through the snow of the worst blizzard since aught something or other and how it was uphill both ways. Then ask one of them to go get the newspaper for you off the front porch.

- #7 When your child brings home his report card, tell him to put it "over there somewhere" and you'll look at it later. Then, when you do get around to looking at it, gripe about the C's he made in Algebra and Chemistry. Tell him (again) how you made A's and B's in high school. Hey, what's it matter if they were in band, shop class, and home economics? You made the grades, right?

- #6 If your kid comes to you with a problem, tell him it's not your fault and to grow up. Remind him that he should be more responsible. Then tell him to put the wheel back on his tricycle himself.

- #5 Drill into your kid's brain that if he wants some new video game,

he'll have to find a way to pay for it himself. Tell him (again) how you had two paper routes when you were a kid. You don't need to mention how your dad got up before dawn, drove you to the pick up point for the newspapers, helped you roll them and then drove you all over creation so you could throw them and never charged you for gas. The important thing was you were just a kid holding down two jobs and doing all the work, right?

- #4 Explain in depth how your child must be honest and never cheat as you copy the video rental your friend got on his account and finished before turn-in time.
- #3 Tell your kid to quit whining about a toothache and to get on the school bus. Then ask your husband to call the office to tell them you're not feeling well today and you won't be coming in to work.
- #2 When your child asks you to pitch a baseball, make cookies or dye Easter eggs with him, tell him that you just don't have enough time right now. Then ask him if he has seen the TV remote control.
- #1 After your child has grown and flown the nest, call him often and ask why he never calls, writes and visits. While you've got him on the line, ask him what the address is for Dad's nursing home, again.

About the Author

Deborah Gafford is a former teacher who has taught in public schools from Texas to Japan. She holds a bachelor's degree in education from Memphis State University and a master's degree in education from the University of Texas at San Antonio. Having retired from the teaching profession, Deborah now pursues a career in writing, both in adult and children's literature and non-fiction.

"Reading has always been a great love of mine," says Deborah, "and for over eighteen years, I have tried to instill that same feeling in my students. To me, reading is

How To Be The Worst Parent In The World

like taking the most fantastic vacation you can imagine."

"In my children's adventure books, I make use of many reading skills such as word repetition, meanings of words explained through context, high interest, and phonics. Having taught hundreds of young students to read over the years, I picked up a few "tricks" along the way and incorporate them in my books. Whether your child is a slow reader or even an advanced one, my books will stimulate and encourage their reading interests and skills."

Deborah's children's book series, **Swept Away Stories**, are richly enhanced with internet links embedded throughout the stories which take children to fun and educational websites which expand the storyline in ways that no paper book can possibly do.

Read more about these exciting e-books by visiting

www.bookmice.com.sweptaway.htm

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Single Session Therapy

Dr. Bob Rich

It was a big house, designed to impress, one of a long row of widely spaced status statements. I parked by the footpath, and walked along the curving drive, up the wide steps, to the carved timber door. The doorbell was an intercom, which answered me in a few seconds in a tinny female voice. Then I heard the faint echo of footsteps, and she swung the door open.

The young woman who stood facing me was a picture of stress. This is not surprising: people don't call me when everything is going perfectly. She was tall for a woman, almost my height, with long, straight dark hair in a ponytail, large black eyes spoiled by the dark circles makeup couldn't hide, smooth Mediterranean skin. The expression on her oval, handsome face was distant, controlled. I had no attention for her clothes, but noted the tremor in the hand holding the smoldering cigarette, the rigidity of her body, the slightly hunched back as if she was carrying a great load.

I smiled at her. "Hi, I'm Jake."

"Come in, Dr Barnes." she said, rejecting the informality. By the way, I'm a real doctor, Ph.D. in Psychology, not a physician. In their case, 'doctor' is only a courtesy title. And whenever possible, I see my clients in their homes, it's far less threatening for them, and far more informative for me.

She led me through several magnificent rooms to the kitchen.

Central heating kept it all more than comfortably warm, so much so that I took off my jumper as soon as we stopped. With these high ceilings and wide open spaces, heating this place must cost as much as my entire weekly budget. And from the contact phonecall, I understood that the family was only husband, wife and one small child, in all this huge space. Well, that's their business.

The kitchen was straight out of Home Beautiful, everything shiny and apparently unused, except for the ashtray on a counter. She stubbed out her cigarette, then immediately lit another one.

“Right, Mrs Gotton,” I started, “I'll need to talk to you for a while before I see Ailsha.”

“Would you like a cup of coffee?”

“That would be nice. I know you mentioned on the phone that Ailsha refuses to go to school. How long has this been going on?” She talked while her hands were busy measuring out powder into the plunger-type coffee maker, filling the kettle, getting out cups. “We are very close with my sister. Her kids are Ailsha's favorite cousins, best friends really. And six weeks ago, she split up with her husband.” She hesitated for a moment, using the coffee-making as an excuse for thought, then continued, “That same week, I was in a shopping center, Ailsha with me, when a baby was snatched from her pram. It was on the news for days, and Ailsha couldn't be torn from the TV, she was riveted by it..”

“She is only five years old?”

“Yes.”

“Then surely you're the one to decide what she watches?”

The black eyes flashed at me with the first sign of humor. “You

don't know Ailsha. She is an iron-willed little lady.”

“I have sure-fire ways of fixing tantrums. Anyway, do go on.”

“Then, a week later, the school was broken into, a computer stolen, things vandalized. It's been since then.”

We paused for the ceremonial enquiries about milk and sugar.

“Describe a typical morning, exactly what happens.”

“Everything is fine until I am ready to leave her at the school. She dresses in her little uniform, has breakfast, chats in the car like she had not a care in the world, greets the other children and the teachers, starts to play. But as soon as I turn to go back to the car, she is screaming, runs to me, clutches me. She won't stay there without me.”

This doesn't sound like the standard pattern of school refusal. In that, resistance typically starts at home. “So, what have you and the teachers tried?” I took my first sip of coffee.

“I've left her, to get a phonecall an hour later. She is still inconsolable, screams until she runs out of energy, then just sits in a corner, hiccupping. I've stayed for a while. Everything is OK while she knows I am there. If I leave, openly or sneaking away, it's back to the screaming fit.”

So, I explored and eliminated possibilities: bullying at school, lack of friends, shame about asking to go to the toilet, wetting herself, personality clash with the teacher, learning difficulties. It was 'no' all the way.

“What's your family life like?” I asked.

She tried to hide her instant defensive reaction. “Good. Ailsha loves me. Too much if anything. She thinks the sun shines out of Ron.”

“And you and Ron?”

“Fine. No problems.”

There are ways around doors slammed in your face. I got a notebook from my briefcase. “Mrs Gotton, we’re still being detectives, to work out what Ailsha’s problem might be related to. One useful tool is a genogram. Now, I’m going to draw a map of Ailsha’s family: every person who is important in her life. I want ages, occupations, interests, Ailsha’s reactions to them, everything that may possibly be relevant. Then we’ll look for a pattern.”

She looked at me dubiously, but she was paying me good money to be the expert. So, we gossiped about the family, and I noted it all down, though I’d got the relevant information in the first few minutes. Ron is fifty-four, Liselle, Mrs Gotton, is twenty-nine. She is the second wife, the three children from the first marriage are adults. Ron is a stockbroker, works in the city, and is away from home 7:30 am to 6:30 pm every weekday. Liselle doesn’t have paid employment. She used to be a computer operator in the same firm, that’s where they met. This is what I call ‘the absent husband syndrome’.

“All right, Mrs Gotton.” I said at last. “Perhaps Ailsha would like to play some games with me now.”

This is where the gray beard is useful. I am every kid’s grandfather. Within two minutes, Ailsha and I were best friends. She happily played the games that help me to estimate her intelligence -- well above average -- activity level, interests, the way her little mind works.

But I still didn’t know why Mom must be present at school.

I said, “Ailsha, draw me a picture of this house. Draw it with all the people who live here.”

She drew a big square, with the red triangle of a roof on top, then

a chimney, not that this house had one, and of course the chimney was at right angles to the slope of the roof rather than vertical. She curled in the smoke, then came the stylized rectangles of doors and windows. At last, she drew a little girl, standing next to the house. Well, little, the figure was half the size of the house, but I didn't quibble about scale. She was meticulous about red ribbons in the pigtails, though the hands had no fingers.

"That's lovely." I said. "Who is that?"

"Me." She looked at me as if I was stupid.

"Ailsha, and why are you outside the house?"

Big dark eyes, Mother's eyes, look up at me, and suddenly she is ready to cry. "Because they are shouting at each other in there!"

QED.

"You are scared of losing Mom?"

Tears well from the eyes. I take her by the hand, and lead her back to Liselle. "Mrs Gotton," I say, "Ailsha and I have solved the mystery. She is terrified that you and her Dad will split up, like her cousins' family has broken up. She knows there is a danger of that, because you and her Dad often shout at each other."

There is a long silence. At last, the woman gets down on her knees, to eye level with her daughter. "Ailsha, darling, I would never leave you. Never." They hug.

She sent Ailsha back to her room, and unlike most kids, the little one obediently went. So, I wonder, who was fascinated by the news of the snatched baby? I don't like inconsistencies, but let it pass.

"Mrs Gotton," I said, "it's natural for you to keep your problems away from a stranger. It's none of my business, except insofar as it

affects my client, your daughter. But talk it over with your husband, and let me know if you want an appointment, so I can help the two of you to sort out your differences.”

I didn't hear again, so as is my custom, I telephoned one month later.

Liselle's voice was cool, self-assured. The undertone of anxiety was gone. “Thank you for ringing, Dr Barnes. She is doing very well, we've had no problems since your visit. For the first few days, I telephoned the school at lunchtime, then one day she forgot to be at the office to wait for it, so I even stopped that.”

“That's wonderful. And how are things for you personally?”

She grew more distant. “Ron and I are now constructively talking. Thank you.”

My next regular follow-up call is three months after the last consultation.

A man's voice answered, “Ronald Gotton.”

I introduced myself, asked after Ailsha.

“Dr Barnes, I want to thank you.” He had a pleasant baritone voice, sounded like a man used to public speaking. Unlike his wife, he was really friendly. “I have thought of contacting you, writing you a letter or something, but life has been a little hectic, we're getting ready to move. You see, I've gone part time, and work two days a week from home, through the Internet.”

“More time with the family?”

“You've got it.”

“That's great. Has it caused any problems?”

“No, though I was worried about money initially. But we've sold

the house, we're buying a smaller, cheaper one. I've traded the Mercedes and the Volvo for just one car, a Commodore, and so, without the mortgage and other debts, we can now afford to live on my reduced income. Liselle is even doing her best to stop smoking. And it's all thanks to you."

"No," I said, "It's all thanks to Ailsha."

About the Author

Bob Rich is an Australian writer, mudsmith and psychologist. He has done enough different things to fill a couple of lifetimes, but is too busy to worry about it. Since 1972, his main preoccupation has been to try and preserve a future for coming generations. The trouble is, he doesn't believe in salesmanship, the missionary spirit. This approach is part of the problem, so mustn't be part of the solution. So, he has lived a low-impact lifestyle for 20 years. When things go bad, he can at least say, 'It wasn't my fault!' Read the reasoning behind his lifestyle at <http://www.geocities.com/bobrich18/essay.htm>.

He is cursed with a sense of humor that gets him in trouble all the time, creativity that makes it impossible for anything he does to fit into categories, and an intense empathy for other people, even if they are very different from him. This is his main tool in two very different endeavors: psychological counseling and writing.

Bob has been writing magazine articles since 1980. His **Earth Garden Building Book** has been in continuous print since 1987, and has been reviewed as 'the Australian owner-builder's bible'. His second book, **Woodworking for Idiots Like Me** is a collection of autobiographical short stories, but teaches woodworking skills as well.

Bob now has an impressive list of prizes and awards in short story competitions, and spends every possible moment writing. He has e-published a collection of short stories championing the underdog in his own unique and inimicable way, entitled **Striking Back From Down Under**. A common theme runs through this otherwise very varied e-book bouquet of short stories: a sympathy for the victim. Contemporary crime, science fiction, fantasy, historical adventure, all of them can be found here. A kaleidoscope of villains and heroes follow each other, waiting to entertain you.

Read more about this work by visiting

www.bookmice.com/striking.htm

How To Be The Worst Parent In The World

Bookmice have also published Bob's trilogy **The Travels of First Horse**. This is the start of a series of books about the Ehvelen, the little People whose memory persists as myths of Elves, Dwarves, Gnomes and the like. The Horse trilogy is not as much about the Ehvelen, as it is about the ancient world of us Giants, as seen through Horse's eyes and is a wonderful story of adventure.

Read more about The Travels of First Horse by visiting

www.bookmice.com/ehvelen.htm

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In My Father's Eyes

Christina Walker

At fifteen I wrote my first creative words on paper, a short poem titled "Where Do I Begin?" On that star riddled night as I stared out the window and felt emotions flow from my heart through my hand and somehow end up as words on paper, my whole life changed. No longer was I a child who could explore the possibilities of what I wanted to be when I grew up. I was free to be a writer and subsequently chained to the desire of becoming an author.

Now, my father was a practical man: Hardworking, reserved, and silently old-fashion about the roles of men and women. As I moved from junior high to high school. He demanded, that I take typing as an electoral, as that surely would be a need for a woman looking for work. In retrospect, I'm certainly glad that I did take the class, however, my father's sense of practicality was a bulldozer to a little girl's dream. Girls wore dresses, learned to cook and clean. If they wrote fluffy little poems and wrote cute short stories, they were better left to a little journal with a lock and key.

That summer was the first crack between us that would soon become an abyss. Did I ever tell my father that I wanted to be a writer? Perhaps not in so many words, but then he knew. To say I want to be a writer was, to my father, like saying I want to fly to the moon. My Dad survived the Bronx of New York, with no male role model and a strict, alcoholic mother, by escaping into the Navy at seventeen. The military gave him an education in electronics and also gave him no quarter.

Which meant, they provide him with a line to walk and a formula that guaranteed that he could succeed, if he just toed the line. Hard work was the means, by which a man could provide for his family, however, it wasn't the only one. A daily dose of reality was my father's way of staying grounded. "Life's hard," "Hard work is not meant to be fun," and "Life's not fair." He held true to the strict standards of military ethics. Always follow orders, do your damndest to achieve the goal of those orders, in other words refuse to fail and just importantly, be prepared to suffer the consequences should you fail. "Life is not a picnic" was one of my father's favorite sayings, and when it came close to being such, he would battle it away with failing fists, afraid that it would destroy him.

So sanctioning his only daughter to become a writer was, in his mind, allowing her to fail. Placing her in a position that would get her hurt. So no, I never told my father that I wanted to make up characters and place them in stories about things I've never done and places I may never go. Besides, inside of the young girl, I wonder if maybe he was right. Wasn't he almost always right? Hence I never showed my father my stories and he never asked to see them.

So, I huddled in the corner of rooms, with my notebook and guarded against the approach of anyone who dared come close enough to see. Unable to clench the fire that burned so savagely through my heart and yet, also unable to vocalize that desire, for fear it would be crushed as soon as it left the paper and fluttered ungrounded in the air. I was a warrior with a sword, alone, in a room full of mirrors. I became your average high school student, never stepping forward, never succeeding at anything above and beyond, but also, never failing.

