

INTRODUCTION

Dear Reader,

If you've already read an introduction to this project, feel free to skip ahead to the first letter in this chapter. If not, allow me to explain what's happening here.

A little over 10 years ago, I started writing a blog called "Truths and Wonders." At the time, I was feeling a bit lost professionally and intellectually, but I had found my life's true calling: raising three daughters alongside the woman I love.

In retrospect, the blog was really an attempt to find my own way by helping my daughters find theirs. My best posts tended to start with two words: "Dear Daughters."

Earlier this year, I decided to go back through the blog to compile the best of its contents into a book, something my daughters could hold instead of just scroll. I wound up creating a list of 50 letters—some already written, some not—that I'm now (re)writing, editing, and planning to share in print. Together, these letters will attempt to convey the best advice I have for living wisely and well, while also (loosely) relating the story of my life so far.

Notably, my daughters don't much need my advice anymore. Ten years on, they have grown into remarkable young women whose guidance I need as much as they need mine. Clearly, the effort at this point is mostly about me finding my own way and telling my own story.

And there's nothing wrong with that.

Memories and stories are among the most important products of

any human mind. They are central to how we make sense of our lives—I of mine, you of yours, we of ours. After ten years of blogging and 55 of living, I’m convinced that the effort to craft and curate them is part of how we become the humans we’re capable of being—for ourselves and for the people we love.

Over the coming months, I’ll be posting the chapters as I work on the full collection. I welcome your ideas and feedback. My working title for the book is “Wonders All the Way Down,” for reasons that will become clear by the end.

What follows here is Chapter 2, with ten letters based on my transition into adulthood.

If what I write helps you wonder and smile and think, I will have done my job, even if you’re not one of my dear daughters. Even, in the end, if you’re just a wiser future me, reading from 10 more years down the road.

Best,

Steve

CHAPTER TWO:
Becoming an Adult

The Characters Inside Are What Counts

What I learned from surviving life in Ike.

Dear Daughters,

In the fall of 1989, I headed off to college at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, VA. (Go Dukes!) I lived in a dormitory there that has since been condemned and torn down: Ikenberry Hall. Nostalgia wants me to tell you that life at "Ike" was all sunshine and light. Careful consideration leads to a somewhat different conclusion.

First off, "Ike" had the amenities and design sensibilities of a minimum-security prison. Our "suite" there consisted of three whitewashed cinderblock cells arranged around a 10×12 common area. The latter was furnished only with a rickety coffee table and a brown twill loveseat that somehow smelled equally of industrial-strength cleaning supplies and spilled beer.

Thanks to one of my suitemates, the rickety table was soon topped with a 19-inch Zenith TV. This received exactly one local channel, and only when it didn't rain. The TV mainly served as an elaborate coaster until someone connected up an old Nintendo system, which subsequently supported the gaming habits of a dozen pasty guys in our dorm. Within a week or two, we also had a pyramid of empty Milwaukee's Best beer cans in one corner. These stood as a sort of shrine to our newfound freedom (as well as our lack of taste). They also added to the stale-beer smell.

We had no air conditioning, no cell phones, and only one computer—though we did have a lively running battle over music. From one side of the suite, my buddy, Dave "Pee Wee" McBride, kept up a near-perpetual flow of Led Zeppelin, working regularly through the band's entire oeuvre. From the other side of the suite, my roommate, Doug "Piano Man" Glickman, kept up his own perpetual flow of Billy Joel. Doug loved Joel's "Greatest Hits" album so much he would listen to it straight through, flipping from side one to side two to side one to side two to ... you get the picture.

Simply put: Ikenberry wasn't pretty. It smelled weird. And its occupants often behaved strangely.

What's more, I wasn't always happy there, especially at first. My high school girlfriend and I had broken up just before I left. We told everyone it was mutual, including ourselves, but I'm sure we both knew it was her idea. Plus, I was off in a new place, away from my family and friends—no longer an athlete, no longer a guy in a band, no longer a recognized face.

It's enough to make anyone feel a bit lonely and scared, waking up in a smelly, alien world, amid unfamiliar faces. It's also enough to unearth some deeply human insecurities: The fear that everyone else has it all figured out and that we're being left behind. The fear that we're truly alone.

But that, dear daughters, is the last thing you actually need to fear. Because you're not alone even in feeling that way. In fact, I guarantee that nearly every person you meet—essentially anywhere—will have similar feelings.

You're worried that you don't know what you're doing? So are they.

You're worried that you won't be good enough? So are they.

You're worried that you'll never find the perfect place in this world, where everything finally makes sense? So, to some degree, is every sane person you will ever meet.

Because the (not-so) secret truth is that we're all just finding our own ways through. We don't have a secret code, because there is no secret code. We don't have it all figured out, because life isn't a set of figures.

Life is not a mystery, filled with clues to be unraveled. Nor is it a math problem waiting to be solved. It's more like an adventure story, composed of escapades, quests, and discoveries, not to mention a bunch of bizarre but often lovable characters.

And what always comes next is just the next chapter in your own story. The adventures may get bigger, and the tension may build. But most importantly, the central character keeps developing. She gets smarter and bolder and ever-more-interesting. She discovers truths about herself and the world around her. She meets new people, some of whom are as smart and interesting and adventurous as she is—if also just as frequently confused.

Some of these characters turn out to be friends she had yet to imagine. People like Pee-Wee McBride and Piano Man Glickman. Not to mention Todd "Bam-Bam" Walton, Tim "Foo-Man" Pfau, Kevin "Keebler" Johnson, and Chris "The Dog" Brown.

Of the fourteen guys who lived on my hall in Ikenberry, six of us chose to live together sophomore year, too. Five of us became fraternity brothers. And four of us (at least) were in each other's

weddings.

In other words, we may have been noisy and smelly and none too pretty — and I, at least, may have been a little insecure. But we also became a band of brothers. And as I found my way through school, I discovered many other brothers (and sisters), too, through a series of new adventures.

Some involved Greek life; others Shakespeare. Some involved parties; others late-night cram sessions. A bunch involved studying abroad in Italy. And the most important of all? That one's a love story, of course. It involves a girl named Mary, though you know her better as "Mom." (More on that one below!)

