

My Favorite Shortcomings

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Podcasters pick their favorite essays by
Kevin Cummings

First Edition

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www.shortcomingsaudio.com

Dedication

To my wife for giving me the necessary kick-in-the-seat-of-the-pants to start podcasting, to my sons for providing material, to the podcasting community for encouragement and support, and to my listeners who have been both kind and generous with their praise and support.

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My Favorite Shortcomings

Introduction

Let me tell you how I started podcasting...by completely misunderstanding the field.

Really.

I had taken some lessons in voice acting from Scott Shurian (www.voscott.com) and thought I'd like to take a stab at getting involved in the business. My work schedule wasn't really compatible with building a career in voice acting, so I thought I could strike out on my own. Podcasting seemed to be a good place to start. I figured I could set-up a website, put out a podcast as a sort of calling card, and then offer to record short snippets for podcasters at low prices.

I did enough research to find out that there were a few people doing that.

What I didn't realize is that a lot of podcasters are doing voice work for each other for free. The only way to charge is if you are really, really good...Don LaFontaine or Harlan Hogan good.

I'm not in that league.

By the time I realized this, I'd already written the essays for my first ten or so podcasts and I'd recorded the first three. It seemed a shame to go that far and not start releasing the episodes so I took the leap and started the podcast.

The podcasting community – particularly the good folks at the *Podcast Pickle* – were incredibly generous and tremendously helpful. They gave suggestions on everything from content to production to audio quality to release

schedules to promotion. I couldn't have asked for a more helpful bunch of folks when I was starting out.

So, when I began contemplating how I might mark my 100th episode, it seemed only natural that I turn to them again. I invited them to choose their favorite episodes for inclusion in this book. As I expected, they responded kindly and this book was shaped by their decisions.

Before each essay, I've included a brief introduction to the podcaster and provided their web address. All of them produce wonderful, entertaining, and interesting shows and I encourage you to visit their websites to find out more.

Three...Two...One...Contacts!

selected by
Grammar Girl

www.quickanddirtytips.com

Mignon Fogarty, creator and host of *Grammar Girl* and founder of the QDNow Network, is a podcaster's podcaster. A science and technical writer by trade and training, she was one of the first to embrace the power of new media. Her initial podcast was an interview and news program called *Absolute Science*.

With a running time of thirty minutes per episode, producing *Absolute Science* was no small task. In time, Mignon found that she had to give it up to pursue her freelance career.

Still, she couldn't bring herself to entirely abandon podcasting. Drawing on her experience as a writer, she decided the world was ready for a short podcast on grammar and writing.

As it turned out, the world was more than ready...it was eager. In just a few months Mignon had amassed over a million total downloads, gained national press attention, and appeared on *Oprah*. She parlayed that popularity into an entire sponsor-supported network and a multi-book publishing contract.

For the record, any errors in grammar or style you find in this book or on my podcast are entirely my own fault. Listening to Mignon is only half the battle...you've also got to apply what you learn.

For her selection for this book, Mignon chose *Three...Two...One...Contacts!*

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My life is a blur these days.

Really.

I've traded my reliable (but stodgy) glasses for less reliable (but far more exciting) contacts. Like a lot of guys who try to trade up, I think I may have simply swapped one set of problems for another.

I slipped solidly into geekdom at the age of ten when I was fitted with a pair of black-rimmed glasses that had all of the aesthetic appeal and elegance of a spork at formal dinner party.

Years passed and my eyes stabilized until I landed on the big square labeled '40' and I couldn't read any more. The nice eye doctor wrote me a prescription for *progressives*.

Through a miracle of modern manufacturing, progressives have two different kinds of lenses forcibly melded into one ineffectual whole; sort of like a compass with a whistle in it, a tent trailer, or low-fat, sugar-free ice-cream. Actually viewing the world through a pair of progressives involves tipping your head back-and-forth, left-and-right until you find the sweet spot for focusing. It's easy to identify progressive-wearers – they're the ones bobbing their heads like demented sand cranes and then fixating on a spot hoping to make the focus last as long as possible.

In theory, all you need to do to read with them is tip your nose down toward the page and rotate your eyes in their sockets. In practice, I found it easier to hold the page up high, tip my head back, and stare down over my nose. While holding that posture, I was giving everyone in the room a panoramic tour of my nostrils. As you can imagine, I'm not often invited to give public readings.

