

can you be  
With me ?

STORIES ABOUT THE CURRENCY OF TIME

**S. Peter Lewis**

Volume 3 in **The Dad Story Project** series

**CAN YOU BE WITH ME? Stories about the currency of time**

Volume III in **The Dad Story Project** Series

Copyright © 2015 S. Peter Lewis, Bridgton, Maine

Text and illustrations by S. Peter Lewis unless otherwise credited

All Rights Reserved

Cover image: The author and his daughter (Peter is on the left), graphite, carbon, and charcoal, original artwork by the author.

*No portion of this book may be reproduced or distributed in any way (print and digital media) without the author's express, written permission; the only exception being short excerpts as part of a book review.*

**For my wife, Karen,  
my children, Jeremiah and Amanda,  
my granddaughters, Sophie and Lexie,  
and my mom and dad**

# Table of Contents

---

## INTRODUCTION

The stuff in the front of the books

Foreword by John Finch

## THE STORIES

Zero sum game, not

The six-hour bathing suit

Why don't we live now?

A slingshot in Nebraska

You just don't have time

Never too late for a first date

A tale of two turtles

Amidst a downpour of mallards

Place one small stone . . .

Serendipity in the barn

Daddy, can you be with me?

The gift at the door

Hey, kids, come down from there

My Life in a Tumbling Troupe

Whispers to an anxious heart

## THE STUFF IN THE BACK OF THE BOOKS

# The stuff in the front of the books

## Why I write these books

Because I don't have time.

Let me illustrate. In the photo below, my son Jeremiah is practicing for the soon-to-be day when the training wheels would come off and he would be free on two wheels. I ran alongside him and gave him a little shove and then I knelt down and raised my camera and quickly focused and snapped the shutter — and in that twitch of an instant I caught him, leaning bravely, legs churning, racing away from me. I can still taste the pungent sweetness of that early spring day, still feel the chilled air rushing in and out of my lungs after my little run, still feel the prick of the sharp gravel stinging my knees. But if you look carefully you'll notice that the photo isn't perfectly sharp; there is still just the tickle of a blur. For even in the most finely split second there is yet a tiny bit of movement. And my son's been moving ever since. He's thirty-one now, yet somehow I took the photo just three weeks ago...



## Why you should read these books

Because *you* don't have time.

Read the paragraph above again and take another look at the photo. Whether you are a parent or a child, life is racing past. It seems like tomorrow will never come (the training wheels will never come off) and then today has become yesterday's long ago.

## How I was even *able* to write these books

I have only been able to become my wife's loving husband and my children's loving father and to live these stories and get all these words lined up properly because of a dramatic intervention a long time ago. My wife and I were in our mid-20s, with a newborn son, and our marriage was dying. The combination of two very dysfunctional childhoods had collided and we were imploding in pain and resentment. We knew we were self-destructing, but it hurt too much to really care. Make a mental list of all the ugly, poisonous, bitterness-spawning, trust-crushing, love-destroying problems that young married couples face. Use your imagination and don't hold back. We lived that lousy list.

And then God intervened and overwhelmed us with his great love and mercy. He turned our heart toward him and gave us new life. He healed us, individually and together, and he beautifully restored our marriage and our very lives. He changed everything, and gave us the only real hope there is. If you're curious about how God transformed our lives (and how He can transform yours), please read our testimony on [The Dad Story Project](#) website.

## How the stories first saw the light of day

These stories first appeared as columns in my local hometown newspaper [The Bridgton News](#). I started the column in 2006, and it's still going strong today. And I am very grateful to my editors for graciously letting me republish some of the stories here.

I write about a lot of things in my column, but one of the common themes has always been my family, especially my relationships with my wife and children.

Growing up alongside my children has been the greatest privilege of my life, and I enjoy writing about the delights and successes and joys and laughter, and even the challenges and frustrations and failures and tears that go along with doing this thing called "dad" — one of the top three most important jobs a man will ever have. And now I'm moving into the grandpa years, which is both tremendously exciting, and sure to provide me with literary fodder well into the future.

For fifty-five years I've awakened each day as a son. Each morning for the last three decades I've climbed out of bed and stepped into the shoes of a father. These stories are about all those days.

## The birth of The Dad Story Project

**CAN YOU BE WITH ME?** is **Volume III** in a series of what I expect to be at least five books. The first book, **THE DAY WE BLEW UP THE CAT — And other stories from a normal childhood**, was released on December 29, 2014, and was extremely well received. You can find it here on [Amazon](#). The second book, **THE TUG OF THE STRING — Stories about staying connected**, was released in early September 2015, and you can find it [here](#).

These books form the core of a ministry called [The Dad Story Project](#) (TDSP). The premise behind TDSP is simple: encouraging fathers through storytelling. If you pause and think about it, stories are the bricks in the building of our lives, our string of days, each day layered upon the one before. Some of the most powerful things in the world are stories. So, I prime the pump with some of my newspaper essays, but the heart of TDSP will be stories submitted by others: fathers mostly, but kids and moms and wives and grandparents will contribute, too — anyone with a positive, encouraging story about the wonder of childhood and fatherhood and the things we do to help each other grow up. My hope and great expectation is that TDSP will morph into a giant, collaborative, interactive movement, a vast community of people with just a single goal: let's learn from each other how to do this thing called "dad."

"Yeah, so who died and made you the world's expert on all things dad-ness?" I hear some of you asking. Hey, I never made that claim. (But I do have an enormous Father's Day card in my office from my then 20-year-old daughter that says pretty much that.) And while the essays in my books are typically happy and positive, that's because I want this series to be encouraging and affirming and hopeful. I didn't do the dad thing perfectly; I bumbled my way through like everyone else. But God was gracious and I did survive (and so did my wife and kids); and we love all each other more in spite of our own stumbles. And I hope that's enough. Please visit [The Dad Story Project](#) website to find out more — and then write your own story and join the movement!

If you would like to send me a story of your own, [click this](#)!

### **Are all the stories true?**

Absolutely...except for the ones that are ridiculous. Seriously, yes, all the stories about me and my family are true. My childhood, my kids, my wife, our lives. Just how it happened. Pretty much. Occasionally I'll squish the timing a little to fit everything in, or rearrange things to make a point more clearly — but you won't notice. And I may take small real event and let my imagination run away with it to see where it will go; but such flights of allegorical fancy will be obvious. And the chronology may seem weird now and again, as if tomorrow showed up late for yesterday, but you know what, being a father and a son at the same time sometimes feels like that. To help keep track, just remember that you're reading the stuff *now*.

**Note:** *publication dates are for columns that first appeared in The Bridgton News, unless otherwise specified.*

## **Praise for: *The Day We Blew up the Cat: And other stories from a normal childhood***

*I am generally an emotionally level guy, but I have found myself laughing out loud to my wife's bewilderment at Peter's slightly-embellished accounts the often hilarious life of a father. But these stories are not merely written to entertain. The astute reader will catch nuggets of wisdom that crystalize profound fatherhood insights. And fathers may be able to portray their enjoyable time reading this book as an investment in parenting. — Off 2 Antigo*

*What a wonderful and delightful set of short stories, essays, insights... I am looking for the correct word or phrase to describe something that simply touches your heart and delights your soul. — Frank H.*

*Peter Lewis has an extremely engaging style of writing that allows the reader to feel what he feels and want the same type of relationship with one's own children. He is funny, yet to the point, in his desire to encourage the reader to cherish every moment with his children and make stories of his own. Most importantly Peter grounds all of this in the grace of God. Throughout one is not put off by him as though he is puffing himself up, but rather one sees his genuine humility and dependence on The Lord to be the father you see in his stories. He loves God and instills that love in all that he does. — Renee D.*

*These stories already resonate with me as a dad and I count myself among the "sappy fathers" out there. It is comforting to read these accounts and know I am not alone. — Christopher W.*

*I opened the book and was unable to put it down, until I reached a story with a title that I felt may cause me to weep. I couldn't wait to pick the book up again even with the threat of tears as a mild deterrent and ended up finishing the book after the second sitting (yes I did shed a tear or two). The stories are heartwarming, funny, encouraging, convicting, and uplifting. The book left me impatient... I don't want to wait for the next book to come out! — Jason B.*

*I handed the book over to my wife without much explanation other than "read this" and I got in trouble for not warning her that she needed to have some tissues at hand. — at\_Brown*

*Upon reading the very last page my 8-year-old son came down the stairs before 6am. He needed me. Tears immediately flowed as I took care of him. We then enjoyed a cup of coffee together. Shhh don't tell mommy. — Don C.*

## **Another thing before we get started...**

Although the stories in these books are primarily about my kids and me growing up together, you will also hear about my childhood, my dad and mom, and even the occasional odd grandparent. I look backward and forward and occasionally sideways, and while I will most often write from the viewpoint of a father, I am also a son and a grandson and a husband, and those roles and perspectives have helped shape me into the man I am today; so I write about those things, too.