After graduation, I married my long time boyfriend and went to

work in a grocery store. That lasted a year and half, before I realized that you can't commit yourself only half way to a marriage and committing myself only half way was all I knew. In deciding to divorce, however, I for the first time had to face failure. I decided, at the time, that my mistake was in the commitment itself. After all if you don't commit yourself anything, it's impossible to fail. The next year and a half were spent wondering if this was it. Is this all that life is about? Reality was sinking in, this was the real world I told myself time to grow up and desist. Time to pack up childish dreams and send them to the Salvation Army. The worn and tattered pages of my imagination were better off with a real writer, who could become a real author. I put my writing away, far away.

Then, I met Jim and I found that commitment could result in success. For the first time in my life, I gave myself wholly to something and found that it wouldn't crush me with reprimand or laughter. I was twenty-one and began the process of fighting the disease of apathy. For my writing, however, it was too late, I had buried it too deep. For the next nine years, through the slow process of trust, I found that it was all right to follow your dreams, or at least the ones that others could share with you. Like me, Jim wanted to travel and we did just that. It didn't matter if anyone thought it was irresponsible, I had a partner that would stand up against the criticism with me. After a while, I even believed that I could run from that place inside of me that continued to call me a coward.

That place that kept asking, who are you? But I smothered that insistent whispering, knowing that if I dared bring it forth, I'd have to stand alone with it and take that chance of failing. Dreams have an

existence of their own, even after you have sent them away. You can banish them from your consciousness, but they rattle around inside of you. They take the form of a beggar you try to ignore, a politician you don't trust, an annoying child, or friend you can find. Life has a way of throwing circumstances at you that forces them to the surface. Despair, injustice, frustration and loneliness.

At the age of thirty, I found myself in another meaningless job, which after nine months no longer needed my services. Perhaps it was being laid off. Or maybe it was the crisis of turning thirty, but I tumbled into the void and crashed into that place where I'd buried my writing. It flooded from me undiluted and in such volume that I thought it would destroy everything I'd fought to become and everything I loved. Fortunately, my friends and especially, Jim, surprised me with their support. Yes, surprised. When you spend your life doubting yourself, you learn to doubt even those who have given you complete faith. I began the painful journey of discovery. Over the course of the next six years, I wrote an adult fiction novel, a middle reader's book and numerous short stories.

As I had grown up and changed, so had my father. He and my mother had divorced and my father had retired early to realize his dreams of traveling and finding happiness. He and I, despite our adversities when I was a child, had become close, even if our visits were infrequent. On one of those visits, I showed him my work and found positive reinforcement. I cried. It never occurred to me, or perhaps I never allowed myself to admit just how important it was to have my father's acceptance.

When I told him that I was a writer and hoped to someday

become an author, he looked at me and said, "Life's short and the only important thing in this world is to do what makes you happy." That opened the wound and I asked him why, as a child, he never ask to see my stories. His answer...he was hurt that I didn't offer to show him my stories.

Had I, through a misperception of what my father felt, buried myself and my writing behind a wall of fear? Yes and no. Through the ensuing conversation my father admitted, that at the time, he felt my becoming a writer was a delusional dream that would hurt me. He also admitted he was wrong. I learned on that day that I couldn't fault my father for trying to take care of his daughter and the only wrong committed was in lack of communication. In words never spoken, trust never given. How much better of a writer would I be today, if I had not felt forced to hide my dreams? How much better of a person? Why couldn't he have told me he loved me and I could be anything I wanted to be? I can call it fate, perhaps I wasn't meant to 'come out' until

I was thirty and it's actually easier to think of it that way. However, you're always left to wonder. Would I have gone on to college to take those writing classes that would have increased my ability? If only I had a desire a reason to want to go to college?

In December of 1999, my father was diagnosed with brain cancer at the age of fifty-eight. I was proud of him because for the nine years prior to that frightening and difficult day, he had let go of the dreary regiment of his life and sought happiness. He was living in Mexico on the beach of a beautiful lake with a woman he loved. He had come to realize that success didn't necessarily make you successful. That satisfaction

couldn't simply be bought with a job well done, unless you found joy in the job. Life was about living and the only way to live it is to love it and the only way to love it was to commit to it.

Two weeks before he died, I flew down to be with him and my stepmother, Carolyn. The disease had reduced his body to a skeleton and the tumor had impaired his ability to communicate. Volumes, however, were spoken with kisses and in holding hands. In those remaining days, under a brilliant Mexican sun, shade splashed by palm trees, my father and I said good-bye.

Those two weeks were some of the most painful of my life. But I was there to tell him I loved him and the only regret I have is that he is not here to share the joy of my first published book. Still, I'm one of the lucky ones. I have not had to suffer through my loss with the an ocean full of unspoken words, untold dreams, or unleashed love. Yet, I am left with the knowledge that, who I wanted to be, was for thirty years of my life, someone I wasn't.

As a parent give your child the gift of confidence, the gift of trust and respect. Only through these traits can we find ourselves, and only in the light of who we really are, can we return these gifts to others.

About the Author

Christina Walker's first full length work, **The Naked Shield**, is a powerful contemporary e-book story on many levels. It's a spiritual search for that place we call "home", and also a suspenseful race to outrun death. The main character is a Native American youth who is lost in the world-in-between, a place of dreams, a place that challenges what we want as opposed to what we are. At nineteen, Bobby is at a crossroad -- he must find a way to build his future upon a tremulous past and in a present that offers him little hope. Having grown up in a white man's world, he has lost all connection with his

How To Be The Worst Parent In The World

Arapaho heritage yet, haunted by visions he cannot understand, he begins the dangerous journey "home".

As one reviewer wrote: "The story at the center of Christina M. Walker's riveting first e-novel introduces us to Bobby, a young Native American man who finds himself at a spiritual and emotional crossroads. His mother, Larae, believing that she was protecting him from life on the reservation, raised him almost entirely in the white world. But now, through a series of confusing visions and his growing need to find his own place in the world, he embarks on the search that ultimately "brings him home."

Skillfully interwoven with Bobby's journey is also a good, solid suspense story involving the theft of Native American relics, the exploitation of Native American artisans and the greed and corruption of the society that allows these acts to flourish. The culmination is an action-packed, life or death chase that bridges the realms of reality, fantasy and the mysteries of Bobby's Arapaho heritage." -- Jan Kozlowski, [Inscriptions Magazine](#)

To read more about this powerful story and Christina's first e-published work,

The Naked Shield, please visit www.bookmice.com/shield.htm

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Soul Murder

Marianne Alexander

I never quite knew when IT was going to happen. I might be in the bath, or watching butterflies, or even digging in the soft brown earth.

I loved the smell of the earth, and I loved best of all the fat slow worms that lived out their important little lives in the ground. I did not understand how they did it, but I knew that they were somehow responsible for the fresh peas that grew in their wet green pods. It was all thanks to the work of the worms that there were ripe strawberries and even the profusion of flowers that spilled over endless crystal vases in the house. Willie had told me that, and I believed Willie. He was our gardener, and one of the few grownups that I felt was truly trustworthy.

Willie would place the bright red ladybugs on my grubby fingers and have me put them on the flower petals, and he always seemed delighted by my offerings of errant worms that had strayed on to the cinder paths. He would dig little holes in the earth around the plants and watch with me while the worm burrowed itself back into its home in the soil where it belonged. He would then send me off searching for more that might have become lost, so that they too might be put to work doing whatever it was that they did to make the garden grow.

Willie only disappointed me when it came to the snails. I liked the snails. I loved the silvery trails they made, and their convoluted homes

that they carried everywhere on their backs. Willie, however, was pretty negative about them. When I brought him snails, Willie was quite appalled and I was told to place those *on* the cinder paths as far from the plants as possible. I thought this was too hard on the poor little creatures who took so very long to get anywhere, so I would sneak around to the front of the house where Willie could not see me and carefully place the lost snails on the lawn.

I would look up at my house and try to imagine what it would feel like to have to carry it around on my back all day long. I remember telling them that at least they would never be caught out in the rain. With a parting pat to the top of their shells I would leave the little group on the lawn and run off to visit ants and butterflies and find more worms for Willie. And maybe, just maybe, I would get a fresh strawberry for my pains.

I can still close my eyes and feel the feelings and the body sensations as if it was yesterday. More than a half century later I can smell the rich soil and feel the sun on my shoulders. You see, I can still remember. And then IT would happen.

IT was a strange sensation that would overwhelm me as I conceived of an idea. I could never have explained it, even to myself, let alone in response to the critical verbal probings of a grown up. It was a fragile thing. A subvocal thing. A fuzzy picture painted in the colors of inspiration. A picture I could not quite stabilize enough to see clearly even in my own mind's eye.

Sometimes the inspiration came in a two dimensions, and sometimes three. One to be painted and the other that needed to be built.

And sometimes it was so tenuous and fragile that I was not sure which it was. The colors I experienced were surely shades of emotion, as they never existed in a paintbox or even in nature.

Along with these tentative visions came a great, urge and desire to get it out. Out of my mind, out through my fingers and out into the world. I longed with unbearable passion to see these visions come to life. I became breathless, my heart raced with a sense of urgency and I would begin to run, or leap from the bathtub, or drop the worm. Anything to find a mediator who could help me.

At the first sign of a grown up it would all come boiling out. "I need... I need..."

What did I need?

"Paper!" -- (revelation.) -- "I need paper and paints and glue and..."

Then it would happen. The dowsing of cold water, the dreaded question "What for?"

"What for?"For this THING in my head. This thing that I cannot explain but that is clamoring to get out and be realized. And I do not know its shape or its size or its color and these things do not matter because if I try to tell you it will go away. It is far too slippery to be caught like that.

If I had only had the language -- but I didn't. And anyway I did not have the voting rights. I was four years old. I would stand mute and lost and say nothing.

Sometimes I would say "Nothing."

Neither way got me my paper, and anyway the mind picture was rapidly fading under the scrutiny of the grown-ups.

Then with my head truly empty I would turn away from the "brick wall" I had run up against, and return to whatever I had been doing before. I was confused, and sad and angry and trying to call back the magical image that had just been bludgeoned out of my mind. The tears would come. Tears of loss and mourning for that which was slipping away so rapidly that I could not hold on even to its frayed edges.

And no one could be allowed to see the tears, for they could not be explained to a grownup's satisfaction. They would be branded "petulance" or "sulking" because I did not "get my way" and such things were visited with severe and physical punishments.

Oh those amazing words that I know now. Words that would have been so freeing then. Words that I did not have and would not have for years to come. For lack of those words I was declared "stubborn" and "willful" and perhaps I was. Perhaps I became so. And perhaps that was not altogether a bad thing.

Behind me would come the plaintive grown-up cry of "Why can't you just wash your hands and read a book?"

The sheer unfairness of that question always nagged at me since I was just as likely to hear "You have had your nose stuck in that book all day, and you have not heard a word I said. Why don't you go outside and get some fresh air?"

And in any event, IT could happen when I was reading a book. Whatever IT was, it came without warning and seemingly unrelated to

what I was doing. Sometimes I might wake up in the morning and it would be there. It could happen just as I fell asleep. It was often part of dreams. Fragile yet persistent, it was as impossible to ignore as it was to capture and bring to fruition. All I knew was that it was a very large part of me. In fact it defined my emerging "me-ness". And the grown-ups could kill it. They seemed determined to kill it.

In time and with a tremendous amount of mental effort I could hold on, at least to a part of the picture, for longer periods. Again and again I would run to a grown up and ask for paper or brushes, paints, glue whatever I felt I needed. I never got it all.

There was a hierarchy of materials I was permitted. Everything was ranked according to the "mess" it made. It was all to do with "inconveniencing" the grownups.

At almost any time I could have pencils and coloring books (which I hated) because these were clean and the grownups understood the end results. But I was not allowed to sharpen those pencils, (the "shavings" were messy) and I always "pressed too hard" as I attempted in vain to reproduce the brilliance of the tones I saw in my mind's eye. So the points broke and the grownups lectured at the "waste" when they had to sharpen them again and again for me, and the pencils grew steadily shorter.

I could have screamed at the mind-numbing boredom of covering half of an 8.5" X 10" sheet of paper with solid green for "grass" ---- and the other half with blue for "sky". There were silly bulbous shapes in the middle that were supposed to represent cars or planes, flowers, houses, trees, even blown up balloon like people. None of it looked like what

was in my head, and the process was the very opposite of self-expression. I always gave up in disgust long before these abominable "pictures" were finished. Often ending with a frustrated scribble that attempted to obliterate the hated black lines.

Next on this list, which involved sitting at a corner of the kitchen table, were dreadful little "magic" painting books. With the addition of clear water, rather sickly blues greens and pinks emerged, stubbornly within the lines. ("If you spill it, it's just clean water" was the explanation.) "When (not if) you screw up I will not be inconvenienced" was the message I got loud and clear. The colors would not even run together and mix to make it interesting.

Years passed, I suppose, for childhood is endless at the time, and one rapid blur when we look backwards. In any event I learned to say "May I paint?" as a type of shorthand when IT happened, and language skills improved.

But a child can never win in grownup logic land, for the giants make the rules. And just as the child has mastered them they invent whole new subsets of the rules. It is as if they toss a coin and say "Heads I win and tails you lose". The child does not have the skills to figure out the con until it is too late.

So then it became a matter of timing. "It is almost dinner time". "It is almost lunch time." "It will soon be time for your bath." "You have just had breakfast" "It is too late to start something new today". And always "You never finish what you start anyway!"

Having effectively made it impossible for there to be any time when it was all right for me to be creative, the grownups turned to the

weather for an ally. "It's a beautiful day you need to be outside" "Look at that rain! I have enough mess trailing through this house without you making more." And even, "It's midwinter, far too dark for you to see what you are doing."

After days of holding as tightly as possible to the rapidly dissolving visions in my head and doggedly asking again and again to paint, there were times when I was grudgingly allowed to do so.

The great moment arrived. I was bundled into old clothes and overalls and giant aprons and enough protective clothing so that I could scarcely move. Had I been working with radioactive art supplies I would have been quite safe. Not being able to move in my straightjacket was a mute point. A cramped and tiny corner of the kitchen table was cleared with much muttering. It was then covered with layers of newspaper as was the floor under it and I was placed there on a similarly covered chair from which my feet dangled uncomfortably, and threatened "Within an inch of my life" not to move from the spot, as if that were possible.

Paints were placed in front of me with the warning "Don't mess them up, mix your colors on the lid." An incredibly tiny quantity of water was supplied, a brush and ONE piece of paper. And all the while grown up eyes never strayed far away. I wanted to scream, "Don't WATCH me!" but that would have brought swift punishment for "insolence", not the least of which would have been the removal of my "painting privileges", so I would bend my head closer to my work to avoid the unwelcome scrutiny, which brought an instant, "You'll ruin your eyes."

Grimly I held to the mind picture that was by now days old and changing and fading as I strove to pull it to the forefront and thus out

onto the paper in front of me. But inspiration and vision cannot be held "grimly". You can relax and invite such things to flood your mind, often seeing them more clearly with closed eyes, but they cannot be forced to a time and place. Pin a butterfly and it dies, the iridescence of its wings fading with the life force to a dulled shadow of what it was in life. How could I know that what I was trying to do takes years of training? Any artist will tell you that the muse strikes when it will and painting to order is the hardest discipline you will ever learn.

All I knew, as I lost the vision faster than I could paint, was that I was not capable of carrying out my own ideas. I would try. I would ask for more paper. I would be denied. "Look!" I would be told as a grown up pointed to a tiny scrap of virgin white in one corner, "There is plenty of paper there." Or, "Use the back! Don't be so wasteful!"