In sum: When I arrived at Ikenberry Hall, I didn't have it all figured out. Sometimes I felt scared and alone. Sometimes I made mistakes or did stupid things. Sometimes I didn't think I would make it through.

And that, dear daughters, is life.

I stumbled and bumbled but found a way. I made some truly remarkable friends. I learned from my mistakes. And, in time, it all became part of an excellent adventure—the story through which I continued to become myself, the story I'm still telling here.

One recurrent theme in that story: The condition of the building matters less than its inhabitants. The characters inside are what counts.

Love,
Dad

When Poetry Closes a Door, Italy Opens a Window

What I learned from my struggles in summer school poetry.

Dear Daughters,

The next step on my journey to adulthood happened in the summer of 1992.

I was twenty-one years old, three-fourths of the way through college, and living alone for the first time in my life. I'd stayed at JMU that summer to take classes, including one on poetry writing. Thanks to Ms. Aspinall, I'd been writing poems and songs since high school. I figured the workshop would help me get better at it. Maybe even "discovered." A silly thought, in hindsight, but one I had.

Then came a series of setbacks. First, the job I was supposed to have for the summer disappeared. Apparently, the local pool company "over-hired." Then, while mowing lawns to make up for my lack of income, I caught the worst case of poison ivy I've ever had. Then, the night before my first collegiate poetry-writing workshop, a girl I'd been interested in called me to tell me she was pregnant and planning to marry someone else.

I knew immediately the baby wasn't mine. This isn't that kind of "becoming adult" story. This is a story about my failure to become a poet—and how that worked out.

The next day, I showed up for poetry-writing class. Our first assignment: compose a traditional 14-line Shakespearean sonnet in iambic pentameter. I wrote about a boy sitting alone in his apartment, watching the sunset over the Blue Ridge Mountains. I didn't mention the poison ivy. I did count out the ten beats per line, make all the right rhymes, and follow the sonnet rules exactly.

When I read the poem aloud in class the next day, a guy in a tie-dye T-shirt snorted and said, "I find the slavish following of the sonnet rules simultaneously juvenile and pretentious."

A girl with red curly hair came to my defense. "You would," she said to tie-dye boy, rolling her eyes. This was not their first poetry workshop together.

Then she turned to me and smiled. "I like it," she said. "You're probably the only one of us who actually wrote a sonnet."

This was true. But tie-dye boy's critiques still landed. Worse, I soon realized I wasn't among the best poets in a summer school workshop in Harrisonburg, Virginia, let alone a wider circle. So much for my secret dream of being an undiscovered poet.

Dear daughters, I had just turned 21, but my life was no party. No job. No girlfriend. No poetic prospects to speak of. Living alone in Harrisonburg with a nasty case of poison ivy, now swollen into purple welts.

With nothing better to do, I decided to read ahead for the fall. I had already bought the textbook for a course with Ralph Cohen, JMU's resident Shakespeare expert. And the sonnet assignment had prompted me to crack it open.

Feeling sad and sorry for myself on an otherwise random

Tuesday, I grabbed a Milwaukee's Best from the fridge, sat down at the kitchen table in our apartment, and started reading *Romeo and Juliet*.

I already knew the basic story, of course: "A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life," and all that. I had been forced to sit through a bad movie version in a high school English class. Still, when I came to the final scene of the play, I found myself reading with tears in my eyes.

Here's the part that got me (spoiler alert!): Juliet realizes Romeo has killed himself with poison because he wrongly believed that Juliet was already dead. She kisses him in hopes of poisoning herself and then cries out in grief: "Thy lips are warm!"

It's a shattering moment in the play, and it's not just the star-crossed love that does it. It's how everything comes so close to going differently. It's the warmth of Romeo's lips, Juliet's realization of how recently he died, the proximity of a narrowly missed life that pushes Juliet toward her own death moments later.

"If only Juliet had woken up thirty seconds earlier," I thought. "If only the friar's letter had arrived on time. If only any of a dozen small things had gone differently, everything might have worked out."

Structurally, *Romeo and Juliet* is a comedy of errors that suddenly crashes into a tragedy, a rom-com that winds up with both protagonists dead in a heap.

"The line between comedy and tragedy is thin," I realized. "With a little luck or one wiser step, the one can turn into the other." I wrote a note to this effect in blue pen in a copy of *Shakespeare's Complete Works* that still sits on my bookshelf today.

And that, dear daughters, proved a pivotal moment in my journey toward adulthood. Because the next thought that occurred to me was this: I have a say in whether comedy or tragedy prevails. Not the final say, perhaps, but genuine agency. How I frame what happens, and how I respond, makes a difference.

I'm not claiming this was an original insight. Nor do I think it was particularly wise. More like "ordinarily wise," if there is such a thing. Perhaps just "adult."

Call it what you will, it was the moment I started to come to terms with the idea that I really could—and should—take more responsibility for myself. Not for circumstances spinning outside my control: the disappearing job, the girl marrying someone else, the poison ivy swelling beneath my skin. But for how I responded to all of them.

It's in the nature of circumstances to spin out of control. It's in the nature of other people to make choices that aren't about you. You can't control timing or luck or the thousand little accidents that shape a life. The main thing you can control, most of the time, is your own responses.

That realization reconfigured the world for me, though I wouldn't—and couldn't—have explained it that way then.

That fall, I took my first (of four) Shakespeare classes with Dr. Cohen. I wrote a paper about *Romeo and Juliet* and its underlying comedic structure. In the paper, I described how Juliet seizes agency in the play, despite being a 13-year-old girl in a deeply sexist world. I wrote about how Shakespeare reveals her intelligence and her agency, and how he positions her as the play's most "adult" character, age and sex be damned.

At the end of the semester, during a conversation about that paper, Dr. Cohen mentioned he was leading a study-abroad program to Florence, Italy, the following year. "You should come," he said.

What happened next is the subject of my next letter.

Before you read that one, consider this. Sometimes life will spin out of your control: A job might fall through; a secret dream might suddenly disappear. Perhaps you'll wind up alone on a Tuesday, with purple welts and the cold comfort of Milwaukee's Best.