## **A final request**

If you enjoy any of my books, please visit their pages on Amazon and consider writing a review or two (or three). Here is the link to the [exploding cat book](#), and here is the link to [the kite book](#).

## Preface to Volume III

*"Can you be with me?"*

How many times have I heard some variation of that theme pour from the lips of my children? When you're 5 or 9 or 19, life really can be this simple (although at 19 it may involve large sums of money or cars, or probably both).

I once heard a pastor say, "If you give a child your time, you give them your heart." He wasn't the first person to say this, of course, because this sentiment has been around ever since God invented the family.

Time. That's all your kids want. Time is their currency. We are often trapped into thinking they want stuff, but they really just want us. In this, the third book in **The Dad Story Project** book series, I've chosen another fifteen stories, this time based on the common denominator of time. Sweet, simple, precious time. A birthday, a bathing suit, a day out on the boat, a porch railing, an evening on the couch. On the surface it's easy for us to dismiss events like these because they don't seem very substantive. In fact, we may view some of the things depicted in these stories as so familiar and tedious as to be annoying, a colossal waste of time.

*"Fill your life with stuff like this? Seriously?"*

Yes, fill your life with stuff like this — because in the end, this is the stuff that really matters. Giving time is one of the greatest sacrifices a parent can make,

So, sit back and relax and prepare yourself to read about not very much. A dad, a mom, some kids, and a bunch of ordinary days and ordinary hours and ordinary stuff going on. But as it turns out, there is nothing ordinary about ordinary.



# Foreword

**By John Finch**

Founder of [The Father Effect](#), [The Father Effect Movie](#), and [EncouragingDads.com](#).



It was only a few years ago when I came to understand just how big an impact I had on my kids. I wish I had discovered it long before then. I was 41 years old with three daughters and had spent 30 years fatherless, trying to figure life out on my own. The catalyst for the change in me was simply forgiveness. God showed it to me and I found it for my dad, who when I was 11 years old, had killed himself. So, it's only been over the last six years that I have really become in tune with God's will for me as a father. Having said this, I wished I would have found Peter and his writings then to help me along the journey. I hope and pray Peter's stories will be read by millions of fathers, both young and old, so fathers will understand the true calling on their lives. A father's greatest work and ministry is the one in his home with his wife and kids. I believe, just like me a few years ago, most dads have no real feel for how they influence their kids and the generations that come after them. What Peter is doing is vital in helping every dad impact his relationships with his kids in a very positive and encouraging way. I know Peter's books will impact many because of the way in which he tells the stories. He shares stories that are very easy to read and inspire everyone who reads them to be a better father. Peter writes in such an intimate and comforting way, helping us all understand the significant influence we have on our kids along the journey of fatherhood. I love reading his stories because they are great reminders of just how important our roles as fathers are in the lives of our kids. Please share Peter's stories so that fathers all over the world will understand what it means to be great dad.

## Zero sum game, not

*(June 7, 2015)*

According to Wikipedia, a zero-sum game is a “mathematical representation of a situation in which each participant’s gain (or loss) of utility [measure of preference] is exactly balanced by the losses (or gains) of the utility of the other participants.” This concept is useful in both game and economic theory, where, in layman’s terms, it really means “everyone breaks even, but no one wins.” Some might even apply it to parenting.

A few weeks ago my son Jeremiah asked me to “help” him with an “experiment” he had concocted. He’s an engineer by bent, education, and profession, and as his experience and training has increased over the years, so has the level of sophistication of his ideas. “Schemes” might be a better word.

Without going into details (let’s avoid getting lawyers involved, shall we), Jeremiah wanted to see if a battery containment vessel he had built for his submarine would implode if put under enough pressure. In order to exert the necessary calculated force (he mentioned something about needing to exceed the “working load,” something I try never to do), we either needed to rent several elephants, or find a really deep body of water. Enter Sebago Lake, a 316-foot-deep lake in southern Maine.

Like many good ideas, this one was really simple. And, like many simple ideas, it ended up complex. As Norman Maclean wrote in his classic nonfiction tragedy, *Young Men and Fire*, “It was a good plan, except that it did not allow for the wit of the universe and the mental lapses of man.”

Out in the middle of our bobbing sea one cold day we sent said sealed container down into the blue depths of the big lake, weighed down by random hunks of steel and tethered to Jeremiah’s pontoon boat with a thin line. Down 250 feet, up 250 feet. Imploded or not imploded. Failure or success. Dead easy. Except that once down, we couldn’t raise the container the barest inch. Yanking as we might. Two strong men, slightly confused.

“Missed a contingency” one of us might have said.

Bottom line: never send a length of parachute cord to do a cable’s job.

In the end, we left the container and its trailing cord behind, buoyed by a submerged personal floatation device and tagged on Jeremiah’s GPS, and headed back to shore to think things over. Level thinking sometimes requires level ground.

After we loaded the boat back on the trailer we spent a few minutes scratching our heads about how to salvage the experiment. The container wasn’t worth anything, but there are laws against leaving stuff underwater, plus it was just the principle of the thing. Eventually Jeremiah looked at me and smiled, “Gosh, dad, we’ll have so much fun trying to get it back!”

In a couple of days, I got an emailed video of the contraption he’d designed to send down the parachute cord to retrieve the container. It was extremely clever, and appeared to have been cobbled together out of old pinball machine parts and a pair of barn door hinges

Back on the boat the GPS led us precisely to the spot of the wreck, and we spent several happy hours scuba diving and rigging stuff and creating three-to-one hauling systems; and then we sent the contraption down the line and, and hurray, it captured the lost container just like in the video; and then we pulled really hard for a long time, tripping over each other and working out the kinks in the system

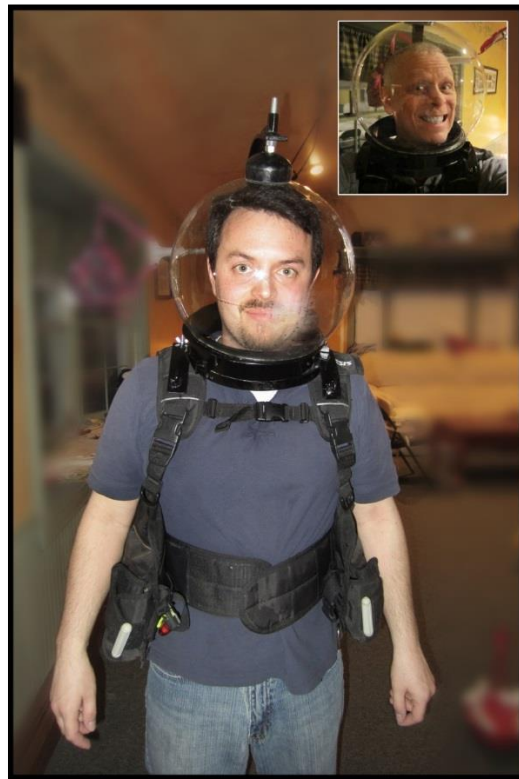
(and for one 20-minute period both of us becoming incredibly confused), and lo and behold, inch by inch, up she came. And with one final heave everything was back up on the boat, dripping, and we were exhausted and wet and cold and strangely happy.

As we headed home with our prize I got to thinking about what we'd ultimately accomplished: nothing. Over two days we'd lost a big section of PVC pipe and some bolts and hunks of steel at the bottom of a lake, and then we got it all back. We ended up with what we started with (minus several gallons of fuel). It was an exercise in futility. Utterly pointless.

Yet two days with my son in the middle of one of Maine's most beautiful lakes. Two goofy afternoons laughing and figuring stuff out and yanking on things and giving each other that "What in the world were you thinking?" look. Getting wet and cold and tired and hungry. Two husbands, two fathers, two friends, so busy yet squeezing out time together. Accomplishing nothing.

Experts would call this a classic example of a zero-sum game. And they'd be so wrong.

