

Stories from a happy and (so far) functional family.

Cats Don't Hike

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Impressionists

My wife and I recently took our children to Atlanta to see the Impressionists exhibit at the High Museum of Art. We always enjoy our visits there and hope that the boys will learn to love art by degrees, although they are both very young. Sam, age four, looked quite the adult art lover as he walked about, tour cassette player over his shoulder, ear phones firmly in place. He seems to see art in the only way that a four year old can; through eyes of innocence. We strolled from painting to painting, amid the press of the crowd, trying to learn as much as we could in the short time available. Each painting had so much to say and so much to give. I don't know how much Sam absorbed. But even exposure can be an education so I think his experience was worthwhile.

His two-year old brother Seth, on the other hand, was ready to leave as soon as we arrived. He wanted to walk, then be carried. He wanted my earphones, then no earphones. He begged me to take him to see "Doug's First Movie." He held my hand in his little hands, turned my face to his pleading eyes and said "Go outside, Papa, please!" One can only endure this sort of begging from a toddler for so long. Kissing his mother and brother goodbye for a while, we escaped into the April sunshine, where he was instantly in his element.

We went to the large grassy area adjacent the back of the museum. The day was warm with a pleasant wind and we chased one another around in circles until I thought we would collapse. We rolled on the ground and we wrestled and tickled as he shook with the laughter that God created especially for two year olds. I noticed that passersby, leaving the museum, looked at us and smiled.

One idyllic moment I was on my back in the new grass, holding him above me, his arms spread wide, his dimples deep, cheeks rosy, all smiles, blonde hair blowing in the breeze as blue

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eyes spilled bliss like fountains. I felt that sensation one has when time stops. It never stops for long enough, although that is something of an oxymoron. Maybe it stops forever when we glimpse something so perfect. I held him close and kissed him. I suddenly understood art.

As I learned from the exhibit, Impressionism was an attempt to represent a moment in time, often a moment of daily life. Why would an artist do this? Why make a picture of something so mundane as a garden or someone bathing? To preserve the beauty of the moment is what we want every day of our lives, whether we are painters or not. We want to take our fleeting glimpses of eternal truth and beauty and preserve them in this temporal plane. We know, in our hearts, that all things will pass away. The paintings of the great masters will go to dust or ashes as surely as we. The sculpture of Michelangelo will crumble to the earth from which it was born. The music of Mozart will one day be played for a last time, then be lost in antiquity. And if not lost to history, each will be lost to every one of us as we pass from this world.

But all of those artistic media are ways to take what really matters and keep it, so that we can see it over and over, and so that others may in some small way glimpse through the pinhole we held up to infinity so briefly and see a transient image of the things that are timeless. Things like love, joy, sadness, wonder and their glorious connections.

Although I am a physician, not an artist, I wish that I could have painted my moments with Seth. I wish that I could have painted them in some magical way that would combine his voice, his look, his feel and smell with our intense love for one another. Then I would frame it with the sun and breeze that we basked in.

I think that was what the Impressionists wanted as well. Because that, dear friends, is art.

Gerbil Farm

The night of our anniversary my wife and I went on a short date. When we came home, my wife's sister Julie (who had been babysitting) met us at the door. In a calm voice she asked, "do you want to put the children to bed or do you want to catch gerbils?"

It became obvious that putting the children to bed would require catching the gerbils. Whenever the children were almost asleep, one of the newly escaped rodents would zip across the floor or dash under a dresser as the sleepy children watched. Each time, they were seized with the thrill of the hunt and jumped out of bed in pursuit of their six, free-range gerbils. Fortunately, small children, being fundamentally like small rodents, are very good at corralling hapless furry things. Since gerbil catching is not a solo activity, we all threw ourselves into the chase, children and adults alike.

I should probably give some background here. My wife's brother Dave and his wife Dawn gave two gerbils to our children for Christmas. Like good gerbil owners, they were confident of the sex of their gift. "I think they're both girls. Or boys. Probably." So, in short order, our fuzzy friends were expecting. And before you could say "prenatal care", we had four new, pink, peanut shaped gerbils. They grew up quickly, attaining gerbil adolescence in a few weeks. Then the trouble began.

You know the big, complex plastic houses for pet rodents that have exercise wheels, water dishes and tunnels for their occupants to explore for exercise? Well we had one of those, then bought another and connected them so that the growing family could have a little leg-room. However the adolescents, like teens everywhere, weren't satisfied. That was when the chewing began. All day, all night, one of them was somewhere trying to get through the plastic. I reconfigured, I taped, I looked

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at them threateningly. It didn't matter. One of them was always right side up or upside down in a tunnel, working his or her way through the walls of their plastic prison. It was like watching Steve McQueen in "The Great Escape". After a while I felt like the commandant of a stalag. So, when we went out of town one weekend, the gerbils made their break, probably planning to go to neutral Switzerland then on to Gerbil Land.