In those moments, remember to breathe. And remember that the one thing you can always still hope to control is yourself—the next step you take into a future that's still unfolding.

Remember, too, that the universe works in mysterious ways: When poetry closes a door, Italy may open a window. Be a person who's prepared to climb through.

That, in the end, is where adulthood begins.

Love,
Dad

Seize the Semester (And Ask the Girl Out!)

What I learned from the best advice Mom ever gave me.

Dear Daughters,

On a gray Friday afternoon in December 1992, my Shakespeare professor, Dr. Ralph Cohen, changed my life. At the end of a meeting focused on my *Romeo and Juliet* term paper, Dr. Cohen offered up an idea.

"You know," he said. "I'm leading a study abroad group in the fall in Florence, Italy. There are a couple of open spots left. You should come. You can help me study Shakespeare's Italian sources. We might even be able to get you a scholarship."

At the time, I wasn't sure if he was just making polite conversation, but the idea of going to Italy intrigued me. I was looking for a new direction, and I had caught a bit of a Shakespeare bug.

There was just one problem: I was set to graduate in May. Spending a semester in Italy would mean spending a lot more of my time, and my parents' money, on college, scholarship or not.

"I'll think about it," I told Dr. Cohen.

He smiled and nodded, the way you do when you think "I'll

think about it" means "I'm not currently saying 'no' out loud."

That night, I called my mom, the person I called with everything important. I explained the situation and said, "I don't know. There's definitely part of me that really wants to go, but I'd have to delay graduation ..."

I closed my eyes and waited for her reply. I expected her to say I was out of my mind, suggesting I should delay graduation to spend a semester in Italy, taking courses I technically didn't need and learning a language I had never once spoken before. But without hesitating, she said, "Are you kidding? You should definitely go to Italy."

"You think so?" I asked.

"Absolutely," she said. "Studying abroad in Italy with your favorite professor? That's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. When you have one of those, you can't pass it up."

It was undoubtedly great advice. With Mom's encouragement, I applied for the program, got the scholarship, delayed graduation, and went to Florence—where I learned to speak (a little) Italian, discovered the history of art, and, most importantly, met a young woman named Mary—the woman you now know as "Mom."

Remarkably, though, that advice—to seize the semester—was only the second-best advice Mom ever gave me. The best advice came later, when she and Dad visited me in Florence.

On their penultimate night in Italy, the three of us went to dinner at my favorite pizzeria. There, I talked and talked—about Italy, my adventures during the semester, and Mary, with whom I had become good friends but nothing more.

As I babbled on about art history, the Medici, and even the band I had formed in Florence (called “Manface”), Mom reached across the table and took me by the wrist.

“Steven,” she said, using the full, official version of my name, as only she could, “If you like this girl Mary so much, why don’t you ask her out?”

Best. Advice. Ever. I have 30+ years and three dear daughters to prove it.

When I asked Mom later how she had known, she shrugged.

“Your eyes lit up every time you mentioned her,” she said.

This was true. Some part of me had been smitten with Mary since our first real conversation, earlier in the semester, when a mutual friend had said, “You two should get married someday; you’d make a perfect couple.”

We had both run with the idea immediately, covering—in our first extended conversation—everything from what we would name our children to where we would live and how many dogs we would have. Much of what we said has since come true.

Better put: much of what we said we have since made true. We do, in the end, deserve some credit for it.

In hindsight, it’s ridiculous that it took six weeks and a push from Mom for me to move forward with Mary after that first conversation. Thankfully, I eventually got with the program.

I learned along the way that I sometimes struggle to recognize and express the depth of my own feelings and to take risks that ought to be obvious. Eventually, I realized that Mom—and later Mary, and now each of you—could show me things about

myself that I couldn't find in a book or my own reflections.

We each need others to show us our blind spots—and sometimes to give us the advice we need most. Advice like “Go to Italy!,” “Seize the semester!,” and “Ask the girl out!”

Also, listen to your mother. She usually knows best.

Love,
Dad

In Bocca al Lupo

What I learned from the best gift I've ever given.

Dear Daughters,

Early in December 1993, I purchased the best gift I've ever given—a gift with implications for your very existence.

At the time, your mother and I were finishing our studies abroad program in Florence. We had been dating for just two weeks, but we were already pretty serious, having spent the last three months touring Italy together with a small group of fellow Americans.

For my part, I was already head over heels, as my mother had recently noticed. So much so that I agreed to walk with Mary to a pottery shop called "Migliori" that was a good thirty minutes from where we lived. I can promise you I had never gone so much as three steps out of my way to visit a pottery shop before.

When we reached Migliori, Mary pointed to a set of bowls and plates in the front window, all of them hand-painted with red and blue shapes that looked to me like whimsical flower petals.

"Those are the ones," she said. "I love them."

She opened the door with one hand and pulled me in by the other.

Inside were white lights, slate floors, and brightly colored

ceramics of all shapes and sizes, from giant pasta bowls to tiny garden gnomes. There were hundreds, perhaps thousands, of pieces, no two of which were exactly alike. Each was uniquely crafted, not in the manner of an amateur, whose pieces all come out slightly misshapen, but in the manner of a true artist, who varies her touch precisely to suit the surfaces she works on.

Mary's eyes widened at the sight of it all, and she began to examine the collection closely.

I was mostly examining her, until I noticed an old woman behind the counter examining me. The woman was tall and slender and impeccably dressed, with a green-and-yellow scarf around her neck. She was eyeing me with something approaching suspicion.

I nodded and said, "*Buona sera*," the appropriate evening greeting.

She half-nodded in reply and left it at that.

For the next half hour, Mary moved through the store selecting her favorite pieces—bowls, plates, cups and saucers, many with that same red-and-blue theme. Meanwhile, I watched Mary, and the old Migliori woman watched me.

When it was time to ring up (and wrap up) Mary's pieces, we realized there was a problem: Mary was planning to travel to Prague with a friend on her way home to America. She couldn't possibly carry all of the pieces she wanted. In particular, the cups and saucers she had chosen were simultaneously too delicate and too bulky for such a trip.

After an agonizing moment, Mary reckoned with the inevitable and decided to leave the cups and saucers behind.

