

Adult Education

According to a popular stereotype, some parents feel threatened if their children want to become better educated than their parents. “You think you’re better than me?” is a common line in old movies where a blue-collar father ridicules his son’s dream of going to college and becoming an accountant. My wife Betsy and I have never taken this attitude but have instead encouraged our children to stay in school as long as their dreams, their abilities, and their student loans would allow. It therefore came as a shock when we discovered our children did not provide similar encouragement when we attempted to further our education.

This attitude came to our attention the other night, when Betsy and I were enjoying an after-dinner cup of coffee at the kitchen table. We’d cleared the table and put most of the dishes in the dishwasher, although the dog was still enthusiastically licking the frying pan Betsy had used to brown the meat. We’d excused our daughters from most of the clean-up because they both had homework to do. My youngest daughter was reading her high school history text while her older sister was solving problems for a college math course. Betsy and I were discussing the latest outrage in the Middle East when my younger daughter ordered the dog to lick more quietly.

I should at this point explain that Betsy and I have, at no small expense, provided both our daughters with private bedrooms equipped with desks and fully functional doors. They prefer to do their homework downstairs, however. On this evening my youngest had her books spread out in the dining room, which was next to the kitchen, while her sister was encamped in the sun room on the far side of the dining room. Ordinarily this is not a problem, as neither Betsy nor I have much need of the dining room after dinner and we’ve long ago abandoned any hopes we may have once harbored about inhabiting the sun room. Those hopes died the day we installed a big-screen TV in that room. Our older daughter immediately claimed that room for herself, faster and with more fervor than Christopher Columbus displayed when he claimed the New World for Spain.

When my daughter ordered the dog to lick quietly my first instinct was to defend the dog by resorting to reason. After all, this dog was barely capable of recognizing her own name, and even then she fared poorly unless you shortened her name to a single syllable. Asking this poor creature to comprehend a complex concept like “lick quietly” was expecting a bit much. My wife, however, was quicker to jump to the dog’s defense. Her response was to suggest that if my daughter objected to the noises the dog was making she was perfectly free to take her books up to her room, clear the piles of laundry off her desk, close the door, and finish her studies in blissful silence. This prompted an explanation from our daughter that this was not a feasible option because she was reading a used textbook which was therefore not clean enough to rest in her princess parlor. It was, however, OK to rest it on the dining room table because she was sitting at her brother’s place.

Neither Betsy nor I thought much of that explanation. My wife was more verbal in her rebuttal and a dialog between herself and my daughter ensued. During the course of this

conversation my daughter mentioned that what she really objected to was that my wife and I were talking too loudly while we sipped our coffee. She suggested that it would be best for all concerned if we would exile ourselves to our bedroom, dragging our coffee cups behind us. This suggestion drew even less praise from my wife than had the order for the dog to lick quietly. The discussion threatened to escalate into a dispute so I stepped in. I've always been a peacemaker, and I announced to all present that Betsy and I would retire to the upper floor just as soon as I finished doing the dishes.

The dog had done a pretty good job on the frying pan but my wife is very particular about her cooking implements so I judged it would be a good thing if I swirled a bit of soapy water in the skillet before returning it to the pantry. Somehow this swirling included a fair amount of banging against the kitchen sink, and I afterward I banged it against the stove once or twice for good measure. The rest of the dishes were not as amenable to noisemaking, but as I was putting the last items into the dishwasher I noticed a pair of spoons in the silverware rack. It occurred to me that I had never learned to play the spoons. In past years I had been able to play scales upon the piano, I tooted a few tunes on the saxophone, and I could struggle through "Turkey in the Straw" on the mandolin, but I had never mastered a percussion instrument. Here were two perfectly good and relatively clean spoons. "There's no time like the present" I thought to myself as I withdrew them.

I explained my ambition to my wife as I sat down at the table and made a few pitiful attempts at a riff. My wife allowed as how she had also long harbored a secret desire to play the spoons and she withdrew a suitable pair from the silverware drawer. I wasn't making much progress by myself but my wife had the inspiration to do a Google search on the subject and she soon found a You-Tube video on how to play the spoons. That video was most helpful. It showed us how to properly grip the spoons, told us which spoon should remain stationary and which should be free to move, and demonstrated the different effects that could be achieved by striking the spoons against your thigh, your other hand, and your outstretched fingers. My wife was working with a pair of teaspoons while I had tablespoons, so between us we covered both the soprano and the bass octaves.

My wife was doing a pretty fair rendition of a galloping horse and I was doing some freestyle jazz improvisation when both of our daughters appeared at the kitchen door, pleading for a little peace and quiet. Neither one of them complimented our performance or the rapid progress we were making in mastering this complex instrument. My younger daughter reminded me that I had promised to go upstairs after I finished the dishes. I pointed out that while spoons were technically classified as cutlery, when one uses the phrase "do the dishes" it is safe to assume they are including the cutlery as well. So in the general sense of the term, I was not yet finished with the dishes. It's amazing how childish a teenager can be when confronted with irrefutable logic like that.

Since it was obvious that our talent was not appreciated my wife and I reluctantly returned the spoons and adjourned to the bedroom. It was only later that I realized that the underlying cause of our children's disapproval was jealousy. We were mastering a skill that was beyond

them. They grew up in a world without Ed Sullivan, Captain Kangaroo, or any of the other fine cultural venues where you could hear really good spoon players. They could have encouraged us in our studies, hoping against hope that if they spent enough time understudying us they too could one day play the spoons. Not as well as Betsy and me, of course, but perhaps they could become their generation's virtuosos and pass this precious gift on to their children. Instead, like the stereotypical parents in those tired old movies, they ridiculed that which they could not master. In my mind I could hear them saying "You think you're better than us?"

Sigh. Right or wrong, their attitude definitely dampened my enthusiasm for the spoons. Maybe tomorrow I'll drag out my saxophone. After all, I was pretty good in Junior High. . .