

Making discoveries and rediscoveries all over again

Forty-five minutes into the English Department subcommittee meeting on drafting a grading rubric for the English 101 final essay assignment, I folded up my notebook and made an announcement to my colleagues: "I'm sorry, but I have to go paint a ceramic owl."

My colleagues on this committee are all non-breeders; most are younger than me and have great shoes, hip eyewear and are lovely people. They were accepting, if disappointed in my bailing early. I shrugged and said simply, "I chose to reproduce."

I actually try not to be the person who makes non-kid-havers look at endless pictures of my six-year old daughter on my cell phone, and I seldom rave publicly about Ramona's most recent observations. ("Mommy, isn't it kind of funny that it's called a chili pepper? Get it? Get it?")

I remember having great shoes, hip eyewear and all the time in the world to invent interesting and funny handouts on avoiding sentence fragments or reflect deeply on a foreign-language movie. I remember the act of tolerating breeders, assuming that I found their children interesting. I think, too, of my favorite quote from the TV show "Boardwalk

Empire," when gangster Arnold Rothstein is asked whether he has children, and he replies, "No, but I'm told that they often say unexpected and amusing things." This is true, but the inflection on Rothstein's words implies the added clause, "but please don't bore me with what your kid said, did, made in preschool art class, vomited, excreted, etc." I don't want to be that parent.

If I were, however, to soliloquize about the joys of parenting to my cheerfully childless colleagues, now that I am, six years in and kind of getting the hang of it, I'd start with the thing I least expected and find most interesting about parenting. The opportunity to do kid stuff with a kid who was once a baby, but is now hitting developmental milestones to beat the band, on her way to becoming a person.

Author Tom Robbins once wrote, "It is never too late to have a happy childhood." The chance to be kid-like is among the many gifts that Ramona forces upon me.

For instance, painting ceramic owls. No joke. When I was a child, I remember my mother dropping me off at the odd little cobwebby ceramics shop in my neighborhood, putting on one of my dad's flannel shirts backwards for a smock, and slathering paint onto a clay pumpkin or owl or Santa or Easter egg, depending on the season. When we got our Chinook Book this year via a school fundraiser, Ro immediately (she can now read) located the coupon for Pottery Fun and insisted we go that very Friday—the day of the week when we typically have an adventure.

Ro doesn't have aftercare, and I pick her up at 3 o'clock. I decamped my committee meeting, grabbed the girl and drove her instead to Mimosa Studios, the paint-your-own pottery shop close to home on Alberta.

Childhood revisited, I thought! Artsy bonding!

The thought lasted until we crossed the threshold of the studio and Ro realized that she would only be painting pottery, not making pottery. "But the coupon said pottery fun, mommy! It's fun to make pottery! It's not fun to paint pottery!" she shouted through indignant tears. At the artfully arranged tables clustered with pigments and brushes, the docile children and their mothers, adding embellishments to their coffee mugs and piggy banks, raised their eyes to my little banshee screaming in the doorway.

Childhood, like adulthood, kind of sucks sometimes.

Ro was upset because she read the language literally—and I was reminded of what a difficult process it was learning all the nuances of the English language and all of the hidden meanings everywhere. As in when Ro's dad was explaining why he didn't push a yellow light on the way home from school recently by saying, "The last thing I want to do is hurt someone," to which she replied, "Do you mean that's the last thing you want to do today?" Childhood is full of little misunderstandings that can produce frustration, shame and more frustration.

But it's also a pretty flexible place to be, and a tremendous point of discovery. I knelt to hug Ro in the ceramics shop and pointed to the wall of animals and dishes and asked if she might like to at least look at what there was to paint before we left. Heaving one of those choking-back-tears-shivery sighs, she pulled herself together and indeed, located an inquisitive-looking little owl that caught her fancy. We pulled up chairs to a table that had room next to a nice mom speaking French-accented English to her daughter, who was painting a Snow

White, and started choosing colors.

Our conversation ran to how excited Ro was to bring AJ, the class pet (a bearded dragon fond of crickets and lettuce) home next weekend for our first try as the Weekend Custodial Class Pet Family. I made no secret of the fact that I am jazzed to host AJ, who sort of clings to your shirt when you hold him and makes a kind of solemn, world-weary, lizardy eye contact. I never had a lizard growing up, but now I get to do that with my kid, whose color scheme for the owl she finished in good time and great cheer (blue head, yellow chest, orange tail) was eccentric, but charming. "Mommy, can we come back next week and paint a dog?"

On the drive home, I remembered the time when I could barely imagine having a child. I remembered the little nickering feeling a decade ago, at 28, when I arrived as emergency babysitting backup for a friend's 4-year-old to find the child naked and covered with orange circles done in marker. "What are you doing?" I had asked. "Obviously, I'm drawing circles on myself. Do you need glasses?" the kid who was not my kid replied.

I was hooked by children saying unexpected and amusing things. What would it be like to corral one of those creatures from the cradle on? To be there for the kid as they make the discoveries, to rediscover, to learn how to see from that perspective and respond and help? I had said to that kid, "No, I don't. Do you want to draw some circles on me, too?"

My colleagues were kind as I left my meeting, and one, a young novelist going places, said, "I want to go paint an owl right now! I think I've gone right past the baby urge and into kid envy."



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