"Oh well," she said, and she asked the old woman to wrap up the other pieces.

Thirty minutes later we were home.

Forty-eight hours after that, Mary had left for Prague, and I was packing my bags for the journey back to Virginia. Before I left, though, I braved a cold breeze and a steady drizzle to make the walk back to Migliori.

I arrived just as the old woman was preparing to lock up for the evening. She stood in the doorway as I approached, once again eyeing me with suspicion.

"*Le tazze*," I said. "*Vorrei le tazze*." ("The cups. I want the cups.")

For a moment, she looked at me like I was crazy—as well you might if a 22-year-old man approached you in the street saying "I want the cups!" in a strange accent.

Then the recognition dawned. First in her eyes. Then in a smile that nearly turned into a laugh.

"*Per la ragazza*," she said. ("For the girl.")

"*Si, si*," I said.

She spent the next fifteen minutes carefully wrapping the cups and saucers for me, smiling and nodding all the while.

To this day, I don't know how much of our story the old woman really understood. I didn't speak Italian well enough to explain, and she didn't speak any English. But evidently my actions didn't need much translation.

As I handed her the money, she briefly took my hand.

"In bocca al lupo," she said.

At the time, I didn't understand this Italian idiom, which literally translates to "into the wolf's mouth!" But I smiled and muttered "*grazie*" anyway.

I later learned that "*in bocca al lupo*" means "good luck." It's used in opera the way actors say "break a leg." So, in a sense, the old woman was saying, "Good luck with your show, boy! Put on a good performance!"

The good news is, I did.

When Mary got back from Italy, she had a layover at Dulles Airport. I hand-delivered the cups to her then.

She showed them to her mother when she got home, and her mother approved—of the beautiful cups and of the smitten boy who had carried them back from Migliori for her daughter. (Not a bad way to make a first impression on your mother-in-law!)

La ragazza and I have been crafting a life together ever since. We still have one of the Migliori cups. I recently drank coffee from it on our 30th wedding anniversary.

It's a beautiful object, no doubt. And it's made significantly more beautiful by playing a part in a much larger story—a story about how lucky you can get from venturing out in a cold drizzle and speaking bad Italian for the sake of someone you love. Something to think about as you consider the gifts you most want to give, as well as the ones you most want to receive.

In bocca al lupo!

Love,
Dad

Everybody Knows Something You Don't

What I learned from my first real job.

Dear Daughters,

In my first real job after college, I worked as a litigation paralegal at Sonnenschein, a large Chicago law firm with offices in New York, LA, and Washington, DC.

I was twenty-three years old, a graduate of James Madison University, and wearing ties regularly for the first time in my life. All around me were people who had fancier degrees than I had and weren't shy about it. The attorneys had law degrees and state bar memberships. The other paralegals were Ivy League graduates or held official paralegal certificates.

I was the one "state school" kid in the bunch, and I wasn't sure I belonged: One of the partners referred to me as "the salt of the Earth," which I took as a backhanded compliment at best. But I was considering law school, I needed a job in the meantime, and Sonnenschein was willing to hire me for the tidy sum of \$23,600 per year. So I showed up, worked hard, and tried to learn.

One Saturday afternoon, I was in the office doing prep work for an upcoming case. (Saturday work was common for litigation paralegals.) Two of the attorneys I worked for were debating legal strategy in the hallway outside the office I shared with

another paralegal when one of them used the phrase "hoist with his own petard."

The other attorney stopped him. "Wait," he said, "What's a petard?"

"It's something from jousting," the first attorney replied, with the casual confidence of a man who had never been wrong in his life. "Think medieval knights. Like a lance or something."

I knew this was wrong. I had spent the better part of my last years of college studying Shakespeare, and the phrase "hoist with his own petard" comes from my all-time favorite play: *Hamlet*. Act 3, Scene 4, to be precise—where (spoiler alert!) Hamlet describes his plan to double-cross Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, catching them in a trap of their own making.

A petard was not a jousting implement. It was an early explosive device, something like a primitive land mine used to blow open castle gates. To be "hoist with your own petard" was to be blown up by your own bomb.

Always anxious to share my insights—not to mention talk Shakespeare—I informed the two attorneys of their error. Both looked at me with patronizing smiles. They knew I had studied Shakespeare, or I thought they did. But they didn't rate me as an authority on anything. They were high-powered litigators. I was a lowly paralegal.

People in Shakespeare's time, they informed me, had no knowledge of explosives (wrong!). The phrase clearly referred to something more medieval (also wrong!). I was welcome to my opinion, but they were busy and important men.

I was promptly dispatched to fetch a document.

When I got home that night, I dug through my notes on *Hamlet* and confirmed what I had told them. The word "petard" actually derives from the French "péter," meaning to break wind. The early explosive device made a sound not unlike a very loud, very destructive fart. (I found this hilarious at the time, since the attorneys were themselves so full of hot air.) Shakespeare definitely wasn't talking about jousting.

Did I inform the attorneys that I had confirmed my claims?

Nope. I didn't think it was worth it. Ultimately, the meaning of petard was a trivial matter to them—and pretty much everyone else. But I had learned something important from the exchange.

These men weren't interested in what a paralegal had to say on any subject, no matter how germane to the present case. They had been to law school. They had passed the bar. A twenty-three-year-old who had partly memorized *Hamlet* was not a credible source, even if he did have a brushed-up knowledge of Shakespeare.

This was, of course, a form of foolishness.

What struck me most was their confidence. They were brazenly willing to assert something false with the full weight of their law-degreed authority, as if confidence could do the work of actual knowledge.

I saw similar foolishness elsewhere at the firm. Two of the Ivy League paralegals were so convinced of their own intelligence they regularly made careless mistakes—because they believed the basic documentation we did was beneath them.

Meanwhile, the legal secretaries were often the best-informed people in the building, despite their lack of elite degrees. They knew which courts and judges were sticklers, which attorneys

did the best work, and who really made decisions within the firm.

The best of them regularly corrected errors in the attorneys' writing and thinking under the auspices of word processing. Institutionally invisible, they were nonetheless directly "in the know." Something similar is true in most businesses, I would later learn.