How to explain that in order to capture some part of what was in my mind I would need the full sweep of paper? How to explain that staring at my own failed attempts paralyzed me and I needed the freshness of a new start? How to explain that the old efforts showed through on the back? How to explain that I needed more water because the colors were getting muddy and losing their brilliance? How to explain that the physical ability to move my arms in a fluid sweep was necessary?

Yes, I know all that now. But then I just knew that I was not capable. I was a failure. I gave up. The grownups rapidly stripped me out of my layers and threw away "the mess" (including my efforts). All the while lecturing about wasting time and materials. I knew the lecture by heart. It went like this, "Days and days you tell me, 'I want to paint. I

want to paint' Then, when I go to ALL this time and trouble -- five minutes and you just give up."

And the logic was implacable. And was I not dependant on the grown ups to tell me what was true? My mother would wash my paint box, carefully cleaning each color off. She washed the red off the white and the blue off the yellow and the red off the blue, so my pinks and greens and purples were quite gone. I would trail off defeated to read or play outside or whatever the grownups approved of for the rest of the day. They were be right, weren't they? And tantalizingly the inspirations would return to delight and torment me in equal portions.

What I was taught, what I learned so very thoroughly was that MY ideas did not work, MY original thoughts had no value. I was flawed and a failure, and most of all, I was not worth my parents' time and effort. The cleanliness and order of the household was paramount. An empty table and a spotless floor were valued so much higher than my original thoughts. How does a child deal with that?

On the very rare occasions when I was able to put some pale imitations of my imaginings down on paper, they were greeted with puzzlement and derision.

"What is that *supposed* to be?" Which told me that I had missed the mark.

Oh, to have been a well-known artist dressed in outrageous clothing and with a long patrician nose to look down. Oh, to have waved a dismissive hand in the general direction of the philistine and to have responded in withering tones "*Supposed* to be? *Supposed* to be, Madam? Why it is *supposed* to be exactly what it IS!"

It *IS* the graphic representation of the fractured emotion felt when viewing the bursting of a bubble! The fault lies with your vision, I fear, and not with the clarity of the expression in this work!

I would have waxed lyrical as I held my audience spellbound. I would have strutted and gesticulated "And this, the master work, captures exactly the bursting breathlessness of a running child who came upon a spider web all crystallized with ice on winter's morning just as the sun broke from behind a cloud and sparked it with diamonds." And I would have moved on leaving the unbeliever in the dust of my wake, bowed and broken, shamed and humbled by the inadequacy of their vision.

But I was not that famous and patrician artist who could view critics from a great height. I was just a freckle faced child with a paint smudge on my nose, bundled in ridiculous layers of protective clothing looking at the grownups from the level of their knees.

At the age of five, it was time for school. There it was discovered that I had some talent for art. I was so fortunate to have lived in a time and place where art was as important as any other mind training subject. We were issued art books and gloriously blank sketchbooks, right along with our math books and readers. We had art homework, and I was introduced to three-dimensional products like papier mache and clay. Best of all we were given the time, privacy and space in which to express ourselves.

I was in turn delighted and terrified. Although no longer strapped to a tiny area and covered in constrictive clothing, my mind was in a straightjacket when I wanted to create, and I had no faith in my ability to

bring any project to a successful conclusion. This went far deeper than art. No one was more surprised than I was when my math answers were correct. No one was more tentative at putting forward an original idea. When I was praised for my work, I did not trust the adult doing the praising. There had to be something wrong with them. Could they not see how flawed my work was? Could they not tell that it was not what it was *supposed* to be? What was wrong with those people?

Slowly, school became my refuge and my delight. Here I was allowed, even required, to explore new wonders daily. Wonders of the outside world, and wonders of the inner processes. My emotions at school were ludicrously heightened. I was forever torn between the sheer joy of learning, and the equal terror that it would be discovered that I was hopelessly inadequate and dreadfully flawed.

At school I was endlessly critiqued on my work. At home I was just as endlessly criticized. At school my way was great, I was using the tools and techniques I knew in an appropriate way, and I was introduced to new ones to help me come closer to realizing my objectives. I was asked to state my objectives. "Tell me where you are going here." So I was on my way! Not, "What is that *supposed* to be?"

At home my way was wrong because it was not the same as the grownup's way, and not as polished in execution. At school the work might be wrong, and I was capable of fixing that. But at home it was *me* who was wrong, who I was, as well as how I did things. And there was no way to "fix" being me or being a child. At school the yardstick was my age group. At home the benchmark was a grown up. No child can perform as an adult while they are yet a child, and this message given

often enough leaves the child knowing that somehow childhood itself is a fault, and they long to grow up, often far faster than they should.

There were times at school when we were each given a piece of paper and told to paint something from our imaginations. I froze. At the time I just knew that there was nothing in my head. I was not yet able to connect that feeling to the years of early failure. That came much later. Neither was I conscious of how I had fought to push "IT" away, my wonderful tormentor that had come all unbidden into my head as a child. Self-preservation, the strongest urge we have as humans had taught me to thrust inspiration away from me in order to survive in grown up land. That land of the all-powerful giants where we all must do what it takes to please the grown ups in order to survive for the first 15 years or so of our lives.

All I knew then was that I had disappointed my teachers. That saddened me, but in a way I was relieved, at least disappointing grown ups was familiar.

I was incredibly blessed by my education. Few children today can say the same. Today schools cram our children's minds with "facts". Often these "facts" are in dispute, or have been superceded before these students graduate. But back then the mind itself was exercised and trained so that it could discover the facts for itself, and maybe even invent a few new ones.

Perhaps all parenting is to some extent abusive. We are given the care of an individual, and we strive to make that individual conform. Because conformation is comfortable, and our world seems to reward the conformist.

Today "IT" has returned. It took years of work to coax it back, that fragile thing, and the early scars and wounds remain. But daily and yearly it grows stronger. It works best in the areas where my parents had no influence. Sculpting, science, research, and writing which came later in my youth when I was more under the influence of my teachers than my parents. And later still, came computers, which of course were not much in evidence when I was an infant. These areas are and have been my life's work. My painting still tends to follow realistic lines and I work from models and external stimuli most of the time. Crippled internal visions are forever unrealized in this mode.

Years of self-reliance and a degree of success have overcome my belief that I was unable to bring personal plans to fruition. Yet I doubt that I have met my full potential.

Today when I work with children, and when their eyes meet mine, I see all too often the same loss of self, mirroring back to me my own. I turn and look at the tight lines around the eyes and disapproving mouths of the teachers and the parents and I know that the land of giants is as real as it ever was, and perhaps with fewer escape routes. And I know that the soul murder goes on, is perhaps even institutionalized.

But if I am lucky I will come across some small person just staring into space, arms hanging loosely by her sides, her games of a moment ago forgotten at her feet, and I know that IT still happens. Or maybe I will overhear a little boy patting the shell of a snail and telling it, "At least you are never caught away from home in the rain". Then I can drive off into the hustle and bustle of everyday life secure in the knowledge that there is a difference between adults and grownups, and

that the giants can't win all the time.

About the Author

Born and educated in Scotland, Marianne Alexander's whole life has been split between science and art. In Scotland she worked in the sciences, as a researcher, but her artwork was so much in demand that she created Alexander Arts in 1964. Wearing a white lab coat by day, evenings often found her in attendance at various galleries where her art was on display.

Prompted by a friend's serious illness, Marianne was inspired to compile and illustrate **Living High on Lowering Cholesterol** which is a relaxed and easy going approach to changing your lifestyle for the better and lowering cholesterol in the process. Ms Alexander combines her scientific background with her artistic flair and presents this e-book with wit and charm and delicious illustrations.

Read more about this at

www.bookmice.com/cholesterol.htm

Always a story teller, soon her fantasy figures and art work became a part of a collection of tales, and the writing has gone on and on. Marianne is currently working on several illustrated children's books for Bookmice.com including

Midsummer Magic, an enchanting tale about the the lowly forest unicorns,
www.bookmice.com/midsummermagic.htm

She also writes for "Pug Pen", a magazine devoted to the care and doings of pugs. She is entirely owned by a pug called Max, who "helps" at the computer by resting his nose on her left hand while she types and promptly falling asleep!

You can read Marianne's delightful account of life with a Pug in

Mostly Max by visiting www.bookmice.com/max.htm

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April Fool's Day

RD Larson

I have always tried to be a sedate, calm mother. I think that it is important to be that way so that children feel secure. If more of us mothers could be relaxed and laid-back, we'd all feel better.

After saying that, I will tell you that I fail miserably. By nature, I am wild and unpredictable. Often, I have embarrassed my children even to tears. Oh, all right, so I cried, too. But then, I am used to embarrassing my own self.

Holidays are a big deal in this family. Let's have a party, a family party, bring your friends, call up your enemies, invite the neighbors, let's have a party! Who could possibly notice my underwear drying in the bathroom? Or would some visitor be so rude as to point out the escaped peas lurking under the kitchen counter? Never! Free food, belly laughs and high-jinx are the fare I serve up on Family Fun Festivities.

When my daughter was ten and my son was five, I was President of the PTA, just like my mother before me. I was more casually dressed than she, yes, in leggings and a tee-shirt, but the game's the same. Delegate, delegate and fumigate! I was busy that spring getting ready for, Lord Help US, the Spring Tea. It was to be a delicate affair, all pink and white, with girlie ribbons and tea cakes.

Ten mothers were volunteering tea cakes; they had the recipes straight from Mama's cook book. I could assist by phone. Fifth and sixth grade girls would be serving tea and coffee. Various sons, fathers and uncles were polishing the silver tea and coffee pots for the ten "delicate" tables. I had washed ten of my treasured, and ugliest, bone-China tea cups for the event. Well, who knew who would be overcome by tea and drop one of my beloved anniversary cups?

Flyers, in pink and white, were up all over town. I was up to my ears in RSVP slips from the school. As I lay on the floor with my head on our dog, Candy2, I looked at each scrap. Who had signed these? Doctors? Baseball players? I thought about the lovely place cards I was stenciling in the washroom. Candy2 scratched her ear and my forehead.

"Ouch, you ninny," I told her.

"Mom, you have a red scratch on your forehead," said Kerry the minute she came in the door. "I hope it fades before the tea."

"Oh, it's not for a week, I think," I watched the clouds through the patio door, not moving. I tickled Candy2's toes. "Maybe even two weeks."

"Moth-ER, it's Saturday, this Saturday!" Kerry shouted leaning over me. Her long hair hung down on either side of her cheeks. Nice straight hair. She's a cute kid, I thought to myself.

"Okay, I'll be ready. Everything is organized; my lists are finished, except for the place cards." I told her, snuggling my head up to Candy2's stomach.

"Why can't Candy2 have puppies? You promised," my girl child

said, suddenly sitting down and taking the black Lab's head on to her lap. I watched as Candy's tongue and tail synchronized at Kerry's loving touch. "You did, you know you did, you promised puppies to us."

"Maybe, we'll breed her after the Spring Tea. The Ford's have big old Duke, huh?"

"Yuck, don't talk like that," Kerry said. She was definitely not the farm child I was. She knew nothing about animals or how they came into the world because she chose not to listen, although I did try. Honestly, I did. You know, this bird and that bee stuff. She was very huffy about the whole thing.

Slam! Slam! The front door rocked the whole house.

"Bobby, don't slam the door!" I shouted, not moving either.
"Who's with you?"

"Mikey," said a very dirty little boy. He must have been playing in the dirt hills by the new houses. He was carrying a mud-encrusted Tonka grader. His equally dirty friend, Mikey, held a huge tractor. The mud droppings littered the floor.

"You're getting everything dirty; you're muddy! Go outside!" shouted Kerry, pointing at the door.

"Oh, well, he doesn't NEED two mothers," I said to her. The mud boy came and sat on my stomach.

"Hi Mom." He leaned over me, smiling. "You busy?"

"You smell like earthworms, kiddo," I said, hugging him.

"I know," he said, deadly serious, nodding his head. "Mikey says Saturday's April Fool's Day."

"Can't be; I've set aside that day for the school's Spring Tea. I wouldn't let it be," I stirred his curls.

"Well, Mikey says--"

"It is so April Fool's Day, Mom," Kerry called from the kitchen. I heard the Oreo bag being torn open. So did Candy2! Up we jumped, heading for the cookies.

The boys followed.

"Mom, what happens if someone pulls an April Fool's joke on you at the tea?" Kerry said, unscrewing her cookies and licking the white center off of one. She gave the bare cookie to Candy2.

"Don't give the dog chocolate; it will make her sick." I stuck my fingers into Candy2's mouth. "Give it up, pup!"

I threw the slimy thing in the sink. Candy2 looked at me, her doggy eyes accusing me of foul play.

"Here's a dog cookie," I handed the dog a four-inch dog biscuit. "Wag politely, please."

The kids laughed. I counted them. "One, two, three. Oh, oh, I've gotten a third child. Do you have a room here too, by any chance?"

Mikey giggled, a toothless cookie face. Bobby gathered up some more cookies, going out the front door with another slam. Mikey slammed behind him.

"Hey, get your vehicles! And don't slam the door!"

"They never listen to their mothers," Kerry said, shaking her head as her tongue took tiny licks of cream filling. "They're just boys through and through."

"Mom, what if some kid plays a joke on you? On April Fool's Day, you know, like puts salt in all the sugar bowls at the Spring Tea?" Kerry looked anxious.

"Oh, they won't, but tell you what? I'll pay you if you work as security at the tea, hey, get Nancy to help you." I wrinkled my nose at her, trying not to smile.

"Mom, you are so silly; I guess we could kind of watch out for you though," she said, stacking the empty cookie slices.

"Can I have your Oreo shells? If you aren't going to eat them?" I looked as hungry as I could. She just laughed and handed them to me.

"The old no-calories in the Shell Game, huh?" Kerry laughed.

I had a whole history of shell games with food, as in no frosting equals no calories in cake and no mayonnaise equals no calorie in ham sandwiches. I wanted to write a book called "The Shell Game Diet" someday. She went off, to do whatever kids do.

I took my mystery book, my milk and my cookie shells for some special private Mom-time. I hooked my legs around the rungs of the stool as I leaned over to read. Bliss, I thought. Candy2 must have read my mind because she rolled over, paws in the air with a satisfied grunt.

Of course, on Friday night I had to make tea cakes at eleven

o'clock since one of the volunteer mothers had decided to go into labor early. She called me from the hospital; I was thrilled for her. But not thrilled about making Mama's tea cakes with a box cake. Oh, well.

I was armed for bear on Saturday; who knew what tortures I'd face? My kids and husband prepared all year to get me back for all the pranks I had played on them all year and on other April Fool's Days for years past. The whole world knows that next to Halloween and my birthday, my favorite holiday is April Fool's Day.

I opened my eyes on the morning of the Spring Tea. I tried to remember what it was that I had forgotten. I reached for my glasses. Dark nothing. Huh? Off, it was the usual blurry world; on it was a much blurrier world and very dark.

Giggles. Pow, it hit me! April Fool's Day. More giggles.

"Okay, bring my glasses in here; these aren't mine." I shouted.

"Hi, honey," my husband peered around the bathroom door. His foam beard was pink. I couldn't stop laughing.

"Bobby insisted on helping me put on my shaving cream. Kerry was wild," Max shook his head. "I should have known."

"Happy Fool's Day, Max," I groaned.