*My son and I trying on one of his underwater "ideas"  
in the safety of his living room.*



# The six-hour bathing suit

(July 20, 2010)

Us men, we don't shop — we hunt.

We identify the quarry (the need), find out where it lives (which store), stalk it (which aisle), kill it (with plastic), and drag it home. It's surgical: quick, efficient, precise, and without distractions. A guy is discerning and goal-oriented; he doesn't go out on a ten-minute hunt for a pound of deck screws and come back six hours later lugging a lawn ornament, two throw pillows, and a pairs of impractical shoes.

Some women, on the other hand (I know, I know, I'm in trouble already), work the system backwards — they're opportunistic gatherers. They take their loaded gun (e.g., Visa), and wander around from field to thicket to forest (store to store to store), until they find something they need (which "jumped out" at them) and then they buy it (plus a few other things which they might actually need).

I live with two women (wife, daughter) who buck the gender stereotype — they're hunters, not gatherers. This makes me happy.

Several years ago, my daughter (13 at the time) and I went out to buy (stalk and kill) a new bathing suit for her. Our time and budget were both tight, and we were constrained by certain modesty standards which we all agreed upon (e.g., no bikinis, no provocative words or images).

We thought this would be fast and easy and started with two local shops. Nope, and nope. Okay, this was going to be a bit of an adventure, so we drove for a half hour to a bigger town with a strip of shops and hit two stores with initials (J.C., T.J.). More selection, more disappointment. Everything was either too skimpy (sold by the square inch), the wrong size ("Slender? Dad, look at me; I'm a twig.") too expensive, or inappropriate (pictures of lips in certain places, words followed by exclamation points — my daughter was not going to wear a bathing suit with "Yummy!" splashed across the front).

After a quick stop to graze some fast food, we went to scout our prey in a different part of the forest (a mall), about an hour farther away. We found ourselves in the home range of some big box stores with lots of game to choose from, but nothing that would work. It was getting late. We ran from store to store but to no avail, and finally wound up at Macy's. As we frantically flicked hangers along the racks, a voice came over the speakers advising us shoppers (hunters) that the store would close in ten minutes.

Then my daughter shrieked gleefully and I saw her arms outstretched, a hanger laden with brightly colored fabric in each hand. I looked at the two pieces and scowled. "It's a tankini, Dad, it's okay," Amanda shouted. "No bad words? No nasty pictures?" I asked. "Nope, it's good, and I really like it," she said. "But it's forty-six dollars," she added. "I don't even care," I yelled, running toward her and reaching for my wallet.

Halfway there, I saw her look at the tag on each hanger and then her arms slumped to her sides and her chin dropped. "Never mind," she said. "Each *piece* is forty-six dollars."

And there our hunt ended as a kind lady locked the door behind us. Six hours, half a tank of gas, and two Happy Meals after we had started, we were coming home empty-handed — there was no tankini triumphantly strapped across the hood of our faux Land Rover.

The ride home started off quiet, but then a happy little banter began, each of us telling our version of the crazy afternoon and how silly we must have looked running all over the place, asking clerks for directions, holding up things and yelling back and forth, “This one?” or “Do you like this? No? Me neither.”

“Oh Mandy, I loved being with you today,” I said as we turned down our road, and then my daughter leaned over and kissed me on the cheek.

Our hunt hadn’t been surgical; it hadn’t been fast and efficient; it hadn’t even been successful — but after six hours of wandering around, we both got what we needed: Amanda needed an afternoon with her dad, and I needed that kiss.

# Why don't we live now?

*(October 14, 2010)*

While in my early 20s, I inherited a gorgeous antique bedroom set from my grandmother. Purchased just after the Great War, the five walnut pieces were brown and heavy and ornate, adorned with flutes and scrolls and marquetry, laced with cubbies and hidden drawers. As a child, when we visited, I slept in that high upper room where this wonderful furniture lived and dreamed of knights and castles and falcons alighting on my outstretched arms. A few years later, afraid of trashing the stuff while lugging it from apartment to apartment, and in need of a few hundred bucks, my young wife and I sold it all.

Last week I heard a man on the radio speaking to husbands and fathers, pleading with them to stop "pouring every last drop of energy into being the big man, to building a business, or making money, or becoming important." I could hear the emotion in his voice, the passion; focus on your children, your wife, your friends, he told us. And then he said something that made me stop what I was doing, sit back, and really think: "Why not live now, like you will hope you had lived?"

There, with just eleven words, the speaker took the present, the future, and the past, wrapped them all around my heart, and squeezed.

And the first thing I thought about was how I'd bartered away all that classy old furniture just to buy groceries and gas. I squeezed my eyes shut and saw the old room in my grandparents' grand home, and I remembered being small and the magic of summer afternoons spent with my imagination among all that dark wood. I never should have sold all that stuff, I thought; I'm sure all we did was pay bills with the money — and bills I still got.

And then I realized that I was the guy the man on the radio was talking to. Forget the furniture, the bills, he'd told me. Redeem the time: it's the people, stupid.

It's a good idea every once in a while to peer into your own rearview mirror — the one that looks back over your string of days — to see if the now that was is the now it could have been, the now that you had hoped for.

I thought of my son, now grown and married and living an hour away, and how he and I had spent an afternoon together last week, me holding a flashlight while he tinkered with the wiring on his houseboat. And how he told me stories of working as an engineer in the Gulf of Mexico; and how he and his wife were thinking of going on a mission trip to Russia to work with orphans.

And then I thought of my daughter, so far away at college, and how she had called me one recent night just to talk, and so I'd flopped on the couch and said things like "Oh, really" and "Hmm" and "No kidding?" and "How cool is that?" for an hour while she chatted on about this and that and the other thing as I drifted half off to sleep.

And then I thought of my wife, the only real girlfriend I'd ever had, and how we'd managed to stay in love for three decades while throwing our hearts into our kids, and how last Saturday night we slow-danced in the kitchen to some sentimental Dolly Parton song on the radio while the eggplant parmesan overcooked in the oven.

Somewhere, that old furniture set is warming up someone else's guest room, triggering little imaginations as tiny fingers trace the scrollwork and explore the drawers and cubbies. Perhaps the



parents and grandparents are in the doorway, smiling, watching the children, seeing the wonderful now that is being lived just as it should be.

Life is all about people. Everything else is just stuff. I have no regrets.

# A slingshot in Nebraska

*(October 1, 2015)*

I don't know whose idea it was to run Nebraska east to west, but they would have had second thoughts if they'd been stuffed with my dad and I inside the dusty cab of his '68 Chevy pickup in the blistering hot August of 1972, bucking across the heart of America along I-80 on our way to the glorious mountains of Colorado. Nebraska is just so long run lengthwise like that.

It was my twelfth summer and Gerald Ford was president and gas cost fifty-nine cents a gallon. The latter two of those things mattered to my dad, but the only thing that mattered to me was those distant Rocky Mountains and the streams that tumbled out of them; streams that my little mind imagined were just brimming with big trout, each one finning patiently in the frigid current and waiting for my well-presented imitation fly.

But here we were stuck in Nebraska at 55 mph, and Nebraska wasn't much better than Iowa, which was yesterday, and baking in that hot sun and staring out the window at endless rows of corn this little kid from Connecticut started to doubt Colorado was real and worried maybe this whole dream fishing trip thing was just hot punishment for not cleaning his room.

We stopped in North Platte so my dad could see the railroad station, which he had last visited on a troop train during WWII on his way to the Philippines where he would get malaria and sleep lightly because the enemy was sneaking around in the jungle with knives.

While in that little prairie town we happened upon a magical old hardware store — my father flits around hardware stores as a moth flits around a barn floodlight. Dark and brooding and wonderful, with creaky floors and aisles rimmed with stacks of wonderful stuff right to the ceiling. I headed for the small fishing and camping section while dad roamed in search of an oil filter. And there I found it: the world's most amazing slingshot. It was called a Wrist Rocket, and I immediately fell for the hype on the packaging.

My attempts at making homemade slingshots were always somehow disappointing, inaccurate, and hurt my wrist — the whole Y-shaped-stick-and-rubber-bands thing; but this engineering marvel promised to be the sling of my dreams. I imagined soda cans crumpling and springing up from stumps as if blasted by a bazooka. I couldn't take my eyes off it, but eventually I heard my dad's shouts bouncing off the towering rafters of the old store and so I ran toward him and when I found him I began to chatter on about the Wrist Rocket. But Colorado was just 80 miles away, he said, and he had his oil filter and his sights set on a mountain sunset; and so he steered my scrawny shoulders with his big hands out of the store and toward the truck, despite my scuffing sneakers and pleading complaints.