Ultimately, I decided not to go to law school. Instead, I wrote a paper about *Hamlet*—specifically about time being "out of joint" and what it means to be called to set things right when you're not sure you're up to the task. That paper helped me win a fellowship to graduate school, where I studied (and later taught) rhetoric—and where I eventually got to work as a researcher at the Folger Shakespeare Library.

I never saw an actual petard, but I did see pictures of one. And I still think of those attorneys whenever I hear that line.

Make no mistake: expertise matters. It's worth taking the time to learn a subject well, and it's wise to respect those who have earned credentials based on their expertise. But never forget that expertise is a mile deep and an inch wide.

The attorneys who dismissed me that Saturday afternoon were more credentialed, experienced, and knowledgeable than I was. They were also, on the matter of petards, wrong. Worse, they were oblivious to potential correction because their expertise in one domain had become a habit of not listening in others.

You can know almost everything about one subject and still know almost nothing about something else. And everybody you will ever meet knows something you don't.

All of the wisest people I have known—including several

amazing, wonderful, brilliant attorneys—have understood this truth. They increase their expertise without becoming incurious. They know that the person across the table, or across the cubicle wall, always has unique experiences and perspectives to share. Even if that person happens to be a twenty-three-year-old Shakespeare fanatic who's mainly there to fetch documents.

Confidence isn't knowledge, and expertise isn't wisdom. The insight you need may be sitting down the hall right now, in the head of some coworker who has the lived experience you lack. Wisdom is the habit of standing up, walking down that hall, and asking her what she knows—then listening carefully.

Love,
Dad

Plight Your Troth

What I learned from not writing my wedding vows.

Dear Daughters,

Two months before your mother and I got married, we sat down with our officiant, James Lamkin, to discuss our wedding ceremony. James was the pastor at Ravensworth Baptist Church, where I'd grown up. He knew my family well, and he'd agreed to officiate our wedding even though we weren't having it at RBC.

We met him at the church on a warm May afternoon. Your mom and I sat across from him in his office, probably looking a little nervous. Thankfully, James had a wide smile, kind eyes, and a hearty laugh.

"So," he said, leaning back in his chair. "Tell me what you're thinking about your vows. Writing your own? Looking for something more traditional?"

"We don't want to write our own," your mother said.

"We thought it would be nice to use traditional words," I explained.

"But we're not interested in any talk about 'obeying'," your mother added.

James smiled. "Got it," he said. "Traditional but not too traditional. We're not going back to the Dark Ages here."

We both chuckled.

"Back then," he said, "the vows ended with the phrase, 'And thereto I plight thee my troth' ... Whatever a 'troth' is."

Dear daughters, I couldn't help myself.

"Actually," I said, "troth is a cognate of truth."

James laughed his hearty laugh.

"Well, there you go," he said, pointing at me. "Mary, you've found the only groom I've ever met who knows what a 'troth' is."

Mary looked at me as if to say, "Oh, don't I know it."

"To plight your troth meant to pledge your sacred honor," I rushed to explain. "It sounds old-fashioned and corny now, but the idea was a good one. It meant that you were promising to share your deepest self with someone—and to take care of their deepest self in return."

James smiled and nodded, brown eyes twinkling. "That's actually pretty great," he said.

Two months later, on July 20, 1996, your mom and I stood on a brick patio at Poplar Springs in Warrenton, Virginia to say our vows. The weather was perfect—80 degrees, no humidity, clear blue skies—and practically everyone we loved was there.

During his homily, James told the troth story.

"Steve and Mary are both teachers," he noted. "Mary teaches

fourth grade. Steve tutors college students and is studying to be a Shakespeare scholar. They're what you might call 'lettered people'—comfortable with books, words, ideas."

He paused for effect.

"A couple of months back, when we met to discuss this ceremony, I mentioned that the old English wedding vows ended with an ancient-sounding phrase: 'And thereto I plight thee my troth.' Then I added—kind of as a joke—'whatever a troth is.'"

People chuckled.

"And Steve immediately says, 'Actually, troth is a cognate of truth.'"

More laughter.

"Now, I'm standing there thinking, 'Okay, sure, Steve. But also: What's a cognate?'"

The congregation laughed harder. James waited for it to settle.

"Of course," he continued, "Steve had a point. He was recognizing the power of the words we use and the truths we can only tell when we live with one another in deep bonds of trust."

The rest of James's homily was a meditation on the fact that our married life would bring days filled with "poetic possibilities," days of "severe prose," and many comparatively mundane days between. The key to success was staying true to one another through them all.

A few months later, James sent me a copy of a newsletter piece he'd written about the experience. He told the story again, made the joke about not knowing what "cognate" meant, then signed it: "And that's the troth!"

I've kept that newsletter for thirty years.

I've also kept the troth I plighted. To your mother. To myself.

Thinking back all these years later, I can't remember why I knew the history of "troth." ("Cognates," by the way, are just words from different languages that share the same root.) Too much time in the stacks at the Folger Shakespeare Library, I suppose, or with my nose between the pages of the Oxford English Dictionary.

Even then, I was fascinated with how words can express the truth without actually containing it, and how humans can use language to be true to one another or not. I was also interested, as I am to this day, in how serendipitous moments can suddenly order our lives in remarkable ways.

Somehow — via James's warmth, my nerdy word knowledge, and a humorous turn in our prenuptial conversation — my long-running fascination with the word "truth" ended up at the center of the most important truth I've ever told: the promise I made to your mother on our wedding day.

There's something simultaneously strange and wonderful in that, something I still don't fully understand.

Sometimes the most important things find their way into our lives sideways, serendipitously, via accidents that aren't quite accidents and that tend to spill out as laughter. What I know now, better than I knew it then, is that you must embrace such moments fully when they occur.

The phrase, "I plight thee my troth," has been close to my heart ever since. It has reminded me of poetic possibility on days of severe prose. It has functioned as a kind of deep magic amid the otherwise mundane. It continues to make me smile.

It's a 1,000-year-old phrase that articulates a 30-year-old promise that helps to define the me I still hope to become. And, as James would say, "that's the troth!"

My advice? When you find the right person, plight your troth and mean it. And when serendipity strikes, lean in.