That brings us up to the chase. Two grown gerbils were loose (one of them again suspiciously overweight), as were their four offspring. Let me tell you something about teenage rodents. They're small, shifty and move at the speed of light. Over the course of an hour or two we moved toys, moved furniture, crawled on our hands and knees, yelled and laughed. My wife Jan, generally the very example of courage, actually lifted her skirt and said "eek" (or something like it) when one charged her with his little incisors at the ready. In the end, all six were once again safe in their plastic home and all four children were asleep with dreams of rats in their heads.

Did I say six? The very next day gerbil mom gave birth to seven more hairless bundles of joy. That brought us up to thirteen gerbils. Which I suppose qualifies as a gerbil farm. Living in rural Tamassee, South Carolina, I always imaged us with more, well, manly livestock. Horses or cattle, sheep or pigs, even Beagles. But, you play the hand you're dealt, I suppose. Gerbil farming isn't really lucrative, although there may be some sort of federal subsidy to encourage us to stop producing them. They aren't dangerous, unless you hit your head on something catching them. They don't get rabies or gerbil-pox. You don't need enormous rubber gloves to help them deliver their young. They don't require a back-hoe to bury when they pass on. And the truth is that the kids love them. All of my boys are expert gerbil wranglers by now. Even my daughter, petrified of bugs,

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thrusts her hand fearlessly into the mass of writhing fur to pull one out and pet it.

We've had good times, but some of them have to go now. The children are a little sad, but I'm expecting a new crop (or litter or gaggle) any day. Two now live in a kindergarten class, which leaves us with eleven. If you think you might pass our gerbil adoption screening process, let me know. I promise to give you two boys or two girls; probably.

Beach Exodus

This is our reading, from the book of Vacations, Chapter 10:

Once, to honor the birth of a small angel in our home, we traveled to the far away land called Myrtle Beach. We left in the darkness, while all of the angels slept. And we arrived in the darkness, and led the angels from the SUV into the inn. And during our time there we prospered and were welcomed by smiling persons in restaurants and theaters who greeted us with open hands, into which we dropped money and credit cards. And the angels lay on the beach and swam in the pool happily.

But after a while we had sojourned too long at the land of the beach. The merchants and innkeepers there had deprived us of too much of our money. We had lain too long in the lazy river beside the inn and had built enough castles of sand. And there were plagues. We were beset by the plague of sun, after which our skin was red, sore and most itchy. We were beset by the plague of sand, which verily did find its way into every body crevice, and into every piece of our luggage. And we were cursed by the plague of sleeplessness, which was delivered at the hands of the four angels who kept us up late, then woke us too early each day demanding sacrifices of Pop-Tarts and doughnuts.

And having been plagued and impoverished thus, we woke and said, "Let us get out of here, for in our own home, though there be no ocean, there is food other than French fries, there is room to relax and empty the sand from our clothing, and there are doors with locks which the small angels cannot open." And so our exodus began, and then we did pack the SUV with every manner of clothing, damp towel, beach toy, seashell and action figure.

Lastly, therein we packed the four angels and prayed that God would make them sleep. "Please God" we prayed thus, "let them sleep awhile that we may hear ourselves think". And God

listened to our prayer, and ignored it, and gave the angels energy and to spare. And they talked endlessly and loudly about bizarre and confusing things, about visions and one another, and touched each other painfully and too often. They asked far too many questions, and for a few hundred miles were fascinated with water towers. They also made odd noises that mortal adults cannot comprehend. But still we drove into the West, to the promised land of Tamassee that we call home.

Yet along the way, another plague came upon us, which was the plague of the bathroom. And when the four angels were not discussing crass things, or playing eternal games of “I Spy”, they were screaming about their need for the bathroom. So we did stop, sometimes four separate times for four separate angelic bladders in one short hour. And thus our progress was slow, and the great hot expanse of South Carolina still stretched before us. Sunburned, sandblasted and irritable, we continued.

But God guided us, and showered us along the way with chicken nuggets and soda, so that we did not faint from hunger or thirst. And he gave my wife peace, so that she drifted into the trance called a “novel” and heard little of the four angels, being swept up in visions of her own. Along the way the four angels chanted to their idol, called “the Happy Meal”, and though our SUV overflowed with small plastic objects from these meals, we purchased them anyway, so as to occupy the four angels while our journey continued.

We were most tired, and we became trapped awhile in the village of Columbia, in the oasis they call Columbiana Mall. There we ate and walked, in hopes that large blood clots would not form in our legs. The angels played and went to the bathroom, and ate food over and over again. And God said to us, “Go on home, crazy people!” But not before he again empowered our angels with caffeine, and made their bladders shrink. Then, when we had traveled across the state for twice as

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long as it should take, passing the cities of Greenville and Clemson, we pulled into our drive. And the angels were tucked into bed without violence. And before falling asleep, we praised God for our deliverance, from beach, from angels and from the long exodus of the highway.

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