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Well, almost!

Does 6 x 9 = Happiness?

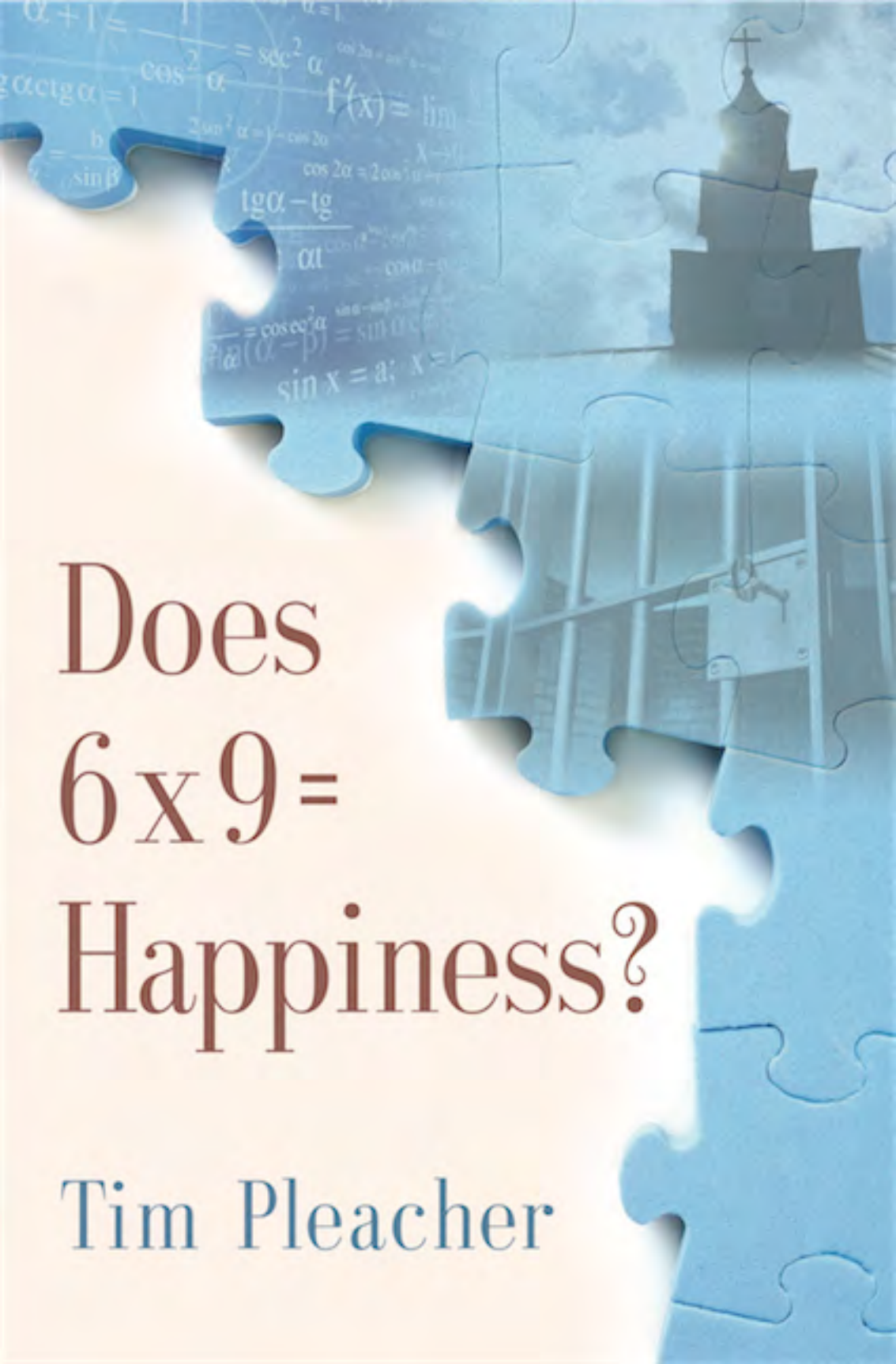
by Tim Pleacher

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Does
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Tim Pleacher

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Chapter 1

Multiplicity

I recall the Year of Our Lord, 1999. My daughter Janelle was 11 years old and in the 5th grade. It was that time of her life when she was faced with the arduous task of learning her multiplication tables. It was a time that would also test the mettle of her parents.

