

Her Gift

By John D. Vollmer

When Emily was only 2, it was always “Why” “Why” “Why” of course. And I caught myself sometimes answering simple questions with complex answers. That was nonsense. She didn’t have the rational type of brain that could process such things. I wanted to treat her like an adult but my answers were too convoluted. I saw it in her face. So sometimes I just used made-up answers and she was satisfied. I realized that what this was really about was her exploration of language, what it is and what it was made for. And she began using it. And even then I knew that the female of the species was far better at language than we men were.

By the time she was 5, that had changed. Now “Why” demanded a real response, not BS, and she would stab me with demanding eyes and say “What?” No more of that.

There had been the odd bout of flu, colds, a fever, and diarrhea. The first bout didn’t seem to bother her at all and I cleaned her up. I explained that it was just the human condition and happened to me too. She got even cheery about it and glad to yell for me to help when it happened.

When she was 7 she was coming up with her own answers to questions. Where does that stream run to? Does it always go downstream? Where does it come from? And she puzzled out her own answers. She knew it must flow to the lake, hidden from sight, but she knew it was there. And nothing would do until we drove to the lake and she worked it out that other streams ran away from the lake. Now, where did they go? We pulled out a map and she traced out streams flowing to rivers, joining other rivers, and finally flowing to the sea. There was triumph and satisfaction in her eyes! Rational being indeed.

And of course, the usual Why is the sky blue; Where do clouds come from, etc. Until we came to trees. Why are they so tall? What are the leaves for? I let her work out photosynthesis and hydrodynamics, with only hints from me, she worked it all out. Until we got to: Why don’t they freeze in winter? For that I had to introduce her to Google and her mind shot off like a cannon.

One day I was getting ready for my shower and she opened the door and looked. I let her look. She left with a smile on her face. The next day at dinner I said “Where did you think you came from?” She smiled and said “I think I knew.” So now you know.

In the eighth grade she discovered Nature. Not in the passing way of before (Look at the birds! What kind are they? What’s this tree called) but as something coming near a mania. We watched David Attenborough endlessly (I think that for a bit she thought he was God; he knew everything) and all the others. However, she cried when she saw all the little fish in huge groups being attacked ruthlessly. I explained that the ones being taken advantage of the most were the ones who had offspring in vast numbers. Called the Balance of Nature.

I took her to the natural history museum and the planetarium and she drove me crazy, and then the zoo. Here I had little to provide of what she wanted to know, so she shanghaied a guide. A woman, always a woman, for she had become skeptical of males (I was one of those, and falling behind).

I had taught her how to read when she was 4 (I could tell she was ready) and now soaked up any and all books she could. Distaining TV, she read while I watched inane sitcoms and the news. And by the time of her second year in high school (she had skipped a year in grade school) she finally found some use for her pathetic old man.

The Age of Literature had dawned on her explorations, but especially when it came to her teachers (woefully not up to snuff), she found that I was not a bad help when it came to the next round of books she needed to devour. She was well past Little House on the Prairie and even Carson McCullers and Jonathan Swift. She had plowed through mystery novels and science fiction and had remarked that they

were “peanuts.” At first she was enchanted by Dickens and Scott but was tired out by their prolixity until I pointed out the perils of authors being paid by the word. She let out a wail over her wasted time.

So together we sank into poetry (Wallace Stevens and Delmore Schwartz) and then the Iliad and the Odyssey (“The Iliad is way better” she said) and the powerful detour into Greek history. Then I plunked down *The Brothers Karamazov* and she actually spent three days on that. She stormed into my office and slammed it onto my desk. “It doesn’t say who killed old man Fyodor” she screamed at me. “I know. It’s a mystery!” “What a waste of my time, you old bluffer!” And we talked about who it might have been and in the end she let me off the hook.

Shortly before this the disaster struck and almost derailed her. It was called Boys.

Then came the tumultuous period all parents know, with cries of “You just don’t understand!” Which was true. One day I left a device on her bedtable stand that she had found on the Internet. The next morning before breakfast she gave me a coy little look and kissed me on the forehead. It was not only OK, it was necessary. And she knew that and made a great leap forward.

But next came the blame tirade. “How could you drive Mom away!!? What’s wrong with you anyway!?” Etc. When she wore down I stood up and she did likewise. I put my hands lightly on her shoulders and said: “Who taught you how to make pancakes?” Head down, “You did Dad.” “Who took you to the Planetarium?” “You did Dad.” “Who showed you how to sew on a button?” “OK, ok, Dad.” I dropped my hands and said: “There’s something you need to know. A man will kill for his wife...but he will die for his daughter.” Her eyes were wet when she looked up and raced for the stairs. Some time later she came down, stood me up, and with her arms around me said “I love you Daddy, and I always will.”

It was the happiest moment of my life, and not the last gift she would give me.

A bit later I wanted to tell her about my marriage.

After dinner, her sprawled on the couch with a book, me in my favorite chair, I said what I needed to say. “Your mother and I were too young.” She put down her book. “We imagined we were Romeo and Juliet and actually played it out like that. But our brains had not finished growing yet and in just a few years we realized that we were now different people, and hardly knew one another.” Long pause.