Love,
Dad

Do Your Own Laundry

What I learned from my cousin's marriage advice.

Dear Daughters,

On the day I married your mother, my cousin Jimmy (who had seen me wipe out often enough) offered me a bit of advice. We were standing in a motel room at the time, sharing a can of Budweiser while we fumbled with the buttons on our fancy tuxedo shirts. Jimmy had been married for just over two years, so he was clearly way ahead of me, maturity-wise.

"Here's what I can tell you," he said, quite seriously. "If you want to be happy in your marriage, don't expect her to do your laundry."

I nodded and smiled. That would be no problem. Mom had trained me to do my own laundry since high school. What's more, she had once told me (and I quote) "if you think a woman should serve you, you definitely don't deserve it."

Mom's poetic advice still shapes me, but I've also never forgotten Jim's sage counsel—which is ultimately less about laundry than about expectations.

We all tend to take for granted what seems to simply occur. Someone handles the shopping, cleans the bathrooms, does the dishes, and (yes) washes the clothes. Someone helps with the

homework, pays the mortgage, hunts the bugs that show up in your bedroom, and generally strives to stay on top of the never-ending litany of needs.

When we're children, if we're lucky, those "someones" are our parents. But one key to achieving real adulthood—to becoming a fully functional, independent, contributing member of society—is recognizing that we never really had the right to expect those things of them.

If we were lucky, our parents served us, but it wasn't because we deserved it.

To put the point another way: Becoming an adult requires accepting that life doesn't come with laundry service—or kitchen or toilet or exterminator service, either. In the end, the only person you should ever expect to serve you is you.

It may sound a bit harsh, but recognizing this reality has a significant upside: Only when we stop expecting others to do things for us do we start to fully appreciate all they do.

Only when doing your laundry stops seeming like someone else's job can it start seeming like what it's been all along—an act of loving care.

It's best for everyone, including you, to see these for what they are. Even when you're doing them for yourself.

Love,
Dad

Get to Know Your Part of the Library

What I learned from the smartest person I've ever known.

Dear Daughters,

When your mother and I first met, she thought I was a bit of a know-it-all.

Based on all of the lectures I've given you over the years—not to mention the fact that I've been writing a blog called "Truths and Wonders" for more than a decade—you might be inclined to agree with that characterization.

But in fact, I haven't even attempted to be a know-it-all in nearly thirty years. Not since a chance encounter outside a library with perhaps the smartest person I've ever known: Dr. Peter Caws.

Dr. Caws was one of my graduate school advisors, as well as the University Professor of Philosophy at GWU, where I studied cultural theory, Shakespeare, and writing. Because I was interested in the philosophical underpinnings of the stuff I was studying, Dr. Caws was kind enough to do a directed reading in philosophy with me. Basically, this was a "class" for which I read a major work from the history of philosophy each week, wrote a brief paper on it, and met one-on-one with Peter to discuss what I had written.

Even at the time, I realized what an extraordinary learning

opportunity this was. Dr. Caws had earned a degree in physics in London (he was born in the U.K.) before getting his PhD in Philosophy at Yale. Over the next four decades, he had written 10 books and dozens of scholarly articles on subjects as diverse as the philosophy of science, structuralism in the humanities and social sciences, the works of Jean-Paul Sartre, and everyday ethics, all while lecturing at a series of top-notch universities. To describe him as "well-read" would be a bit like describing LeBron James as "coordinated."

Anyway, I ran into Dr. Caws on the street outside GWU's Gelman Library one day, in the early spring of 1998. It had been a few months since I'd completed the directed reading with him, and I had recently started working part-time as a researcher at the Folger Shakespeare Library on Capitol Hill.

When Dr. Caws spotted me coming out of the Gelman, he smiled, and we exchanged pleasantries.

"How's your semester going?" he asked.

"Pretty well," I said. "I've been working part-time at the Folger, doing research for the Arden Shakespeare's new electronic edition."

"That's right," he said. "You told me about that. How fascinating. How do you like the Folger?"

"To tell you the truth," I said, "I find it a little intimidating. I mean, it's a library with 250,000 volumes, all on the topic I'm supposed to be an expert on. When am I going to find time to read that many books?"

Dr. Caws let out a wry British chuckle and nodded. "That's really the situation we're all in, isn't it?" he said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Think of it this way," he said. "Right now, we're standing outside a library that contains something like 2 million volumes—seven stories of stacks of books, arranged on thousands of shelves. I've spent the last 50 years reading, and I've only read a few shelves' worth. You're thirty years behind me, so you've read even fewer. But neither of us is going to make it to the end of a single floor, much less the rest of the library. And never mind all of the other libraries out there—like the Folger, for you—or all the knowledge that isn't contained in books."

I nodded. "I guess that's true," I said.

"Compared to all there is to know," he continued, "my 50 years of reading don't amount to much—though I hope they still count for something."

"Of course they do," I said. "You've taught me a ton. And I'm just one of your students."

"I'm glad to hear that," he said. "And if I'm not mistaken, there's your answer."

"My answer?" I asked.

"To feeling intimidated," he said.

"Just do your best to get to know your own part of the library—and be willing to share what you know when someone asks. If that's not enough, then we're all in trouble."

I smiled. "Okay," I said. "Thanks."

Then we shook hands and said our farewells. He went his way, into the Gelman, while I went my way, into the street.

I've been working on my part of the library ever since—and trying to share what I learn. I still think that's the best we can do when it comes to knowledge.

That, and give each other at least a few chances—the way your mother did with the younger me, who was really just trying to impress her.

Love,
Dad

Life Is Bigger

What I learned from becoming a parent.

Dear Daughters,

I knew from the start that your mother was a remarkable human, but my appreciation for her reached new heights when we were expecting our first child.

Both of us were filled with a sort of anticipation I had never experienced before—a little like waiting for Christmas as a kid, but with nine months to marvel at the gift that might be coming and an actual human growing inside the love of my life.

Under the circumstances, I did what I always do: I read a bunch of books—*What to Expect When You're Expecting*, *A Child is Born*, *The Girlfriend's Guide to Pregnancy* (which isn't meant for men, but I'm anti-sexist), plus several works on early cognitive development that I hoped would make me a better supporter of baby brain development.