As a Baby Boomer, I was forced to learn the multiplication tables the old fashioned way. That method being by force, through rote memorization, and under the threat that there would be a trip to the woodshed in my future if I didn't. Naturally, I felt my daughter should have to learn the tables by using this same time honored system. I felt it was just a rite of passage. She should be made to learn them the way I did, the way my father did, and the way all our grandparents before us had done!

But my wife Kelly, also a Baby Boomer and someone who I thought would never sell me out, didn't see it that way. Both She, and my Daughter, made it clear to me that learning through rote memorization was a thing of the past and that I was living in the dark ages.

My Daughter was certainly not a mathematical wiz in those days; and was struggling mightily with the task right from the start. I was doing my best to be Robert Young from the old TV show *Father Knows Best*. I was laying down the demand to memorize the tables as forcefully, but as lovingly, as I felt I could. You know; the old iron fist in a velvet glove routine. But, I also felt I was making it crystal clear that she would memorize the tables come hell or high water!

I must have been coming across a smidge too sternly though because I remember bringing my daughter to tears; and few things in heaven and earth are more powerful than the tears of an

11 year old girl. Soon my “beloved” wife was chiming in with support.... but not for me! “Stop leaning so hard on her!” she sobbed. “Why does she have to memorize them anyway? She will always have access to a calculator, and it’s just not like it used to be!”

Now every fiber of my being told me that the right thing to do was to ignore the tears and the whining! I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that I should stick to my guns and absolutely demand that tradition prevail. I wanted justice to be done. Math through memorization could, and in my mind was going to be, mastered by an 11 year old girl!

So, for the next few weeks I summoned all the manhood that was deep within me and pushed the issue for all it was worth. The daughter continued to struggle, the wife continued to bitch (I mean stick up for her) and it was hell on earth for the old man.

Now I’d love to be able to tell you that manhood won out, and that I struck a blow for father’s everywhere. Yes, I’d love to say that I fought the good fight, that tradition prevailed by a landslide in our home, and in the end I won the war. I’d love to be able to tell you those things, but in all honesty I just can’t.

Did I fold up like a cheap tent and cave in completely? Well not exactly, but nor did I receive the honor of raising the Jolly Roger in victory either. In the end she made some progress, and learned most of the tables, but to this day she still can’t tell you off the top of her head, and say with absolutely certainty that $6 \times 9 = 54$.

And now the essential question to pose is this. Would my daughter’s having memorized her multiplication tables allow her, my wife, or me, to go on to find happiness in life? We will soon be pursuing the answer to this, and life’s many other essential questions.

Bartender – keep em coming!

“More Like Melissa”

What could the First Lady, an alcoholic ex-pilot who crop dusts the wrong fields, a single mother dancing at a gentleman’s club, and a pilot who couldn’t qualify for the space program possibly have in common?

As we came to discover they would all demonstrate their courage, and will to survive, by helping to save the earth in the movie “*Independence Day*.” I thought that the film’s director, Roland Emmerich, did a fantastic job of introducing what seemed to be unrelated characters, and then then dramatically bonding them together later in the film.

I was bewildered about where the film was going in the beginning, but that was obviously the effect he was trying to create. By the end the characters each played a part in heroically saving the planet. I felt he did a masterful job, and I’d like to have a go at using that technique myself. So, please humor me for a moment. I’ll first bring up some seemingly unrelated topics and then try and bond them together for you as we go.

Most of us have heard our grandfather, or beloved elder, refer to something as a “doozy.” As in, “That’s a doozy of an idea, or that engagement ring is really a doozy.” The word has come to mean extraordinary or unique. The origin of the word actually refers to a type of car manufactured as the “Duesenberg” which was renowned for its luxury and quality design.

I believe most of us are compelled to see, and are strangely drawn to the extraordinary and unique. The Swigart Auto museum near Huntingdon Pennsylvania houses a 1936 car called the “Gentleman’s Speedster”. It’s the only 12 cylinder Duesenberg ever built and it was owned by the movie star Jackie Coogan. I’m not much of an auto buff, but seeing that car in person did hold a curious fascination. When you realize that an item is truly a “one

of a kind” it nudges your imagination to think that something could be rightly referred to as “unique”.

