

A Father's Day weekend (2023)

A celebration— somewhat encumbered by reflection.

Thursday June 15th

“Where you headed?” asked the American Homeland agent in the departure zone of the Vancouver airport.

“Palo Alto, California,” I said.

“Purpose of travel?” he asked, glancing between his screen and my passport.

I have always been rattled by interrogations at border crossings. Yet for once, the formalities were a breeze. “I’m going to Stanford University,” I said, “to attend my son’s graduation.”

“Wow,” said the officer, handing back my passport.

Indeed, on the calendar day marked (at least by Carlton cards) for the honour of fathers— how many would have the honour of seeing their son conferred a Master of Law degree from one of America’s most prestigious universities? Moreover, how many 71-year-old fathers are close enough to their sons to be invited to share their campus room for the weekend?

Yet even in the fullness of heart there were twinges of anxiety. MH has always acknowledged my modest contribution to his success. He continued asking for feedback on his papers at the post-grad level. Even as managing editor of the Osgoode Hall law journal, he seemingly took no slight in marginal comments on clarity and coherence from a mere retired teacher of basic English...

Yet from high school onward, he felt that I have never fully appreciate his achievements— that I dwell on the negative... In the road trips we have taken since he moved to Toronto in 2014, there have been uncomfortable silences. It sometimes seems that over the last several years our communication at distance is freer and warmer than it is when we are together... What are the odds that this weekend we can avoid those subtle tensions?



In wheeling my carry on towards the departure gate, I thought of my son’s recent WhatsApp messages: *‘Some of my fondest memories are playing catch with you and going for walks together... Talking in the car with you, going for camping with the two of us, our road trips...’*

He was forgiving in his recollection. By the time he was ten, I could no longer throw a baseball far or fast enough for him. He is generously overlooking the camping trip in which tent poles

were forgotten or the edgy road trip to California though torrential rain and blinding mountain snow. When we had to put chains on the tires, I almost backed over his hand...

In that same exchange of texts, he reminded me of my early efforts in helping him learn to read—not always with patience: *'You were concerned— even exasperated— that I wasn't sounding out words— but the moment I realized how it worked, I began reading the words, and quickly...'* He was lucky that both his parents were teachers...

A few months ago—perhaps for old times' sake—he got me to look at the literature review of his Masters' thesis. It was touching to proof-read *'Green Clauses in Labour/ Management Contracts'* written by the same person who once struggled with *'Hop on Pop'*...

Whatever guidance he had received along his journey— both in classrooms and on sports' fields— he always had a rare determination of his own. As he noted in that recent back and forth of text messages:

'I remember in Dubai, the principal called in mom and said the stories I was writing were very good for my age.... I'm glad I had some initial setbacks in elementary school that put some seed in my mind that from that point forward I had to work hard to earn top grades...'

Fatherhood with a son has undeniably seemed more complicated than fatherhood with daughters. Perhaps that is why I have probably written more about the growth and education of MH in my journals than that of his two sisters...

I recently came up the idea of presenting MH with a montage of vignettes in which he is featured. Perhaps he might eventually treasure my early observations of him as much as his favourite family photos... Might such a collage be offered as a belated graduation gift?

In the departure gate lounge, I pulled out my laptop and plugged into the charger. In the hour before departure, I began sifting through old journal notes, copying and pasting:



I began with an entry from August 1993, when we lived at a coop townhouse in Burnaby, British Columbia. MH was just a year old:

With MH on my knee, I parted the curtain in the kitchen window and pointed out at our blue Dodge caravan parked beside the green dumpster.

"Car, MH, look, there's our car out there."

Pressing his hand against the pane, I repeated. "It's a car, honey— your car."

Looking down over the tops of cars gleaming in the summer sun, his eyes widened. An unfamiliar light was flickering. Was he on the verge of a breakthrough?

Joggling him up higher on my knee, I remembered a moment last March when I pushed him in his stroller along the footpath through the woods behind the coop building. In crossing the culvert, I turned the wheels so he could look down at the tiny creek, swollen with the spring rain.

"Look, little guy," I said. "Look at the water. Say it: 'water'."

Watching the water gurgling over rocks, the baby's face brightened, but he made no sound. I thought of Helen Keller, as portrayed in *'the Miracle Worker'*, on her knees before the pump. My little son was on the edge— but not quite ready...

Yet this afternoon before the kitchen window— perhaps he made the quantum leap.

"Ca," he called, "Ca!"

"That's it, honey— car!" I said, hugging him in a welcome to the magical world of language...



I recalled how rapidly in the year that followed: his mono-syllabics developed to words, and words into sentences...

Meanwhile, I was often confined to my desk, engrossed in coursework or lesson planning. Even in the paucity of the undivided attention he deserved, MH still doted on the figure he first called "da." More than a quarter century later, the rushed moments with my little boy are still painful to recall. Typical is the following from February 1995. He was not yet three:

Like a chick outside the shell, following the first moving object— there was little MH, just one step behind as I moved from desk to bathroom:

"Are you going to work, da?"

"No, MH, I've got to go up to the university."

"Will you tell me a zombie story, da?"

Rinsing my toothbrush, I bend down to him. "We'll have a dark story on the weekend, OK?"

"Will you give some gum, dad?" He reached toward my jacket.

"Sorry, MH," I turned away, "That's empty. I'll get some gum, later."

Nudging him aside, I switched off the bathroom light and clomped down the stairs.

Halfway down, his wail prickled the back of my neck.

"What's wrong?" I stopped and crouched on the stairs. He stood at the top, crying.

"MH?"

"All he asks me is 'when is 'da' coming home'," called T. from the kitchen. "And then you come home and don't pay attention to him."

I held out my arm. "Come here, honey." Sobbing, he slid down the stairs.

"MH?" Hesitantly, he slid under my arm. "If I give you some gum," I whispered, "Will you promise not to tell your sisters?" Sniffling, he nodded.

I kissed the top of his head. Will I ever make it up to him? By the time I finish the dreary courses and get a day shift—it may already be too late...



Scrolling forward through the months, I found an entry from May 1997 that revealed something of the breadth of MH's language development over the previous two years. The same passage exposes a conscience troubled by presumed neglect:

"I'm going to miss you, da."

On this final evening of the three-month long luxury of a day shift, little MH followed me from room to room.

When I was at the computer, he was prodding at my elbow.

"What is it, MH?"

"Let's play cowboys."

"Sorry, I can't. Look, I'm working right now."

"Let's play snakes and ladders."

"I'd love to—but I've got to go. We'll play snakes and ladders on the weekend, OK?"

"Then let's play 'where are the jewels'," he said. "I can be the bad guy!"

I laughed in his reference to the improv role play of a would-be jewel thief harassing an innocent victim. He loved the growling chases around the house.

"You are never the bad guy, MH," I said. "But we'll play it for sure on the weekend."

Later sitting on my knee during the supper-hour TV news, his eyes widened in alarm in the report of a fiery car crash.

"What's the matter, little guy?"

"I'm worried."

"About what?"

"You and mom driving."

"You know we're both very careful."

"But I'm scared you'll get hurt!"

Hugging him, I wondered about the extent to which he had been affected by the gloom of the last several months. His 5-year-old mind had had to process the talk about the deaths of a grandfather and of two aunts. Perhaps he fears that at any moment a member of his immediate family might be snatched away...

That foregoing entry was added to the montage just before the boarding call of WestJet Flight #774 to San Francisco.



On the plane, I was lucky that my aisle seat, 22C, was in an empty row. After take-off, I opened my laptop on the forward tray... I nudged the time-machine throttle backwards to November 1994. From my diary of that month, I pulled out a heart-rending incident. MH, only two and a half at the time, insists he clearly remembers it. Knowing I still feel guilty, he teases me about it:

"Look at MH," said big sister MT. "He's wet his training pants!"

As my little son stood before the T.V., eating candy, I wiggled fingers under the elasticized back. It was sopping wet. "MH—what in hell happened?" I growled. "You're not a baby anymore!"

In a stab of anger, I slapped him on the rear. Knocked off balance—pants around ankles, he toppled forward. He lay on the carpet for a moment, shocked. Catching his breath, he began shrieking. He was still clutching the empty chocolate covered raisins box.

Bending over him, his eldest sister began to sob. "All he did was pee his pants. You didn't have to hit him!" Crying, she gathered up the scattered chocolates. His middle sister, TE, watched from the side, silent but alarmed.