Mary, remarkably, took it all in stride. She read a similar set of books, kept teaching fourth grade, and periodically asked me to fetch her bean burritos and Diet Coke from Taco Bell. Her body was undergoing profound changes—growing an actual human!—and we were both approaching the biggest existential transition of our lives, yet she evinced a sense of calm that both dazzled and steadied me.

It surely helped that she had already lived with a baby—her youngest brother was born when she was 17. And it didn't hurt that she had previously worked at a daycare center and had a master's degree in education. But it wasn't just that. Mary had a sense of peace and joy about becoming a mother that transcended all the questions and concerns. She seemed plugged in to a sort of deep understanding of what was happening, something the books could only hint at.

When I mentioned this to my own mother, she noted that one of the main pieces of advice in Dr. Spock's famous baby book is simple: "Trust yourself, you know more than you think you do."

"Maybe Mary knows she's got this," Mom suggested.

Eventually, the big day came, and I drove us to the hospital with our pre-packed bags and a checklist Mary had put together. Then I stayed up all night, cheering Mary on as she did the hard work. At midnight, I ate a hamburger in the hospital cafeteria with her mom and both of my parents.

Baby Francie was born at 6:22 AM. Minutes later, I held a newborn for the first time in my life. I remember staring down into her little blue eyes and disappearing into the miracle.

We typically think of knowledge as housed in our brains, a product of our rational minds. But it's more accurate to think of our rational minds as extensions of our living bodies, which carry within them knowledge that our rational minds struggle to fathom.

Mary's body knew how to grow a baby, with no help from *The Girlfriend's Guide to Pregnancy*. Francie's body knew how to develop from a zygote into a blue-eyed infant with two trillion cells and 50 trillion synaptic connections in just nine months. My own body knew how to love them both so completely that they

felt like parts of me—parts for which I would sacrifice myself if I had to. I knew this less in my mind than in my bones.

During the ensuing weeks and months, Mary and I got our first crash course in parenting. Francie was a bundle of joy that needed constant tending. Mary was consistently amazing, if often exhausted. She trusted herself, for good reason, and I trusted her.

The books I had read were helpful. They gave me information and built my confidence. But none of them taught me the real essentials: like how to hold the bottle just right so Francie wouldn't spit up, how to sway in a soothing rhythm while dancing through the living room to the Gin Blossoms, or how to change a diaper in the dark without waking Mary.

They certainly didn't teach me how to feel like the world now felt sometimes, when I would lay down beside my wife with our baby on my chest, and Francie would gaze at Mary with the same sort of love I had for both of them.

The three of us adapted to our profoundly new reality by living through it together—sometimes cuddling, sometimes crying, occasionally sleeping. In so doing, we began to become something new and different: a group of humans that was, and is, larger than the sum of its parts. A family.

In graduate school, I read hundreds of books, including dozens about how humans come to know the world through language and the stories we tell. Many taught me important lessons. Some changed what, or even how, I thought. But none changed the I who does the thinking.

Becoming a parent did exactly that. It made me a different sort of "I." It increased my appreciation for Mary. It deepened my wonder at the marvelous mystery of life. It taught me a new

kind of love and expanded my capacity for empathy. It made me a bigger and better me.

Over the years, I've come to believe that growing ourselves and our souls in these ways is essential to a well-lived life. I'm certain that being your dad has made me a better Steve.

I've been grateful for the chance from day one. I still am.

Love,
Dad

Love Abides

What I learned from Mom dying young.

Dear Daughters,

Baby Francie was barely seven months old when I got a phone call that changed my life (again). It was Mom, calling to tell me she had been diagnosed with an aggressive Ovarian sarcoma.

Cancer. One of the kinds that requires immediate aggressive action with no guarantee of success.

I remember walking into the backyard with our dog, Bonny, looking up into the late November sky, and noting the brightness of Orion's belt.

"I don't know why," I thought at the time.

I still don't.

Surgery followed soon after. Then aggressive chemo. Then a trip to Sloan-Kettering in New York.

Experimental treatments. Months of hair loss, sickness, infusions. Family gatherings shadowed over and rendered more meaningful than ever.

Mom struggled and tried not to let us see it. Moments with us, and especially with her baby granddaughter, were too precious to waste on either suffering or complaining.

The surgeons did their best to cut the cancer away. The chemo did its best to poison what was left. And the body they attacked in the process was Mom, barely 5'2" and under 90 pounds before they were done with her.

They all failed, but she never did.

She died, dear daughters, but no sense of the word "fail" applies.

After nearly nine months of treatments, sitting once again in a hospital bed, she told me she was ready to go home. To her own bed. To hospice care. To the God she had always believed in.

There were no surprises left by then, so the tears in that moment were more of resignation than sadness—as much a function of me wondering at her fortitude as anything else.

"It's tempting to say this isn't fair," she told me. "Like, what did I do to deserve to die at 59?"

I nodded in agreement because it sure as hell was tempting to ask that.

"But if I asked that about the cancer," she continued, "then I'd also have to ask it about having you and your brother, and your father and the life we've had together."

"What did I do to deserve two healthy children when some people get none? What did I do to deserve a loving, devoted husband when I know a bunch of good women who wound up with abusers or liars or cheats?"

"I think you and Dad have both deserved each other," I offered.

She smiled and sniffled at once. "Thanks," she said. "But you see what I mean."

I did, and I do. People ask "Why me?" when things are bad. Not so much when they're basking in goodness.

"I don't want your father to be lonely," she told me. "If he finds someone else—you know, after a while—he has my blessing."

"You know, after a while" was pure Mom—and pure human. She wanted Dad to move on and find happiness. But not without appropriate mourning. Not without remembrance of what had been. Not without the love that had long surrounded them lingering beyond her, as if to prove what she had always believed: We cannot escape death, but death cannot comprehend love. None of us escapes this world, but love transcends us all.

I believe this still. More, even, than I did then.

In any case, Mom had nothing to worry about. Dad would never forget, and neither would I or anyone else who knew her well.