"Big day for you, huh? All set? I'm scheduled to do some manual lifting and stapling over at the school at ten. Anything else? I plan to watch the kids." He smiled as he wiped dripping water off his chin.

"Mm, Kerry thinks she's going as my security guard to foil April Fool attacks. Nancy, too." I said, wiggling my toes.

"It's not Kerry any more; she changed her name again. It's Vicki, now."

"TA-DA, TA-DA, breakfast is served." The kids and Candy2 muscled each other trying to get through the bedroom door at the same time. The breakfast tray Kerry/Vicki held tipped dangerously toward me.

Naturally, Candy2 was happy to greet me; her lovely long tail wagged the tray. Ice cream, apricot halves, minced toast and lukewarm milky coffee dribbled down my night shirt.

"Delish, very delish," I said, popping an apricot half into my mouth.

"Mom, remember last year, you made eggs with white ice cream and apricots, huh?" Bobby leapt on to the bed, too. Candy2 did her best to clean my arms and hands as I held them out to her.

"Shut up, Bobby, now everything's ruined." Kerry, alias Vicki, stomped her huge tennies at every word. "I wanted to fool you, Mom."

"Oh, honey, you did," I grabbed her, as dog and boy bobbed around on the bed. I began to tickle them both while Candy2 kept at her cleanup job.

Max came out and sat down, grinning ear to ear like some country guy instead of a government official.

"Kerry, Bobby, let's go get some chocolate donuts for your Mom; she's got a tough day ahead."

"DAD, not Kerry, VICKI." Kerry yelled.

They disappeared as quickly as they had appeared.

Thinking of more serious matters, I tried to figure out how to fix my hair for the tea. Up or Down? If up, did I have enough bobbie pins? I grabbed the phone. Scooter answered on the first ring.

"Hi, Scooter, it's Rose, the kids and Max are on their way down to your place for donuts, would you tell Max to get me some gold bobbie pins?"

"Rosie, there ain't no donuts, just bear claws, your kid's like them?" Scooter was a smooth business man.

"Oh, sure, yes, would you tell Max about the bobbie pins? Gold ones?" I sighed.

"Okay, but we never did have gold ones, just black and brown." Scooter said.

"Tell Max to get brown bobbie pins."

"Okay, and bear claws instead of donuts." Scooter hung up. I just hugged Candy2 -- OH well.

By the time to get ready for the tea, I had dealt with spiders in my hair, Saran wrap on the toilet seat, salt in my coffee and phone calls that hadn't rung the phone. I was fed up with April Fool's this year.

Max took the kids and went off. He promised Kerry would look normally dressed at the tea, even if she insisted she was Vicki. No lime green with orange stripes.

I looked at my peony-pink ottoman-rib suit with its four giant buttons; would it gap? I hadn't worn pantyhose for a month. Or heels. I

mean I was a mother full-time and a full-time volunteer for sixteen things. How much could I remember how to dress up?

After putting my make-up on, getting the peony-pink suit on, I thought better of myself. I began to twist up my hair. Of course, it immediately untwisted. So I braided it down my back, like every other day and curved it into a round bun with fifty-million brown bobbie pins. Candy2 watched as I pulled on the pantyhose.

"Just you wait, this is just one of the tortures of motherhood," I told her. Her tongue lolled out; that dippy dog didn't know what it took to be a mother. "Someday, when you have puppies....."

I began to look for my high heels, soft pink leather, brand-new, where were they? Had the kids hid them? I wandered around the house looking under chairs and beds. In the family room, I glanced outside.

There were my pink heels. They leaned against each other in the middle of a blue plastic air mattress in the middle of the doughboy pool. Those brats; those little brats. I glanced at the clock and began to strip. In my slip and underwear, I slid into the icy pool, my pantyhose felt absolutely gooey, like sponge cake with Jell-O. I walked carefully toward the air mattress.

"Okay, Rose, no waves, no waves," I cautioned myself as I crept closer to the evil mattress. Snatched up my shoes. Slimy footed, I made my way back to the edge. As I swung my legs over, I threatened to get those kids of mine back for this caper. Max too.

The Spring Tea was lovely. Kerry was a darling child, her hair pulled back into a graceful ponytail, she served the tea cakes nicely. The

brat. I looked fine. No one knew my slip was damp or that my shoes were sticky. They didn't know my temper was on fire either. All the ladies had a fine time; at least they said so. Mama's old-time friend, Bertie Nelms, won the cake walk although she didn't even have to walk; it was pass-the-flower to the music kind of cake walk. I was glad it went well.

Mama would've been proud.

When I got home, I was exhausted. I fell on the bed, never mind the shoes or pantyhose.

"Can I go over to Nancy's?"

"Can I play with Mikey?"

"I'm going to go to the hardware store, honey?" At least Max was civil.

"Yes, yes, be good and come home right at five; do their mother's know you're..." the last was cutoff by a triple slam of the front door. I ground my teeth.

Candy2 licked my leg through the pantyhose. It really felt funny and tickly. I couldn't help myself and laughed at her. I pulled them off. Candy2 watched, fascinated, I guessed, that my "fur" came off.

I was thinking and thinking. And now I had a plan. Those brats! That man!

"Candy2, you've got to help me." I told her, my face in her face. Doggie licks are the best when you're feeling crummy and mean.

Everything was ready when my kids and husband came home at five, right on time. I met them at the front door. No slam this time.

"Shhh, quiet." I whispered to them.

"Why, Mom, Why?"

"Shush, Bobby. I have a surprise for all of you."

"Well, what?" Kerry/Vicki wanted to know.

"I wanted to tell you last week, but I got so busy with the Spring Tea," my voice trailed off.

"Honey, what is it?" Max was even excited.

"Mommy, pull-ease?" Bobby grabbed at my arm, jumping up and down.

"Shhhh, Bobby. Quiet. Okay, here's the news." I held my breath, looking into each expectant face. "Candy2 has had her puppies."

Their faces absolutely glowed. The thrill of birth can't be measured. Even Max looked beautiful with the news. I sighed, at peace at last.

"Can we see them?" Kerry whispered.

"Can I hold them?" Bobby whispered as well.

"But how, Rose? How?" Mother Nature had made even Max whisper.

"Come with me, but be very quiet." I told them.

They followed me down the hall as quiet as any new parents

could be.

I pushed open the bedroom door.

Candy2 lay on bed; at her belly six little black round things nuzzled. She looked at me smiling her doggy smile.

"Oh, how darling," Kerry knelt at the bed.

"Boy, they're little," Bobby leaned closer.

"Hold on, WA--it, hey they aren't puppies, they're socks, my socks!" Max shouted.

"April Fool!" I laughed. I fell, dying laughing, on the bed with Candy2. Balls of black socks went in six directions.

No one in my family talked to me for at least a week. I should have been ashamed, but I wasn't. Besides, when Candy2 did have her puppies in May, they didn't believe the puppies were real so I kept the babies to myself for almost a week.

Dogs are pretty good friends. I never did tell anyone how I talked Candy2 into lying on the bed with all those socks and I won't tell now.

About the Author

RD Larson writes from the heart about growing up in California in a way that is characteristically and uniquely her own. As one reviewer wrote, "[Mama Stories](#) is a collection of adventures in the life of Rose Darlington Berry, who lives on a California farm with her parents and brother. Pop was born and bred in the Pacific Northwest, but Mama is a transplanted Virginian whose valiant efforts to bring Southern grace and refinement into the home occasionally produce surprising results. The down-to-earth farmer and his wife often disagree strenuously, but their deep mutual love always helps them find a way to

How To Be The Worst Parent In The World

solve their problems. Rose's brother Lance is the quiet, studious peacemaker in the family. Rose is a mischievous tomboy who loves outdoor adventures and dreams of being a cowgirl. She adores and admires her beautiful mother but would rather work on the farm or play "Warrior Woman" with her friends than learn to be a gracious hostess.

"RD Larson has provided a book that parents and children might like reading together. Everyone will enjoy Rose's Halloween preparations in "The Frankenstein Snake" and sympathize with her mother's battle with a mangle that lives up to its name in "Reverend Harpo Stops By." Children will cheer for Rose's attempts to help her mama get over car sickness in "Mama Takes a Bus" and will commiserate when she accidentally swallows a bee in "Buffalo Girl Dreams." "The String Divorce" and "Camp" may help them see that family members can disagree without losing their love for one another. The author never preaches, but kindness and generosity shine in all of the stories. Families who read this collection will be entertained and enriched by the experience." -- Ilene Sirocca, [The Running River Reader](#)

Read more about **Mama Stories** at www.bookmice.com/mama.htm

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Telling The Truth

Susan K. Droney

When my now grown daughters were young I faced the responsibility of teaching them all the qualities that would turn them into two well adjusted human beings. As a divorced parent I was the parent solely responsible for their upbringing because they could only spend four weeks each Summer with their father due to the distance he lived from us. I taught them right from wrong and tried to instill good honest moral virtues in them, virtues that would last them throughout their lives.

I knew what they needed to be taught and I happily taught them the most important values through stories and songs I'd make up for them. I'd promptly answer any questions they might have to the best of my ability and if I didn't have an answer we would make a game out of seeking the answer. I made certain to let them know from the beginning that I didn't always have all of the answers and never pretended to. I didn't believe in telling them something that might not be the absolute truth just to keep them quiet; it was extremely important to me that what I told them was the truth. The three of us formed a healthy strong bond of love and trust.

One day the subject of lying came up. Since my oldest J.T. was entering kindergarten that fall I knew her sheltered world would now be expanding and this seemed as good a time as any to discuss why always

telling the truth is so important. I sat J.T., then five years old, and her younger sister Jessi, three years old, on the sofa as I pondered how to explain to them the importance of always telling the truth. I dug down into my vast memory vault recalling long ago conversations with my mother and grandmother on this very topic when I was a child.

Looking at my daughters I never dreamed how complex this subject would become, but I would find out very soon. “I want you two to promise me that you’ll always tell the truth no matter what.”

They both looked at me with big bright eyes and smiled. “If you tell lies you’ll get into trouble. But worse than getting into trouble is how sad it’ll make you feel inside right in the middle of your tummy. Lies hurt really bad.”

“How?” Jessi asked.

“If you say something about someone that’s not true it can hurt their feelings very deeply and they might even get in trouble for something they didn’t do. We should never talk about anyone behind their backs or listen to lies about them either...that’s called gossiping,” I explained.

“What if somebody tells you something about somebody and it isn’t a lie?” J.T. asked.

I frowned. “Unless it’s something nice that’s being said, then nothing should be said at all. Remember if you can’t say something nice about somebody then don’t say anything at all.”

They both listened though squirming and I knew they’d much rather be outside playing on that beautiful Summer afternoon instead of

sitting in the stuffy living room listening to one of my mother speeches. Jessi's eyes gave away her devilish nature and I sensed she was recalling an incident from several months before when a friend of mine met the girls for the first time.

“Is that like Harry, Mommy?” she asked.

I had to suppress a smile myself remembering the incident. When the girls met Harry they politely chatted with him for a few minutes, then Jessi took me aside and in a whisper loud enough for Harry to hear and promptly asked with a giggle only three year olds have, “Mommy, why didn't Harry's Mommy and Daddy name him Baldy?” Of course her pronunciation came out ‘Bawdy’. Harry happens to be completely bald. Red faced I explained to Harry that she didn't mean anything by it and was grateful that he took her remark good-naturedly and even joked about his name and lack of hair to the girls. They became fast friends after that.

I clarified to Jessi that the ‘Harry incident’ wasn't quite the same as what I now wanted them to understand. I hoped I could find some way to get my point across to them so I continued in simplified terms telling them all the usual things our parents told us and their parents told them about how one lie will lead to another until the tangled web of lies makes it hard to know what the truth really is. You'll always wonder if the person you told the lie to will ever find out that you lied and that will make you very unhappy and worried because if he or she finds out that you lied it will be hard to trust you and everything you say even if it is the truth will be doubted. No lie no matter how little is acceptable under any circumstance.

For good measure I threw in some mother guilt. I looked at their innocent little faces and said, “If either of you tell a lie, it will make me very sad and I will be very angry with you. Just remember that Mommy never lies.”

“I won’t lie, Mommy,” J.T. quickly answered.

“Me either,” Jessi said firmly.

I gave them both a hug and sent them out to play feeling quite smug with myself knowing I’d covered every possible situation imaginable about the horrible consequences of lying -- they’d think twice before ever telling a lie.

In the next few weeks nothing was mentioned about lying or the conversation we’d had so I assured myself that J.T. and Jessi heard the message loud and clear. Besides I was busy preparing J.T. for kindergarten, Jessi for pre-school and planning an informal late summer get together for family and friends. A ritual of mine was talking to my closest friend every afternoon on the phone. I filled her in daily with all the details of the party, which was fast approaching. We laughed and giggled like two high school girls as we commented about the flaws of some of the guests. I never dreamed that my daughters were absorbing my end of the conversation.

The day of the party arrived and everyone who’d been invited showed up. Relatives and friends made the usual fuss over the girls and marveled about how they were like day and night. J.T. was the quiet one who would sit for hours coloring or reading picture books. Jessi was the

type who needed to be involved in some physical activity almost every waking hour.

Whenever friends or cousins were around the girls would gather them for an hour or so for rehearsals then appear later to put on plays and sing songs for anyone who cared to watch. Of course the relatives always made a big deal about their productions showcasing their many talents. J.T. was a budding young artist and would take pieces of cardboard and draw scenes on them and set them behind her key actors. I was always proud of their manners and the polite way they'd accept the hugs and kisses from relatives even though I knew they'd prefer not to be hugged and kissed so much, but I'd covered that issue with them a long time ago by explaining to them that their relatives were happy to see them and it was gracious to politely accept their attention.

At one point, I picked up a tray of appetizers and passed it around. The girls were busy chatting with their cousins and friends; I assumed reading the play they planned to put on later that afternoon. An overweight relative remarked about her new diet and how 'losing weight was becoming a losing battle' as she stuffed one snack after another into her mouth. She went on and on for several minutes as we adults nodded politely all too familiar with this scenario but none of us wanting to hurt her for the world even though we all knew that she wasn't losing any weight because she refused to moderate her intake of food. "I don't think I'll ever get this weight off," she lamented.

I assumed the girls weren't paying any attention to what we adults were talking about, until Jessi piped up with, "Mommy says you need your mouth taped shut then no food can get in. If you do that for a few

weeks then you won't be so fat."

I almost choked and then froze as the room fell deadly silent. All eyes riveted on Jessi and then back to me. The aunt in question had a stricken look on her face. I looked at my little angel Jessi with her round cherub and innocent looking face. Everyone looking at this sweet child's face had to know that the words that had just come out of her mouth were not said to be cruel. I hoped they didn't think they came from me either. I looked at Jessi's confused expression and knew that she was only trying to help her Aunt. At that moment though, I wished the earth would swallow me up. I'd never felt so ashamed or humiliated. "Jessi, that was a terrible thing to say to your Aunt. Apologize right now," I sharply insisted.

Jessi's eyes filled with tears as she looked at me questionably, then at her Aunt. "I'm sorry," she answered in a small quivering voice.

My sister walked over to her and gave her a hug. "That's all right."

"No, it's not," I answered. And things were about to get worse.

"But Mommy that's what you said," Jessi replied.

I was horrified. "All right, young lady, go to your room," I demanded, trying to save face, but feeling sick for letting my baby take the fall.

"But Mommy you did say it. You always say stuff on the phone," J.T. said coming to Jessi's defense.