"Didn't you hear me ask him if he needed to go to the toilet?" I shouted. "Wasn't that just ten minutes ago?"

Wailing louder, MH caught my eye— his little face screwed in anger. In a flood of shame, I realized that his toileting mishap had almost nothing to do with the slap. My outburst was triggered rather by an unrelated frustration— the term paper in which I was bogged down.

"MT, stop crying," I frowned at his big sister. "I didn't hit him hard."

She put her arm around her baby brother. Rhythmically MH sobbed, a few chocolate raisins still unswallowed. A brown string of drool dangled from his chin.

Just a few hours earlier, he had been playing beneath my desk. *'Da, I love you!'* he had said...

There then came to mind one of my earliest memories: a hard beating taken for a broken wooden yardstick I didn't break. My middle sister owned up to the 'crime' after my father left for work. Neither did my father beat her nor say 'sorry' to me. That tiny injustice was duly forged in memory. Could my act of thoughtlessness similarly shape a "mind-forged manacle"?

Later after lights out, I was crouched on the floor at the side of MH's bed, finishing 'a dark story', as he'd asked for.

"MH," I whispered, "You did nothing wrong in the living room. You just had a little accident. I should *never* have slapped you. Daddies sometimes make bad mistakes. I won't ever do that again. I'm really sorry."

"OK," he said softly.

After the tuck in and kiss of cheek, I slipped away in the dark. *'Before it should ever again strike my innocents in anger— may this fucking hand be cut off!'* That was my silent vow before closing the bedroom door.



Thereafter, I restrained my hand from striking hard or in frustration. Still, all three of my kids will remember at least one pinch, ear pull or bum slap from either their mom or from me. Such examples may not be the worst of our inconsistent parenting— but they are the least subtle. The following episode was recorded in November 1996:

4-year-old MH was snuggled with his face in my arm. Minutes before, I had dealt him a smack on the rear with a hairbrush. That was for his grabbing the TV remote away from his big sister, MT, then kicking her when she tried to get it back...

After the smack I held him tight and tried to sooth. "Honestly, you need to control your temper, honey. It's dangerous."

"But MT loses her temper, too!" he sobbed.

"Yes, she does— and it's not nice. But you know, MH, it's a lot more dangerous when boys lose their tempers— especially teenage boys."

I faltered. His years were still too tender for the broaching of the painful subject of the public perceptions of race. "You can take deep breaths when you feel angry," I continued. "Let's practice right now."

As he breathed, I counted. At the same time, I was stung by hypocrisy. Was my 'lesson' that violence is to be countered with more intimidating violence?

I swallowed against the swelling lump. "Would you like me to sing to you, honey?"

"Yeah dad," he said, snuggling closer.

What would you like to hear?"

"*"Danny Boy,"*" he murmured.

Stroking his head, I cleared throat and in a shaky voice and began... If his memory tapes had been rolling, the hope was that previous fifteen minutes will be erased...



Before the plane's descent into San Francisco, my searching had tacked into more jarring passages. Every boy has a few close calls, but MH's still leaves me shuddering. The earliest in my record occurred on June 2nd 1995:

I looked around from the kitchen chair to the slapping sound of a tiny hand on wire mesh. On the other side of the table, MH was leaning forward from his chair. He was pushing at the window screen facing the stairway.

"MH, my god!"

I leapt up just as the screen came loose and toppled down to the driveway, ten feet below. I grabbed his arm and pulled him away from the window. T. swooped round from the stove, grabbing his other arm. Together, we pulled him from highchair to floor.

T. hunched on the floor, squeezing him. "He could have been killed," she cried.

I looked out the open window. Had he fallen forward, our grabs would have been a half-second too late. I grasped his shoulder. "MH, what were you doing? You could have broken your neck!"

His face reddened. Stop screaming at me!" he cried.

"Shhhhh," his mother urged. She rocked him as he sobbed...

At 8:00 PM, after his bedtime story, I lay beside him on his bunk. In the grey light of dusk through the drawn window blind, I broke the moment's silence.

"So why did your mom and I get so scared today?" I asked softly.

He hesitated.

"MH?"

"I almost fell out the window."

"So, what did you learn?"

"Not to look out the window?"

"No, honey. You can look out the window. You just shouldn't lean against the screen. You'll remember that?"

"Yup. Can I have another story, da?"

Instead of reading, I croaked out a story of a little boy, who was too little for his bicycle. His mom and dad told him only to ride on sidewalks but one summer evening he felt brave enough to ride it along on the busy road near his house. He was wobbling around a corner when a drunken teenager in a Camaro came roaring up from behind. His daddy, who was working in his garden beside the road, heard the terrible screech of the brakes— but it was too late...

"What happened to the boy?" MH asked.

"The ending is too sad for me to tell, honey," I said, gripped in that instant by a village tragedy of more than a quarter century ago...



After landing in Terminal #1 of the Harvey Milk International airport, I asked directions to the pick-up zone. Misdirected to the Uber pickup bay, the somewhat stupefied old codger wandered in the parkade for several minutes before finally locating the arrival zone where his son had earlier asked him to wait.

When I found a seat by the glass doors, I texted MH. He replied that he was working at the library but would pick me before 5:00 PM. He said to watch for a red Mustang. I had earlier agreed to pay for weekend's car-rental. With an hour and a half to spare, I continued scanning my journal files for disasters, narrowly averted. Few episodes are more hair-raising than this chronicled in Dubai in April 1999:

MH met me dribbling from the shower as soon as I stepped through the door.

"I almost drowned at the beach, dad."

I dropped to knees. "What?"

"I was with Javen and his dad at Jumeirah beach," he said solemnly. "The waves knocked me down. Javen paddled over and saved me."

I gripped his shoulder, shocked. "I told you how dangerous the undertow is at Jumeirah Beach. Where in hell was Javen's dad?"

"He was way out deep."

I hugged him close, brushing the stubbled crown of his head. "Listen, you must *never* go into the ocean unless there is an adult watching you close by... If a wave ever does knock you down—you mustn't panic. You've got to keep calm. You don't fight it. You keep your head above water and you let it take you. Keep calm until you're rescued—you got it?"

"I got it dad."

My hand shook on his back in a rush of the darkest imaginings:

'I would have been called out of the teacher's meeting... From inside they would have heard my scream... Rushing back to the apartment, I would have found T. and the girls inconsolably wailing... If well-meaning neighbours had come the door, I would have screamed and sent them away... T. would have needed to go under sedation. I would have had to go alone to identify our son's body, still salty wet...'

"Listen, honey," I choked out. "You have to take this as a lesson. Never take dumb risks—never, ever! You understand?"

“OK, dad,”

I then thought of our walk last fall on the trail along the rain-swollen Coquitlam River...

When we had passed an open stretch where the brown rapids licked right to the edge of the pathway, I was seized by a sudden terror of MH falling in. I had even caught a horrific image of little arms flailing in the roaring current and rapids surged around a tiny bobbing head...

I grabbed his arm and held him close to my side until the trail curved back away from the bank. Further along, with hand still on his shoulder, I said:

“Listen honey. If you ever fall into the water, just grab on to something. A rock a tree— anything. Just hold on tight and don't let go—and I'll swim out to save you.”

Embracing him this afternoon—wet and warm from his shower— I trembled in depthless gratitude...



From 4:40 PM onward, even while keeping laptop open on knees, I looked nervously out the windows where the cars were pulling up to collect arrivals. Meanwhile, MH had activated his location on WhatsApp. His car appeared as a blinking red dot on the Google map, edging northward from Palo Alto. When the dot shifted from the freeway into the airport, I put away my MacBook and went outside to wait by the curb.

Moments later, the red Mustang pulled up. The young man in blue jeans who stepped out the driver's side wore dark shades. He had a full beard and short Rasta knots in his hair—perhaps a challenge to the stereotype of a post grad law student.

After tossing my luggage in the open trunk, we hugged a little awkwardly. On the drive back to Palo Alto, I strained to hear my son's low voice over the car radio. In any case, he spoke little.

Instead of my usual interrogative effort to prompt conversation, I looked out the side window. My muttered pleasantries about the scenery were largely met with silence. I had the first paranoid twinge of being taken as an old coot in want of an ear trumpet...

We stopped off to get some groceries at a Trader Joe's. After dropping them off in his large residence room along with my luggage, we went out for a walk around the campus. Having risen at 4:00 AM, I was hungry and exhausted. It was hard to pay attention to the landmarks he was pointing out. I was later embarrassed in asking about the Hoover Tower. I had not remembered that he'd identified it when passed it on our walk. Again, he assumed I was stubborn in not wearing hearing aids.