We took her home, and she held on for six more weeks. Dad barely left her side. We visited as often as we could—Tim and his wife, Leigh. Mary and I and little Francie.

Friends from the church crowded around Mom and delivered meals to feed us every day. Cards and flowers piled up along with the baked goods. Time stretched out and lingered like long summer evenings.

Through good days and bad, Mom faded as people do, but she brightened every time she saw Francie—the deep magic of love and new life pushing back the darkness again and again and again.

Until it just couldn't anymore.

Until the last time I saw Mom's face and knew her spirit had moved along. I have no better description for what I saw than that, try as I have for many years to make it all make sense. What had once been her body remained; Mom was gone.

Four days later, I gave a eulogy at her funeral. Here's what I said, in full.

Faith, hope, and love are our themes for today. Mom chose them for us, both literally and symbolically. She left us a sheet of paper saying she wanted them to be our themes, and she lived her life in such a way that we could hardly have had it otherwise.

Mom didn't want a traditional eulogy. She wanted this to be a time of worship--a time set aside not simply to remember her but to remember God. Her wish was full of wisdom, for in times like these it's as difficult to remember God as it is necessary.

"Where was God in all of this?" we keep asking, and we need to remember ...

One of the things I'll miss most is calling mom up on the phone just to chat. We used to chat about everything from changing diapers to changing conceptions of God in the history of Western Christianity.

Mom was always ready to talk about the big questions. As Stan Hasty reminded us this week, she was something of a lay theologian. She thought about God like a scholar, read books

about God that were written by scholars, and was always ready to chat with her pseudo-scholarly son about the big questions.

But Mom also never forgot that the living God--the God she knew in her own life--is less a God of "changing historical conceptions" than a God of changing diapers. A God who helps us get through the dirty work of life with faith, hope, and love in our hands and hearts.

That's the God Mom would want us to remember today. Not the God we tried to invoke when we prayed for a cure, but the God we embodied when we continued to love and care for Mom when we knew no cure was coming.

The God embodied in my father's dedication and compassion for her--the love in him that shone all the brighter the darker our days became.

The God embodied in the cooking of six weeks' meals, all delivered to our door like so much mana from heaven.

The God embodied in the writing of countless letters, notes, and cards. In the praying of countless prayers. The crying of countless tears.

The God embodied, finally, in one of Mom's last movements--when she reached up to touch her granddaughter one more time.

Through it all, Mom never took God for granted.

She never assumed that she knew what God wanted or what God was really like. She lived in faith, but the faith she lived in was not a matter of believing blindly. Nor was it an excuse for sidestepping difficult questions.

I don't think she'd want us to stop asking, "Where was God in all of this?" And I don't think she'd expect us to find a decent answer.

In the end, I think, she'd want us to remember that the point is not to know God--that knowing God is simply impossible. I think she'd want us to remember that the point is to do God's will, as best we can, without knowing. I think that's what Faith meant to Mom: walking the walk without knowing the way, even in the times when we feel ourselves most lost.

She left us a passage that she wanted read today. It's a little theological, so bear with me (her pseudo-scholarly son can hardly help himself). The passage comes from Thomas Cahill's book *Desire of the Everlasting Hills*, and Mom said it came close to capturing what she believed about the meaning of faith and religion in this life. Cahill writes:

"When Luther claimed to be Pauline by asserting that 'man is saved by faith alone,' he was misunderstanding Paul--as so many have done in so many different ways. Yes, man is saved by faith, if by that you mean faithful commitment to the cosmic Christ--that is, to the poor, to the afflicted, and to the healing of the world. But

this 'faith' of which Paul spoke with such feeling is not a single thread hanging above the abyss by which the believer is attached to God--some new-fangled form of automatic, if perilous, salvation--nor is it Kierkegaard's 'leap of faith' over the abyss. For when you have sorted through the whole long, Judeo-Christian tradition, Paul would say what remains is not one, sola fides, but three, "for in the end, faith, hope, and love abide, these three, but the greatest of all is love."

I think Mom would want us to remember that faith isn't simply an antidote to take away our pain; that it isn't the opposite of doubt; that it isn't the final answer. I think she'd want us to remember that faith is a way of living--a way of abiding in that mystery called "hope," in spite of the doubts and fears we have that faith never quite takes away.

I think she'd want us to remember that faith runs deepest where doubt is confronted honestly and directly. Where we never cease to ask, "Where was God in all of this?"

Finally, I think she'd want us to remember that, to paraphrase Paul, if we have the faith to move mountains but don't have love, we are nothing.

In the end, Mom would say, love is the closest we ever come to an answer. The closest we ever come to God. And love, like faith, is less a thing than it is an action, less a feeling we have than a force in the world in which we take part when

we're lucky. Mom was lucky enough to be loved by everyone here. Or, rather, we were all lucky enough to experience the love Mom embodied—and that each of us embodied with her.

In a sense, love is always an act of letting go, of giving up control and letting God's great ride carry us forward, even in the face of our fears and doubts. But if love is an act of going along for the ride, it's also a willingness to get out and push—side by side, with our feet in the dirt and our noses to the grindstone, sweating it out together till the ride gets going again. Mom would want us to remember that there is such a thing as the labor of love.

For the last few months, our family has mostly been down in the dirt, pushing and grinding it out. And it moves me to think just how many of you have been down there with us, straining and struggling along.

Now it's time to start the work of letting go, which can't and won't be easy. But Mom, in creating a theme for this service, has helped to show us the way once again. With hope in the face of our fears, and with faith in the face of our doubts, we can begin to let love break the bonds that tie us down.

Mom has returned to the force of love from which she came, and in which she endeavored to live.

I don't pretend to understand that force, but I

hope that you can feel it here today, as I do. And
I have faith that, when I feel it, Mom is there.

That's as close as I've come to God. And if that's
all there is, it's enough.

I love you, Mom. And that's as close as I can
come to an answer.

Dear daughters, as I put this letter together, I thought about
trimming the eulogy down. It's too long. Too theological. Too
exhausting and sad for this format.

But I can't and won't touch a word of it.

I remember how it felt to stand up in that pulpit, shattered,
hoping love would really abide. And I know now that it has.

It can take as many words as it wants.

Love,
Dad