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Accidental Academic,

Deliberate Dad

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IN SEVENTH GRADE CAREER PLANNING CLASS, I HAD TO TAKE one of those psychology tests that ask the same few questions a dozen ways each, as if you forget your answers every few minutes. But as the unpopular oddball, I was clear about schools. Learning was fun, but school was not. Every time the test asked about more education, my answer was none. Tech school? Nope. Master's degree? No, thanks. Ph.D.? What for?

But in high school I changed my mind about education: a sheepskin might be my ticket out of the lumpen middle class. But how? The only thing I was ever any good at was homework. Most subjects were hopeless for someone unable to remember rules. Sports couldn't help someone unable to recall how to move his body the same way twice. But a bad memory mattered less in academics — teachers mistook it for creativity.

I sat through the entrance exam and got junk mail from one engineering school in the South, plus Dartmouth College, a brochure that got me dreaming. When I finished the application form, my parents just laughed. Who in his right mind would send \$50 to a rich East Coast school? I ended up at Brigham Young University, the only place fool enough to foot the bill. My step dad considered college a waste of time: "Why don't you get a job and do something useful?" he asked, but he did drive me fifty miles south to the campus and dropped me off, suitcase in hand.

The place I rented in the international house had seventeen students cooking strange-smelling foods, but I stayed in my room doing homework. My major, Latin American Studies, went fast, with classes like Latin Dance. Two years plus one semester later, the B.A. got me two internships apprenticing with bureaucrats — first in the USDA writing trade policy papers and then for the UN analyzing tariffs for imports like "edible offal" — but no job.

I went back for a master's degree, starting out in economics at Maryland, but dropped out because of health problems. I moved back to BYU part time and finished coursework in communications before getting kicked out. Seeing a draft of my project, the advisor said I didn't understand "the nature of graduate work" and swore he'd never allow me to get the degree. But when he went abroad on sabbatical, another professor alerted me so I could finish. Instead of a job, I ended up with freelance gigs in editing and design, based on two grad-school courses I'd taken.

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Becoming a dad was different. My own family was a put-together mob of thirteen kids, a real yours-mine-ours plus, in my case, theirs. So I longed for what I never had: to be a dad. I liked the din of home life, but wanted a *small* family, I told my wife-to-be, "Maybe just five." She had other ideas: a *big* family with three kids. When the first arrived, I was a stay-at-home dad and soon discovered this rule: Put an adult and a child together, and one of them gets bored. So I changed my mind: one was enough, a dream fulfilled.

Instead we had two more, quick. Friends asked if we knew "where babies come from," but we knew: each came from a birth control method that failed. (I joked that *diaphragm*, *condom*, and *the pill* would make swell nicknames.) I wanted to call my first son Chance (we had also used spermicidal foam on our honeymoon). Instead we named him Joel Sky, the first for something serious, the second for something fun, a flyer for Sky's Christmas Tree Lot.

A few weeks later, my wife conceived a second, disproving the old saw that nursing prevents impregnation (and neither did the spermicidal gel). We named him Andrew West, the first name a serious form for what we preferred (and good thing, too, after Drew Barrymore got famous) and the second to mark our move from the East.

The pill worked best, blocking sperm for a year. Then the third came along, and we named him Matthew Penn, the first name sticking with the Biblical theme and the second in honor of my first published essay. (I can't explain the double t's and n's.) After having three in four years, another dream fulfilled, my wife wanted her tubes tied on the delivery table.



Teaching began as a stopgap during the recession following the late 1970s oil crisis. Our income, pieced together part time, began falling off. But a friend told me Westminster College wanted to create a non-credit workshop on editing and design, an odd combination back when designers went to art school and editors studied English. I got the work and called the course Getting Graphic, clueless about academics.

But with three kids, I needed more than part-time work. Another friend told me an ad in *Editor & Publisher* described me to a T: teaching graphics for an English department in Keene, New Hampshire, not far from my Dartmouth fantasies.