At about 6:30 PM, we were back in his room. My son prepared a delicious meal and insisted I take his bed while he slept on the couch... After supper, he sat in the sofa furiously texting on his iPhone while I hunched back on his bed... At about 8:30 PM, he said he was going out to see a few friends.

When the door closed, I thought again of the texts we'd exchanged on WhatsApp over the last couple of months. On my iPhone, I scrolled through the messages we'd exchanged just a week ago. After sending me a link to a *New York Times* Daily podcast on the controversy around the use of phonics in early childhood reading instruction, MH wrote:

'You used the phonics method with me when we would read at home... I remember you just saying to 'sound it out'... Yes, I remember in Dubai you were incredibly frustrated when I didn't know how to start a story... One big issue I remember was not understanding why the first letter of the first word was gigantic— like the 'O' in 'Once upon a time.' ... When I realized how that worked and started reading, you stopped being angry at me....'

Reminded of those early struggles, I opened my laptop to search for more excerpts for my collage. Before falling asleep, I found the following passage from early 1998, his Kindergarten year in Dubai:

"Do you want to end up under a bridge?" T. threw down the *'Butterfly'* phonics primer and crossed arms. "Eating out of the bloody garbage?"

Little MH slid from sofa to the rug, wincing from his mother's ear-pull.

T. then looked at me, her eyes narrowing: "I don't want to hear anyone call him a slow learner just because of how he looks. I won't put up with that bullshit!"

I assumed she was referring to MH's kindergarten teacher with whom she had recently met. She had felt the Irish woman treated her condescendingly.

"No one thinks he's a slow learner. Boys often start reading later than girls. He's only six. Just keep working with him. He'll make a breakthrough."

I looked down at MH, fidgeting on the carpet. "Your mom's trying hard to teach you," I said sternly. "You need to start paying more attention to your flashcards than to the Cartoon Network."

"But you always read to the girls," said T. bitterly. "When they were younger than him, you read to them every night. You don't read like that to him. What is it— do you think he's inferior?"

"You know that's bullshit," I glared. "It doesn't help."

"Well, I get bloody tired. And I could use some help." She tsked. "Maybe someday you'll appreciate all I do for these kids. *Ewai!*" Grumbling in Shona, she headed into the kitchen.

“We were reading ‘*Cat in The Hat*’ last night, weren’t we, buddy?” I said loud enough for T. to hear.

Little MH, rolled onto his back, scowling. He picked up the primer and pouted at the stylized butterfly on the cover. Perhaps it was proper that the code therein should intimidate until cracked...



A few times in Dubai, I tried to tutor MH in arithmetic. My patience was as shamefully limited as my fossilized Grade Seven math. The following snippet is from January 1999:

The father-son camaraderie lasted through our early morning swim in the apartment pool. But when I pulled out an arithmetic worksheet after breakfast, the dynamic changed to one between harsh taskmaster and unwilling charge. Soon MH was playing listlessly with his pencil.

“Can’t you focus for just thirty seconds?” In a stab of frustration, I lashed out with a glancing skite across the back of his head.

"Dad!" he cried, “why did you do that?”

His angry stare pierced me to the quick. How dare I forget my own feebleness with numbers? I crouched on knees before the kitchen table and hugged him.

“I’m sorry, honey.” I said, “I just hate to see you not trying. I want you do your best in everything. There’s nothing worse than not trying.”

I knew, of course, I was advising myself...

Friday June 16th

With a mid-June dawn coming later in central California than back north of the 49th parallel, I managed to sleep until first light at around 5:15 AM. Having not heard MH come back in the night, I was surprised to see him under a blanket on the sofa. Not wanting to wake him, I checked news sites on my iPhone until about 6:30 AM before quietly rising.

After a few minutes of exercise in the bathroom and a cup of tea, I felt rather more at ease... By 7:00 AM, my son was awake and texting. He said that he would be driving a friend to the Bay Area airport. Upon return, he said we could have breakfast and by mid-morning set off on a drive to Carmel.

That gave me about an hour to continue sifting through old journal files.

From tracking the emergence of his literacy, I shifted to a search for early hints of his enquiring mind. It took only minutes to come up with a few examples... I remembered how after the deaths of two aunts and a grandfather, MH began to ask questions that seemed unusual for a 7-year-old. That led me to another entry written in Dubai. It was from March 1999:

"So how is it that someone can just fall down dead?" asked MH. "How does someone die anyway?"

The supper table talk with the kids took an odd turn. It started with the news from MH that the father of one of the kids she went to school with back in Coquitlam had had a fatal heart attack. That led to my talk of the relative risks of heart disease and cancer... Guilelessly, I then segued to a description of watching the hearse pull away after my sister's funeral in Ottawa two years ago:

"What is so sad," I said, "is when you realize that the dead body holds nothing whatsoever of the living person. The person and all his rights disappear at the instant of death. Bodies are treated with respect, for sure. But after the funeral— if there is one— a human body has to be quickly buried or cremated. The shell of what was once a person becomes hazardous waste."

The three fledglings all dropped their eyes in discomfort.

After a moment of silence, MH piped up: "Dad, why don't you ever cry?"

The next excerpt to pop up was from winter 2003, That was a year after the family separation. MH and TE stayed with me half-time in my apartment on Pipeline Drive, four blocks away from their mother's place. He was then eleven:

With the sun not setting until nearly 10:00 PM, MH waited up until I got home from my late shift. He was running 'Runescape' on the computer but exited before being scolded. He watched while I unpacked my bookbag to be ready for grading student essays early in the morning.

"Would you like a bowl of ice-cream before bed?" I asked.

"Sure," he said. As I creaked over to the fridge, he looked at the cover of a grammar textbook I'd pulled out my bookbag along with the student essays.

"Is it hard to teach English?" he asked.

I chuckled. Well, like in any job—there're challenges. Students sometimes get bored or frustrated. You have to try different ways to help them."

"Dad?"

I turned, expecting some special request. Was it a drive somewhere tomorrow, a sleep-over permission; a new PlayStation game?

He caught my eye in a glint of curiosity, “How did language get started? Who invented the first word?”

Pleased by his stirring interest, I sat down on at the table. I tried to frame an answer that might spark further interest. “Well, honey, no one can ever know for sure— but I’ll tell you a couple of theories I’ve heard about. Afterwards you can check them out on the Encyclopedia Britannica DVD.”

For the following five minutes, ice-cream was all but forgotten...

Four years later, his older sister, TE, was in university and he was in Grade Ten. All three kids were then living half-time with me at a rented townhouse several blocks from their mother’s. MH’s success in Japanese, the language elective he chose that school year, was the first hint of his interest in Asian languages. The following excerpt is from February 2007:

“Let me show you something, pops.”

TE and I were at the kitchen table, going over her linguistics assignment. MH came downstairs and showed the list of numbers he’d memorized in Japanese, along with the Kanji script.

TE, challenged by phonetic transcription, was as impressed as I.

“Take advantage of the sharp mind you have now,” I said, “When you get to be my age—you’ll definitely appreciate that.”

“You’re not that old yet!” he chided.

Maybe he was right— but I still felt a little like a wheezing old Sam Johnson counselling the young James Boswell: *“Ply well your books while you’re young, laddie!”*



MH got back a little sooner than expected from the airport. He came in the door talking on his phone with big sister MT in Toronto. When he proceeded to make us an omelet, he handed the phone to me. For nearly twenty minutes, MT and I chatted amicably. Our spat when I picked her up in the middle of the night at the Vancouver airport last month seems mercifully forgiven.

I handed the phone back to MH who talked while setting out the plates. It was good to observe their sibling closeness. The seven-year age difference— which would have been almost culturally unbridgeable in earlier times— seems to be no obstacle for their generation.

At about 9:45 AM, we left on a drive to Carmel. It was the same route that MH had taken his mom and her husband on during their visit last fall... Like his middle sister, TE, my son has always been judicious about dispensing equal treatment to his divorced parents...

Much of the drive was in silence, except for the Sirius radio. Feeling a little patronized by the Beatles channel he chose for my benefit—I switched from ‘*Octopuses’ Garden*’ to a bit of Mozart. When MH did speak, I could barely make out his low timbre. Knowing that he was again annoyed that I wasn’t wearing hearing aids (which I did not reveal having brought along in my backpack), I mostly watched the scenery.

