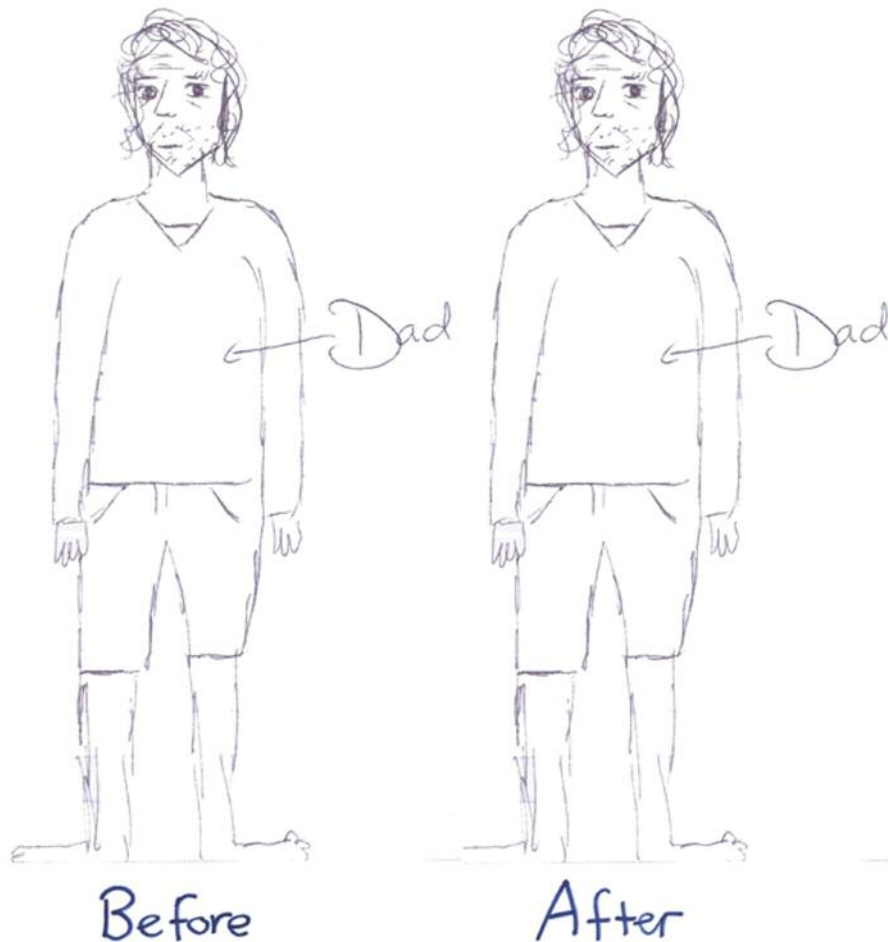


extra fingers

Newsletter number 13 • November 27, 2011

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You're still the same, Dad

DAD, reading from Richard Dawkins' book *Unweaving the Rainbow*: "Hols, listen to this. I want to read you something. 'We are going to die, and that makes us the lucky ones. Most people are never going to die because they are never going to be born. The potential people who could have been here in my place but who will in fact never see the light of day outnumber the sand grains of Arabia. Certainly those unborn ghosts include greater poets than Keats, scientists greater than Newton. We know this because the set of possible people allowed by our DNA so

massively exceeds the set of actual people. In the teeth of these stupefying odds it is you and I, in our ordinariness, that are here."

HOLLY: "Oh, Dad. People like that only say things in confusing ways so that suckers like you will buy their books. Why couldn't he just say we were lucky to be born? The problem with you is you think you're going to get something out of those sort of books but you don't. You just remain the same. You don't get any smarter and you look exactly the same as before you read them."

Glue it is

AMELIE: “Dad, you know how you said white bread has glue in it.”

DAD: “No, I wouldn’t have said that.”

AMELIE: “No, you did. You definitely did say it. I told kids in my class that you said it. I said my dad thinks your sandwiches have glue in them.”

DAD: “No. What was the full sentence you said?”

AMELIE: “What?”

DAD: “Can you remember the whole sentence you supposedly said about me saying white bread has glue in it?”