By this time my face was flaming red with embarrassment. I shook my head. "I don't know what's gotten into you two today." I

looked at my friends and relatives knowing they were watching to see how I would handle this with my normally well-mannered children.

“You said Uncle drinks too much and then gets into arguments with everybody,” J.T. added, then continued on about the Aunt who wasn’t as pretty as she thought she was.

I stole a glance at those in question. If looks could kill I would have been dead for sure. They were glaring at me their eyes looking like daggers ready to sear through me. I looked at my best friend Dee. She was as red faced as me and looked like she’d die from humiliation at any moment probably for fear that she would be found out as the one on the other end of the phone line.

I exhaled loudly, and then said, “I don’t know why you two are being so rude and telling lies, but you are both going to your room.”

“But Mommy you know you said it,” J.T. adamantly said. “We aren’t lying.”

“Mommy’s lying, J.T.,” Jessi said as she took her sister’s hand giving me a look that pierced my heart.

“Apologize to everyone for being bad girls and go to your room.”

They looked at me with the saddest eyes I’d ever seen, then said, “I’m sorry,” and reluctantly headed to their room.

I apologized, to everyone again for my daughters’ bad behavior and the party came to a swift and uncomfortable end. I had the bad feeling in my tummy that I’d warned the girls about. Later my friend Dee and I surmised that the girls must have overheard our phone conversation. I knew that I’d have to try to explain to them how wrong I

was and hope they could forgive me.

I sat on the edge of J.T.'s bed and motioned for them to sit beside me. Their eyes still held that same sadness and disappointment.

"I'm sorry that you two had to be punished today, but what you did was wrong. You caused many people who love you to feel bad by what you said."

"But you said it, Mommy and then you told a lie," Jessi promptly informed me.

I let my breath out. "You're right. I did say all of those things when I was talking to Dee on the phone. I shouldn't have said those things about other people, that's called gossiping and it wasn't nice of me. And I lied to you two by not telling the truth to my family and friends about what I said. I was very bad for lying and letting you take the blame."

"You need to get punished," Jessi said placing her hands on her hips. "I don't trust you no more."

Tears sprang to my eyes. "You're right, Jessi, but I already am being punished because I have a very bad feeling inside. I feel bad for saying things that weren't very nice about people I care about. I feel bad for not telling them that you two had nothing to do with it. I feel bad for making you two miss the party and punishing you, but most of all I feel bad for you not being able to trust me to tell the truth. If you can't trust me then you may never believe anything I ever tell you again. What if I tell you not to eat something because I know it's poisonous and now you don't believe me and think I'm lying and you eat it and become very

sick? That would be terrible. No one should ever lie, but it's just as important to learn when to say something or keep it to yourself. Do you understand?"

Jessi shook her head.

"We never ever tell a lie cause you said not to," J.T. answered.

I sighed. "Let me try to explain this better." I put my arms around them. "We all know that no one is perfect, right?"

They both nodded.

"But we don't have to go and tell someone they're not perfect. Sometimes by not saying anything is better than saying something that will hurt someone's feelings. You heard me tell Dee all those things about my relatives and it wasn't nice of me to be talking about them behind their backs even though what I was saying was true. But I should have told Dee my concerns about them instead of making jokes. That wasn't nice of me. I lied when I didn't admit to them that you two had only repeated what you'd heard me saying so that made matters even worse."

Jessi frowned.

J.T. was thoughtful for a minute. "But you should have told the truth, Mommy, cause we got punished for telling the truth."

"Yes, I should have. I did two bad things."

Jessi nodded. "Yep, Mommy is a liar and gossipy."

I struggled for the right words. "Did you two learn a lesson at all?" I studied both of their faces. They sat quietly. "Do you remember

when I told you about repeating what someone says about another person?”

They nodded.

“You two aren’t entirely innocent. You shouldn’t have repeated what you heard me saying to Dee.”

“But if you didn’t say it then we wouldn’t hear it,” J.T. reasoned.

“That’s true, but you should still never repeat anything you hear unless it’s to help someone.” Now I had to explain the difference between when it was okay to repeat what you heard versus not saying anything at all. It was becoming more complicated by the minute. “If you’re not sure what to do or if you should repeat something you’ve heard then it’s always wise to tell me or a teacher, or another adult what you heard.”

“But what if I don’t want to talk about that person,” J.T. insisted.

I was growing weary trying to get my point across. What was supposed to be a simple question of lie versus truth had opened up a can of worms and I realized that there were no simple explanations. “As you get older you’ll know the right thing to do, but for now if you’re not sure then ask me and we’ll figure it out together.”

“But you lied, Mommy and that’s not okay.”

“No, it’s not and I’m going to feel bad for a very long time and I promise I won’t lie to you two again.” I looked them both in the eye.

“But you two have to promise me something, also.”

“What?”

“If you overhear me saying something about someone come to me and ask me about it. I know you didn’t want your aunts and uncles to feel bad.”

“Are they mad at us?”

“No, they understand and still love you both very much.”

Jessi sighed. “Well, me and J.T. gotta think of how to punish you, Mommy.”

I knew I had to help them with my punishment so I came up with a solution that would teach them about facing the consequences of our actions. My punishment was to tell each of the offended the truth. I knew it would be hard, but I would do anything to regain my daughters’ trust and respect.

A few days later I fulfilled my punishment and along with my apology offered an explanation as to why I said the things I had. In time they came to realize that what I’d discussed with Dee was sincerely said out of concern for their well-being and I wasn’t being vindictive. Taken out of context, my daughters had repeated the words but not the sense of what I had said.

That incident with my daughters happened nearly nineteen years ago. It’s funny, not in a comical sense, but in an ironic way how the lesson on lying was reversed and I was the student and they became the teachers that day. I learned so much more from them through the years; sometimes I think I learned more from them than I ever taught them.

Ever since that day I found if I put myself in their place and really

listened to what I was saying it was always easier to practice what I preached. Telling them to never lie was good advice, but I should have taught them tact along with it. It took time, but finally as they grew older they realized the difference between telling a bold faced lie to make themselves look good or to hurt another deliberately and the tact to not deliberately hurt someone's feelings. At first they were so truthful it almost drove me crazy, but in time things settled down. They would come to me privately if they heard me talking about someone, but never mentioned it to the party in question.

Having my daughters lose their trust in me even for a moment was the most painful experience I'd ever gone through and I know it was just as hard for them. If they couldn't trust their parent whom could they trust? It was also equally important for them to learn that parents and adults make mistakes and aren't perfect even though we'd like to be, especially in the eyes of our children.

I had the opportunity to talk to both of my daughters before I wrote this because I was curious as to how much they remembered about that long ago day. They both remembered, but now laughed about it. I know I made a lot of mistakes along the way and there are several things I'd do over if given the chance, but the more I think about it the more I realize that this was meant to happen and seeing my not-so-perfect side helped to build the bond that I share with my daughters today and hopefully they will share with their own children someday.

Today J.T. and Jessi are both very intelligent well-respected young women who hold honesty and truth as one of the highest qualities a person can possess. As Jessi summed it up, "Mom, don't be too hard

on yourself. Even the best parents make mistakes, but admitting it took guts.” That statement said it all for me.

About the Author

Susan Droney was born and raised in New York state and moved to southern New Jersey in 1997. She knew from the age of twelve that her goal was to be a writer and she filled notebooks and journals with poetry and short stories which she shared with anyone who would read them.

In November 1998 "Broken Promises: A New Beginning" was e-published by The Hard Shell Word Factory. In May 1999 "Twisted Lives" was e-published by the Fiction Works who have also accepted "The Cats-Kill" which will be published in the near future.

Susan has written a delightful children's series entitled **The Adventures of Angel**, about a curious little bunny named Angel who finds herself involved in many awkward situations. She always learns a valuable lesson at the end of each story, and more often than not, her family learns a valuable lesson from her.

To read more about her work, visit

www.bookmice.com/angel.htm

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With Practise, You Too Can Be A Bad Parent

Ten Cardinal Rules For Bad Parents

(With helpful commentaries)

Neil Bezaire

The goal of bad parenting is an unhappy emotionally disturbed child. Of course, bad parenting cannot always take credit for an emotionally disturbed child. Chemical imbalance in the brain, defective genes, nervous system under attack by the environment (peer pressure, drugs, and living next to a toxic dump) can produce all kinds of emotionally disturbed unhappy children. But aside from this, children whose parents fail to acquire the right bad parenting skills unfortunately will grow up emotionally well adjusted and happy as a clam.

But even when genes are fine and negative peer pressure and drugs are absent from your children's lives, and your home doesn't sit near a nuclear test site, you can greatly increase the odds that you will have an unhappy emotionally disturbed child simply by following the guidelines. It would not be unreasonable to hope that assiduous training would produce a wildly sociopathic child.

Discipline and training will accomplish the skills you need to practice the art of bad parenting. When your son first wakes up in the morning, when he gets dressed and asks where his clothes are, when he brushes his teeth, when he eats breakfast and when he prepares to leave

the house for school furnish you with abundant opportunities to practice your bad parenting skills. Give yourself a good bad parent morning workout by taking advantage of these inexhaustible recurring opportunities. Evening family time present their own limitless opportunities to practice. Some of you might think that two workouts per day are excessive but bear in mind that you will be spending time with your children anyhow, and it takes no more time and effort to be a bad parent than it does to be a good parent.

RULE 1 Ignore your children:

Comments: Start when the child is still an infant. The best way to ignore an infant is to close the door. If you can still hear your child cry, buy some earplugs. With practice you will be able to read a tabloid without earplugs even when your child is screaming for attention while lying at your feet. Do not succumb to the human instinct to pick up and cuddle and sooth your child. Keep your eye on what's important-- becoming the world's worst parent. It's only hard to resist at the early stages.

You'll know that you are well on your way to becoming a bad parent when the urge to cuddle and sooth is gradually replaced by an urge to smack the child. As your child gets older, practice using the mantra "Umm" to help focus your inattention. Your daughter is telling you about the gold star she got at school, "Umm" her as you continue with what ever you were doing. Do not smile, do not make eye contact. Do not even look sideways in the general direction of your child because she might perversely interpret your sideways glance as a spark of

interest. Showing interest in your child makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to become a bad parent. When the child becomes a constant screamer, or withdraws, or becomes overly cranky or aggressive, you'll know that you're advancing towards exemplary bad parenthood.

RULE 2 Criticize your children:

Comments: Criticizing is easy, and opportunities abound. The importance of criticism in helping you become a bad parent is impossible to overstate. Tell the child as soon as it wakes up in the morning that it has bad breath. Be dramatic! Say, "Whoee! Your breath stinks!" Tell them the bedroom is a mess, worse than a pigsty. After the child is dressed and groomed, find fault with the dress and grooming. If the child looks perfect, tell her she took too long to get ready and now her breakfast is cold. A really good bad parent can criticize non-stop from the time the child first opens its eyes in the morning until the child disappears down the street headed for school.

With time you'll notice more and more things to criticize. The child can be too skinny, too porky, too dumb, or too bright for its own good, and has terrible posture. The child can be irresponsible, not grown up or too grown up; it can be lazy or too hyper (what are you, on dope?). If your son lacks your sense of humor tell him he's dull. If your daughter was not blessed with your good looks be sure to criticize her looks, large nose, small eyes, stringy hair and so on. The list is endless, and that is what makes it so easy to criticize. If you take advantage of all the golden opportunities to criticize you will move easily and quickly along the road of bad parenting.

Although it is easy to criticize, an urge to show exuberant satisfaction with some outstanding quality or accomplishment might occasionally pop up, especially at the early stages. **DO NOT GIVE IN TO THE URGE TO PRAISE!** You can undo weeks of bad parent exercises with just one well-deserved praise. Look for signs of lowered self-esteem--a slouch, slovenly appearance, lethargy--to let you know that you're on the right track.

RULE 3 Do not discuss; dictate to your children:

Comments: Bad parenting requires that you dictate to your children. No matter how many times your children try to engage you in a conversation, avoid discussing anything with them. Don't engage them in meaningful conversation or explore the meandering path of authentic enquiry with them. If your son asks "Why is the sky blue, mama?" head him off at the pass by responding with a voice dripping with condescension: "The sky isn't blue" (make sure "dummy" is implied in the tone of voice) "everyone knows that it only looks that way. Now, leave me alone, can't you see I'm busy?" Dedicated bad parents get exceptionally good at this. By the time their child reaches puberty a glaring stare is enough to convey the message.

You can tell your efforts to become a bad parent are paying off when your child no longer can express himself. When you try to engage your son in a conversation his face will harden with a smirk and he stares you down without uttering a sound, except possibly an expletive like "sh--," or, if you have trained exceptionally hard he might mouth the words "f--- you." To arrive at the point where the child audibly

pronounces those words requires the highest level of bad parent training. If you are willing to put in the effort, some day you will hear the words that will let you know you are approaching that highest degree.

RULE 4 Vent your anger on your children:

Comments: After you become proficient at criticizing your children (See Rule Number Two) and you want to advance further, try coupling your criticism with bursts of venomous anger and observe how the anger greatly magnifies a little criticism. Timing is important. Practice until your criticism is mindlessly accompanied by a wild burst of anger every time. Once you have your anger trained so it comes out automatically without your having to think, it is easy to ratchet up your bad parenting to the level of violence. The combination of criticism, anger, and violence is a powerful vehicle that can propel you at jet-like speed along the path of bad parenting.

When a son comes home late from school rage and shout and slap him around. If he wets the bed, yank him out of his sound sleep and shove him towards the toilet while shouting at the top of your lungs how stupid and baby-like his bed-wetting is. Pull down his pajamas and give him a frenzied spanking.

Signs which let you know that you are making great progress are your son's aggressive behavior towards his siblings and friends, torturing insects, birds and pets, sullen withdrawal of the child into his own world, always avoiding you, and your son's friends unwilling to enter your home. Less obvious signs are loss of appetite, undue meekness, lack of concentration and plummeting school grades.

RULE 5 Do not be moderate in confrontations:

Comments: When done consistently and with ever increasing energy, over-reaction during confrontations with your children is one of the surest ways to maintain your bad parent status. The nice thing about over-reaction is that it is so easy to do and yet produces such spectacular results. When your daughter spills a glass of milk react as if you were witnessing a devastating train wreck. Shout, scream, rant and rave. Throwing something at your daughter will create a memorable event for her and greatly improve your skills. A subtle ancillary benefit is that over-reaction places all of the child's conduct from not washing her hands to killing the cat in the same category. The child's nervous system is constantly on a high state of alert and the child fails to develop any insights or understanding. Your child's escalating nervousness will let you know that you are moving along the path of bad parenting.

RULE 6 Set bad examples for your children:

Comments: You can start being a bad parent even before the child is born. As soon as you become pregnant, start smoking, use alcohol on a daily basis, and use whatever drugs you can get your hands on. When you child is born, you will already be far down the road of bad parenting. Your child will be underweight, irritable, impaired in most of its functions, and depending on the amount and duration of drug use, your child will be a drug addict at birth.

As soon as your child becomes aware of what's going on around

the house, bicker with your spouse in the child's presence. Almost all husbands and wives know how to bicker, so that part is easy. Just be sure you do it in front of the children. Your son or daughter becoming more and more whiney is a clear sign that lets you know that your bickering is working.

Racism, prejudice, ethnocentricity, and intolerance are powerful tools to improve bad parenting skills. By being parents you are in a unique position to influence how your child develops. Your child's brain is constantly creating neural pathways and altering old ones in response to what the child hears, feels, sees and even to what it thinks. So flood the child's brain with degrading remarks.