As we passed through the Santa Cruz mountains (fog rolling in behind) I recalled having spent a night hitch-hiking through there nearly a half century ago...I slept on the deck of the cabin of a vegan couple met on the boardwalk in Santa Cruz... The fruit stand where we stopped near Castroville was probably also not far from the vast field where I got stuck for hours without a ride on that first trip to California. I was twenty-three— eight years younger than my son at present... While tempted to share that reminiscence, I kept it to myself.

In Carmel, it was overcast and a little chilly but we had a pleasant walk along the beach. On the bare toes, the shoreline was as icy-cold as was the same ocean a thousand miles north. We took a few selfies before doubling back to the parking area. Those were the day’s most relaxed moments...

There was a little more talk on the drive back. Sensitive to MH’s notion that I was “obsessed” with Trump-loathing, I steered clear of U.S. politics. I did attempt to speak on a neutral topic of the therapeutic use of psychedelics. I felt thick tongued in making rehearsed points. One notable topic was that of electric cars. Unfortunately, that raised the sore point of my missed opportunity to get a better car instead of accepting expensive repairs after our accident last winter. As in the trip down, I mostly just took in the scenery...

We got back to his campus room by 2:00 PM. MH barely had time for a shower before he headed off to the airport again— this time to pick up his mom and her husband. They were booked into a hotel in nearby Redwood City.

In the two hours until his return, I lay back on his bed and opened my laptop...

This time, I took a different tack in my search. While from childhood onward MH showed determination and grit, he was not immune to frustration. In that thought, I pulled up a brief account of a walk at Lafarge Lake one evening in August 1999:

All three of my fledglings were taking in the full moon rising behind Lafarge Lake, when MH suddenly let go of my hand:

"You never spend any time with me," he cried. "You never talk with me!"

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Aren't we together right now?"

"But that's just because TE and MH are here. You wouldn't ask me to take a walk alone."

Lagging behind with Nikki, the mutt newly acquired from the SCPA, the girls paid us no attention.

"I promise you MH, we'll go on a father-son trip together soon. Just you and I."

"Right, fishing at Como Lake," he scoffed, referring to another Coquitlam suburban duckpond. He yanked my hand. "I watched asparagus with you, but you don't watch '*Wishbone*' with me."

"Asparagus? Do you mean '*Spartacus*'?"

"It was about four hours long— but I watched it with you. You wouldn't watch my show for just one hour."

"OK, I'll watch *Wishbone* with you this weekend," I said. I did appreciate that he liked an 'educational' kids' show that featured a talking Jack Russell involved in literary fantasies such as tagging after Shakespeare... I grabbed his hand. "And we'll take an overnight trip together. We can sleep in the back of the car just like we did in the Ford Explorer in Dubai."

"No, we won't," he whined. "You only want to do fun things with MT and TE!"

"No, we'll, have an adventure together. Just the two of us. Soon. I promise."

In a twinge of guilt, I was reminded that the summer was nearly over. Any camping trip would be nearly a year away... Still, my sensitive 7-year-old did not pull his hand away...

From Peewee baseball to college soccer and cycling, MH was always a fine athlete in both individual and team sports. Yet he was always hard on himself. Among remembered instances of his anguish in falling short by his own measure, was one noted down when he was just seven:

Back from the sandlot batting and catching session, MH felt thick thumbled with the computer 'paintbrush' programme.

"I can't do anything right. Everything I do is wrong."

"So, what if it's hard?" I scolded, hovering over the desk. "Hard is good. Can you build up your muscles by lifting teeny-weeny weights? When it's hard, MH— that's when you're growing your brain."

"Can you help me?" he wailed. "All I want is someone to help."

"MH, you know I'll help you in every way," I said. "But you also have to learn to help yourself."

Suddenly his teen sister, MH popped her head into the doorway. "What the matter with that child? Does he have emotional trouble?"

"Shush!" I warned.

I gripped his shoulder. “Don’t pay attention to teasing, honey. Just be strong.”

Yet the 7-year-old sobbed on— for the moment, inconsolable...



It was nearly 7:00 PM before MH got back to the room to pick me up for dinner at a local Italian restaurant. His mom and her husband were already dropped off and waiting for us there. Perhaps they were no more enthusiastic than I about spending the weekend in mutual close company. But they were no doubt similarly disposed to pleasing MH on his grad weekend...

When we arrived, my ex-wife and her husband were chatting with the professor *emeritus* and his wife whom MH had also invited. We greeted cordially as had been our custom at family gatherings over the last few years. Although semi-retired, the elderly professor had apparently taken MH under his wing and would continue to support him in his upcoming doctoral studies.

In preparation for the table chatter, I had worn one of my ill-fitting hearing aids in my left ear. Unfortunately, I was seated at the right side of the professor with left ear to the buzz of nearby tables...

It was only in checking Wikipedia upon return to MH’s room that I discovered how much I’d missed about the biography of the old professor who sat on my left:

Professor *emeritus* William Gould IV of Stanford had been the chair of the Labour Council during the Clinton administration. Much more recently, he had published the diary of his namesake ancestor. The first William B. Gould, was an escaped slave from North Carolina who served in the Union Navy during the Civil War... That Gould ancestor was commemorated in a statue recently unveiled in his adopted town of Needham, Massachusetts... His law-professor descendant was also honoured at the ceremony. Yet in sitting next to him for more than two hours, my interaction with the professor was largely confined to asking whether he approved of the new rules of baseball!

Meanwhile, my ex-wife sitting on his left side, was *tete-a-tete* with the 86-year-old professor throughout the dinner. He was apparently fascinated to hear that she had grown up in Rhodesia. Across the table, her husband (himself a lawyer) chatted up the professor’s British wife... Facing one another across the table, MH and I spoke little... Before leaving, T. gave the professor a thank-you card with a lengthy note— along with Oprah-on-steroids parting hugs...

So it was, I was left feeling rather sheepish. While MH drove his mother and husband back to their hotel in Redwood City, I lay back on his bed and opened my laptop. I continued my little copy/paste project...

Before sleep, I searched for journal excerpts describing the exceptional maturity sometimes noted in MH from his early age. The first pulled up was from early December 2000, when my son was just eight:

“Have you voted yet dad?” asked MH, just home from school. “The polling station is in our school gym.”

“I know, I know,” I said, head down in my evening lesson plan.

No federal election campaign in my memory had been quite so boring or the choices quite so bleak. There are two right wing parties— the old conservatives and the upstart Alberta-based Canadian Alliance. The only party marginally on the left, the NDP, is a feeble voice in the wilderness... Yet the patronage party of Jean Chretien did not deserve another majority government.

Rather than spoiling a ballot, I had decided not to vote at all. But after MH asked his question, I saw an opportunity for giving the bright-eyed 8-year-old a civics lesson.

“So how would you like to vote, MH?” I asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean— we can go over together right now. You can tell me how I should mark my ballot. Would you like to do that?”

“Sure!” he smiled.

In the chill November dusk, we walked up Torey Ave. and then down across his soggy school playing field. Through the lit-up back doorway of his primary school, MH led us along the arrow signs to his gym. After showing my ID, I was directed to a table where an old man, watched by two old ladies from opposing parties, handed me the ballot.

With hand on MH’s shoulder, I led him behind the cardboard shielded booth.

“OK, honey. I’ll read the names of the parties. You tell me which one to vote for.”

Along with the dreary mainstream choices, the list included the Green, Communist, Marijuana and Rhinoceros parties...

“Which one did you say in Jean Chretien’s party?” he asked.

“Liberal.”

“That’s the one,” he said.

I put the stubby pencil in his hand and showed him where to place the ‘X’.

In walking out, he was not quite as proud of himself as I was of him...

Another time he showed maturity greater than his years, was on an overnight road trip we took in August 2000, just before he started Grade Three. We travelled down a remote twisting gravel road south of Hope, B.C., and parked at dusk in a lay-by. We spent an uncomfortable night in sleeping bags in the back of the van. The plan was to go fishing in the early morning:

On the bank of the roiling green Skagit River, at 7:00 AM, MH waited for me to hand him the rod with baited hook. It was only at that moment I discovered that there was no filament in the reel...

“Jesus Christ!” I shouted.

“What’s the matter, dad?” asked MH in alarm.

“There’s no line.”

“Does that mean we can’t fish?”