In late June I sent (on green paper) a one-page resume and a cover letter with the sentence, "I'm drying out here in the desert — please take me back East to revive." After the July Fourth weekend, a dean called to ask me for an interview. I flew in and spent the first day puzzled by all the one-on-ones with art and English faculty, but the second day found out I was getting an offer. The dean said he wanted only to be sure I wasn't "swinging from trees."

A few weeks later we were driving back East, our car full of boys in diapers and a U-Haul full of stuff. August found me teaching four sections, two each of Freshman Composition and News Writing. It was my first real job, but I'd never taught a full semester of anything or written news beyond the school paper. It turned our progressive marriage into breadwinner-housewife roles.

The first term I designed a program in graphic arts and the next I began teaching the main course. But I ran through all my lecture notes from Getting Graphic in the first three-hour evening class. When we met years later, one former student said, "There was one great lecture, but after that it was the worst course I ever took."

My years at Keene are a blur of planning (including a Continuing Ed program), prepping, grading, and coping with colleagues and bureaucracy. We bought a house, replaced our car, and settled in,

but I hardly remember my sons except for all the washing (of cloth diapers). Our marriage deteriorated. One stock argument involved summer. Wasn't I supposed to be off, to give her a break from childcare? No, summer was my only chance to write.

By the fourth year I had managed to go to a few small conferences and publish two essays. My wife had managed to lose her patience. We began a trial separation, the boys splitting each week between her home and my new apartment.



Then my dean got a call from his chum Jim Carey, dean at Urbana (who'd read my essay in the *American Scholar*), asking permission to talk to me about a job. Soon the head of journalism called, but I put him off, asking him to send "some literature" that I never found time to read.

He called again. Would I go for an interview? I said no — that I liked my job (but not that the Midwest held no appeal or that I was going through a divorce). He pressed, asking, Why not just take a look — no expectations at all? And by the end of the call I caved.

My Urbana visit involved every possible blunder. I criticized the predecessor in the job. I'd done no homework: "What does the word *ill-ee-nee* mean?" I asked, "It's on all the signs around her" (to demonstrate my powers of observation). "Oh, the *ill-eye-nigh*?" he said: "our mascot." That night I found the venerable Jumers Castle Lodge a muddle of Americana in mismatched paisley — and said so the next morning. They offered me the job anyhow. Driving to the airport, the head proposed a salary, and a professor begged me to consider. I said I'd look at whatever they sent, thinking to put them off.

They took me as a hard bargainer. Within days, a better offer arrived: more money, graduate assistance, and less teaching. I said no again, but they came back with double my salary, one course per semester, new teaching facilities, and more grad assistants.

Faced with that breathtaking offer, I rationalized: The job sounded easy, and with that kind of money I could visit my sons and fly them to Urbana for holidays and summers. I said yes.

And I regretted the decision. After the move, my only time to talk to the boys was at 6 a.m., Central Time. Ever try talking to a child long distance? The conversation survives two sentences. It was a struggle for them, dragged out of bed on a school day. Once a

week I would make small talk with each one in a row, saving up my stories and peppering them with questions about school, play, and, when all else failed, the weather. We were talking more (or I was talking to them more) than ever before, but I wanted them on my lap, not sleepy voices in the dark.

Another option was gifts. One evening I wandered through the boys department at Target, looking for something to send them to cheer me up. When it dawned on me that I didn't even know their sizes, I fled the store in tears. By the holidays I had loaded the house with presents, aiming for quantity and size but mindless of what brands or styles they preferred.

Wanting company, I took them out of school early and sent them back late, demanding a full week for Thanksgiving or two over winter break. But what to do with them after the turkey or gifts?

Summers were worse. The first year my ex-wife and I each drove five hundred miles for the hand-off, but I'd brought only small travel games to fill the nine-hour return. My rental apartment had room only for sleeping bags on foldout beach lounges.