In the introduction I mentioned a sermon that carries particular meaning for me. Here are some additional particulars from that stirring address. The pastor was discussing where he was most able to sense God’s presence.

“We don’t always sense God’s presence at the Country Clubs and Shopping Malls. People in those places are generally not seeking God. If you want to really feel his presence follow me to the quiet places; and to the Hospitals, Funerals and Nursing homes where people are seeking his love. You will find him there!”

“Don’t get me wrong, He is with us during our happy times, but we aren’t always seeking him then. Often, it’s not until we face a personal crisis that we call out for him. I feel his presence the most in the homeless shelters, nursing homes and hospital wards that I visit. I sense him most where people are hurting, It’s where his comfort is easily found.”

Again, I realize it sounds like I’m drifting through unrelated topics. But as requested please stay with me as we drift just a bit more.

You’ve probably never heard of a medical condition called Horner Syndrome. Horner Syndrome is a rare condition. When a person who has it is physically exerting them self, one side of the person’s face doesn’t sweat and the pupil on that side constricts. It’s usually brought about by nerve damage and isn’t debilitating. But I’m sure that if you had such symptoms they would scare the hell out of you!

Harlequin Syndrome is related, but is more serious. It doesn’t affect just the face and the eye, but rather a person’s entire side. During exercise, the whole side of the body doesn’t sweat, thus leaving the skin white and clammy. This can, but isn’t always

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caused by a more serious condition like a tumor. Unlike Horner's it can have severe health related consequences. Harlequin Syndrome is very rare. In fact, there are only 14 people on the planet that have been diagnosed with Harlequin's. To put that in perspective, your chances of winning the lottery are hundreds of times greater than your chances of contracting Harlequin's.

Here is the last seemingly unrelated drift.

Counseling work in a men's Correctional Facility is not particularly glamorous or exciting work. Looking into the eyes of a street smart, gang hardened 21 year old that has been convicted of Aggravated Assault, and is serving 10 to 20 years, is not for everybody. Many inmates who come to prison are from broken homes; they suffer from drug addiction, and have little love in their heart for anyone. They often have long sentences and have to come to grips with the fact that they will be away from their families for a long time. The realization that their children will grow up without them sinks in each time they get letters and pictures from home. In short they become bitter and aloof. Being a counselor to them is dangerous, demanding, and frequently unrewarding work.

Now, let me try to weave together all these seemingly unrelated and disjointed topics.

If you haven't guessed already, I've tried to set the stage to introduce you to one of my favorite people on the planet. Please let me introduce you to Melissa. I served for many years as a Unit Manager at a Correctional Facility for 2300 men in Southwestern Pennsylvania. It was there where I first met Melissa when she was assigned to my unit as a Counselor. When I first met Melissa she was in her very early 30's, thin, and very attractive.

At that time she had 2 young sons and was going through a difficult divorce. She has a Master's Degree in Sociology with a math minor. It was obvious from the start that in any given setting

she was usually the smartest person in the room. She had worked in the Mental Health and Prison Environment since leaving college and was very savvy coming in. So much for the basics, now let me tell you about her character.

Inmates may not have Harvard degrees in psychology, but they are manipulative and street smart just the same. Try and be something you're not and they can see right through the lack of strength in your character. They can spot a phony faster than money through my wallet. To make matters worse the Corrections environment is often dominated by outdated notions that women don't belong there. So just by virtue of being an attractive woman working in a prison Melissa had it rough. To be taken seriously by both the inmates and your co-workers you had better be the real article. You must be self-assured and confident about who you are and what you do or you won't make it as a staff person. Melissa is, as they say in prison, "All that and a bag of chips too!"

When an inmate is nearing the minimum length of his sentence he is scheduled for a hearing with the Parole Board. In preparation for his hearing, prison staff conduct a pre-meeting with them called a "staffing." During that meeting we ask inmates to discuss how they feel about their crime, their victim, and their plans for the future. Heaven forbid an inmate gives a ho-hum or insincere response during his "staffing," for if they do they can expect Melissa to pounce on them. Being the least bit unprepared to explain their future intentions is not something Melissa tolerates.