And so westward we chugged, the interstate stretching ahead, a ribbon of shimmering black leading to the hoped-for purple mountains of the true west, even though I was quite sure they weren't there...and I couldn't get that magical slingshot out of my head. I was quiet and pouty and I slumped against the door and when my dad asked me if anything was bothering me I shrugged and said, "I just wish I could have shown that slingshot to you. It was so neat, Dad."

That old Chevy had no air conditioning and even with the windows rolled down the heat just pumped in in waves and the endless road hummed underneath us and soon I drifted off into a sad, sweaty sleep, my shoulder bumping against the doorpost.

I awoke as I heard and felt dad downshift, the old truck growling and rumbling and leaning in a long arc down around an exit ramp. The centrifugal force tipped me back upright and as I looked out the bug-streaked windshield I didn't quite understand what was going on. The sun seemed like it was on the wrong side of the truck now and the town we were coming into looked oddly familiar. My first thought was that Colorado looked just like Nebraska and that Nebraska looked an awful lot like Iowa and that all these western towns were just copies of each other and I had so wished for more. After a few turns down side streets my dad crunched the truck to a stop in the gravel in front of an old hardware store that looked just like the one we'd left an hour before.

Then I knew. Can still see dad smiling. Can still feel his hands on my shoulder as dad steered me back up the front steps and held open the big door.

# You just don't have time

*(March 6, 2012)*

The problem with being a dad is that you don't get any practice or a head start. Three days after my son came squiggling into the world I realized that a dad is born on the same day as his first child and that I was already behind. I've been trying to catch up ever since.

Back in February my pastor asked me to speak at church at the end of March. We were in the third chapter of Colossians so I chose to focus on verse 21: "Fathers, do not exasperate your children, so that they will not lose heart." This was an easy assignment for me because being a father has been the greatest privilege of my life and encouraging men in this pivotal role comes as naturally to me as breathing or cheering on the Patriots.

To prepare for my talk, I dug all over both testaments and found lots of heartening scriptures and helpful cross-references. I decided that after briefly exploring the theology of dad-hood, I wanted to give the crowd something they could carry away in their hands, practical, simple, everyday stuff that would help dads (and moms) build their boys and girls into fine men and woman. And so, inspired by both the Word and nearly three decades of (often stumbling ) experience, I built a list: know God, show your dependence on Him, study our user's manual (the Bible), pray with your kids, ask for forgiveness and forgive, be faithful and generous, focus on people instead of stuff, give your time sacrificially, say "I love you" (a lot), hug constantly, write encouraging notes, give your children responsibility and then trust them, discipline them properly and with abundant love, be sensitive (guys, it's okay to cry), say yes whenever possible (even when it inconveniences you), have high expectations, fill your home with laughter, and finally, dads show your affection for your wife right in front of your children (even if it makes them squirm and squeal).

It seemed a fine list, but I wanted to end by lighting a fire under the dads, to help them to rise up and commit to being the best fathers possible, to bolster their courage and resolve, to infuse a sense of urgency into this, their highest earthly calling. I struggled with this until I found a snapshot of my son that I'd taken back in 1989. As I looked at the simple image of a little boy riding his bike down a dirt road I realized what I'd left off my list: the fleeting nature of time.

And so, at the end of my talk I put the image up on the screen. I told the audience how much I loved my son, how proud I was to be his dad: I told them about his life now (an engineer, married, living just an hour away and commuting to Brazil each month for work), and how he had been my best friend then and still was today. And then, choking back the tears that I knew would come, I tried to explain the almost unbearable mystery of that old photograph, that though my boy was 27 now, I was certain that I had taken the picture only three weeks before.

Fathers, please do your job well — you just don't have time.



# Never too late for a first date

*(July 3, 2011)*

The man hadn't had a date since 1979. Actually, he'd never had a date. As a gangly, height-challenged, pimple-ridden, poorly dressed teenager with goofy hair and bad teeth, he'd rarely even talked to an actual girl. Never called one on the phone to stutter about Saturday night, never been to a prom, never leaned against a high-school locker and mentioned pizza and a movie in the same breath, never sat at said (unattended) movie and pretended to stretch so he could drape his skinny arm over a brunette-splashed shoulder. Even back in '79, when he'd met his first wife at college, they'd just fallen into it — and she'd done all the work (the asking), and all he had to do was mumble, "Gosh, okay." He was, in the lingo of the day, a total dweeb.

So, thirty-two years later, when the combination of a girl and the girl's favorite folk singer playing at the local playhouse occurred simultaneously, the man was impressed that he had the courage to ask, and a little surprised that the girl said, "Yes!"

He'd known her for many years, since she was just a little girl, in fact. And she was still just a girl, at least compared to him — so many years younger that he'd have some explaining to do if cornered.

He was still gangly and not very tall, but at least the pimples were gone, the teeth had been fixed, and the goofy hair was just a memory (actually, hair of any sort was a fading concept). Alas, he could still barely dress himself. Once a dweeb, always a dweeb.

Despite his shortcomings, the man prepared diligently for the big night. He showered and shaved, put on a pair of clean pants that actually fit, found a nice shirt that wasn't too wrinkled, and wrapped his best Winnie-the-Pooh tie around his neck. Deodorant and a pair of flip-flops completed the ensemble. He even flossed.

Decked out thusly, the man commenced pacing back and forth in his kitchen until the appointed hour. And then there she was, walking right in the door: tall, beautiful, brunette, confident, smiling, a college student just finished with her shift at the local ice cream shop, dressed to the nines and ready to go.

Well, the date was wonderful. A swell time. Guy and gal hitting it off perfectly. He held doors open for her and she walked right through. She laughed at his jokes and he actually listened to her when she talked. They ran into a few people that the man knew, but he was prepared, and it seemed effortless the way he introduced his very young companion. His friends smiled and said nice things and whispered "What an adorable couple" under their breath. The man and his date had good seats in the balcony but he didn't do the arm-stretch-shoulder-drape trick because it just seemed wrong. But that was fine; just sitting next to such a winsome thing for two hours was a real treat. He felt like he'd known her all her life.

When the folk singer (who was great, by the way) had strummed through his encore and the applause had died away, the man and the girl walked out into the fragrant spring night and he drove her straight home. It was 11:30 when they got there and the house was dark (her mom hadn't even waited up for them). Totally ready for that awkward first-date moment on the front step, the man thanked the girl for a lovely evening, kissed her on the cheek, and told her she was a blessing from God and that he

loved her so much he could hardly stand it — it seemed the most natural thing in the world. The girl hugged the man, said she loved him too, and then she went inside and up to her room to go to bed.

The man quietly followed his date up the stairs, then slipped into her mother's bedroom, put on his pajamas, and slid carefully between the covers. As he lay smiling, staring toward the dark ceiling and replaying each moment of the night, the girl's mother roused briefly, turned toward him, and planted a big kiss right on his lips. "I hope you had a wonderful date with your daughter," she whispered. Then his first wife put her head on his shoulder and fell peacefully back to sleep.

# A tale of two turtles

*(July 18, 2011)*

From a strictly herpetological standpoint, our family has always been a bit odd: snakes, lizards, turtles, anything from the order crocodilian, well, we just love them. “All things Reptilian!” is our rallying cry (at least for three out of four of us — the lady of the house, the sensible one, the children’s mother and my wife, is merely tolerant of the scaly, the wriggly, or the carapaced).

It began with my childhood, and my mother’s admonition that the snakes we found in our garden were, “beautiful and fascinating, with skin like living velvet, not at all slimy. Here Peter, now hold him gently...” And, despite the popular phobia, Mom was right; hence began a fury of collecting that continued right into my own children’s young years. At one point, my son (when he was about 10) had twenty-eight assorted snakes living in aquariums stacked all over his bedroom, and I clearly remember the day when I heard my daughter kicking at the back door and yelling, “Quick, let me in!” — kicking because she had a writhing snake in each hand and couldn’t open the door herself.

When my son reached adolescence, the fascination became turtles, especially snapping turtles, and the bigger the better. Many summer nights, father and son (and often daughter) were spent out in the boat, cruising the weedy shallows of the local lakes on the lookout for snappers, armed with root beer, bags of chips, three-million-candlepower spotlights, huge nets, and wooden crates reinforced with rebar. Family bonding at its finest, and completely legal (if slightly redneck).