CAVEAT: Do not expose your child to love, compassion, uplifting music, and authenticity. It has been demonstrated in exhaustive studies that doing so can nullify bad parenting efforts far more than anything else can.

RULE 7 Be dishonest with your children:

Comments: If you cannot give up authenticity, you can never become a truly bad parent. It is almost impossible for honesty and bad parenting to coexist in the same household. It is easy to become dishonest if you do it in small steps. For example lie to your son about why you were late picking him up from school. Lie to your daughter about trivial things so you can move up to more important things like lying about how the car got smashed. Get your daughter involved by asking her to go along with the story. If she is disinclined, let her know that you need her to lie so you can keep the insurance down. Brag to

your son about how much extra change you got and involve him by giving him the change to buy some candy. Let your children know how clever you were when you bought your Nordstrom dress with the intention of returning it after you wore it to the party. In hardly no time at all you will have etched dishonesty into your child's brain until he or she can lie, cheat and steal smoothly and easily. This is a sure sign that you are making splendid progress. Keep up the good work.

RULE 8 Set unreasonable rules and enforce them:

Comments: This rule is the foundation of the most strenuous of all bad parenting workouts. Setting unreasonable rules for your children may seem like a good effort but it has no lasting real effect unless you enforce them. Enforcement can be mentally and physically demanding on your part. Prepare yourself for an onslaught of besieging confrontations, which never seem to end. You'll feel like the last remaining soldier of Custer's last stand at Little Bighorn.

However, don't be satisfied with merely establishing an unreasonable rule. Keep changing the rule. This leads to much turmoil. When your home is in turmoil you'll know that your bad parenting exercises are working for you. A variation of the "changing the rule exercise" is the "enforcement/relaxation technique." If the rule is "no watching television on school nights" relax the rule during the week. Then when your daughter is enthralled by her favorite program on Friday night, turn off the set and remind her that it's a school night. She'll of course rant and rave and tell you (actually she'll holler at you) that tomorrow is Saturday and there is no school. Holler back, "I don't

care, this is a school night and rules are rules.” A nice advantage of this technique is that it can be used with the computer just as effectively as with the television.

RULE 9 Do not respect your children:

Comments: Respect for children is inconsistent with bad parenting. A lot of parents fall into the trap of respecting their children. This reduces the efficacy of bad parent training. One easy way to disrespect your children is to eliminate “please,” “thank you,” and “excuse me” from your vocabulary insofar as your children are concerned. Avoid saying, “Would you please pass the salt.” Say, “gimme the salt.” And of course never say, “thanks” unless it’s appropriate to add, “for nothing,” like, “thanks for nothing, dummy.” If you accidentally bump into one of your children never ever say, “excuse me.” Saying, “excuse me” will increase their self-respect but decrease your bad parenting skills. Ignore your daughter while she pours her heart out to you. Faithfully following this rule of bad parenting is sure to deepen and widen the chasm between you and your children. You’ll know your efforts under this rule are producing results when you notice hurt expressions on your children’s faces, a defeated slouch in their postures, and listless leaden steps.

RULE 10 Never trust your children:

Comments: Nothing does more to improve relations between a parent and child and nothing is more inimical to bad parenting than

genuine trust. So avoid it at all costs. The distrust must be manifested. If it isn't, the child might naively assume that you trust her. When cross-examining your daughter about where she was and what she did the previous night, be explicit. Say right out, "I don't believe a word you say, lady, and I am going to check up on what you tell me. So you better tell me the truth." And then be sure to check up on what she tells you. Call her friends and cross-examine them. Don't worry about appearing like Captain Queeg; chances are your children are too young to have seen the *Cain Mutiny*. Serious bad parenting devotees never worry about what their children think.

REVERSING THE COURSE:

Bad parenting is not for everyone. If after you have given bad parenting a fair trial and you discover that bad parenting is not for you, you can take effective steps to unwind the bad parenting process. It is easier to unwind the bad parenting process than you might think. Just look at the rules above and do their opposite. It's that simple. Do not ignore your children, do not criticize them; discuss things with your children and explore with them the meandering path that leads to truth; do not vent your anger on your children; do not overreact, act as a loving guide to your children and be a good example for them; be honest; respect them; trust them.

The most effective rule you can apply to reverse the bad parenting process is, "love your children unconditionally and accept them warts and all." In spite of what you might think, your children really are human, and humans are never perfect. As Dante pointed out

six hundred years ago, love spares no one who is loved from loving. Love transforms us and the one we love. So if you discover that bad parenting is not your cup of tea, loving your children might be a good option. It's worth a try.

About the Author

Neil Bezaire was born 1929 and has lived an unconventional life. After one year in the Korean War, Neil lived in Japan for eight years where he met and married Momochan, his wife of over fifty years. The first three of his ten children were born in Japan and where his interests led him to trace Japanese Zen back to its roots in India. After returning to the United States he went to night law school and practiced law for thirty years. In 1989 he left the practice of law to pursue his studies in greater depth and when Maria, his eldest daughter, a UCLA philosophy major, gave him western philosophy books, he used these to expand his studies.

The author has been a student of eastern and western philosophy for forty years. After special training, the Author and Momochan team-taught marriage classes for high school students. His whole life has lead him to the point of writing his thought-provoking e-book **First Empty Your Cup** which begins with the recounting of a classic Zen story:

Nan-in, a Japanese master during the Meiji era, received a university professor of philosophy who came to inquire about Zen. Nan-in served tea. As the professor droned on about everything he already knew, the master poured his visitor's cup full, and then kept on pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. "What are you doing! It is overfull. No more will go in!"

"Like this cup," Nan-in said, "you are full of your own opinion and speculations. How can you receive Zen unless you first empty your cup?"

To read more about Neil's work, drop by
www.bookmice.com/first_empty_your_cup.htm

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The Worst Grandparent

J.V. Lofgren

How to be the worst grandparent is a story that began a long, long time ago. It began before my own grandfather but for sake of brevity I will begin with him. The fault was passed on to my father and from my father to me like bad DNA. It wasn't my fault really it was just in my genes. I can say that because that way I can avoid all responsibility for being the worst grandparent. But I'm not alone in this fault. All grandparents fail because of their DNA.

Throughout the night ice crystals had been pecking against the cabin window as the banshees shook the house and moaned in the eaves. A cold chill raced through Hannah Olson's enormous body in spite of the long flannel nightgown and the down comforter of her feather bed. Her grandmother had first told her about them and she knew first hand that banshees did exist, those female spirits who wailed outside a house as a warning that a death would soon occur in the family. She had heard them the night she gave birth to a blue son, who never drew a breath. She had been alone in the small log cabin in the mountains outside Vagan, a small fishing village in Norway's Lofoten Islands. Her new husband had gone into the village to fetch a midwife. In her weakened condition Hannah had staggered out into the cold, dark night to set the

poor thing on a snow bank surrounded by pine trees so that the banshees could take its soul back to heaven. Oh, yes, she knew them well, as well as her husband knew his spirit companions.

The old woman had been huddling beneath her down comforter listening to the howling wind and the pecking ice crystals for more than an hour when her husband rolled over and snuggled against her. The old woman was big boned, of solid Norwegian stock, tall and stout; while her husband was a small man, a full head shorter than she was. He had a wiry body, lean, sinewy, and strong, the body of a fisherman.

"You're not going to take the boy out today, are you?" She asked softly.

"I promised the boy that today we'd go fishing."

"Don't you hear the wind outside? We promised his mother we'd take good care of him."

"Don't worry. I'll take good care of Yerri."

"I'm afraid . . . I don't want you to go out on the ice today."

She could feel his hand tighten on her breast as his body stiffened with determination.

"I've been a fisherman for over sixty years. Why are you afraid today?"

She stroked the back of his head the way she had done it a thousand times or more over the years, an intimate bonding they'd never failed to do each morning before beginning a new day. It was something they had started the morning after they were married back in Norway.

His hair had grayed and thinned but for a sixty-eight year old man he was full-headed, with the mane of a lion.

"I had a terrible dream last night. I saw the boy sliding down through a long black tunnel. He cried for me to help him. I reached out but I was too slow. He disappeared into the blackness."

"Just an anxiety dream, nothing more. I won't let anything happen to him."

The sound of their intimate stirring brought a towhead peeking around the open doorway. The old woman caught a glimpse of a blond head with wide blue eyes before it disappeared from the doorway.

She didn't have long to ponder what the boy might have seen or how much he might have understood. How much could a boy of five understand about love between a man and a woman? Could he understand what it meant to her to be loved by the same man for thirty-six years?

The old woman was jerked back to the moment when the howling wind returned with greater fury, like an angry snow monster growling as it prowled for its prey.

She turned and put her arm around the old man and hugged him gently.

"Please don't go out today," she softly pleaded again. "Stay in... just this once."

"I promised the lad that today I'd take him fishing and by God I will. A grandfather's promise to his grandson is a sacred vow, not to be broken. If a grandson can't count on his grandpa who can he count on?"

The old woman relaxed her grip. She knew it was pointless to argue further. Once he'd made up his mind there was no changing it; she knew that about him.

The old man was always at war with his status in life and with the elements. Even as a young man, when saner heads stayed safely in port beside warm fires, he had gone out into the gale teeth of the North Sea. Time after time, with his oilskin cap pulled down tight and the cold salt brine in his eyes, he went out to set his nets for the Atlantic cod, which would buy their tickets to America. He was a determined man who walked his own path, and listened to his own inner voice.

Magnus Olson was a Norwegian son of the sea who when once he had set his course would allow nothing to deflect him from it, not even when his stubbornness sailed him into dangerous waters. He was a peculiar little old man whose strange ways caused the people of Isle to laugh at him behind his back. That was one of the reasons why Hannah loved him; what others feared gave her comfort. She understood when he would sit in the living room and talk to spirits that others could not see. But she had seen them, several times, when the sun light was just right she had seen their outlines, briefly, fleetingly, so she knew they weren't just figments of an old man's senile mind. But she never heard them speak as he did.

She understood that townspeople often laughed at things they didn't understand like the time when the old Indian, John Jeki, twitched on the sidewalk in an epileptic fit. They stood around and laughed at a crazy old Indian being tormented by his whiskey devil. She understood that that was their way of deflecting their fear of the unseen. The

bench-men that sat outside Nyquist's said Magnus was just a crazy old man. While others, more prominent citizens like Herb Nyquist, who owned the town's only grocery store and was the head deacon of the Isle Baptist Church as well as the president of the school board, shook his finger and warned that someday the spirits would tell Magnus to do something terrible -- for such things were of the devil!

When Hannah heard the townspeople talk that way about her husband she'd stiffen her back, and stick out her clinched jaw and sneer, "*Puss, nu, gummo chering.*"

"What does that mean?" Asked Jerry, her grandson who had just turned five that previous November and was a frail, thin boy, having barely survived two earlier bouts with double pneumonia. The doctor had warned that another attack to his weakened lungs would be fatal.

"It's a saying from the old country," she said. "When townsfolk talked about someone behind their back they sounded like a bunch of dumb old gossiping women -- *gummo chering.*"

There comes the first time a grandchild comes face to face with death. What's a grandparent to do?

Because of his cute baby face Jerry was smothered by the older girls and had his nose bloodied by the bullyboys. He was a lonely, withdrawn seven-year old who had two friends; his grandpa and a dog named Spot. The boy and his dog were inseparable companions.

Spot's lineage flowed from many bloodlines, which gave him a coat of tan, shorthaired with large brown spots. His powerful body, an inheritance from a distant bulldog, enabled him to reign as king of the

local dogdom.

Spotty would greet his young master as he came home from school by rubbing his hindquarters against the boy's leg while vigorously wiggling his stubby tail; a tail that had been bobbed when he was a puppy. Jerry and Spotty had been together since Uncle Otto gave the puppy to Jerry as a present on his first birthday.

From the beginning Spot had assumed responsibility for his young master who often wandered about the oak forests behind the barn in the grips of vivid daydreams.

During the cold winter nights of northern Minnesota Spot would nose his way beneath the buffalo blanket to share his warmth in the unheated attic bedroom. In their warm cocoon they were secure from the frost that beaded on the ceiling nails.

No itinerant bum could get within three feet of young Jerry without hearing Spot's warning growl and seeing his bared teeth. Those who ignored the warning felt the slash of Spot's teeth on their backside.

Spot was not a hunter. He would lag disinterestedly behind Jerry's heels when they ventured forth with handmade bow and arrow in search of imaginary lions or bears. But when it came to woodchucks... that was another matter.

When Spot cornered a woodchuck beneath a pile of fence posts, his barking could be heard throughout the neighborhood. He would keep barking, day and night, until Jerry relented and unpiled the posts one by one. With the lifting of the last covering post Spot would leap upon the hapless woodchuck and with a snap of its neck throw it into the air, dead

before hitting the ground. With no more than an confirming sniff Spot would trot home for a meal of table scraps and a drink of water, leaving the dead woodchuck for the crows to feast upon.

As the years passed their mutual love seemed as permanent and carefree as the fields they romped over. Neither was prepared for the suddenness of change.

It happened on a beautiful spring day when they were playing fetch. The ball struck a rock and bounced into the street with Spot hard after it and into an oncoming truck.

Magnus, Jerry's grandfather, came upon the scene shortly afterwards. The old man eased himself down beside his grandson.

"Cradle his head in your hands," said the old man. "Let's ease him off to the side of the road... gently now."

"It was all my fault, Grandpa," the boy sobbed.

"Yerri, there was nothing you could do."

"He ran out in front of the pickup. Oh Grandpa, the thud was terrible. He bounced under the wheels. I saw the wheels run over him. Will he live?"

The old man looked over Spot's broken body, with its protruding white bones, and answered softly with a slow shake of his head, "I don't think so. He's hurt too bad."

"Grandpa, he yelped as he struggled to get up. His left front leg was crushed. It happened so quickly."

"Tragedy always strikes like a lightning bolt. We're never

prepared for it."

Tears were flowing down the boy's cheeks as he gently stroked Spotty's head.

"Grandpa, Spotty isn't crying."

"Dogs suffer silently, with dry eyes."

"Why did God allow this to happen to Spotty?"

"I don't know but God does. The Bible teaches us that not one of God's creatures dies without the Father's will."

"I don't understand."

"Neither do I. Terrible things happen and we ask why? We know that death as well as birth is part of God's will. As He wills us to be born so He wills us to die. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

Sidney Nutt, a gaunt young man with hollow eyes, slipped through the gathering crowd. Dropping to his knees he took Spotty's head in his hands and looked deeply into the dog's big brown eyes that blinked less often now.

"It'll be all right, Tom. The medics will be here soon," Sid said softly.

No one moved. Since Sid's return from Guadalcanal he hadn't spoken a word to anyone. He just wandered around the small village like a zombie. Shell-shocked, they said.

The young boy said, "Grandpa, as Spotty struggled to get up his big eyes pleaded for me to tell him what happened."

Murmuring from the gathering onlookers came to the boy's ears.

"Shouldn't someone do something?"

"Whose dog is it?" Another asked.

"It's the boy's dog."

"Oh, that's so sad."

The boy's face twisted with pain.

"I'm so sorry, Spotty," he pleaded. "It was all my fault."

The boy looked up to his grandpa.

"Why is he so quiet? Isn't he in pain?" Asked the grandson.

"There is no pain when the injuries are fatal. God is merciful in that way."