AMELIE: “Nuh. I just remember saying you said it had glue.”

DAD, suddenly: “Oh, gluten!”

AMELIE: “Yeah, that’s what you said. Gluten.”

DAD: “Yes, gluten. Which is not glue.”

AMELIE: “Isn’t it?”

DAD: “No. Although, come to think of it, ‘glue’s’ not a bad way of describing gluten.”

AMELIE: “So it is glue.”

DAD: “Yeah, alright.”

AMELIE: “Told you.”

The Gospel according to Amelie

DAD: “Did Jesus do any good?”

AMELIE: “He did lots of good things.”

DAD: “Did he? Alright, like what? Tell me two good things he did?”

AMELIE, enthusiastically: “Okay. Do you want me to make this up?”

DAD: “No, I’d rather it be the truth as you know it.”

AMELIE: “Okay. Well, he . . . well, God once helped a person stand up well.”

DAD: “Did he? Really? When did he do that?”

AMELIE: “Because there was this lady and she was like this (demonstrates a very crooked posture). She had a sore back and she’d never tried to stand up right. So God told her to stand up straight. And so she did. And that’s how God helped her.”

He’s a wonderful person

DAD, after Amelie had just told him what Christmas means: “Alright. So why, then, do we today still get stacks of Christmas presents on Christmas Day when it was all about Jesus?”

AMELIE: “Well, Father Christmas brings them.”

DAD: “Oh, it’s Father Christmas. And he’s not anything like God, is he? He’s different to God.”

AMELIE: “Yeah. He’s a wonderful person.”

Doesn’t sound like you knew much about them

I used to share a house in London in the 1980s with eleven other people I didn’t know. Isabella found this more than intriguing.

ISABELLA: “Well, I suppose if you didn’t like them or they wanted to attack you you could have ran out of the house and tried to live in the back garden or something late at night.”

DAD: “What? Attack me?”

ISABELLA: “Yeah. Because at least then if you were out of the house and they started to chase you you would have been able to get

away more easily. Like, you would have been able to go into a car or something and then drive off.”

DAD: “What for?”

ISABELLA: “So you could get away from them!”

DAD: “But they were nice people.”

ISABELLA: “Yeah, but that’s not what you knew to start off with. You only knew that later.”

About an hour later . . .

DAD, describing to Isabella how shared housing works: “The best number of people to share with is the number of people you think you can handle living with. It’s true, when I was in England about twenty years ago I had to share with eleven or twelve people—”

ISABELLA: “So you didn’t know their names? You just called them ‘blah, blah?’”

DAD: “No, no. I got to know their names.”

ISABELLA: “Well, why are you saying eleven or twelve people then? That doesn’t sound like you knew much about them.”

Not a good name

AMELIE: “I don’t like the name ‘God’.”

DAD: “Don’t you? Why’s that?”

AMELIE: “Because, ‘Here, God. C’mon God!’ sounds weird.”

Perhaps she thinks God is like a pet!

Toying with the idea

There’s probably little that would be more sadly inaccurate than our understanding of the predicament those starving in Africa face each day. When asked to bring to mind a single malnourished face with anything like the ease we’re able to call to mind our own

children’s faces, we quickly succumb to the effort. This incapacity, of course, is shared by our children who largely want to watch what we like to watch and therefore end up knowing about the sort of things we like to know about – which is rarely Africa. Occasionally, though, they can surprise us. As Isabella did one night recently.

ISABELLA, as she was tucking in some of her toy children: “Dad, would you rather be a child in Africa* or one of my toys?”

DAD: “Oh, one of your toys for sure.”

ISABELLA: “But you could get squeezed.”

DAD: “True. But that’s nothing compared to starving.”

ISABELLA: “So, you think my toys are pretty lucky? Even the ones in my shelves that aren’t my favourites and get tumbled around a lot?”

DAD: “Yep. Compared to the starving children in Africa I do.”

ISABELLA, a little contemplatively now and about to head off to bed: “Yeah. I know. I think they are too.”

*Sadly, the only images of African children Isabella appears to have in her mind are ones of starving children. Mind you, that’s probably the case for most of us. It’s rather depressing to think that footage of malnourished bodies are the only images many of us have when we think about children living in Africa.