We tried camping once, but I forgot to check the weather, and we had to pack up in pouring rain to return home in the dark. At the apartment complex, we would walk to the pool and I would read on the deck, leaving the boys to splash and dive by themselves. By luck we ended up at the hospital only once, after Matthew banged his head on the concrete edge and bled profusely.

We tried day camp, and only later did the tales of hazing leak out. Too young for his brothers' program, Matthew chose something called Douglas Fun Camp because it had *fun* in the title. After the last day, I asked what he thought. "It was okay," he said, "but why was I the only vanilla and everyone else was chocolate?" At four he had no concept of race, and at thirty-four I had no idea how much race mattered.

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At work I remember a big empty office — no books on the shelves except what textbook publishers had sent. There I sat, wondering what to do. I had figured out how to stretch lecture topics over a semester (before reading Feyerabend's autobiography), but had little teaching to do.

A New York agent wrote to suggest I expand my first essay into a book, but I replied that I'd written all I had to say, and, anyway, I

didn't know how to write a book. I started another essay, this time about newspapers, but it would take five years to see print.

Then a UIUC office asked me to review an internal grant application. Instead of the single, sustained essay like the one I knew how to write, the applicant churned out papers going over the same ground, each citing his previous work and adding a small, incremental idea. Journals had published every one. It looked like what I had to do to keep my job.

Around that time, Dean Carey gave me forms for a Lilly Foundation fellowship, but the topic, academic leadership, seemed dull, and I had no project to propose. That hint was all the academic advice I would ever get from him. I applied instead for a Fulbright to teach (I now knew how) and for a safe bet chose a place nobody wanted to go: Perú. Carey signed the application, but when the award came through, the department refused to let me go. No one else knew how to teach the one required course I taught. Finally the Fulbright Commission suggested I go in the summer. I decided to defy the department, go on my own time, and take my sons. Friends exclaimed, "You're crazy! There are terrorists down there." But I said, "Well, people *do* live there."

The boys were too young to travel alone, and so their mother came along to Cuzco and Machu Picchu, not that far from Shining Path guerrillas. After she left, we returned to Lima, where I worked, and the hired help watched my sons in our Miraflores apartment. They hardly left the fifth floor. We went on one outing to a nearby beach: they swam in the winter surf while I fended off thieves. The country faced shortages, and when we found rice in one store, limit one per customer, each boy bought a kilo to share with my colleagues.

The bombed electrical towers outside Lima left us without power except for an hour each day, when we rushed to cook, clean, bathe the boys, and fill up containers with water. The timing was unpredictable, and so sometimes we just waited. After one sprint while the pump was working, I jumped in the shower and soaped myself up, when the power went out and the water stopped.

Another time I walked home exultant after discovering two hard-to-find luxuries in a small *bodega*: sugar and chocolate. The boys were excited, too, after all day with no television. To fill the time, they had begun inventing fantasy games that scared the Peruvian cook's daughter.

A year later, my colleague wrote to say he'd been in Miraflores and turned down our street, Calle Tarata. But all that remained of our apartment was some concrete dangling from iron re-bars. A bomb had destroyed our building along with the bank on the corner.



Back in Urbana, work relations had soured, and my efforts to socialize flopped: watching the World Series with the journalism faculty was a bad idea for someone ignorant of baseball. I could comment only on the color of the grass, a point I never lived down. Once I offered to get a block of seats at an Illini basketball game, only to learn that everyone else had season tickets.

Colleagues over in the Institute of Communications Research sensed the problem and offered to team up, co-author papers, and get at least something into print. But then the journalism profs considered me a turncoat for fraternizing with “academics.”

Meanwhile, Joel was becoming a rebellious pre-teen, and his mom asked if he could move in with me. I cancelled a conference talk and withdrew from a news industry event, angering colleagues and the dean, but I stayed home with Joel that summer. When he started school, I went back, working overtime to save my job.