“Sorry,” I blew out a hot breath. “We’ll have to wait until next time. Next time, we’ll be better prepared. I promise.”

MH shrugged. “No problem, dad.”

As we started driving back along the muddy road, I was roiling in guilt. Why was I always making promises to him that I never kept? Meanwhile, how in hell could I have forgotten the fishing line? I could almost hear the ghostly scorn of my own father for setting off ‘half-cocked’...

Still, it was only 7:30 AM. I vowed to make the best of the rest of the day. Fortunately, I had not forgotten our bikes.

“How about we get a nice breakfast at Hope?”

“Yeah, I’m hungry.”

On the passenger’s side, my 8-year-old sat wrapped in his sleeping bag... For all my ineptitude, he was glad to be with me. That thought warmed better than any (also forgotten) jacket in the icy air. Bouncing back towards Hope, I blasted the car heater.

“After breakfast we can ride our bikes in the Othello tunnels. Hopefully that won’t be a disappointment.” I glanced over. “You’re feeling OK, honey?”

“This is an adventure, dad,” he yawned.



Saturday June 17th

After an early morning bowl of oatmeal with the strawberries from yesterday's stop at the Castroville fruit stand, we took the walk MH promised on the drive in from the airport on Thursday. That was up the 'dish' trail that meanders past an array of radio telescopes on rolling hills south of the Stanford campus. As during yesterday's drive, I made little effort to start conversation. My hope was that MH would himself initiate some topic of interest to him. The walk to the crest of the hill was mostly in silence but MH did seem more at ease on the way down. He brought up the topic of recent innovations in running shoe design. That generated nearly five minutes of relatively relaxed talk...

With a little prompting, I learned more about his regimen of running and cycling. I was pleased to hear that he was healthy and abstemious. He said he was unattached.

I still felt sorry for M.— the girlfriend (and fellow lawyer) with whom he had recently broken up after nearly five years of their living together. She was a sweet girl who had invested a lot in him. Yet he said he was in a rut back in Toronto. He said he feels enriched by the Stanford milieu and invigorated by the very air of California... That I had already gathered over the last few weeks of our text messaging and a couple of lengthy phone chats.

If we can have relaxed text exchanges and phone conversations, why should there be awkwardness face to face? Is it something oedipal? This handsome young man, I reminded myself, was once an infant I held within hours of his birth... Yet it almost seems that our roles have reversed. It is now the father worried that he is not meeting the son's expectations. Slipping momentarily into paranoid mode, I even wondered whether it had crossed MH's mind that the deaf old man might embarrass him at the grad ceremony...

Back in his residence room, MH got ready for the ceremony scheduled to begin at noon. He then drove to pick up his mom and her husband at their hotel. I had about two hours before walking over to the law school. After showering and changing into my suit, I sat on the sofa and opened my Macbook.

I looked for more vignettes of my son's emerging character. I found an amusing one from early 2000:

"It doesn't look too bad, does it?"

There was MH in the doorway of my workroom tilting his head towards me. Above his right ear was a bald patch.

"Geeze," I turned from my computer. "How to hell did that happen?"

He tsked. "Well, I was just having a shower. You know that razor that MT uses to shave her legs?"

"I guess."

“Well, “he averted his eyes, “that razor fell off the shelf. It just fell on my head and cut my hair.”

“MH,” I grasped his arm. Do you expect me to believe that?” I squeezed. “Do you really?”

He flinched away with a squeal. Eyes widening, he began to sob. “I’m sorry, dad. I was just fooling around. It was an accident!”

I crouched and held his shoulders.

“Honey, please— don’t ever—don’t *ever* be scared to tell the truth.”

“Don’t tell MT,” he cried. “She’ll laugh at me!”

“Don’t worry, I won’t. Now go to bed.”

Patting his shoulders, I remembered once telling a cub-scout master that my ‘*good deed for the day*’ was rescuing a cat whose paw was caught in a manhole cover... Perhaps MH has inherited a flair for fibbing...

A similarly touching incident—however solemn in contrast—occurred about a year and a half later. At that time, MH was nine:

MH and I were pushing MT’s trolley towards the parkade in the Vancouver airport. She was just back from a visit with her Nana in New Brunswick. She had just told us of putting flowers on her grandfather’s grave in the village cemetery...

“Don’t you want to be buried in New Brunswick, dad?” MH suddenly asked.

I stopped up for a couple of seconds, spooked.

“Well, I certainly have no plans for that, honey.”

“Wouldn’t you *like* to be buried in the same graveyard as Papa?”

I jolted the cart forward. “To tell you the truth, MH, that graveyard gives me the creeps. That’s about the last place on earth my ghost would be at peace.”

He chuckled.

“So how about you?” I asked a little teasingly. “Have you ever thought about where you’d like your earthly remains to come to rest?”

“That’s so morbid!” said his teen sister, steadying her bag in the trolley...

“Wherever you’re buried—that’s where I want to be, dad.” said MH.

“That’s a nice thought, honey... But maybe in about a hundred years that’ll be up to your kids. Just like what happens to my dead body will be up to you guys. But now you know where *not* to put it!” I touched my daughter’s elbow. “MT’s right though— there’re a lot more pleasant things to talk about.”

However morbid the topic, MH’s avowal of filial loyalty brought a lump to the throat...



At noon, a half hour before the start of the grad ceremony, I made my way (using the Google location app) to the law school. The chairs set up under a canopy on the expansive front lawn were beginning to fill.

To kill a little time, I wandered into the adjacent Stanford campus bookstore. In noting the prices, I circled back out.

Meanwhile, I received a text from my ex-wife that she had saved a seat for me. She thoughtfully met me back at the entrance to the seating area. I followed her to the front and greeted her husband. Over the din of the crowd, I mimed the back strain I had to avoid, then pointed outside the canopy. Hoping no insult was taken, I walked outside and stood on the lawn behind the brass quartet that was gearing up *‘Pomp and Circumstance’* for the entrance of the grads. For the ninety-minute ceremony that followed, I remained standing— content with a side view of the stage...

Due to the shadows and bobbing heads of more than two hundred and twenty grads, I failed to get decent photos of MH. By bad timing on my phone cue button, I also missed getting any clear video clips.

Waiting by the exit afterwards, I spotted my ex-wife’s husband and hailed the couple as they came out. Together we made our way to the entrance of the law school where tables were set with finger food and refreshments for the milling crowd.

MH, still in mortarboard and gown, found us in front of the abstract sculpture in the courtyard. His mother greeted MH with a tearful embrace. She clung to him for more than a minute. I stood back beside her husband, awkwardly smiling.

MH, holding his mother’s hand, asked me to put his degree cover and mortarboard in my backpack. I gladly obliged. Still, holding hands, MH and his mother sidled off to the food table. The husband of my ex-wife and I found shade by the table serving watermelon. For upwards of twenty-five minutes, we chatted about unaffordable housing in Vancouver and Trump’s chances for re-election. MH and T. finally drifted back, presumably after multiple introductions to his classmates.

Thereafter the four of us walked back to his residence room. MH beside his mom was leading the way with T.'s husband and I tagging behind.

While MH changed in the bathroom, options for dinner were raised. My ex-wife's husband, thirsty for a cold beer and a beach view, suggested that we go to Santa Cruz. I had expected that we would be going to San Francisco, as MH had mentioned in the weekend itinerary he proposed in the drive from the airport.

When I came out of the bathroom, there was an uncomfortable silence suggesting some unease in the conflict of preferences. It was only in walking down to the underground parking that MH, a little brusquely, confirmed that we were going to San Francisco. I climbed into the backseat beside T.'s husband and glumly watched the scenery...

Even with the traffic crawl in the approaches to the Bay bridges, within forty-five minutes we arrived in the San Francisco North Beach neighbourhood. In contrast to the weather back in Palo Alto, there was a grey sky and chill breeze. Lucky to squeeze into a parking spot on one of the incredibly steep streets, we then walked a few blocks to the restaurant MH booked back in the room. Horrendously overpriced—the Marco Polo apparently had some renown—with photos of celeb-patrons (*e.g.* Francis F. Coppola) displayed on the walls. I ordered the cheapest offering on the menu—a small dish of mediocre spaghetti for \$22.

There was an awkward moment when the cheque came. I pulled out greenback cash but T. waved it away and paid the bill with her credit card—seemingly to the annoyance of her husband... Still, that seemed fair enough given my coverage of the car rental for which both she and her husband benefitted.