“OK, I can see that. Where did I come in?”

“After one huge fight she looked at me for a long time and said ‘there’s one thing I can give you and I want you to accept.’ What’s that?” And ‘that’ was you. I objected, strongly, but she said she knew I’d be a good father and she wanted to move on. I wasn’t so sure, but in the end I agreed. Secretly, I was hoping for a daughter, I don’t know why, but there it was and there you were and I instantly fell in love.

“Every day on your birthday she’d send me a gift for you and asked me to pretend it was from me. I did. But they came from her, from your mother.”

In her freshman year in high school she discovered Math. Another zoom into the heavens. I was an English Editor of medical journals and I helped as best I could but by the time she got to trigonometry, I was utterly lost. Didn’t matter. She brought home one wondrous gift after another and danced and skipped and whooped around the room, holding up an exercise book. This was yet another gift, for she let me see her joy.

Soon she skipped a year in high school and entered college and I felt she was getting so far ahead of me I began to feel forlorn. But then something wonderful happened. She would stay up until four in the morning watching movies. One morning she told me that she like movies because to her they were a part of literature. Wow.

A whole new connection opened up before us and we talked about movies endlessly. At least until I nodded off. We were back in tune and had something huge to talk about. Yet another gift.

Taking up the challenge of her postdoc work, she began poring over pamphlets and brochures and applications from some of the best universities in the country. She could easily have been accepted as a TA in advanced at either MIT or USC or any med school. And then came the next stunner.

Emily made me my favorite dinner, then took me by the hand and led me into the living room.

“Dad, I’ve got something to tell you.”

“By all means, let’s hear it!”

“I’ve decided on an advanced degree.”

“Indeed, great!”

“It’s not what you think.”

“Which one is it?”

“It’s UC Davis.”

“Tremendous! Excellent university.”

“In the Veterinary Medicine Department.”

For once, I was totally bereft of words.

She stroked our cat Dumbface. (I named her that because she was an incredibly pretty cat and I didn’t want her to become vain. Didn’t work.)

“I considered a career in medicine. After all, you’re a doctor.”

“Of sorts. Not really.”

“But people really do consider their pets part of the family. And med school is loaded up with students, aimed at the big bucks and after undergoing the incredibly hard years of internship etc., they feel entitled to the money.”

“True enough, but...”

“I want to make a difference. A real one. And here it is. In veterinary medicine, cats are hugely understudied. The textbooks vets use for cats is the one for dogs. And they are not at all alike. Cats are utterly unlike any other species. Just for example, Dumbface here is a black and white shorthair. Why black and white, which really marks them as targets for predators?”

“True enough, but...”

“One night I was out in the evening, it was twilight, and I saw a black and white shape and I thought ‘How did Dumbface get out?’ But it wasn’t Dumbface, it was a skunk! And it hit me like a knock on the head. They’re colored like that to make predators think they’re skunks!”

I laughed. She was exactly right!

“That’s just one small thing but I wrote a paper on it and sent it to UC Davis. And they accepted it and sent it off for publication!”

“But isn’t it still...”

“No! It’s not a step down. After what you and David Attenborough taught me, humans are NOT really a step up. We are all wonderfully intertwined as species, as life. And I want to be enmeshed in that Life!”

Other things can come later.”

So there was that. My beautifully brilliant Emily, with another surprise and a wonderful gift. To quote, my heart soared like a hawk.

At the university she took my advice and “sampled” men until she found the right one. His name was Greg and I approved without reservation. Against the usual pattern, he was two years younger than her and, of course, nowhere near as brilliant. But he didn’t mind and instinctively I knew he would be a good husband and father. Before too long he taught her something I’d never been able to do. Let it go. It was a blessing we both appreciated.

And in due course Emily brought forth a daughter. They named her Rina and I spoiled her completely from Day One. It made her happy and Greg knew exactly how to mend it. Salt of the Earth was a term invented for him.

Pretty soon I became the official Catman. I had to train them all to use the cat door. All the boxes were outside and I’d be damned if I was going to put up with that smell. They just kept coming and, finally, not wanting in to give in to ultimatums, I just took the sickest ones to the shelter, and then maybe a few others. She never counted.

A few years later I heard the word I’d been waiting for. Cancer. They sent me for endless tests and then told me my “options.” The best ones were always the best options for them. I mulled it over a bit but I was never in any real doubt. I knew that in my case there’d be the semi-torture of chemo and radiation with the false dawn of “remission.” And then back again with a roar and the real torture. I knew that from the journals I edited.

I decided to let Nature take its course. And not tell Emily and Greg, of course.

But one day she saw the truth, while I was in bed. I saw the fear in her eyes and let her run through the usual arguments. But there was no way I was going to go through with the nursing, cajoling, “orders,” looks of sympathy and all the rest.

Another evening, she sat quietly but her eyes were beseeching me.

I said, “Emily. I am content. And I always have been. Because of the great gift you gave me. I am content.”

Pause.

“What gift...”.

Pause.

“Yourself.”

Knowing of my spinal arthritis, the hug was quite gentle, tho lingering. It was her way of saying OK.

So that is our story and it was time for me to fade.

John D. Vollmer

© 2025

john@johndvollmer.net