The parrot sketch

Isabella, after a man came up to her while she was busking today and dropped three religious magazines into her guitar case instead of money: “Dad, that was so weird. I thought we were going to get some money.”

DAD: “Did you?”

ISABELLA: “Yeah. That’s why I smiled at him and said thank you. All I got, though, were

these three Watchtowers. About God.
(Sarcastically) Gee, thanks! I'm so happy!"

DAD: "Well—"

ISABELLA: "Oh! Look at this, Dad! (Shows front cover of one of the magazines that featured Noah with a parrot on his shoulder) See? I told you people in the olden days had parrots on their shoulders. That's what a lot of people did back then."

Isabella and I had had a lengthy discussion about pirates and parrots and wooden legs and eye patches and no matter how hard I tried to assure her not all pirates were so attired, she remained convinced they all were.

Technically speaking

ISABELLA: "Dad, smart people say this to show they're smart. They say 'technically'. They go 'technically speaking.'"

DAD: "Yeah, but that doesn't make them smart, Issy, just saying 'technically speaking'."

ISABELLA: "Yeah, I know. But that's how they try to do it the easy way."

A Close Encounter of an Adulterous Kind

We'd been watching Steven Spielberg's sci-fi classic *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. In one scene, in a moment of exhilaration at seeing the aliens' mothership, Roy and Jillian, two of the leading characters, share a kiss. Innocent enough, you might conclude. Not to Isabella and Holly, though. Earlier in the film, as he tried to make sense of his first encounter with an alien ship, Roy is seen constructing a mountain in his family's living room out of soil from his front lawn. Understandably, the lounge room was a mess, so much so that Roy's wife Veronica had bundled her and the kids off to her mother's.

HOLLY, at the parting of their lips: "Hey! He's having an affair! I can't believe it! He might

have had a chance of getting back with his wife, but not now. There's going to be no chance. Well, there wouldn't have been much of a chance anyway after what he did to their home and living room. But still. He might have gotten her back. Not now though."

ISABELLA: "I know. I can't believe he's gone and done that. That was so silly."

You've just not read that bit yet

ISABELLA: "I can't imagine you as Hitler, Dad. In the face, yes. But not in the personality. Did Hitler have any children?"

DAD: "No."

ISABELLA: "Didn't he? What about in the 'bunk thing'?"

DAD: "You mean the bunker. No, he didn't have any in there."

ISABELLA: "He had six, didn't he?"

DAD: "No, that was Goebbels."

ISABELLA: "What are they?"

DAD: "Goebbels wasn't a 'they'; he was part of a family."

ISABELLA: "Funny name for a family, Dad. Did Hitler go and shout at them?"

DAD: "I don't think so. Not directly. I think he liked them."

ISABELLA: "He shouted at everyone else."

DAD: "Yeah, I know."

ISABELLA: "Then he probably did. You've just not read that bit yet."

How would you know, Dad?

DAD, reading from The Diary of Anne Frank:

" 'Friday July 21, 1944

Dearest Kitty,

I'm finally getting optimistic. Now, at last, things are going well! They really are! Great news! An assassination attempt has been made on Hitler's life . . . This is the best proof we've had so far that many officers and generals are fed up with the war and would like to see Hitler sink into a bottomless pit, so they can establish a military dictatorship, make peace with the Allies, rearm themselves and, after a few decades, start a new war.'

I think she was being very cynical there, Issy. She wasn't showing much trust in there ever being ever-lasting peace, was she? She would have been rolling her eyes when she said that."

ISABELLA, rolling her eyes: "Oh, Dad!"

DAD: "What?"

ISABELLA: "You don't know if she would have been rolling her eyes then. She might have been . . . *(taps her leg)*."

DAD: "Tapping her leg?"

ISABELLA: "Yeah. Or her arm."

LAST WORD

Twelve'll do

I was rushing frantically around the house one Saturday morning recently trying to find the invitation to Amelie's friend's seventh birthday party so I could get the address off it. I knew the street name but, for the life of me, couldn't remember the number, when Amelie chimed in.

AMELIE, impatiently: "Let's make it '12', Dad."