

The Prairie Light Review

Volume 35 | Number 2

Article 20

Spring 5-1-2013

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Recommended Citation

Salem, Patrick J. (2013) "A Dialectician in Diapers," *The Prairie Light Review*: Vol. 35: No. 2, Article 20.
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/plr/vol35/iss2/20>

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A Dialectician in Diapers

Patrick J. Salem

My son, Tommy, is an asker of questions, and it makes me worry that he'll never get a good job. Like many middle-class, suburban kids, he's more interested in the metaphysics of ontology and dialectics than practical matters like potty training or the importance of clean hands.

He was three in October.

Every day he drives me deeper and deeper into the study of reason and logic with his constant questions about everything. Actually, he focuses mostly on two questions: "What?" and "Why?"

"What's that, Daddy?" he asked me early one morning, pointing at the oily maw of the hopper on an asphalt paver that a road crew left parked near our house overnight.

"That's where they pour the loose asphalt from the big dump trucks," I said.

"Why?"

"Because it's more efficient to lay blacktop with a machine."

"What's ee-fish-int?" he asked haltingly, tasting the new word.

"It's the method used to achieve maximum productivity."

"What's duck-tiv-ee?"

"It's the measured ratio of output to input especially in manufacturing. It's an important concept in economics."

"Why?"

"Well, jeez, I don't know," I said. "I mean that's essentially what the science of economics does, measuring individual productivity and efficiency—at least on the micro scale. On the macro, it's about interest rates and the market place."

He got real quiet then, like he was considering my answer. You could tell he was thinking because he went completely still, like a pointer near a covey of quail. I could see his little brain gears turning and turning, and I worried that I might have overloaded him conceptually.

Luckily, he's only two and a half. He spotted a large stone laying in the street near his green sandals, and he bent down to pick it up.

"Pocket, Dad," he said reaching for the flap on the thigh of my cargo shorts.

That's Tommy for, "Dad, I'm gonna put this rock in your pocket to keep for later so don't forget to pull it out before you send these to the laundry and make Mommy mad when the thing goes kathunk, kathunk, kathunk in the washer."

Tommy and I have a very complicated shorthand.

My wife wonders why I make the effort, and it's really hard to explain without telling you about the way my father answered similar questions when I was a kid. Like most parents back then, my father would often answer questions with the familiar, "Because I said so," which even now feels like the worst answer a par-

ent can give a kid. But my father was a master at giving bad answers. Like the time my sister showed him a photo of Mussolini in her Social Studies book, and Dad told her that the Italian dictator was my mom's cousin. (Mom's Italian, and Dad's Irish so he always had great fun on anything related to the topic.) My sister was really embarrassed the next day in school to learn what a horrible man her mom's cousin was. She came home crying and was inconsolable until my father finally admitted he was only kidding, and even then she wasn't sure because Dad's face never changed.

'Your dog is dead' was delivered with the same stiff face as 'We're having ice cream.'

One summer afternoon, back in the mid-70s, my dad and I were sitting on the front porch—it musta been a Saturday or Sunday because Dad wasn't at the mill and the baseball game was on the radio—when I suddenly noticed that the sky was the bluest blue I'd ever seen, like if I tried hard enough, I'd be able to see the stars through the glare.

"Hey Pop," I said. The Sun-Times in front of his face kinda rattled so I knew he was listening. "Why's the sky so blue?"

He didn't even have to think about it, the answer came to him so easily.

"Because if it was green you'd never know how long the grass was.

Speaking of the grass, you need to mow the lawn."

As I pushed that old cylinder mower back and forth across the grass, I tried to imagine a green sky. Before I finished, I found myself lying down with my chin pressed hard into the ground, my neck strained, and my wide eyes trying to see the blue sky through the green grass. I used a piece of broken glass as a green filter and confirmed that my dad was right. It's hard to see green grass if the sky looks green too. It was really the beginning of my interest in science.

Another time I saw a road sign on a bridge that said, "20 Ton Max Gross Vehicle Weight."

"Hey, Pop, what's that sign mean?" I asked him.

"That's the most a truck can weigh when full to cross the bridge, son."

"How do they know?" I asked.

The words just seemed to come out without him even pausing.

"They drive bigger and bigger trucks over the bridge until it collapses, then they rebuild the bridge and weigh the last truck that made it across safely." It was years before I learned about the principles of diffusion and mechanical engineering, and I felt a little foolish for ever believing my dad. The older I got, the more I realized that just about every answer he gave me was nonsense. Sort of like when I learned the truth about Santa and the Easter Bunny, and I'm still waiting for them to tell me the truth about God.

So when my wife gave birth to our son, I determined that I'd never dismiss him, never feed him misinformation, and I've been pretty good about it even though it's getting harder and harder to answer his questions.

Last week, we were walking through the woods near our house when we came upon a makeshift headstone carved from a piece of sandstone.

"What's on that rock?" Tommy asked.

The markings on the stone looked like a kid carved them with a screwdriver.

"Puppy 7-2-87 7-9-87."

"What's that?"

"It's a grave marker," I said, wondering about the death of a week-old dog nearly twenty-five years ago.

"What's a grave?"

"It's where you bury something that died."

"Why?"

I was torn between the practical and the ritual of burial so I settled on a mix of both.

"We bury people and pets that we loved to honor their memory and so we can't smell the putrescence as they decay," I said.

"What's decay?"

"It's when organic matter transitions to less complicated structures where each component part separates on an elemental level."

"Why?"

"I don't know, Tommy. Some people say that dead people decay because their souls no longer inhabit their bodies. Other people say that nature will always seek simplicity."

"Why?"

"Because the human body is governed by a complex relationship between tissues and axonal conduction that is extremely complicated. Such complexity can only hold together for so long, kinda like trying to keep lots of plates spinning on long sticks: inevitably they'll begin to fall and break."

"Why?"

"Why do things fall?" I ask, trying to understand his question.

"Yeah," he says as we begin to walk away from the spot where Puppy was buried.

"Things fall because of gravity."

"What's that?" he said, his tiny hand squeezing mine. It's tough to walk like this because the path through the woods is narrow, and I have to watch for roots and branches that might trip us so I stopped.

"It's a relatively weak force that tends to attract objects toward the center of the earth. It's also the measured relationship of attraction between two objects proportional to their masses. Newton described it pretty well with his law of universal gravitation, and Einstein clarified it with his theory of general relativity."

"Why?"

"Because it's part of man's nature to try to understand the order of things, to glean the truth about the universe from disparate observations."

"Why?"

"Truthfully, Tommy, it goes back to trying to prove the existence of God," I said recalling a long ago lecture in physics class at St. Ignatius.

"Do you know what God is?" I asked, anticipating his next question.

"Yeah," he said. He bent down to look closely at a swarm of ants on the

forest floor.

"What?" I asked.

"Mommy is God."

I almost laughed, but he wore this look of serenity that I'd only seen on the face of a cancer patient drifting off on a sea of morphine. I thought about what wisdom he must possess to be so certain of this, to know with such conviction that his mother is God. I thought about how my teaching him complex concepts and answering his dialectical inquiries to their ontological conclusions. My father wouldn't recognize this form of child-rearing.

"Why is Mommy God, Tommy?" I asked.

"Because I said so."

That's as good an answer as anything I could come up with.

Kale

Elizabeth Marlowe