Sid, continuing to hold the dog's head in his hands, whispered, "You don't feel any pain, do you, Tom?"

Sid looked up into the faces about him.

"Do you see how he just sits here in the sand looking at me, his eyes wide and questioning, as if asking me, 'What happened?' When I ask him if he is hurt he doesn't answer, he just keeps looking at me with wide eyes."

Suddenly Sidney jerked and hugged the ground with his hands over his head as if a mortar round had exploded nearby. Then Sidney slowly lifted his head and looked around with terror filled eyes.

"Did you see how Tom slowly toppled over? Do you see that

there is nothing below his waist? See how even in death his wide eyes keep looking at me, asking me, what happened?"

The grandson slowly stroked Spotty's side that heaved less now.

"Is he dying?" Jerry asked his grandfather.

"Yes," said the grandfather. "It won't be long now."

"What happens when he dies? Does his soul go to be with Jesus?" Asked the grandson.

"Animals don't have souls like humans," a thin woman murmured just as an Indian with a large beer-belly eased his way through the thinning crowd and squatted beside the dying dog and his young master.

Alex Moose, the chief of the local Ojibwa tribe, asked the woman, "How do you know he doesn't have a soul?"

The woman with metal rimmed glasses was startled by the question. She sputtered slowly, "The Bible says only man received the breath of life, a soul."

"Hmmm," relied the Indian. "My people believe that all life is sacred. It is a gift from the Great Spirit. When this dog dies its spirit will return to the spirit world from which it came. It is the same with humans."

"That's pagan teaching," snapped the pinched-faced woman.

"Whether pagan or Christian it is the truth. For a moment, put yourself in the dog's place. Feel the sudden impact of the truck's bumper knocking you over, feel the weight of the tires roll out your body like a dough ball, feel the shattering of your ribs and back, the crushing of your

legs -- all in a few seconds, in a blink of your eyes.

"Then, you are alone on the cold black asphalt, struggling to get up. You feel no pain because you are in shock. You look about in confused panic and ask what happened?

"Then hear the words that have justified great acts of cruelty. It's only a dog. It has no soul. It's only a savage. It has no soul. It's only a woman. It has no soul. It's only a nigger. It has no soul. It's only a Jew. It has no soul.

"When you sit down to your next beefsteak remember that it came from a creature that once was alive. It loved life as much as you or me. It loved its life up to the instant the hammer smashed into its forehead.

"It's easy to kill creatures that have no souls but it is hard to kill creatures who have souls."

"Alex, I know you've killed many deer. What are you talking about?" asked the squinting woman.

"All life is sacred and never to be taken lightly. Yes, I've killed many deer, but only in order that me and my family would live. First, I ask permission from the Great Spirit and from the deer I'm about to kill. If they give their permission, I kill the deer in the quickest and most painless way.

"In purity of spirit the deer gave their bodies that I may live. Just as when I die, other creatures will feast on my body in order that they may live. I existed before my birth and will continue to exist after my death."

Sid laughed in derision, "That's only a myth based on a false hope. The cold truth is that death is final, the end of life. There was no life before conception and when the body dies life ends. Souls are the creation of medicine men, chaplains and priests to have power over the people."

Spot jerked his head upward as if to protest, then fell limp, his tongue that hung out of his open mouth guided the oozing blood to the ground.

"What's happening?" Asked the terrified boy.

The grandfather placed a comforting hand on the boy's shoulder and said, "All God's creatures possess a strong will to live. Even while dying they resist death. It won't be long now."

The boy reached out to stroke his friend's head. He noticed Spotty's eyes blink at the approach of his hand.

"He's still alive. I saw his eyes blink."

There were long pauses between the heaving of Spotty's sides.

Alex spoke softly and respectfully, "Death doesn't quicken his steps even as he draws near."

The deathwatch had thinned until only four remained at Spotty's side.

"It's only a dog," the others had concluded as they walked away.

Alex looked after them with disappointment flashing in his eyes, "Whether a dog or a man neither deserves to die alone."

The grandfather said, "We are never alone even if no man waits

with us. There are always God's angels to comfort us and help us cross over to the other side."

The grandpa smiled and said to his grandson, "That is what we believe, isn't it, Yerri?"

The towhead nodded his agreement.

Sid sat back to challenge.

"What if this is all there is? There is no life apart from the body. What if when the body ceases to live it's all over? There is no other side. What if heaven and hell are the creation of priests, the carrot and stick to compel obedience in this life? Can any of you prove me wrong?"

The grandfather answered, "Jesus appeared to his disciples after his death."

Sid sneered, "Where is Jesus now? Has anyone seen him walking around Isle lately? Did he come to your home for supper last night?"

He paused to await an answer. When no answer was forthcoming Sid continued, "No, of course not. It's just another story told by ministers and priests to keep gullible people in line, to compel the people to give money to support them and build grand churches.

"It's all a con, a slight of hand... Can any of you provide scientific proof that there is a soul or spirit that lives on after death?"

Silence reigned as the others considered the question.

Alex finally broke the silence. "Can you prove that this dog doesn't have a soul?"

Sid blinked his startled eyes.

"I never thought about it in that way."

The grandfather added, "There is scientific truth and there is spiritual truth. Science can tell us when the life force ceases in the body but it can't tell us if the life force died with the body or departed from the body. Saint Paul insisted that there was life after death."

"How could he?" Sid sneered again.

"Because the Holy Spirit came upon him, opening his eyes to the spiritual Kingdom of God that laid within. There the Risen Christ walked and talked with him.

"As you say, to some it is a myth, then again it is a myth that is true to those who have experienced His presence. We can't prove the future. All we have is the present. Life in the present is a bit easier because of our beliefs even if there is no future."

Sid's gaunt mouth quivered in anguish.

The old man said, "Alex can confirm that we are surrounded by spiritual beings, can't you, Alex?"

"Yes, it's true. We are never alone. All we have to do is believe and you will see the spirits."

"All you have to do is believe! What a bunch of crap!" sneered Sid. "Men believe in guardian angels, spirits, the Virgin Mary and a host of Saints but it was the mindless laws of physics that determined the flight of bullet and shell. The survivors thanked their spiritual protectors but Tom had no one to thank."

The skidding of bicycle tires broke the suspended silence. A

classmate of Jerry's, straddling the bike to keep it upright, leaned over her chrome handlebars.

"What happened to your dog?" She asked.

"Got run over," Jerry answered tearfully.

"Will it live?"

"No," said the boy.

The girl asked, "Is it dead? I mean really dead?"

Magnus replied, like the preacher he had wanted to be, "Disbelief is our first response to the reality of death. Emotionally we have been conditioned to expect Spotty to get up and run away like the movie characters who are 'killed' in one movie only to reappear in the next. Thus, the reality of death has been reduced to an illusion, a temporary condition to be remedied in the next reel."

"Yes, he is really dead," said Alex as he closed the lids of the dog's big brown eyes, shutting out the blank stare of death.

Sid jumped to his feet and screamed into the sky, "Tom, if you had a soul let me hear you call out from the other side!"

He cupped first his right ear then his left, straining to listen.

"I don't hear you calling," wailed Sid.

He looked skyward again and screamed at the top of his voice, "Tom, Are you there?"

He waited for an answer but no reply came. Then he dropped his shoulders and shuffled soulfully away.

Tears poured down Jerry's cheeks as he gently stroked Spotty's head and whispered softly, "Spotty, I'm so sorry. It was all my fault ... I'll miss you. G-G-Good-bye. The Angels are waiting."

About the Author

In 1983, Jerome Lofgren began a journey that would take him out of the normal physical world he had always lived in and into the world of a spiritual quest beyond anything he could have imagined. In a series of past-life regressions, Mr. Lofgren realized that he was in fact the incarnation of Jack London. His recollections while hypnotized and the spontaneous visions that he experienced, provided previously unknown clues to Jack London's life and his love of Charmian Kittredge and formed the basis of his first e-published work, **The Search for Jack London**.

Not since the story of Bridie Murphy has there been such a compelling recollection of a past-life experience. Through a series of regression hypnosis sessions and spontaneous visions, the author recalled his former existence as one of America's greatest writers - Jack London.

This e-book has ignited a controversy while at the same time laying to rest the mystery surrounding Jack London's life and death and his love affair with Charmian Kittredge. Over twenty biographies have been written about the famous American writer yet the elusive Jack London the man remained an enigma -- until now.

To read more about Jerome's work and Jack London, visit

www.bookmice.com/the_search_for_jack_london.htm

and www.bookmice.com/notallspirits.htm

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What I Said, What I Saw and What I Heard

E. J. Morris

“What,” I said to my twenty-five-year-old daughter, “does the ‘twenty-something generation’ mean and is it something I can write about with three children born in the Sixties?”

“It means, Mother,” she said, sounding almost prim, as if I should know, “that our lives are not going to be as good as yours, or so the media tells us.”

“So,” I said, “can I talk about that, about you? Can I have a thought or legitimate perception of your lives that means anything?”

Or, I wonder to myself, am I lost to it all, a Fifties person raised in a small midwestern town in a constricted, authoritarian atmosphere of religion, school and family. A place and time where if you didn’t participate, didn’t belong to everything you were supposed to belong to in the community, you didn’t belong, were strange.

Naturally, when I left home I left all that belongingness behind with malice aforethought, hating the constriction and so-called sense of community where you always had to play the game--their game. The rules were simple, but rigged. To be safe, you had to go along.

“In the case of community activity, this means that when one cooperates with others, the accomplishments are greater than what the

individuals can do on their own. Such a situation requires a harmony that will generate ideas, inspiration, as well as momentum for growth and action. If the combinations occur properly, the results will be like fire upon fire and will illuminate the world....

[But] One must be careful not to lose one's own personality in any joining. The idea is integration, not assimilation. No matter what can be achieved in joining with others, it is wise to remember that we each walk this path independently. The ultimate truth of the journey and its final rewards are still for each of us to face alone." 365 Tao, 69, Illumination, Deng Ming-Dao.

“Go for it, Mom,” my daughter said, laughing at me. “But be careful, because no matter what you say, somebody will disagree.”

Thus, I have come to observe that my children are living completely different lives from mine and do not understand my dislike of groups, belonging, joining, of causes which suck you in by intimidation and then by their very nature force you to play their group game or remain (so they infer) forever an “outsider.”

I observe my oldest, an artist who sees with the gentle eyes of a painter. For him it has been a sometimes violent world, one which has struck him, stabbed and robbed him literally, sent him reeling into Karate and Zen, two quite different disciplines yet not so different. He lives and works his vision in a studio in a violent inner city area without batting an eye, has worked as a truck driver and bartender, more recently assisting in putting together the Holocaust Museum. He has helped hang various artists' shows as well as painting backdrops for exhibits in between working on his own canvasses. All a far cry from his suburban

upbringing and education. Many of his friends are involved in political jobs and they all seem to believe that what they are doing matters, counts for something even in a constantly changing world. For most of them, the [then] new Democratic administration embodies an opportunity to make their own mark in life, and whether it's true or not doesn't really matter.

My second child finds, buys and sells art in New York City, a place where the sun never sets, where she finds the things that give her life meaning, away from the small-town atmosphere of Washington, DC. where she was raised, went to college and worked for a while. Involved in an artist's activist organization called the Women's Action Coalition (WAC) she keenly sees a need and opportunity to help women, particularly artists, and likes nothing better than to spout some liberal refrain like "WAC is watching" at her ultra conservative father, laughing good-naturedly at what he is and is not.

Her conviction that she can make a difference is shared by her friends, most of whom are involved in their own rights groups--animals, children, women, art, teaching, raising money, marching.

"There is no such thing as 'art for art's sake,' Mom, art is for society, defined by artists in their society. Each artist *is* society or represents it, from Edward Hopper to Gustave Courbet. Society and reality are one and the same and as society has changed, art has followed. Courbet took a mundane subject and made it heroic in *Burial at Ornans* [1849], a painting often considered the precursor to realism. Courbet is reputed to have said, 'I could never paint an angel because I've never seen one.'"

“Then there’s Hopper’s work,” my daughter continues. “Like the one with the woman standing at the window or *People in the Sun*. Society dictates the kind of art it produces in each generation. I mean it is mundane, but that is basically realism.”

Meanwhile, my youngest, most overtly rebellious child from a very early age has slowly moved away from the punk-rock, drop-out world of her teens and early twenties into a space where law-and-order are her priorities. She seems to see this as a place to work for change, entry into performing services for as yet unknown causes. In the spring of her final law school semester, my daughter’s best friend left to help write her African country’s new constitution before returning to finish her studies and begin work as a public defender.

This once rebellious (“the crowd don’t understand” [Rod Stewart]) daughter of mine sometimes sounds like a weary soldier home from the wars of bars, rock music, drifting, drugs, the ennui of Bruce Springsteen people and others, many others. She is working wherever she can now while waiting to go to law school from which she plans to jettison herself into a different kind of life after taking seven years to finish her undergraduate studies. Having earned a degree in political science she is now an involved observer and participant in the exigencies of a larger world she sees as her own.

* * *

“*Nobody* ever took my side when I was growing up,” my youngest said recently, shortly after being accepted into the University of Wisconsin law school in Madison, responding to a similar complaint

from a relative.

“So now you’re going to become a trial lawyer and take sides,” I said, avoiding the real question--**who** never took her side growing up.

“Your friends must have taken your side,” I added quickly.

“Oh, sure, but my family, my siblings and parents never did--not just when I was a teenager but when I was little,” she said matter-of-factly, then waved a hand dismissively, artfully dodging some old pain reflective of the so-called art of living, I thought.

“I never really learned how to paint when I was young because nobody taught me how to *see*,” my artist/painter son said one afternoon, standing on the back deck of our house looking out at the towering old trees, an ancient walnut and chestnut shading, guarding the entire backyard, light shimmering through waffling leaves like a flickering old movie film gone awry.

“When I was an undergraduate I painted a lot of things I called abstracts but I had no idea what I was doing. I knew it wasn’t art but I didn’t know why. I’m just now beginning to know what art is and how to make it. Certain things just don’t need to be created,” he said, shifting over to sprawl his lanky, six-foot-eight frame in a deck chair as his New York City-based art historian sister sat down on the far end of the deck, a grieved expression on her face as he continued.

“You have to be able to *see*, really *see*. Light, for instance, you have to learn how to draw light and shadow. That’s where art begins. It *is* life.”

“Art has to make a statement or what’s the point?” his oldest

sister said, sounding impatient, old sibling rivalries never far beneath the surface of their close relationship. In fact, they rarely sound as if they agree at all about anything, particularly when it comes to art. She espouses a broad, critical stance with an art historian's decided preferences while he takes a grass roots, hands-on view which is continually changing as his work grows.

“It takes ten years to learn something and two years to say it,” he asserts.

Perhaps the one thing they both agree on is my sister's work. A professional artist for all of her adult life, they tend to look askance at her feminist, Western-oriented work and education, particularly her abstracts which are full of sexual images depicting her own female feelings regarding the world as she perceives it, a society she grew up in that somehow offends their Eastern New York art education preferences, their youth.

Not very long ago my sister wrote the following: “I recently read an interview with Louise Bourgeois--a sculptor, someone who has been around for years. I never studied her in mainstream art and as I read [the interview] I understand why--female--expressing herself internally, whereas mainstream art is very formal, following influences throughout history.”

“What am I doing in this family?” my youngest daughter says good-naturedly, rhetorically, only half-listening to her brother and sister. “I'm the only one with no art interests or connections.”