Meanwhile, MH stared into space. When we stood outside afterwards waiting for his mom and her husband to exit the washrooms, he did not speak. If he felt mild tensions between his divorced parents—there was no doubt whom he felt was to blame...

Still, in the heart of the old beat district there was much to wordlessly ogle... Thanks to the suggestion of T.'s husband, on the walk back to the car we stopped at the famous City Lights bookstore. It was a time capsule—exactly as remembered from my visit in May 1975. Perhaps there was even the same layer of dust on the shelf of socialist literature. In any case, the twenty-minute browsing of the gathering place of literary legends of the 1950s Beat movement was a rare delight... The City Lights visit seemed to lighten the mood on the drive back. I even felt enough at ease to tell the anecdote of Alan Ginsberg's 1969 visit to Saint John. T.'s husband's chuckling response was genuine.

After dropping them off at their hotel in Redwood City, MH and I were back on the Stanford campus by 8:30 PM. He went out again to visit friends, leaving me some time alone...

Laying back on the bed with my laptop, I wondered how the day had seemed for MH... Was the glory of his achievement sullied by the old tension of pleasing either one of his divorced parents without disappointing the other?

I recalled how once in his early childhood he placed his hand between mine and his mother's. "*I get it,*" he proclaimed. "*mom's chocolate, and dad's milk— so I'm chocolate milk!*" I searched my journal for that reference. I found it dated October 19th, 1996. He was four.

Following that search, I pulled up another vignette from two years later during our Dubai sojourn. I noted snippets of talk with the 6-year-old MH on June 13th 1998:

"What the difference between '*love*' and '*like*'?"

As we walked slowly back in though the steamy high-rise canyon between Spinney's supermarket and the Oasis residence, MH surprised me with that question.

"Well," I hesitated. "I guess love is stronger and you feel it more deeply. Why do you ask that, honey?"

"I dunno," he scuffed his feet. "I was just wondering."

"Well, what about your family?" I asked, "Do you *love* them— or do you *like* them?"

"I love them," he said.

"But honestly," I pressed, "do you like your family as people? I mean— if your mom and I weren't your parents— do you think you might choose us to be your friends?"

"Yeah," he said uncertainly.

"Well, what do you like about me?" I asked. "Just for example."

"I like your stories," he said.

"Well thank you, mister," I bumped his side, grocery bag in hand. "You know, I *love* you because you're my son and I also *like* you because you're a nice guy."

He tugged my untucked shirt tail. "So can we go camping again in the Explorer?"

"When we're back from summer holidays," I said. "When the weather gets cooler."



Two years thereafter we were back in Canada with the family on the verge of splitting up... MH was obviously torn, but unlike his oldest sister, he showed little of his feelings. One notable exception was on a Saturday in October 2001. Late that morning, his mom was taking his older sisters and one of TE's friends on an excursion in downtown Vancouver:

While his mother and the girls were getting ready to go to Science World, MH was hesitating outside my basement office door.

“Why don’t you want to go with them?” I asked. “You’ll have more fun there than you will here.”

“But I want to stay with you, dad,” he said.

I was touched— but a little guilty. As much as I’d like to have taken him bowling or to a movie, I had a dental appointment and student essays to mark.

Still, I definitely did not want him to regret staying behind.

Putting aside the marking, I first took him over to the Coquitlam Centre stadium where we did laps around the rubber track. Afterwards, we drove to the mall. At the dentist’s office, he played with TE’s Tamagotchi in the waiting room while I had my teeth cleaning. Before heading home from the mall, we rented a PlayStation game. He played on the basement TV while I worked on the essays. I picked up a pizza for our supper. He seemed content.

When the girls got home with their mom, along with TE, we watched game six of the World Series on the basement TV. It was slugfest that ended in a win for the Diamondbacks over the Yankees— the result we were both rooting for...

“Tell you what,” I said to him and TE in one commercial break. “Next summer, we’ll go to a Mariner’s game in Seattle.”

They both nodded dolefully—acutely aware of the immanent family split-up...

It was just a month before his tenth birthday that I moved out of the basement of what was to become his mother’s house...

Despite all the broken promises, I managed to keep the most critical one— that my kids would always have a bed in any place I stayed thereafter... Admittedly, that was difficult in the first two-bedroom apartment we lived in. Still, both MH and TE made sure they spent equal time with me...

Five years later, both of them would have their own rooms in the pristine townhouse that my new partner, C. and I would rent in Port Moody (Sadly, the relationship with my eldest, MT, was more erratic through her turbulent teens)...

All three kids first met C. when I invited her to Easter dinner in April 2006. At that time, I was renting a scruffy townhouse on Inlet Drive. That introduction to the lady who would become a devoted stepmother, was unforgettable. As recorded in my journal:

The apprehension of the invitation to the special dinner melted away within minutes of C.’s arrival. She immediately pitched in to help in the kitchen. By the time the baked ham and roasted

potatoes were served, there was ease around the table. While TE was a little quiet, MT and MH chatted volubly. C. was warm and comfortable.

After she left, I asked MH over his shoulder as he texted on Windows Messenger. “Well, what are your impressions?”

“I like her,” he said matter-of-factly, staring into the computer screen. “She’s really nice.”

Is it too much to hope that all five of us might come to share a place together? As deeply proud as I am of the kids for accepting my new ‘relationship’ — I must be careful not to rush things...

In closing the lid of the laptop, I felt a pang for the absence of C. Why should T.’s husband attend MH’s graduation and not my wife? Does his being a lawyer give him a greater claim than that of a stepmother who for years cooked for MH and washed his clothes? But then C. herself, in her generosity, saw this as a father-son weekend— a chance for me to stay with MC, instead of in a hotel... But is that arrangement working out for the best of all? Have I been sullyng the atmosphere with negative vibes?

With that guilty thought, I fell asleep...



Sunday June 18th

Just as on the first night, I did not hear MH coming back from his visit with friends. But in the last morning of the visit, it felt less awkward in getting my cup of tea and banana without disturbing him sleeping on the sofa...

He was up by 8:30 AM and soon off again pick up his mother and her husband from their hotel. He said he would be dropping them off at a breakfast café near the campus stadium where we would converge for the college-wide grad ceremony at noon... When he left, I packed to be ready for the drive to the airport later in the afternoon.

Before his return, I found another snippet suggesting that from MH’s early adolescence, he showed signs of exceptional character. The note was taken in May 2005, soon after his thirteenth birthday:

In our latest jog around Lefarge Lake, MH suddenly stopped and held up his arm.

“Stop, dad— look!” he cried.

On the bank a few metres ahead of us, a black cat was creeping up on a squirrel. Within seconds it was plain that the squirrel was injured and that the cat was playfully tormenting it... MH sprang

forward and took up a branch. He held the cat off, long enough for the squirrel to retreat into taller grass...

In resuming our jog, I thought of how at his age, I would have likely gawked in sadistic fascination. My disgust for that prehistoric runt made me feel ever prouder of MH...

Early in the evening, in watching him across the table devour a T-bone steak, I thought again of the cat and squirrel incident... Every day he grows stronger. I also thought of how he likes to gauge his height by standing back-to-back with me. Just as he already runs faster and throws harder—no doubt he will soon surpass me in height. Even deeper pride will come, hopefully, in a surpassing character...



MH was back by 10:30 AM, in a rush to ready for the college-wide ceremony... In emerging from the bathroom, he asked for his mortar board and tassel thought stuffed into my backpack yesterday. I immediately fished out the mortarboard but did not find the tassel...

He swooped up my backpack a little roughly and emptied it on the bed. Still no tassel.

"I'm sure, I put it I there," I said. "I don't know what happened to it. I'm sorry."

"Don't worry," he said.

I wondered whether I'd failed to completely zip up the top of my backpack. So much for my reliability! MH rushed out, leaving me a little guilty... With forty-five minutes before heading to the stadium, I looked for another snippet. I found one from May 2008:

MH had earlier told me that the father of his friend, Gordon, a man only in his forties, had terminal cancer. I had never met the father (the family lives on the same street as my ex-wife) but was shocked by MH's news:

"Gordo's dad died yesterday."

"That's terrible. Poor Gordon—were he and his dad close?"

He looked away. "I don't know," he said. "But Gordo said his dad managed to tell him everything he needed to say."

MH turned back to the computer. Seemingly emotionless, he was on Windows Messenger, typing fast. I watched him for a few seconds in profile. Should my luck suddenly run out—could I claim to have told my 16-year-old *'everything I needed to say'*?