One fine summer day I was returning from work when I spied a mid-sized snapper crossing the road. Knowing that it would just make my son’s day, I pulled over, grabbed the hissing reptile by its stout tail, and heaved him onto the floor of my car in front of the passenger seat — the whole operation took barely 30 seconds and I was downright proud of my courage and deft.

Shifting thorough the gears, I had just gained fourth and was reaching for the radio dial when I heard a distinctive heavy clunk. My first thought was the transmission, until I felt something damp and coarse rasp against my sandal-shod right foot. And there my carapaced friend was, underneath the pedals and thrashing about, clicking his beak wickedly and rasping and hoping for blood. Well, if you’ve ever tried to drive a car with one foot out the window and the other in the glove box, you can just imagine my ensuing difficulty. I couldn’t reach the clutch or the brake; I could only steer, work the emergency brake, and scream as I coasted toward the breakdown lane, the engine straining and complaining and sputtering until it finally died. At which point I stuck both feet through the driver’s window and yanked myself out like a racecar driver. Mister snapper was summarily dumped in the trunk, where he hissed again and gave me a savage stare. When I got home and popped the trunk, my son was impressed. “Hmm, nice one Dad,” he exclaimed. “And sorry about your golf clubs.”

On another day, my son skidded his truck (towing his boat) to a stop in front of the house and ran in yelling, “Dad! Dad! You won’t believe how big this one is!” Out into the dooryard we all poured (sans Mom), only to find nothing in the boat but a splintered paddle. “He was in there, Dad,” the exasperated boy exclaimed; thence into the truck we three jumped (father, son, daughter), squealing tires and spinning gravel off onto the lawn as we raced back toward the lake, shortly finding two young girls, screaming and running and pointing frantically behind them toward something huge and black in the breakdown lane — forty-three pounds of lacerated, hissing malevolence.

We're all grownups now, leading mature (if slightly boring) lives as respectable members of society. There is nary a scaly creature in the house. As a father looking back on his role as a nurturer of children, I think of our reptilian years as the good old days, precious times spent instilling values, building trust, demonstrating the rewards of hard work and diligence, and leaping around in a boat late at night trying to avoid getting our toes snapped off. My wife says we were all just all nuts.



## Amidst a downpour of mallards

*(June 17, 2012)*

I called home at the end of a workday last week and my youngest daughter answered the phone.

"Hi, Dad!" she said, cheerfully.

"Hi Sweetie, what's up for tonight?" I asked.

She told me that Mom was at work and afterward she'd be going to her ladies' Bible study.

"So you're going to be home all by yourself?"

"Yup, home alone."

Suddenly my plans for getting my oil changed and doing some errands and then going for a long evening trail run after work didn't seem very important anymore.

"Hey, do you want to do nothing together tonight? Like just hang out at the house and eat stupid food and watch movies? Just you and me?" I asked.

"Yeah, that'd be great!" she said.

And so we would have ourselves a daddy-daughter date and I got in my car and rushed straight home and screeched the car into the garage and then jumped out and ran into the house and there was my girl, waiting right in front of the door when I yanked it open.

"Hey, if this is going to be the full couch-potato deal," she said, rocking up on her tip-toes, "then can we go get Chinese takeout?"

And so it was back into the car for a quick spin into the village with all the windows rolled down and the sunroof open to the blue sky to grab a batch of chicken fingers with honey mustard on the side.

Returning home we quickly settled in: shoes and socks off, pillows and blankets procured, blinds pulled down, plates, glasses, forks and napkins arranged, TV remotes located (all four of them), and one cat (out of two) cajoled into joining us. Then we snuggled onto the couch, head-to-foot and all tangled up in each other, comfy against the soft pillows with a cat between us, and hunkered down for the long haul.

Hours later, with the dishes on the floor and the cat long gone, Mom came home and found us dozing off in the near-dark and barely visible under the blankets. Once she figured out that we weren't just a pile of laundry, she smiled.

"Oh, look at you two. Are you bonding?" she asked, giggling sweetly.

"I guess you could call it that," my daughter mumbled, "all I know is that my right leg is completely asleep."

A few nights later, while in the bathtub enjoying a good book, I heard a faint knock followed by an inquisitive small voice and then that same daughter creaked the door slowly open and chucked a hail of small rubber ducks up over the shower curtain to splash crazily all about me.

"I found these in my room and I thought you might be able to use them," she said with obvious delight, and then she darted back out of the bathroom to tell her mom what she had just done.

Lying there with my drippy book, with soap bubbles in my hair and a miniature mallard bobbing happily in the surf next to my left elbow, I thought for about the ten-thousandth time what an honor, privilege, and blessing it was to be a dad, what a treasure my children were, and what a simple delight it was to watch them grow up. And I considered the time, all those fleeting minutes and hours and days and weeks and months and years, all those collective moments that pile up one on top of the other to make a family, and I knew again as I'd always known — that if I could live it all over again I'd fill every second of my life with the small things of Everyday , with the laughter of my children, with spontaneous trips into town, with evenings on the couch under the covers, and with the random silliness of raining ducks.

It goes so fast, the time. Relentless. Almost without pausing. It's now, and then it's gone. My youngest daughter will be gone soon, too — I have her for just nine more precious weeks and then she's off to catch a pre-dawn flight to a faraway city to begin her junior year at college.

*(Note: At the time of publication, Amanda was in her final year at another school getting her second college degree...over-achiever.)*

## Place one small stone . . .

*(July 3, 2008)*

I broke into my first construction site in 1967.

My mom pried back a jagged rent in the chain link fence and ushered me through the prickly gap.

“Go! Go quick! And be quiet!” she whispered, while peering anxiously over her shoulder.

I waited for her on the other side, crouched in a heap of gravel behind a menacing sign that proclaimed the area a “Mandatory Hard Hat Zone!”

I pulled my baseball cap down low and smiled.

I was seven and I laughed in the face of danger

In my right trouser pocket I absentmindedly rubbed a small smooth stone. The stone’s name was Babbitt, and it was because of him that Mom and I were sneaking around between bulldozers on a Saturday morning.

Little boys go after rocks the way cats go after mice — we just can’t keep our hands off them. We throw them, catch them, skip them, hoard them, label them, trade them, lick them (especially the smooth ones from the seashore), occasionally toss them through garage windows — and yes, we even name them.

I don’t know where my stone came from, or why I named him Babbitt, but I was obsessed. He went everywhere with me: I placed him next to my plate at dinner, dunked him in the tub with me, wouldn’t get in the car without him, and tucked him under my pillow at night.

But after a few weeks, my relationship with Babbitt began causing me great inner turmoil — I was desperately afraid I would lose him. I hunched when I walked, my hand jammed in my pocket, and looked side-to-side. I couldn’t spell paranoia, but I sure had it.

“But Mom,” I screeched one day, clutching Babbitt the way a teenager strangles a set of car keys. “What if somebody steals him, or I get mixed up and accidentally throw him into the swamp?”

Eventually my obsession began to border on mental illness. After a particularly manic episode that involved me, Babbitt, our clothes dryer, and a very close call with 110 volts, Mom reached her limit.

She sat me down hard and gave me the look .

I tossed Babbitt back and forth in my lap, not only because I was uptight, but because Babbitt was still too hot to hold onto.

“Peter,” Mom said wearily, touching her fingers to her temple. “Babbitt, like all of us, needs a purpose in life. He has a bigger destiny than your pocket, or my dryer.”

Then she began telling me a story of how Babbitt and I could change the world.

Fast-forward to the construction site.

Near the edge of an enormous open pit, we found a freshly poured concrete footing, still curing. Mom knelt down and I stood up on her knees. She held onto my waist as I took Babbitt out of my pocket.

I was excited, and a bit scared.

I looked up into the sky where the building would be, then down at Babbitt.

“But he’s so little,” I whimpered.

“Big things are just lots of little things one on top of the other,” Mom said. “Babbitt only has to do his small part. By placing one small stone, the two of you will become part of something very big.”

I carefully placed Babbitt on top of the concrete footing, and hopped down. As we slinked back toward the getaway car, I kept glancing over my shoulder.

Looking back on it now, I realize that Mom was, as usual, multi-tasking. She was helping me get over my obsession with one particular rock (hoping, I’m sure, that I would move on to other things: matches, knives, the innards of cats), and she was teaching me about life.