He became an academic latchkey child, but instead of going to our apartment, he would visit neighbors. On the first floor, the Owl Lady would give him snacks and get him counting owls. He never found all her collection: ceramics, wood carvings, framed oils and prints, soft goods, and novelties. But other neighbors were grad students who started gossip about my late arrivals home.

At his mostly Black school, Joel got in trouble for mouthing off at teachers and, after relentless teasing, for clobbering a girl half again his size. On a field trip to a local history museum, he got a sliver under his fingernail from an aging handrail. He wouldn't calm down, and the teacher apologized when she called: “It's only a sliver.” I drove him to the ER, where the doctor thought the same, that is until a local anesthetic made it possible to extract the wood fragment reaching to Joel's knuckle: tough kid.

But also a softie. He wanted to see the *Marriage of Figaro*, and my way of resisting was to turn it into a big project. He had to get recordings from the library, compare them, and pick a favorite. He had to follow the Italian libretto with a translation on facing pages.

Then we went, armed with books and sheet music, but I had goofed: the performance was in English.



At work, the mid-probationary review hit me by surprise. In three years I had published nothing. A fundamentalist graduate assistant wrote a complaint about me, her depraved supervisor. After discovering I was gay, I blithely came out to everyone. My sons took it in stride, and my ex-wife's dry comment was, “Well, that explains a lot.” The tenure committee chair now wanted documentation to disprove the student's allegations that I was an unfit professor.

To buy time, colleagues in the Institute encouraged me to apply for a fellowship at Columbia. When it came through, the department head once again said no. That was it. The dean at Syracuse had courted me for a job earlier, but I'd said no. Now I asked: Would he hire me and then let me spend the first year at Columbia? He was delighted for me to fly “the Syracuse banner.”

Joel and I packed up and left Illinois, but he didn't want to live in the big city. After summer, he stayed in New Hampshire. I thought of him as a stay-at-home type, but of course got that wrong.

The fellowship was to write a book, and by coincidence an editor from St. Martin's Press had walked into my office to announce, “I want you as my author.” When she asked what book I'd like to write, I said I could try expanding my essay on newspapers, and she produced a contract.

Andrew, then eleven, decided to come along to New York. We rented an apartment on 116th Street, and I enrolled him in a magnet school for aspiring writers (following my dream, not his). It was near campus, and so I went with him the first day, then left him to his own devices for the twice-a-day, ten-block walk along Broadway. I worked (and dated, to meet the right man).

With his freedom, Andrew ran into trouble by skipping school and making mischief at home. Our huge university flat was a sabbatical rental with parking and a cleaning lady, and I quickly learned New Yorkers would not hear complaints about too much space. It also had hallways long enough for rollerblading, and Andrew discovered he could make dramatic crash landings in the living room. I had to clean each scratch and use a tiny paintbrush to fill the grooves with varnish.

Then came a phone bill he ran up, calling 900 numbers to show off for a friend after school. I got the charges reversed, and the phone company blocked all sex-chat lines. But after we moved out, the landlord returned from sabbatical and called to object to dozens of charges that came on the next bill.

I didn't meet my man, but we enjoyed the city. On weekends we rollerbladed along Riverside Park and explored Manhattan by train. We went for Indian tandoori Sunday afternoons. Some nights we ordered in. When we called up a dim sum place to order a "No. 51, Chicken Buns," the delivery arrived with fifty-one containers. I couldn't throw food away and so froze them for later, but Andrew soon lost his appetite for buns. I also tried to cook, frying up, for example, the homemade pesto left in the freezer by our landlords. How would I know to serve pesto fresh?

I finished a draft of the book, and the publisher accepted it as-is, leaving one chapter a raw literature review. On the long drive for a talk I gave in Washington, D.C., Andrew began what became our habit of philosophical debates. He was a positivist, the default product of capitalist America, and I was reading critical theory by then. I thought of him as a humanities-word guy, but of course got that wrong, too.