The Google location app was not needed for directions to the Stanford Stadium— one had only to follow the crowds. Once through the security gate, I went to the top bleacher above the packed seats in front of the stage. In absence of sunscreen, I soon headed for the shady side of the stadium. There was only a distant sideview of the stage but it was cooler and less claustrophobic.

Before the ceremony started, the couple on my right struck up a chat with me. From Florida, the husband was a businessman, and his ethnic Japanese wife was born in Brazil. Their younger daughter was graduating in business administration. When I told them that my son was receiving a master's degree in law, they asked if I was a lawyer. After I said I was a "retired schoolteacher", the tone of our conversation changed...

The ninety-minute ceremony, watched on the jumbotron screen a quarter mile across the stadium, was highlighted by the "silly walk" entrance of the grads and the key-note address. The first involved grads entering in silly costumes (*e.g.* pinheads and rubber duckies). The latter was a salty pep talk delivered by tennis legend, John McEnroe.

In listening to the latter's speech, I was stuck by how MH's achievement could be ascribed to rigours similar to those urged by the 1980s tennis bad boy. Of course, MH was spared the hard-ass father like that of McEnroe or Tiger Woods... Perhaps a belief that anything is possible— underlying determination and a little charm— can work quite as well. In MH's case, at least two of those three attributes are not of paternal inheritance...

I left before the egress of the grads, hoping to spot T. and her husband. With thousands exiting through multiple gates, it was plain that meeting up that way was highly unlikely. Fortunately, the Stanford 'guest' wifi kicked in long enough for me to send a WhatsApp message to MH and to receive his reply.

When I got to Gate One where he had messaged me to rendezvous, he hailed me through the crowd. He was smiling. I congratulated him and he responded with a "happy Father's Day" and a hug. While T. and her husband waited in the background, we took a couple of selfies.

Slowly, the four of us began walking back through the thinning crowds towards MH's room. As yesterday, T. walked ahead holding his hand.

As soon as my bag was loaded in the trunk of the Mustang, alongside the luggage of T. and her husband, we headed off for a late lunch. At my suggestion, we returned to the Mexican diner where MH and I got takeout burritos on Friday... MH took the cheque—insisting it was a Father's Day gift. Still, in glancing at the reaction of T. and her husband, I wondered whether MH's generosity added to my reputation as a cheapskate...

Since our flights back to Vancouver departed at nearly the same time, by 3:00 PM we started off together for the airport. T. was again in the front passenger seat while her husband and I squeezed in the back...

Since T. and her husband were dropped off at a different terminal, I had a few final minutes in the front passenger seat beside MH. I thanked him profusely for the trip and apologized for any

faux pas over the three-day visit. We hugged stiffly at the back of the car—just as when he picked me up...

Minutes later, in my nervousness after the (expected) special pat down in security, I left my laptop at the security pickup. My mad dash back from the gate corridor definitely turned heads.

“Bet you were worried,” said the plain-clothed security guy when I swooped up my Macbook at the end of the security belt.

Disaster narrowly averted, I took a seat in the WestJet departure gate and plugged in. For the two hours until flight time, I finished off the selection of journal excerpts for MH’s ‘collage’...

I looked for the description of a memorable incident in his mid-teens... At that time, and for several years thereafter, MH was far from immune to hormonal wildness. My worry was not that he drank or partied. What was scary was hearing (from my daughters) that he could be a nasty drunk who sometimes got himself in dangerous situations. Yet afterwards, he always felt remorse. After his lapses, he tended to redouble his efforts to excel. One incident that stands out occurred on May 14th 2008, when he was sixteen:

It started with a call from an officer in the Coquitlam RCMP informing that MH had been fingered for some petty vandalism on the Westwood Plateau. He was apparently witnessed breaking some lawn ornaments. The property owner had yet to press charges but was considering...

At the time of the call, MH was at his mother’s house. When the landline rang unanswered, I left a message with MT, who moved back to her mother’s basement last month. Despite being a little sarcastic (“It was probably one of the trashy kids who live around your place!”) she passed the message on.

When MH himself came through the door at 4:00 PM, I gave him a hug. He was near tears. From initial silence, it gradually emerged that he had been at a house party on the Westwood Plateau where he had had a few beers.

On the way to the bus stop, he and a few friends stomped over some garden lamps. When a woman in the house next door came to her window, they ran away. It must have been that neighbour who called the cops. Soon afterwards, the cops came to check on both the noisy house party and the reported vandalism on the same block. Although MH didn’t mention it, the cops probably asked if anyone knew the name of the “black guy” who was at the party earlier. Facing underage drinking charges, one of the kids at the party probably gave them MH’s name.

“Well, that’s not really fair,” I said, “if the other two guys get away. You are all equally responsible.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’ll pay for it,” he said, looking away. He had a little money from his weekend job at the mall shoe store.

“It *does* matter. What you guys did was dumb. But it’s still not fair that you were singled out.”

“I don’t care,” he said.

“I care— and so should you. You need to be treated fairly whether for good or for bad.”

“I’ll talk to my friends,” he said, “I’ll get them to contribute.”

“Well, if they really are friends, then they will share in the blame.”

He blinked in what seemed both sorrow and shame. Meanwhile, my dilemma was balancing the injustice of his being singled out with the justice of his taking responsibility for his folly...

I squeezed his shoulder. “Look MH, you owned up to your mistake... I’m proud of you for that. “You know what? The owner would be really impressed if you would personally apologize. I caught his eye. “Could you do that?”

In the fashion of his mother, he lifted his eyebrows in assent.

Later in the afternoon, we pulled up to the curb across from a *feng shui* mansion on the Westwood Plateau. It was near the park where not so long ago, he played peewee baseball.

Nervously I watched from the driver’s seat while MH got out and walked up to the massive doorway. When the door opened, a Chinese man emerged looking wary. I braced for angry gesticulations. Instead, the man seemed to be listening. For his part, MH was looking up and down while talking. Suddenly, MH extended his hand. They shook hands.

Half a block away, a middle-aged heart soared in pride...

That same incident led me to reflect on hopes that my three kids can be at ease in their individuality and be resistant to group identity. My ex-wife— understandably given her Rhodesian experience— has always encouraged our kids to embrace a black identity... Yet I have always believed race is as malleable as any social construct... At the same time, I realize that it is much easier for one of European heritage to assume that. Still, if there be a felt need for racial identity, it has remained my hope that my kids would consider themselves biracial— equally proud of maternal and paternal heritage...

With the history of racial animus and violence, I was always uneasy at the prospect of MH studying in the USA. Still, I knew that was always his goal. I was glad that he got his opportunity at Stanford— less so because it was an elite institution than for its location in multi-racial California...

Yet even in the Silicon Valley, there is no doubt MH is often identified as African American. Perhaps one day we can have a conversation about the extent to which he feels an outsider in the USA— an expat Canadian— despite the stereotyping.

That is not to suggest that in growing up in suburban Canada, he was untouched by racial stereotyping. In such regard, I thought of an incident that occurred when he was only twelve. I reported it in my journal in May 2004:

I was helping TE on a history essay at 8:20 PM when MH came through the door.

“How was your game, honey?” I asked, jolting up to dish out his lasagne.

“Look, I got my baseball statistics.”

Before sitting at the table, he showed me a copy of a chart with yellow highlighting. “I’m leading my team is almost everything.”

“This’s really impressive!” Feigning a smile, I looked them over. I waited until he was nearly finished eating before dropping the bomb.

“Your vice principal left a phone message to call him. I’ll going to call back in the morning. Do you have any idea what it’s about?”

For an instant he looked scared.

“Just tell me, honey.”

He swallowed. “O, some kid shot me with a soft air gun.”

“Shot you?”

“With a soft air gun.”

“Did you say: ‘*shot* you’?”

“Here,” mouth full, he pointed to a tiny red welt on his cheek.

I touched his cheek— shocked. “That could have hit your eye. What little bastard did this?”

“Just this weird kid. He doesn’t have any friends. He always tries to show off.”

“What to hell was he doing with a gun at school? We ought to phone the cops.”

He shrugged. “It was a *soft* air gun.”

He noticed my hand on his shoulder, trembling. “I told the principal to call you,” he said. “I know mom would freak out.”

“Well, I’m freaking out.” I blew out a hot breath. “But we’ve got to think how to handle this properly.”