Over the coming months I would always paste my face against the car window as we drove past the construction site. I watched with pride and awe as my office building rose into the sky, and I thought of Babbitt and his small, but crucial, job.

Even today, when life is daunting and a task seems overwhelming, I often think of that old construction site and a sneaky Saturday morning and a rock named Babbitt and the wisdom of my mom.

I can almost hear her say, “Pete, just place one small stone . . .”

# Serendipity in the barn

*(April 26, 2015)*

“Hey dad, can you come out to the barn and help me with something?”

Coming from a normal person, this sort of innocuous request would barely raise your level of consciousness, being on par with such trifling matters such as being asked to loosen the lid off a jar of pickled herring.

No cause for alarm, right? I mean, it couldn't possibly be dangerous, or anything...

But over the last three decades I have learned to respond to insipid requests like this from my son Jeremiah with a combination of excited anticipation and caution. I'm not afraid, exactly, I just have a heightened sense of awareness and a sudden yearning for self-preservation.

It turned out that Jeremiah wanted me to help him lift something. If lifting had been part of the original request, I may have declined, but my son is very clever the way he asks things. For Jeremiah, “lifting something” does not mean “Can you help me carry this box of broken Christmas tree ornaments out to the garage?” In this case, it meant, “Can you help me lift my houseboat?”

So out to the musty old barn we went and we clambered over a bunch of old junk to get to the back of his houseboat and then we just latched on and “one-two-three” heaved upwards. Considering that the houseboat weighs about a ton, and anyone can see that just by looking at it, this was clearly a dumb idea. But blind optimism is always worth a try.

I won't bore you with the details, but they involved a car jack, a stack of old boards, a rickety sawhorse, various hand tools, and a trolling motor. And there was, of course, the requisite crawling around in the dark under the boat and fussing with things, and one of us holding something while the other one pushed or pulled or said, “Gosh no! The other way!” And it's an old barn full of stuff, including squawking swallows and at least one raccoon, and nothing is organized (unless you count piles) and so the grubbiness level rose until there was generic barn grunge hanging all over us and we were pretty filthy.

The high moment of anxiety came when the boat was at its teetering apogee and the jack was straining and things looked precarious and yet at least one of us still needed to be under the boat and then my son uttered the dreaded phrase, “Golly, I'm not sure about this.”

It turns out that reason for this whole lesson in physics and leverage was that Jeremiah needed to remove the trolling motor from under his houseboat to use on the new submersible vehicle that he's building so he can drive around on the bottom of Sebago lake. I wish he'd just said that in the first place.

Anyway, this was his project so I mostly stood around and watched, at the ready to pull or push on something, or dial 911. And soon watching turned into admiration as I marveled at my son's creativity, ingenuity, and energy. He had cobbled the houseboat together from scratch, a sophisticated wonder of engineering and electronics and bungee cords, with all the accoutrements of an expensive RV, and which he operates entirely by remote control from a lawn chair on the roof.

Jeremiah, the engineer by education and trade, now the husband and father, and always my son and best friend. How is it even possible, I wondered, that he could know and do so many things, and so well? It's humbling (and wonderful) when your offspring turn out better than you did.

And then, lying at my feet, I found an old, discarded, crumpled piece of paper. On one side was a drawing that Jeremiah had made when he was five. Our house, with the little stick-boy standing happily in an upstairs window and his name written in awkward block letters. On the back I found a note that I had written, dated December 30, 1989, detailing a conversation I had with my young son.

"Dad, how do they make trains?"

"I don't know." (Too tired to answer)

"Yes you do, you're a big strong guy."

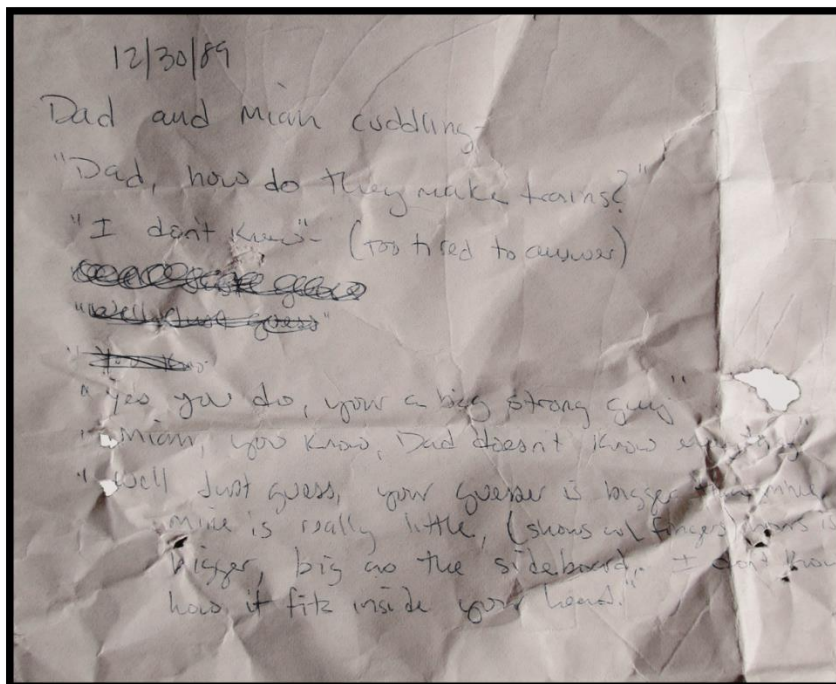
"Miah, you know, dad doesn't know everything."

"Well, guess. Your guesser is bigger than mine. Mine is really little, (shows w/ fingers), yours is bigger...I don't know how it fits inside your head."

My son and I, both certain that the other is more brilliant.

I struggled for a long time how to end this essay, but nothing seemed to work. So I just sat there at my computer, staring at that little serendipitous note in my hands, amazed, proud, happy, and weeping.

*The scrap that I found on the barn floor—26 years later.*



# Daddy, can you be with me?

(September 28, 2009)

Our culture is often dulled by a lack of bluntness. To avoid being offensive, or explicit, or even honest, we soften our world and shield ourselves from clarity by ducking behind barricades of fuzzy rhetoric.

The incompetent aren't *fired* anymore, they're *let go* because they failed to meet proficiency expectations. Surgeries gone bad have *negative outcomes*, the poor are *economically disadvantaged*, and used cars are *previously owned*. A *communication specialist* answers the phone, and lies are nothing more than *disinformation*.

All this vagueness can disrupt your inner ear and make you reach for a *motion discomfort bag*.

In his 1984 book, *Manners from Heaven*, Quentin Crisp describes euphemisms as "secret agents on a delicate mission, they must airily pass by a stinking mess with barely so much as a nod of the head. (They) are unpleasant truths wearing diplomatic cologne."

The euphemism I despise the most is *quality time*. As a young parent, eager to succeed, it seemed a sensible admonition: make certain the moments you spend with your children have real value. But the problem, I discovered, was that the wrong people were judging which moments were valuable.

Often, the pat on the head and the gentle words, "Let's wait until I can give you some quality time," concealed mere convenience. Translation: "My priorities are A, B, and C — you get the leftovers." Now, those leftovers could seem impressive — trips to Disneyland or a ball game, or some future puppy — but the counterfeits rarely passed for the real things.

I read a classified ad once that said, "Teach a boy to fish! Boat and tackle included." I imagined the clever father who wrote it, shook my head, and cried a little.

Both my children used the same phrase with me when they were growing up; they'd tug on my sleeve and say, "Daddy, can you be with me?" That simple. No discussion of quality, just you and me, now, please.

And I listened. And so we'd lie on the ground and watch ants, or play in the rain, or climb a tree, or draw pictures of clouds, or (try to) make cookies, or toss rocks at cans, or chase butterflies, or build snow forts, or just flop on the couch and watch a coyote blow himself up. And when my kids got older we'd build birdhouses, or drive to the lake to see if it was warm enough to swim, or go shopping for books, or pick blueberries, or rearrange their rooms, or just sit and talk.

We didn't stop to calculate the *time/activity quotient*; we just grabbed the kite and went outside. What and where didn't matter much. The who mattered (us), and the when mattered (now) — but if we got those two things right, the quality part would take care of itself.

Now this tended to chop up my days and mess with my schedule, and I often had to put some vital adult task on hold temporarily, such as . . . well, I can't remember exactly right now, but, you know.