She forgets her youthful punk rock physical statements: blond hair dyed white (once pink) and spiked; black coats from men's suit jackets

to overcoats to tails, mainly purchased from used clothing outlets; expensive black leather tooled cowboy boots; numerous hats; silver skull and dagger earrings and rings; a long black cape--art imitating life, life imitating art.

“Art should make a statement,” my oldest daughter says flatly. “It must show us something about our lives that we haven’t noticed or been aware of before, at least consciously.”

“Before what?” her brother inquires facetiously, barely hiding his skepticism.

“Before time began, now, in the future. A political artistic statement is more valid than a pretty picture--which is no statement at all, meaningless.”

I like pretty pictures,” the youngest says, laughing, but they ignore her.

“You can go out and look at a pretty landscape if you want a pretty picture,” the art historian said disparagingly, waving a long, bangled arm at the trees and back yard. “There is life and there is art depicting an aspect of life--if you’re good--that you hadn’t been aware of before.”

“You sure are opinionated,” her brother says.

“All you care about are aesthetics,” she retorts.

“What’s wrong with that? We’re not talking aesthetics for the sake of art but art aesthetically performed--the aesthetic in and of itself--nothing to do with producing art because somebody wants a particular kind of painting...although I could do that too, and have. We all have to

have our own validities in whatever work we choose to do in our lives...right?"

"Right," his oldest sister says emphatically, sounding as though they had agreed to disagree.

"Anyway, we all talk too much," my son said, shrugging.

"Sometimes we sound as if we know something we don't know and what art does--or should do--is reflect what the artist knows. That's all, *finis*, there is no more. Maybe you have something to say, maybe you don't, but you do it and forget it."

"That's fine, but I'm going to have something to say about whether you have something to say or not," the art historian sister says, smirking at her brother.

"Is this a war?" the youngest interjects, and I could see why she had to make a niche for herself in some arena that did not impinge on theirs. "I just don't get any of it and I don't think it matters whether I do or not. So what's the big deal? Life is life."

"Oh, you get it all right," her sister said, lifting her nose slightly and sniffing.

"Yeah," her brother says, laughing. "She gets it all right but she'll never admit it."

"Easy for you to say about someone else," the oldest girl said, making a face at him, and they all laughed as their father stuck his head out the screen door.

"Can I come out now? Have you finished your meaning-of-life

conversation?”

“Who’s on first, Dad?” the youngest said.

* * *

All this borne of unconsciousness, my own isolated, non-involvement in a world I never made. So how then, I might ask, did I spawn these kind of people and are they products of their upbringing, their times, or both, and does anyone or anything dictate how they are living their lives anymore than anyone dictated mine to me. I read Albert Camus’ *Resistance, Rebellion and Death* many years ago and the only thing of it that remains with me is the title (and the man,) which perhaps says it all.

In my view, the world today offers people so much more than mine did, good and bad. In my twenties and thirties my activities revolved around friends, getting married, buying a house and car, having a family and maybe going to the theater or a ball game once in a while.

“The media tells us we’ll never be able to afford houses the way our parents could,” my youngest daughter said, sounding sarcastic. “As if that matters to me,” she added, shrugging.

The way I see it, there were simply fewer options for making a difference in my world, especially for women, and I never even participated in the few acts of independent commitment that were available in the sixties and seventies. What I did was write fiction in my spare time and that writing was a reflection of my life, past and present. Now it’s the future and I’m tired.

“Followers of Tao [the way] value initiative, but mere

aggression is not enough. One needs creativity. This can mean the ability to solve problems, to think of unusual strategies, or to compose poetry, music, and painting. In all these cases, one moves in concert with Tao not by blind aping, but by giving intelligent counterpoint and harmony. Creativity does not mean the arbitrary making of something out of our cultural minds.

Rather, it is spontaneous movement in tandem with Tao, a movement that will generate life and not misery for others.” 365 Tao, Deng Ming-Dao, Creativity, 68

And so it goes, as Kurt Vonnegut wrote a long time ago in another era, another time, another place. And so it continues.... The future, as they say, is now, and commitments are being made now.

About the Author

A versatile writer, besides being a novelist, Ms. Morris has been a regular newspaper columnist and feature writer, has published short stories, essays and reviews and had numerous full-length and one-act plays stage-read and produced, one of them at the Women's National Museum for the Arts in Washington, D. C. She was the Assistant Director of the PEN Syndicated Fiction Project sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts until the project was retired to the Library of Congress and is now a full-time writer. She has also worked for and been a volunteer at the local Writer's Center since its inception and is a member of the Chesapeake Chapter of Sisters in Crime.

Elizabeth has published her first e-book, **An Elusive Inheritance** and you can read more about her work at www.bookmice.com/an_elusive_inheritance.htm

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Time and Silence

S. Joan Popek

A Child's Time

A child's time is
A snail creeping across a trail
A second splitting across infinity
Moments lost to the past
Moments found in the future
The thunder of energetic living
The silence of peaceful slumber
A child's time
Is God's Gift

It's the middle of January and snow is falling. Great, huge flakes that look like a million butterflies filling the crisp winter air. A light blanket of pristine softness covers the dried umber of suburban lawns, hiding the brittleness of winter's face.

It won't last. In this part of New Mexico, warm days outnumber the cold ones even in the darkest of winters. Soon the sun will rise, and the fairyland outside my window will vanish into a bright, chill day as the snow melts and the earth turns muddy brown again. The snow will vanish like the years have. Time, the destroyer of youth, the nemeses of middle age, the friend of the aged, will keep its appointed rounds.

Today is my son's 33rd birthday. It's odd that I can remember every detail of his birth -- his tiny, premature, three pound body -- brought too early into this world and no larger than my daughter's doll -- his miniature face -- the little fingers barely as long as my fingernail. I can remember the pain and fear of losing him, then the joy I felt when he survived and we brought him home to stay.

This is odd because the details of his first birthday are lost to the ravages of passing years. Master Time has shrouded a dusty veil across my inner eye.

I haven't even a single baby picture to remind me because his father took them all when we were divorced so many years ago. But I didn't care then. I had the real thing. I had my son and his brother and sisters. What did I care if there were no pictures?

Birthdays, milestones, memories of my five children growing up are dim now that I need them the most. Once, an old farmer friend jokingly told me, "I wasn't raised, I was *jerked* up!" We laughed when he said that, seeing humor in everything in those days full of youth and joy.

Now I realize that my children were *jerked* up in a sense too. But I don't laugh about it anymore. My oldest daughter had to baby-sit and play "Mama" while I worked to put food on the table. I didn't have time to be there for the first step or the first word, or if I was, I smiled, clapped my hands and went back to the *important* tasks of meals, laundry, dishes and such. When the baby would tug on my skirt needing attention, I sometimes would get impatient, cram a cookie in his hand and send him off to play with a sweet for comfort instead of what he

really needed -- my time -- a hug.

The children are all grown up now with families of their own. I ask myself why I didn't take the time to engrave those precious moments on my memory when they were young?

But I was busy.

I was working two and three jobs. I was feeding them and clothing them and struggling to make ends meet. Who had time to "stop and smell the roses?" All I ever had time to smell was dirty diapers.

Strange, the details of the good times are fuzzy, but the lost moments are as crisp in my memory as those icy snow flakes outside my window.

I remember the time I slapped my 8-year-old son for talking back to me. I was really striking out in frustration at my life. But I never said that I was sorry. I wish I had.

But hey, I was young too, right?

I remember when my four-year-old daughter broke her arm, and her grandmother had to take her to the hospital because I was miles away at work. I arrived just in time to watch the surgical team, masked, impersonal and frightening, as they wheeled her on a gurney that seemed to swallow her small body. I had time to just glimpse the tears glistening in her anxious, blue eyes as the medical team whisked her through the cold, gray doors into surgery. She hadn't even realized that I was there.

But hey, I had to make a living, didn't I?

I remember how I kept forgetting my January born's birthday

because it was so close the holidays. Almost every year, the other children would have to remind me. Once, two days after his sixth birthday, when I had finally remembered and hastily thrown together a small birthday party, he came to me and said, "Mama, I'm sorry I was born when I was. Maybe if it was a different time, you wouldn't be so busy and could remember." I cried myself to sleep that night.

But hey, I had a lot to think about, didn't I?

I remember when my middle daughter burst through the door, face beaming because she had just earned her first letter from band in Middle School. She was so proud. I kissed her cheek and said something like, "That's nice, Honey. Watch your sister while I'm out." Then I rushed out the door on some errand. Today, years later, I can see the crushed look on her face, that I didn't take the time to notice then, as I rushed to my car. When I returned home, the red letter emblem of her success was lying on the floor in her room, tossed aside as if it had no worth. I picked it up and put it on her dresser. It stayed there for weeks until one day when I was cleaning, I put it in one of her drawers. She never mentioned it again. I never did either. I wish I had.

But hey, I had a lot to get done, right?

Time won't bring back those moments, won't let me change anything. I now realize that all of those rationalizations I told myself and believed at the time were excuses -- excuses for my guilt for not having the time. No--it was really guilt for not *making* the time. I never made time to enjoy those hugs, those achievements -- never made time to be there when they needed *my time* more than they needed the physical *things* I worked so hard to give them.

Yes, there were good times too. When they were small, I held them on my lap and read to them. I remember their chubby cheeks dimpling with laughter as they traced the words and pictures with their tiny fingers. We had picnics, camping trips, horse back rides along forest trails, weekend "coffees" we still have at the local restaurant with family and friends. All of these times I hold dear.

Sometimes, at those "coffees," the kids joke about my son needing to change his birthday date so we can all remember it. They laugh, but I don't. That sweet boy has forgotten his sixth birthday confession, but I haven't.

I'll always remember the bitter-sweet mixture of pride and sorrow as my oldest son boarded the bus that would take him forever from childhood, and me, into the adult world of the United States Air Force. He had become a man long before that, but I hadn't noticed.

One of my dearest memories is of my oldest daughter squeezing my hand so hard it turned white as she gave birth to my first grandson. The love in her eyes when she saw him for the first time is forever etched onto my heart.

I remember the happiness I felt as I walked my youngest daughter down the aisle to give her in marriage to a wonderful young man. Her face glowed with happiness, and tears of joy shone in her beautiful, blue eyes -- so different from the tears of that frightened child being whisked into surgery she had once been. She has forgotten, but I haven't.

Five years ago, I had the opportunity to witness the miracle of birth again as my youngest grandson came into the world. I had the honor of being the first to hold him in my arms and welcome him.

Because of this, we have a special bond that nothing can break, and I have vowed to myself not to let time steal the moments of my grandchildren's lives from me as it did their parents'.

I remember all of these wonderful times with joy, but they are all later, after the children were older. Sometimes, I feel an emptiness inside -- a sort of grieving for all of those lost moments -- those days when I didn't have time for soft arms to encircle my neck in the kind of hug only a small child can give.

That emptiness is touched with the loving arms and bright smiles of my grandchildren. I melt with love when my newest granddaughter gives me her golden, sunshine smile as she reaches for me. But the void will never be filled completely.

Outside my window, the snow has stopped falling, and the white blanket over the Earth is already beginning to melt. The sun is slowly stealing the newness away from this winter scene, just as my memories have melted and disappeared -- stolen by time.

Time. That precious commodity should never be wasted. Once lost, we can never regain the wonder of childhood -- ours or *theirs!*

My children and I are very close now. I do not doubt their love for me as they do not doubt mine for them. Now that they have their own families, they are very busy. Sometimes, they are too busy. Sometimes, I see myself in them as I see *my own* mother in myself.

I try to tell them, "Take time."

They smile and say, "Yes, Mom." Then they kiss my cheek and rush out the door on some errand or another. They turn and wave, then

they are off to their own lives -- their own families.

I don't know if they ever think about those lost moments that I could have given them and didn't. I've tried to talk to them about it. They say I can't change things and that I did my best. They say not to worry about such things.

Sometimes, late at night, when no one else is awake, and the silence becomes a sentient presence, I grieve for their lost childhoods.

I can't help but wonder if maybe, my children grieve, too -- late at night, when no one else is awake, and the silence becomes a sentient presence.

About the Author

Joan Popek is co-editor and co-owner of JoPop Publications which publishes The Roswell Literary Review and Millennium Science Fiction & Fantasy Magazine. She is a published science fiction writer whose short stories have appeared in Millennium Science Fiction & Fantasy Magazine, Chaotic Reflections, Eternity On-Line and PULP ETERNITY, The Roswell Literary Review, Exodus, THE EDGE, Another Realm and others. She has had short-stories in several anthologies, and nonfiction and poetry in a number of regional and national magazines including Writer's Digest and Fiction Writer.

The Fiction Works has published her book length collection, "The Administrator." in e-book form and it will soon be out in audio book. Ms Popek is a member of EPIC, The Southwest Writer's Workshop, Ardeon, The Zine Guild, The Collective and a number of other online groups for editors, publishers and writers. "The Alien Feeder," won the readers choice of the month story in Eternity On-Line Magazine for November, 1997 and placed in the top ten in a readers choice poll at "Predators and Editors" writers on-line site. "A Job Well Done," published in Millennium Science Fiction & Fantasy Magazine placed in the top ten in the same poll. Another story, "The Prodigals", won an honorable mention in Eternity's 1998 "Best of The Web" contest.

Joan's newest work, **Sound the Ram's Horn** has been published to much acclaim

How To Be The Worst Parent In The World

from reviewers for her prophetic and insightful look into humanity and our future. It is a prophetic Millennium story that you hope is coming true as we squeak into the new century. Ms. Popek has cleverly woven threads of biblical prophesy into this inspiring novel which will undoubtedly be compared with The Celestine Prophecy and many will find its message encouraging, intriguing and uplifting.

"At an unspecified time in the near future, a Golden Child is born. Not the first of the GC's but certainly one of the more important, Joshua, the offspring of a inter-racial marriage, isn't genetically possible according to the doctors--but he lives, thrives, and becomes, along with the rest of the GC's, terribly important to the survival of the human race. He is an empath and a healer--the other GC's have other talents. The travails of the GC's present a vivid commentary on racial relations, humanity's reaction to differences, and the possibilities inherent in unconditional love. SOUND THE RAM'S HORN is science fiction, but it's not possible to read it without hoping the author has spoken with a prophetic voice, has envisioned a future that might lead to peace and harmony in the universe.

"Ms. Popek has made an auspicious and moving debut with SOUND THE RAM'S HORN. Using prophecy, Biblical stories, and a penetrating look at the world's ills, she has produced a book that made me choke up with grief, smile at the future possibilities, and try to contain the feeling of awe that the writing and the author's wisdom engendered. It is an incredible book--one I will treasure." -- Patricia White, [Scribe's World](#)

To read more about Joan's work **Sound the Ram's Horn**, please visit

www.bookmice.com/sound_the_rams_horn.htm

To Our Final Words

Thank you for reading our stories and reflections. We will leave you with the words of one reviewer who, although writing about Joan Popek's work, has inadvertently summarized the theme of this How To Be The Worst Parent In The World e-book:

"Is it so hard to believe that a child could change the world and the way we look at each other? No, I don't believe it is. Christ said, "Let the children come to me." Joan Popek's story may be Science Fiction, but it should definitely bring to life, that children are the backbone of our future hopes and dreams."

Kim Gaona, [Kim's Reviews](#)

If you enjoyed these writings, please pass this special e-book on to your friends and associates.

If you would like to learn more about electronic publishing, please visit www.sjoanpopek.com

Drop by, stay a while, talk to us, we respond.