Regardless of an inmate's size, or their nasty demeanor, she can figuratively pin them to the mat with a verbal attack during staffing. With a direct and confident approach she demands that they consider what their overall lifestyle will be like beyond prison. She asks them that they consider who they will live with, who their friends will be, and what their work day will be like. She requires them to describe their educational, vocational, and family goals. She makes them reflect on how they started using drugs in the first place, and did they really have a plan for staying straight?

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Sitting there listening to the sincerity and dignity of her tone, I frequently started to reflect on my own life's goals. I could see the words she was using were penetrating the fiber of many a young man's being. I knew that she was very often melting away the rough veneer of the biter men in front of us. Many inmates, who have since paroled, have written back to her thanking her for the direction they received from her in the Institution. Her inner strength shines in the prison; guiding the lives of young men like a lighthouse guides a ship to safety.

Two of the happiest moments of my life occurred when my wife told me that she was expecting our children. It was like a party atmosphere, and we beamed with joy and anticipation at the prospect of becoming parents. My son's birth was difficult, and was almost changed from a conventional birth to an emergency C-Section. This was due to the length of the time my wife Kelly was in labor, and some berating difficulties she was experiencing. The Doctor told me to expect some blood when he needed to do an episiotomy on my wife to allow for a natural birth. But when he touched her with that scalpel what looked like a gallon of blood sprang forth, and I immediately fainted. My daughter, on the other hand, was born so quickly that she broke her collar bone during delivery and wore a sling for the first few weeks of her life.

Believe me, these seemed like major problems at the time, but I soon came to realize that in the grand scheme of parenting they were really not concerns at all.

I could not imagine if my newborn child was faced with the prospect of intestinal surgery days after his birth? How would you feel as the Mother of the child facing such a prospect? What if one surgery wasn't enough? Suppose there was an emergency return to the hospital, and several follow up surgeries needed? Would you rethink the joy of being a new mother? Unlike the inconsequential concerns associated with the birth of my children, Melissa's introduction to Motherhood was that her newborn son

would need to endure the process of several intestinal surgeries at Children's hospital in Pittsburgh.

After countless medical procedures, and many sleepless nights, Melissa and her son are doing fine now! But when Melissa conveys the many details of this ordeal she never talks about the strain on herself. She talks instead about the care of the Doctors and Nurses, and about the strength of the children and parents around her who were enduring similar, or even worse situations.

God lives at Children's Hospital in Pittsburgh. His presence is with the staff, and he lives in the hearts of the children, and in the lives of new mothers like Melissa.

Melissa loves to run and exercise. She frequently putts in 30 plus miles a week and was a dazzling high school athlete. When she began noticing that one side of her body was not sweating, and was remaining cold after heavy exercise Melissa got scared. One of her pupils also wasn't dilating properly. Local doctors diagnosed her with everything from nerve damage, to heart and circulation problems. She was advised at one point that she should never run again, or she ran the risk of having her heart explode.

What ensued for Melissa were endless doctor visits with each doctor doing their own poking, prodding and testing. In addition each one wanted their own flesh and blood samples. After several trips to the Cleveland Clinic Melissa was diagnosed with both Horner and Harlequin syndromes. Thank heaven she received treatment, remains active and neither condition was traced to a tumor or other life threatening concern.

But can you imagine the fear that would accompany this diagnosis, the anguish of enduring the testing process, and then awaiting the results? I hope Melissa wins the lotter soon. That would be more common than having these illnesses, and she certainly deserves it!

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Melissa always recants the experiences about all of her personal and family medical concerns with humor, and faces each day with gallantry and joy. She recently underwent Gallbladder surgery. I've never seen anyone happier about facing surgery. When it was over she said, "It was a pleasure to finally be diagnosed and treated for something basic."

You might recall me talking about the 1936 Duesenberg as being a "one of a kind." Well when you think about it, we are all one of a kind. We are all rarer than the 14 people on the planet who have Harlequin syndrome, because, after all, there's only one of each of us!

But I think you might agree that few are as rare as Melissa. She may not have saved the planet like the characters from Independence Day, nor has she won a Nobel Prize, but she is a "doozy" nevertheless.

