

Jim's Perspective...

Papa Goes to School

Our daughter's two children started grade school this fall in the Gretna area school system. Students and parents had the option of in-person classroom learning or virtual learning from home. Granddaughter Anne is in fourth grade and grandson Ben is in first grade. They are both taking classes using zoom and virtual learning from home. One day Janie and I were at the house and the grandkids started up their virtual learning systems. Anne suggested that papa sit near her to see how all of this zoom process works and to see how everyone learns via zoom. I jumped at the chance to sit by her and see how all of this is done. I also figured that perhaps I might be able to help Anne a little bit with some of the lessons she was to complete that day.

She started with mathematics. As the teacher is explaining the lesson plan for this math period I am thinking, "Well, I suppose I can help with the multiplication tables or maybe there will be a math word problem that I can assist her with." Suddenly, the virtual class started work on the first assignment for the math class that day. It involved algorithms! I knew nothing about it! I was stunned. Anne started analyzing away, and papa just sat there. Poor papa, flummoxed in fourth grade! As she worked away, occasionally she would glance at me, and I could tell by her look that she was enjoying performing a task that she knew papa couldn't do and did not understand. I said nothing, but kind of nodded with approval. I am thinking to myself, "How in the world did fourth graders get involved in algorithms?!" It was also interesting to see Anne appreciate a sense of what was going on between her and me. She knew quickly, without a word being said, exactly how I was feeling about the algorithm experience. It is interesting how young people begin to develop the social skills of empathy and emotion, and the ability to understand how someone feels without a word being said. She is very good at it, and while she may never be given an elementary school official grade for this skill, this aspect of her personality will serve her well as she goes through life.

We finished the algorithm problem and moved on to another task. "Now is my opportunity to help," I thought. The problem involved finding a variable number identified as "m" by use of a bar chart filled with numbers. I was stunned! What in the world is this? Anne dutifully worked on the bar chart and occasionally smiled at me. "Poor papa," she must be thinking.

We finished math class, took a short break, and then went back on-line to work on writing and literature. This proved to be more fun for papa, but Anne didn't need my help. The first assignment for the class was to write a short story of what you would do if you could go forward or backward in time. What would you do? Every child went back in time to relive some fun experience with the exception of Anne who went forward in time. She wanted to go twenty years forward in time and be a doctor. She wanted to use her income to buy the "holiday house." The holiday house is an Airbnb house that Janie and I rented this summer in Silverthorne, Colorado. We took the kids and grandkids out there for a little vacation. It had six bedrooms, eight bathrooms and a hot tub in the back yard. We saw deer, antelope and foxes. We hiked up a mountain and went on ski lifts. Anne loved the place and she wants to own it some day. A worthy goal and a great imagination!

Another assignment for the writing and literature class involved the issue of homework. Each student had to spend ten minutes and write a story on the topic of, "How I lost my homework papers last night." After ten minutes, the teacher asked each student to explain what happened to their homework. One student said the obvious – the dog ate it. Someone had his homework destroyed by a fire-breathing dragon. Anne explained that her little brother, Ben, made her homework into paper airplanes and then flew them outside when suddenly a tornado came through the neighborhood and blew all of the homework papers far away. Again, very imaginative, I thought.

With the virtual classroom, I could sit nearby and it was as if I was in the classroom. I have not been in a grade school classroom since my kids were young. It was fascinating to see these young people interact socially and focus on completing their school work. Yes, they were distracted at times, but they always seemed to come back to the topic at hand, and pay attention.

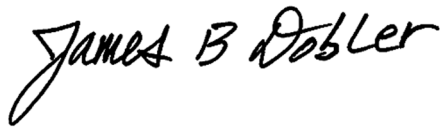
Another interesting experience for me was that as I was watching the math class, suddenly, some old math feelings that I had as a boy came rushing back. It is interesting how the brain can dredge up an old feeling or idea that you hadn't thought about in roughly 50 or 60 years. How does the brain do that? As I sat by Anne, and as I was totally clueless about algorithms, I started to remember how I felt about mathematics as a boy in grade school and junior high. My opinion or attitude towards mathematics as a boy can be summed up as follows: $2 + 2 = 4$ - - - SO WHAT! I had no appreciation for it, and no interest. I liked reading, writing and even learning Latin which the Nuns at Holy Family where I went to grade school and junior high insisted that we learn.

My difficulty with mathematics continued through high school and college. In the fall of 1968, as a freshman at Nebraska, I chose to enter the College of Business Administration. This required that I take a freshman algebra class. I flunked the class and was placed on academic probation. This meant that if I did not attain a "C" grade point average at the end of the spring semester of 1969, I would be expelled from the University. At that time, if you were a full-time student in college, you were given an academic deferment from active military duty which meant you would not be sent to Vietnam. My parents and my girlfriend, Janie, were very worried. However I changed my major to the College of Arts and Sciences, took the freshman algebra class a second time and got a "C", and raised my overall GPA above a "C" for the spring semester. My mathematical struggles are also part of why I ended up in law school. No math classes there!

But I digress. I am doing what social scientists describe as something older people do – "off-topic verbosity." Let's get back to my day at school with Anne. The ultimate irony of that day at school was that I think I learned more than the school kids. I sat there and watched Anne and her classmates work on various school assignments. The school kids seemed so accepting. They automatically just started to try, and work on whatever the teacher placed in front of them. No questions asked. No complaining or disruption. Their environment was one of new challenges and new material. They were not working with the "routine" automatic day to day matters. It was mostly new, but they were glad to take on the unknown and were trying hard to achieve an understanding of life around them. How beautiful. It made me think that it might be good if all people were a little more accepting of the "unbidden."

We might all do well to take a moment and consider the frame of reference, or the approach to life that young people openly accept. Look at what is before you, embrace it, be kind, be collegial, and be happy! How delightful and enlightening it was for papa to be a fourth grader for a day! I conclude with a mathematics poem!

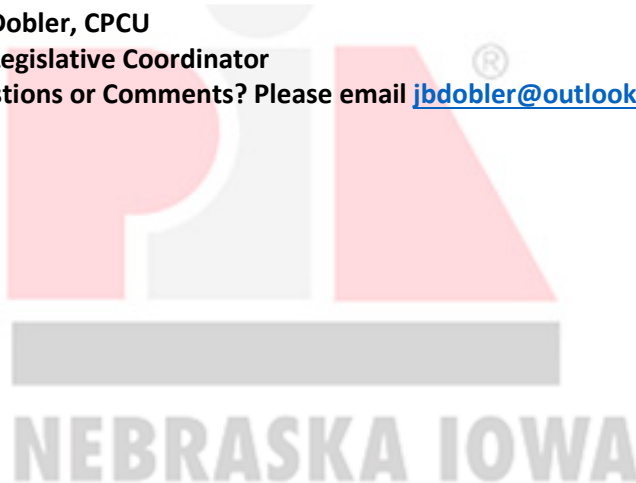
Happiness is
the one thing in life
that multiplies by division.
The more happiness one
gives to others
the more he has himself
Judge Jonah J. Goldstein¹



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¹Gilbert Hay, Happiness is . . . : (Essandess Special Edition, New York, 1967)