That summer in New Hampshire, I started dating my "gay lover," Richard, an environmentalist who won me over by playing video games with my sons. He offered to teach them tie-dye, and I invited him to dinner, but their mother had planned a week with them in Maine. We met for dinner anyway.

The next year, when I arrived at Syracuse, the book came out and got me tenure at the Newhouse School, despite objections that my personal-essay style wasn't "scholarship." "Have you read it?" one tenure committee member asked the dean, who said yes, and that was it.

All three sons soon joined me in Syracuse, where I bought a big American foursquare on Greenwood Place, near campus and their schools. They would get home before me, search the cupboards, and snack over cartoons. I would arrive cranky about their unfinished homework.

The boys took a turn each week making dinner, with rounds of pasta, tacos, and a casserole Joel called *glop*. Thursday was take-out

pizza night, and I cooked on weekends, as well as shopping and doing laundry. I made a pie chart of chores and a cardboard spin-wheel to rotate their names. They each cleaned a room to pass inspection, and I paid allowances to match their work. They then disappeared with their new Syracuse buddies.

Each night I called Richard to drone on about my day of single parenting. Not much for the phone, he finally said, "So much happens to you!" His days were just the opposite, but he gave up his staff job at Boston University to become Uncle Charlie to my three sons, our own sitcom: the only family my sons knew who ate dinner together every night at 6, making polite conversation.



Tenure was no road to popularity. Where I grew up, folks said just what they thought, talked openly about money, and repeated what others said no matter who could hear. Not these rude habits but my lack of a doctorate is what Newhouse colleagues used to keep me out of the way.

After working there, a colleague took a chair at Amsterdam and then, to get my colleagues off my back, invited me to write a dissertation in Holland. First I had to document my entire academic life, a dossier the council of deans considered the week of September 24. That day I had a massive heart attack, but the efficient Dutch, while approving my candidacy, also discussed whether to award the degree posthumously.

I had too much to do before I died: sons to rear and places to go. They had complained they were too young to appreciate Perú, and I still remembered illustrations of Spain from a sixth grade textbook. So I began applying for grants and leave, hoping to write the dissertation there.

My fall sabbatical got approved, and for spring the semester abroad program assigned me to teach at the Madrid Center. The two-semester deal surprised my dean, but I went anyway. For the sabbatical, instead of the important Complutense in Madrid or the up-and-coming Navarra in Pamplona, I accepted the invitation of an unknown university, La Laguna, in the Canary Islands.

That fall in Tenerife our apartment overhung the Atlantic Ocean. Andrew complained that he wanted the crashing surf "to just shut up" at night so he could sleep. He attended *instituto*, a high school where he made friends, passed most of his courses, and excelled in

calculus, despite having studied only French. I hadn't believed it when he said he'd just "pick up" Spanish, but he did.

Richard lost sleep because of my computer keyboard clicking and printer churning out chapters late in the night. He'd also taken French in high school, but squeezed in two semesters of night school Spanish before we arrived. For help with the language, I invented errands: To mail a letter he would look up the words, memorize some sentences, venture to the post office, and ask his prepared question. The Spanish clerk would reply too fast, but Richard used signs and a word list to get by. He developed a big vocabulary for food just by grocery shopping.

Matthew understood a lot of what he heard, but could hardly open his mouth to speak, despite years of Spanish in school, clear pronunciation, and a non-gringo accent. He was older and bigger than most of his classmates at the elementary school, and he soon stopped taking the bus with them, preferring to walk kilometers to town or instead not going at all.

For his birthday in November, I wanted to cheer him up. The local open-air market had fresh shrimp, a luxury we never saw when I was young. I bought it, oblivious to his dislikes. At dinner I pressured him to take a taste, but after swallowing one shrimp, he began to cough and wheeze, then excused himself and went to bed. Even the cake could hardly lure him back.