In my mind she defines the word brave. She is a wonderful mother, a caring person, a good friend, and a consummate professional in the workplace. Each day I'm around her is a privileged one for me. She lives each day with courage, conviction, character and love. I can think of no higher praise than saying that she inspires me to become someone better than I am today. I hope that somewhere inside me lies the ability and strength to be, "More like Melissa." She carries a strength I hope we all can find.

Chapter 2

Generations

My grandmother was a person who had a reverence for cleanliness. If you got up at night to use the bathroom the chances were good that by the time you got back to your room your bed was made. There was never an unwashed dish, or an unwashed piece of laundry anywhere in the house. If you found a shelf that wasn't dusted, it was only because you had brought the dust with you.

But...I recently went to visit my son and his girlfriend at their apartment. It was clear that they had perhaps never made their bed. I also wondered if they had ever washed a dish, or washed a single piece of laundry. Nothing was dusted, and I'm not sure they knew what the word "cleanliness" meant.

My Grandmother was a saintly person who personified the old adage that, "Cleanliness is next to Godliness." I'm sure that my son, on the other hand, must believe that, "Cleanliness is next to impossible."

Does all that mean that my son and his girlfriend are immoral people? They certainly are not. It's obvious; however, that Grandma and Grandson are from different generations. And oh how the generations do look upon things differently!

Since the question of whether having your multiplication tables committed to memory, and thereby knowing from repetition that $6 \times 9 = 54$, is largely a, "How do the generations learn?" type of question, I want to convey a story that illustrates how the generations mingle. This is the story of how 5 generations interact in a family, and is told from the perspective of "Melissa" who you just met.

I've heard Melissa regale this story many times over a cold drink at a tavern in Somerset Pennsylvania called Maggie May's. Let's imagine for a few minutes we are there. I'll fetch us another round while Melissa regales.

The "Almost" Golden Years

Melissa begins;

Let me tell you how the 5 generations of my family socialize. "My mother, my 2 sons, and I recently went to visit "Granny" who is my 102 year old Great Grandmother (First Generation) who lives with my "Grandma," who is 80 years old (2nd generation).

As we met and began to chat Grandma said that four cases of yogurt had been purchased a week before from a discount food warehouse. She said the name of the place was "Trusty Earl's Food Bin." But I live near them and have never seen anyplace that goes by that name. But my frugal Grandma can sniff out a bargain anywhere. I was told that since it was too warm in the house, which is usually kept at a tropical 94, the yogurt was to be placed on the porch.

Now the "porch" is actually a side room that is still in the house, but is separated by a sturdy curtain, otherwise known as a wall. The purpose of the curtain wall is to save on heating. Granny and Grandma don't agree on everything, but when it comes to scrimping and saving they both recall the depression and willingly agree to "pinch" a penny any which way they can! Yep, the temperature on the porch is perfect for storing items needing refrigeration – a cool 71.

Soon, I heard a yell ring out from across the kitchen. "Just put that yogurt on the porch Honey," The order had come from 102 year Granny, and was directed to me as more of a command than a request. From behind me came the voice of my six year old son asking for the 6th time, "Can we leave now Mommy?" But I will

give more detail about my children's (5th generation) perspective a bit later.

So Granny gave her beloved "honey" (that's me, the 4th generation) the order to move the yogurt from the kitchen to the porch. Incidentally she has called me, and for that matter everyone else on the planet "Honey" my entire life. I'm not sure she remembers anyone's actual name. But, I did as I was told and went to move the yogurt.

While picking it up I noticed that it was about a month past its expiration date. I reasoned that the expiration date, coupled with its not even having been on the "porch" at 71 degrees, let alone the refrigerator, had probably done little to foster the yummy prune and kiwi flavor of the stuff. I showed the expiration date to my mother (3rd generation) who in turn tried to convince Granny and Grandma that there was no earthly way they could, or should, consume the yogurt.

"Like Hell," Grandma barked, "That stuffs good, just put it in on the porch, I'll get to it." Out of curiosity I opened a cup to find the contents had shrunk to the size and color of a black marble, and smelled almost as good as Granny's toe jam. Unfortunately I know how Granny's toe jam smells because I am frequently the groomer of that, and other, parts of her anatomy. But that is another story. Anyway, being unable to convince the dynamic duo they would not be able to eat it; we did as ordered and left it in on the "porch." Bon appetite!