One day when I was about fourteen I found my father working intensely on a project in his workshop. I was bored and asked him if we could do something together. Didn't matter what it was. He put his tools down and smiled and we spent the rest of the day whacking chunks of firewood around the perimeter of his property with sledge hammers — a sort of redneck golf I suppose you'd call it. Just a

few weeks ago — thirty-five years after the fact — we laughed about that long-ago day until we had tears in our eyes. “What important thing were you working on in the shop, anyway, Dad?” I asked. “Oh, I have no idea,” he said.

Forgive me for being blunt, but our kids don’t give a hoot about quality time. They just want us, now, please.



# The gift at the door

(November 21, 2013)

On a recent Friday evening, following sketchy directions from a toothless guy at a gas station, I turned a rented sedan onto a quiet street in a small town in western Virginia and began scanning house numbers. When I got close, I flicked the headlights off and drove the last hundred feet in the dark. At the correct driveway, I turned in and let the car coast slowly to a stop on the crunchy gravel. I got out, left the door ajar, stepped quietly up onto the porch and rang the bell.

A beautiful young woman answered wearing sweatpants, a hoodie, and socks. She stared, tipped her head, blinked, and then her eyes got big and she fell into my arms.

"I didn't know what to get you for your birthday," I said through a mouthful of brown curls.

"So you got me you!" my daughter whispered in my ear.

It took Amanda 7,670 days to reach her 21st birthday, which, if you do the math, is just about average. I pondered for weeks what to get her as a gift for this milestone day, but dismissed each idea in turn — cash (too impersonal), shoes (57 pairs is enough already), and a baby rhinoceros (they smell, plus her room at college is pretty small).

Finally, I listened to my heart and realized that I didn't want to give my precious daughter some *thing*; I wanted to be with her, to stand in front of her and hold her face in my hands and tell her how proud I was of the young woman she'd become. So I bought a plane ticket.

There was some pushback about the idea, especially from some of my female friends. "Yuck," said one; and "If my dad showed up on my 21st birthday I'd shoot him," said another; and "Are you sure this is a good idea?" said a third, deeply concerned, her hand on my arm, ready to pull me back from the brink of parental impropriety.

The general fear was spawned by the fact that turning 21 in our culture has a certain social significance — for mostly the wrong reasons, unfortunately — and having a middle-aged guy show up unannounced could certainly spoil a typical twenty-one year-old's evening plans. But for my daughter, the stereotypical first chance at boozing and partying and acting like an utter fool until the wee hours without risking jail time held no such attraction. This is a girl virtually immune to negative peer pressure whose life has been characterized by a nearly unbroken string of wise decisions. In the end, I flew south riding the buoyant encouragement of my wife: "Oh Peter, you should totally do that!"

The next two days were perfect. Amanda drove me around the town and the university campus, pointing to this and that while I just looked at her and smiled, hearing almost none of her words, just delighted to be breathing the same air with her.

We worked out, went trail running high in the Blue Ridge Mountains, and ate pizza and burritos with her many friends. We laughed constantly and flopped exhausted each night in her room, watching movies until we began to doze off. It was just like when we were kids growing up together.

On Sunday morning she was excited to take me to her church. It was a big, energized place, full of young people, and the musicians were many and the music was joyful. I stood next to my daughter and sang my heart out to God, thankful beyond measure.

On the wall of Amanda's room is a poster that she has covered with inspirational quotes and sayings, from famous people, from her friends, and many from the Bible. On Monday morning, while she was rummaging around in the kitchen getting ready for class and I was packing my bags to go home, I found a blank spot near one corner and wrote, *"I love you. I'm praying for you. I trust you. You're safe. I'm listening. — Dad"*

A few minutes later we stood in the driveway, facing each other with our hands intertwined. I prayed for her and then held her for a very long time in my arms. And then we let go and she drove off to class and I pointed my rental car east toward Richmond.

I had trouble driving away from my daughter, and it wasn't because of the glare of the early sun. They just don't make windshield wipers for so many tears.

*Amanda and I after trail-running to the summit of Sharp Top Mountain in the Blue Ridge Mountains in November of 2013. According to hiking websites, the round trip to the top (3 miles with just under 1,000 feet of elevation gain) should take about 2.5 hours. Amanda and I summited in 28 minutes, and while we didn't run down, I suspect we could have easily done the round trip in less than 50 minutes. The family that runs together...*



# Hey, kids, come down from there

*(August 3, 2011)*

I've never been much for titles. I don't have initials after my name, no epaulets dangle from my shoulders, and my children never call me sir. (In fact, when she was going through a particularly weird phase, my daughter Amanda called me "Brush Pile" for several months. Yeah, I didn't get it either.)

The bottom line is that I've just never lived the kind of life that oozed sophistication or begged fawning acclaim. I'm not even particularly aware of my environment or how to act in public: I wear socks with sandals, carry a toothbrush in my pocket, and wear two pairs of glasses at once at the office because I need them both to see my computer screen. (This latter fashion faux-pas — which makes my eyes bug out — often stops co-workers in mid-sentence: "Um...I'm sorry, I just can't talk to you unless you take at least one pair of glasses off.")

I credit this sort of blissful self-unawareness to my mother, who always encouraged silliness and warned me of the stuffy perils of becoming a grownup: "Not worth it. Life's too short," she would say. So, while I'm certain there is a fine line between childlike and childish, I'm just not sure where it is. I mean, here I am at the blisteringly decrepit age of 51, and my wife still says things like, "Honey, please come down from there, you're likely trespassing" when we're out for an evening walk down in the village.

The problem is that the world isn't silly enough. We're all so concerned with how we appear, how others perceive us, what kind of an impression we're making (hence the right clothes, car, spouse, house, etc.) that we've forgotten that everyday life can be whimsical and a little goofy — perhaps is even meant to be. One of the saddest phrases I know is, "Act your age."

We lived in the suburbs for a while when our children were little, and I remember one sweltering summer day when my son (about 11 at the time) and I and a bunch of the neighborhood hoodlums spent the better part of the afternoon in a scruffy overgrown lot, chucking rocks at cans, daring each other to eat grasshoppers, pig-piling ourselves into sweaty heaps, drinking soda and belching parts of the national anthem, and basically just goofing off in the kind of harmless way that will get the attention of passing adults but not incite them to call the cops. When our moms finally called us in for supper, one thuggish boy in overalls sauntered over to my son.

"That big kid's fun, who is he, anyway?" he asked.

"Oh, that's my dad," my son said, smiling.

My son is all grown up now (I know this because he's told me about his 401K statements), but I bet he'd still eat a grasshopper for a quarter.

One of the perils of becoming a grownup is the inevitable disconnect with our children. Just when they need us most, whether to splash around in puddles, climb trees, or just sit quietly and listen to them ("I wonder if maybe boys aren't yucky after all...") we so are so often unavailable: off playing golf, checking the performance of our stock portfolio, or reading the Wall Street Journal. We live as if the big-person things we do really matter when so much is just inane.

My wife and I have recently rolled up our sleeves to help plant a new church in a nearby town, and (for now) we all meet in school gymnasium. A couple of Sunday's ago, while setting up chairs, I noticed

my home-from-college daughter lying on the school stage with her feet on the floor. All I could see were her feet and knees — the rest of her was hidden by the folds of the thick marron curtain that spanned the stage. I went over, sat next to her, bent over backwards and wiggled my torso under the curtain. And there we lay for a good ten minutes, shoulder to shoulder, hip to hip, knee to knee, staring up at the vents and ducts of the dark stage ceiling, talking quietly. Talking about nothing in particular. Just together.

As the time for the service grew nearer, we could hear the muffled commotion of people filling the gym. Gentle voices greeting each other. The soft sounds of hugs. And, when close to us, some polite giggles. “Whose feet are those next to Mandy’s?” we heard a lady’s voice ask. “Oh, that’s her dad,” my wife said. And my daughter smiled.

# My Life in a Tumbling Troupe

*(February 15, 2007)*

A week ago last Tuesday, one of our cats fell down the stairs. Thump, thump, thumpity, bump. Eleven bounces, one bounce for each step. When I first heard the racket, I assumed my 14-year-old daughter had stuffed a toaster into a pillowcase and tossed it off the second floor landing. I dismissed this as just a puberty-thing, until I heard the racket start up again — even hormones wouldn't make her do that twice.

I bolted for the stairs and got to the bottom just as our black and white stray cat, Sergeant Ribs, thumpity-thumped down the last few steps and landed upside down in a heap of fur. (Okay, about the name: "Ribs" because he weighed just four boney pounds when we caught him fishing refried bean cans out of the trash with a coat hanger, and "Sergeant," because he told us he'd been in the army.)