After an uneasy night, at the kitchen table I watched the minutes digitally click off until 9:05 AM. Taking a deep breath, I called the office of the Maple Creek vice principal.

In a bland voice, the vice principal informed that the offending boy had taken the air pistol to school in his backpack. He was firing it in the playground when MH was hit. The boy was temporarily suspended. When I asked for the boy's name, the vice principal said that he could not tell me over the phone "for legal reasons."

"Look, my son could have lost an eye," I said sharply. "This is a very serious matter."

"O, this boy's in trouble—you can be assured of that," he said.

"I could press charges against that boy's parents."

"Yes, you could, Mr. T.," he tried to sooth.

I had intended to come across as 'firm yet reasonable' but grew more irritated by the patronizing tone. "This kid—and his parents—especially the parents—have to know how serious this is. Unless he apologizes directly to my son, I *will* press charges."

"I know how you feel, Mr. T. But you should know that the boy's coming into the office with his father later in the morning. We're going to decide then how long to keep him suspended."

"I want you to call me back to confirm the apology."

"Certainly, Mr. T."

After hanging up, I felt duped. It was plain that the primary interest of the vice principal was covering his ass. His greatest relief was that I did not accuse the offender of a racist attack on my son. That's very likely what T. would have done. She would have called the cops—or even BCTV news. They would be eager to use such a story for one of their nightly local scandal reports.

Because MH asked me rather than asking his mom to handle the matter—will some trashy little bastard get off the hook? Maybe the little creep will go on to become a white power fanatic...

I still want to be a voice of reason: cautioning MH not to automatically assume that every injustice he experiences stems from racism... But in this case—have I failed him?

When I came home from work at 6:45 PM, MH was in front of the computer.

"The kid apologized," he said without turning around. "In the principal's office. His father was there, and he apologized to me, too."

"Are you OK with that?" I asked. "We could take it further."

“No, it’s OK.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Well, I’m awfully proud of you, honey. You should never take shit— but you should always have the capacity to forgive. That’s the mark of the better man.”

In hugging him, I was struck by a little irony. It was not the devoutly Christian parent who was invoking the virtue of turning the other cheek...



I would guess that MH did sometimes seek reassurance from his mother in those years— but more often kept his feelings to himself... As for the disquieting experiences that I knew about— another occurred only a week after the ‘soft air gun’ episode. I wonder how his memory of the Peewee baseball tournament in Surrey in May 2004 differs from the one recorded in my journal:

Although MH brought home a team trophy for first place in the baseball tournament in Cloverdale— he was glum. Tainting his team’s victory was his feeling that he deserved the tournament’s Most Valuable Player award...

As the closing pitcher the semi-final game, he shut down the opponent’s surging comeback. Then in the afternoon final, he pitched six solid innings. In the innings when he wasn’t pitching— he was a solid catcher. He blocked several wild pitches that would have resulted in stolen runs.

When the winning team lined up for medals, he got the strongest spontaneous applause. Yet the MVP award, as usual, went to the kid whose dad helped out most with the coaching...

Back in the living room, I tried to console.

“Just forget it. It’s not the most valuable player award anyway. It’s really the dad’s appreciation award.”

Yet the irritated flick of his fingers on the Play Station buttons made it plain that he was upset.

It occurred that had his mother been at the game, she would probably have offered a different version of commiseration: *‘You see—just to be recognized for your achievements in this society— you have to be twice as good as the white kids!’*

At the same time, I wondered whether in this disappointment MH has made any connections with the soft air gun incident at school... Such rude awakenings will probably be part of the story he carries into adulthood...

“Hey,” I patted his shoulder— to hell with them. You *were* the Most Valuable Player today. You know it and I know it. That’s all that really matters!”

Seconds after I pasted that into passage into the collage text— I turned aside to see T. and her husband standing beside me... Their flight departure had apparently been redirected to Terminal One... I motioned to the seats beside me... In the twenty minutes before they left for their own gate— we chatted amicably...



Monday June 19th -Wednesday June 21st

C. picked me up at the airport and I drove home, bleary-eyed. We did not get home until nearly 11:00 PM. However fitful the sleep, I was up at 4:15 AM with the first high summer light... After unpacking, I wrote MH the following text message:

‘Flight was a bit delayed but arrived at 9:00 PM and got home around 10:45 PM. A million thanks for your hospitality over the fascinating weekend. Our walk along the beach at Carmel and along the ‘dish’ trail are stand-out memories. Of course, the dinner with Prof. Gould (despite my hardness of hearing) was unforgettable as was the visit to the City Lights bookshop in SF. Yet above all, was hearing your name read as you crossed the stage to receive your degree... And to think that in 2 years I might be back at Stanford to see you gowned as a doctor-of-law! How many dads could be so honoured by a son’s achievement?’

Through the remainder of the day, I grew uneasy in the absence of a response... I knew MH was preparing for his conference at Tsinghua university in Beijing... Yet when no reply came the following morning, I sent another WhatsApp message:

‘Let me know if you need more money for the car rental... Looking forward to hearing about the conference in Beijing. Hope to chat before you head off for China. Would like to hear about your plans for further travel and for practicing your Mandarin...’

As soon as I sent it, it occurred that I ought to have offered to pay the gas along with the car rental... Yet even a want of generosity could only have been a *minor* irritant...

I then thought of the final moment, in lifting my bag out of the trunk at the curb of the airport terminal. Although I had expressed gratitude and pride in him— my parting words, must have

seemed odd. *'I'm glad you didn't inherit my lack of self-confidence,'* I clumsily joked, *'You must have got that from somewhere else!'*

That was intended as a wry acknowledgement of his maternal inheritance... But I distinctly recall a tightening of his face.

Does he think I harbour doubts about his biological paternity? Perhaps his suspicion that such doubts had crossed my mind was the reason he refused to take the *'23 and Me'* DNA test which both his sisters were glad to do. Is it even possible that he has himself been haunted by similar doubts that I always had until taking the test?

For twenty-four hours longer, the claws of paranoia wiggled in my neck. Then mercifully on Wednesday morning, there popped up his WhatsApp reply:

'Thanks dad, I'm so grateful that you made it down and that we were able to spend that time together. It means the world to me. We will chat about China.'

Sorry I forgot to send that yesterday. I typed it out but didn't hit 'send'!!

Along with profound relief—I felt ashamed. So easily I panic and slip into a vortex of paranoia. There has never been any need for *'23 and Me'* to confirm what is obvious in both our resemblance and in the beat of my heart... Yet few old men still have such a shitload of karma to work through in their ever-shrinking allotment!

I then reopened the collage of journal excerpts. I added as a final piece—a reflection written a few weeks before I was to visit MH in Bengaluru, India, where he was working on a NGO during the summer between his first and second year of law school. On April 4th, 2015, I reflected:

In the latest insomniac consideration on pivotal moments that determined my trajectory— this morning at 2:00 AM, I recalled meeting T. and 6-month-old MH at the Vancouver airport upon their return from Zimbabwe in November 1992:

It is painful to recall the marital strife that intensified right to the hour of T.'s departure on that Zimbabwe trip, two months earlier. She left in the uncertainty as to whether she would return... It was tacitly understood that the two months of her absence would be something of my trial single fatherhood with our two little girls. Meanwhile, T. would be testing the prospects of living back in her home country as a single mother of an infant son...

Within two weeks, fortunately, her postcards proclaimed her eagerness to return... Still, there was much uncertainty while I waited with the girls (and the kind neighbour who drove us) at the arrival gate on that November night...

When she emerged from the international arrivals gate rolling her loaded cart toward us, little MH was sitting in the forward basket. He was grinning. Even as the girls and I embraced T., he was looking curiously at me.

“He was with *Sekuru* a lot,” said T., referring to her father. “He expects you to pick him up.”

I duly picked him up and hugged him. There was the faint smell of woodsmoke from the Zimbabwe farm kitchen in his jumper. His little arms hugged back. In that instant, I was won over— forever...

Yet I wonder... What if he’d had a chafing diaper? What if he’d squalled and flinched away— would I have taken that as some aversion to me? Such a reaction, ironically, could have set my infant son and I on a trajectory similar to that which determined my poisonous relationship with a father. Yet by random luck, that downward spiral was avoided. An alternate course was set for devotion and respect...

So, it is quite possible that the source so much subsequent joy and fulfillment was determined that night by nothing more than the condition of a diaper...

Even if add more vignettes to the collage— I am quite sure that preceding one should be placed in the center...

2023, July