Now back to my children's perspective. When we had first arrived, Granny, who can only see about 2 feet in front of her, gave her traditional greeting to my sons. This greeting takes the form of grabbing them by the head in something part way between a half nelson and a hug. Then she mutters about how they have grown, although I'm not sure with her vision how she knows that. She calls them both "Honey" and proceeds to pinch their faces for a few minutes.

I'm sure that enduring the greeting was bad. I'm sure that listening to the banter about the yogurt was bad. But I know that the smell of Ben Gay, kitty litter, rotting yogurt and whatever else it is which makes that "old people smell" had worked my sons over, and they had had enough of the visit.

My oldest son's earlier sheepish request that we leave had now taken on a pretty demanding tone. By his 10th request he was chirping in my ear, "Let's make a break for it while they ain't looking!" Now I was thinking the same thing, but I couldn't let on to him that I all I wanted to do was get the hell out of there too.

Like every grandchild before him he would have to learn the lesson we've all had to learn. That lesson being - "Above all, respect your elders!" So, I chirped back into his ear, "Hold your breath, plant a fake smile on that kisser, and act like you're enjoying this visit!"

So, you think the tale of the rotting yogurt is a tall one? Well, as the old saying goes, you ain't heard nothin yet! You may recall I mentioned the pair was a bit frugal. While grandma was bribing the kids with cookies, in exchange for listening to her wild bingo adventures, I took a moment to sit in her recliner.

As I sat in the chair my hand slipped down into the magazine cover and I was puzzled to find some one dollar bills. I continued to pull them out until I had about 23 in my hand. At this point I naively asked, "Grandma, what are all these ones doing in your chair?" The answer came from Granny. "I'll tell you why they are there. When that Meals on Wheels fella shows up and wants a tip she takes whatever money she has and stuffs it in the chair. Then she feigns like she doesn't have any money and stiffes him."

I guess that might help explain how my mother got her propensity to be; well "thrifty." On a recent trip to the movie theater Mom began a strange ritual. About 5 minutes into the show she starts looking around at the other patrons. Next, she starts riffling

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through her purse. Soon she pulls out a plastic bag and heads for the lobby. Next thing I know she is munching away on, and offering me popcorn.

I was mortified to learn that the popcorn refills are free, provided you have the same color bag the theater is using on any given day. You guessed it! Mom has an assortment of colored bags from the theater in her purse! When she found out the color of bag being used that day...voila, free popcorn! That gene must be alive and well in me. I can hardly wait to see how it manifests itself in the coming years!

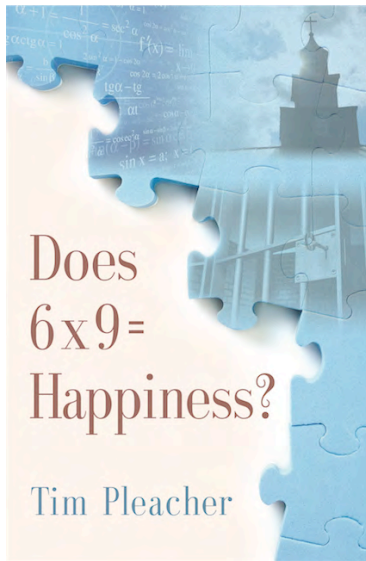
But let's get back to the visit. Granny, at 102, continues to ride an exercise bike. I mention that because the pair discussed how they recently got a visit from a nice 80 year old gentleman from Ohio. Turns out both Granny and Grandma were smitten with Cupid's arrow, and developed a school girl, puppy love crush on the old boy.

And I thought Granny couldn't even see!

I worked up the courage to ask about her intents for the Gent. "Well Honey, I'm hoping for the same things every woman wants! You just get what you can." Now I know why she stays in shape riding that exercise bike!

I don't know about you, but I sincerely hope that when I'm 80, and then 102, I'll be eating pungent yogurt, stiffing the Meals on Wheels fella, riding that exercise bike and chasing the opposite sex with a passion!

"God love them, and us, in our "almost" golden years!"



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