I stared down at Ribs, at that idiotic gap-toothed grin of his, and he stared back up at me. And I swear he winked.

"Oh, for crying out loud, Ribs," I blurted out, as if scolding a toddler, "You're doing this on purpose!" He seemed to wink again.

And all this winking got me thinking of other notorious family tumbles.

The time when I was twelve and on crutches because my leg was full of stitches from running nearly naked through a plate-glass door (you'll find that story in the first book) and I was at home recuperating and I tried to go down the stairs by reaching down a few steps with the crutches and gently swinging out. Halfway through the terrible arc, my good leg pawing at the air, I knew I had made a huge mistake.

The time I fell off a roof while zipped inside a sleeping bag, the hideous laughter of the other Boy Scouts ringing in my ears as I plunged all-trussed-up into the shrubbery.

The time my son tumbled thirty feet out of a tree and landed unscathed in a pile of manure. "Next time, don't let go of the rope," I told him, sternly.

That time with the home-made go-cart with no brakes and lousy steering and me driving in the car behind my son as he piloted the diabolical rig down the long hill and with me yelling encouragement out the car window until we came to the sharp corner where I slowed and turned and he went fast and straight.

I see a pattern developing here and I'm going to let it run.

One of the best father and son collaborative spills occurred one glorious fall day in a parking lot a few blocks south of the Coors brewery outside Denver Colorado. It was that classic cat-and-mouse game where one combatant (my son) rides pell-mell back and forth on a bicycle while the other combatant (me) tries to bean him with a Nerf football. Back and forth, back and forth, miss, near miss, this time wide right, now too high, "Whoa, that was really close," laughing, taunting, fists shaking, and then one magnificent and perfect throw.

He quartered passed me, right to left, legs churning, and I led him perfectly as if shooting at a partridge, launching a tight spiral that vectored right into that small triangular space between his front tire, the fork, and the frame. The Nerf ball wedged. The front tire stopped turning, and my son kept going. It was beautiful.

The bicycle pivoted forward on the front tire, the rear wheel lifting straight up off the pavement then arcing over to westwards. My son, determined to get high style points, kept his position precisely, hands on the handlebars, feet on the pedals, back straight, jaw clenched. Eyes wide open and focused straight ahead, he saw a strange procession of things: the far-off mountains, then a housing development, then grass, sidewalk, and curbing, followed by black asphalt, then the house next door (oddly, upside down now), and finally, accompanied by a great thud, clouds.

Landing flat at on his back, he nailed the dismount, pitching the bike up and off him such that it turned over another 180-degrees, landed back on its wheels (dislodging the Nerf ball), and rolled straight and true across a busy street, missing everything, before stuffing itself face first into a culvert.

The crowd roared. The international panel of judges — in a rare display of unity — all held up placards recording perfect 10s. (The British and French judges, seeing they had agreed, threw their placards in the air, scrambled toward each other, and embraced. Tears ran down their cheeks. “We shouldn’t have waited so long to build the Chunnel,” the Brit sobbed.)

Mere words cannot convey the perfection of this crash — that rare combination of timing, athleticism, foam rubber, pavement, and stupidity that defies the laws of probability and physics and makes emergency room attendants everywhere prepare Exam Room Three. We were truly at the top of our game.

We spent the rest of the afternoon trying to do it again.

## Whispers to an anxious heart

*This story was first published in Focus on the Family magazine in October, 2008. Reprinted with permission.*

I sat at my desk with my fingers poised above the keyboard, the small room bathed in the glow of my blank computer screen. This would be the first draft of a new writing proposal, the beginning of a new hope, a new dream, but my fingers only hung in the air, doubtful, fearful.

I just didn't know how to begin.

In the midst of all of this striving uncertainty, I felt a small tug on my sleeve and heard a small voice.

"Daddy, can you be with me?"

"Oh, sweetheart," I said to my 5-year-old daughter, Amanda, looking down at her and tussling her hair, "I'm just so busy right now."

"Please? I want to show you something."

Amanda wrapped her fingers around my pinky and pulled me out of my chair with the leverage of her smile. Then she towed me out onto the back porch.

It was a hushed afternoon with a hint of rustle in the cottonwoods. Amanda said, "Stand there," and pointed.

She crossed to the other side of the porch, stepped up onto a wooden bench, and holding the back of the bench for balance, stepped up again onto the four-inch railing that shot straight along the edge of the porch.

Clutching the backrest, she placed her feet just so, caught my eye, then held her hands out for balance and looked straight ahead.

"Watch this," she said, eyeing her narrow, six-foot journey.

Nothing happened. She stood with one foot hanging in the air, doubting. Nothing. She stared hard at the railing and bit her lower lip. Still nothing.

Oh, Dad, I'm scared I can't do it."

"Sure you can, Mandy," I said, and walked over and swept her into my arms and set her back down on the seat of the bench.

"Look," I said, pointing to the boards that formed the bench seat. "These boards are exactly the same as the railing, but you can't fall off because there's a board on either side. Now, try it again, right here."

Amanda placed her feet just so, held her hands out for balance and took a step. Then another. And another. She kept her eyes fixed straight ahead, save for one quick glance my way between steps three and four. She began to smile.

"I can do it!" she shouted from the end of the bench. Then she hopped down, ran over to me and hugged my legs.

"Now," she said confidently, pointing again. "Stand back over there."

She climbed back onto the railing above the bench, placed her feet just so, raised her hands out to the sides for balance, looked straight ahead...and didn't move. She looked over to me.

"I need you closer," she whispered.

So I walked over to my daughter and stood beside her.

"Mandy, I know you can do it," I said, looking into her eyes. "You showed me that you can. You're just afraid of the empty space on either side. Keep your eyes straight ahead and your arms out for balance, and put one foot in front of the other."

She nodded. "OK, Daddy."

Then, accompanied by the gentle applause from the rustling cottonwoods, Amanda began to walk along her railing. I stayed right behind her, my arms outstretched just in case, and slowly we walked together. I leaned in close and my lips brushed her hair. "You can do it, Mandy," I whispered. "I'm right here, and I won't let you fall."

As my small words spilled out, I suddenly remembered my glowing computer screen and my unwritten proposal and my fear of the empty space on either side. And as I walked beside my daughter, whispering encouragement in her ear, so too God walked beside me, silently speaking the same things to my anxious heart.



# The stuff in the back of the books

## Thank you for joining me!

I appreciate you hanging with me right to the end. I hope you were encouraged. And there is more to come — I will be publishing the remaining books in **The Dad Story Project** series as quickly as I can. The next book should be out early in 2016. You can track the progress by following me on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Google+](#), and by visiting my website, [thedadstoryproject.com](http://thedadstoryproject.com).

## A final request

If you enjoy any of my books, please visit their pages on Amazon and consider writing a review or two (or three). Here is the link to the [exploding cat book](#), and here is the link to [the kite book](#).

## And a great opportunity!

To all of you out there who are dads or moms or children or grandparents or friends — please tell me your stories! They don't have to be polished or professionally edited, they just have to shed a small beam of beautiful light on this wonderful thing called fatherhood. Go ahead, pour your hearts out. You will find writing and submission guidelines [here](#). Each selected story will be published on [thedadstoryproject.com](http://thedadstoryproject.com) and the very best will be collected and published in more e-Books! Please help me start a movement that celebrates fatherhood and the joys of growing up!

## And a final hope

I hope my stories touch your soul. I hope they make you smile and laugh, maybe shed a tear or two (especially you sappy people, like me...you know who you are), and perhaps even motivate you to write your own stories. But even the best of our stories are **nothing** compared to the story that made all this possible; they're **nothing** compared to the story that makes **everything** possible — that glorious true story of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, living and dying and rising again to satisfy God's perfect justice; and by His great mercy and sacrificial grace giving humanity the settled hope of salvation. Ultimately, this is the only story that matters. The gospel of Christ is the only hope any of us has; and I am not ashamed of that gospel, for it is the saving power of my life, and of the lives of my wife and children, and so many of my friends. You may read a short summary of our family's story of new life and hope and peace and restoration and purpose and astounding joy by visiting The Dad Story Project [website](#). And I pray that God does for you what he has done for us. If you ever have questions, please email me at [speterlewis@gmail.com](mailto:speterlewis@gmail.com).



Photo courtesy [Spirit-Fire](#)