After one term, he left Spain. His classmates, in fun, had pestered him with memorized English phrases, ogled his fair hair and eyes, and chanted for him to count to ten in Spanish. But I was busy doing research. Back in New Hampshire, he had another reaction to seafood and started carrying an epi-pen. I thought he was vulnerable, shy, and a bit lazy, but here too I was dead wrong.

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In January we moved to Barrio Salamanca in Madrid, and I began teaching two courses while revising the dissertation. Andrew bumped along in the *instituto* near Ventas bullring and started drinking wine. Richard kept house, and Joel came only for a nine-day visit. In New Hampshire he had found a job and met a girlfriend. I wished he'd stay longer in Spain, but he said, "I have a life."

In May we flew to Amsterdam for the public defense. The committee from Spain, England, the U.S., and Holland wore academic

robes and marched into the 17th century Aula at the Spui, behind a sexton who pounded a large staff to call the audience to attention. I stood at a podium, flanked by two *paranymphs*, grad students who had read my dissertation (and translated an extended abstract into Dutch), ready in case I lost my cool.

The next year I was on the market, Ph.D. in hand, and got two offers. A verbal one from Rutgers vanished between December, when the dean called with the good news, and February, when he hired someone else. Meanwhile I returned to teach in Madrid, but my family was worn out. Only Richard managed to get an "adventure leave" from his new job for two months.

Chicago seemed like a cow town when I flew from Madrid for an interview. The offer from UIC came after weeks of waiting for the first choice to turn it down. But I was used to playing second fiddle: all my academic jobs (I heard later) came after searches lost other candidates. No matter. UIC hired me.

I moved to Chicago alone. The boys were in college: Joel at Keene, Andrew at Earlham, and Matthew at Carleton. Even Richard stayed behind to do a master's degree at Antioch New England. But I was dogged with my weekly phone calls. When Richard, Andrew, and Matt finally moved to Chicago, the calls turned into Sunday dinners, until I dragged Richard off again. On yet another fellowship, this time in Italy, I went to the corner pay phone and placed calling-card calls to my sons.

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Maybe academic life puts distance between fathers and sons. Professors mete out judgment, harsh about error and doubtful of quality. Dads serve up wholehearted appreciation, or at least so it seemed to me. My step-dad finally got a real son of his own and was nothing but a fan. But teaching taught me something about myself: I used to start out semesters unsure about the students. Now I know I'll be fond of them before the term ends, so I start with that in mind.

It took me years to realize how much I admire my sons and respect their choices. Instead of being a stay-at-home type, Joel moved to the U.K. to pursue a career in the arts, landing his dream job in high-school technical theater. It was fun to visit him on another sabbatical and see him grown to manhood, respected by co-workers, and settled with his wife and her family.

Instead of a humanities-word type, Andrew majored in math, took a master's degree (through real travail) at Loyola in Chicago, and found jobs doing data analysis. But we still have philosophical discussions. Matthew started out studying (of all things) first marine biology and then performance studies, but ended up working an intense physical job in clinical massage therapy — no shy-slacker type. Woodsy Richard decided to enter the family business, doing a doctorate.

UIC promoted me, made me department head, and gave me a Big Ten fellowship. It was for academic leadership, but by then Jim Carey had left Illinois. He was less a mentor than a surrogate parent in my adoptive bourgeois family. His most memorable words, looking me up and down as we both left an international conference in Washington, D.C., were something like, “When are you going to grow up and start dressing the part?”

Academic success came despite my wearing jeans, t-shirt, and a baseball cap, despite my spotty training and bad memory, despite my checkered past. Fatherhood is not so easy. I'm a talker about emotions, sex, and experience, embarrassing my sons. They make talk from gaming and pop culture references — things that leave me blank. I like nothing more than having my sons around, but when they come home I seem distracted with too much to do. It's a bad habit that covers the fact that, after all these years, I still have no idea how to be a dad.

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