The indignity of it all didn't bother me as much as the conviction that progressives meant I must be getting old. Like all middle-aged men, I accepted my situation with grace and class by immediately plotting ways to clutch desperately at my fading youth.

For two years I flirted with the idea of wearing contacts. My glasses had been my companions through thick and thin for more than three decades. They'd stood up with me at my wedding for crying out loud, but I was willing to toss them aside without a second's thought if it made me feel younger.

Contacts were young, hip, sexy – I'd stop hiding behind the double-glazing and face the world openly. All I had to do was figure out how to get the contacts in.

Putting on glasses involved one quick, well-practiced motion; swing 'em up, settle 'em on my nose, and I was out the door. In military terms it was a lightning surgical strike. Putting in contacts is more of an extended military campaign which involves air support, ground support, and a modest quantity of chemical weapons.

Installing contacts requires carefully removing a contact from its case, matching it to the appropriate eye, squirting it with cleaning solution, rubbing it, carefully balancing it on the tip of an extended finger, holding my eye-lids apart to create a clown-like expression of surprise in the mirror,

pushing the contact toward my eye, blinking, squinting at my reflection to decide whether or not the contact went in, realizing it didn't, finding the contact on the counter and starting all over again. It's a game I can play all morning...over...and over...and over.

The first time I put contacts in at the Optometrist's shop I managed it in less time than it takes to compose an opera. I felt good and, more importantly, I looked good.

Only I didn't look *well*. At least not in the sense of being able to see where I was going. Mr. Magoo-like I walked out of the store, bumped into a bench, and apologized to it. My wife was laughing so hard, I'd collided with and apologized to a lamp post, parked car, and mailbox before she caught up with me.

"Blink" she suggested.

I complied like a coquettish girl intent on fanning a young suitor with the gale from her eyelashes. Gradually the world beyond four feet twisted into focus.

Hey! I could see without glasses! What fun!

I marveled at my new freedom right up until dinner time when I realized that I couldn't clearly see my plate. Were the yellowish lumps the au gratin potatoes or squash? Was the main course roast beef or chicken? Which fork should I use for the dessert?

(To be fair, that last question vexes me even when I can see well.)

With practice, I got to the point that I could settle the contacts in place in less time than the average transatlantic flight. My close vision didn't improve though. Simple things like reading, writing, and counting change became adventures

in squinting. I took to tossing needles on the floor and “finding” them to convince people that I really could see.

My ever-helpful wife suggested reading glasses.

I resisted.

Wasn't the whole point of this exercise – including regular morning self-inflicted eye gouges – to look good? I wasn't going to ruin that by going back to glasses...until I found myself eating a packet of dressing that was I supposed to put onto my salad instead of directly into my mouth.

So now, I'm looking good most the time; except when I'm fishing for my reading glasses or patting myself to try to remember where I put them or mumbling about having lost them. The economic toll isn't inconsequential either.

Contact lenses; seventy dollars for a three-months supply.

Contact solution, cases, and associated contact-lens protection and cleaning technology; thirty-two dollars.

Reading glasses; four-ninety-five at K-Mart.

Looking good in contacts? Well, about one-hundred-six dollars and ninety-five cents. I just wish I could see a mirror well enough to know just how good I look.

Secret Agent Dad!
selected by
The Eclectic Review

eclectic.libsyn.com

Listening to *The Eclectic Review* is like sitting down with two of your most well-educated friends over a meal. Stuart Jaffe (a science-fiction writer) and his wife Glory (a scientist and health care professional) cover a diverse range of topics, focusing mostly on science and science fiction. In addition to the main topic in each episode, they share reviews of films, books, and TV series.

From time to time, Stuart talks about writing techniques. Although much of what he talks about – story structure, character development, etc. – is geared for longer works of fiction, I still find these segments engaging and enlightening.

Glory brings her background as a trained scientist. During the recording of the series, she was working on a Masters degree and shared both her experiences and her research with the listening audience. Anyone considering an advanced degree in the sciences ought to listen to a few episodes to find out what they're in for.

Among their other titles, Stuart and Glory are parents. Maybe that's why Stuart chose the essay called *Secret Agent Dad*.

I grew up watching spy movies and I wanted to be just like my on-screen heroes. In the elementary school cafeteria I ordered my chocolate milk shaken, not stirred. This earned me a blank stare from the lunch lady.

I invented complex recognition codes and forced my friends to use them.

“Oz never did give nothin’ to the Tin Man,” I’d say.

“Hi Kevin,” they’d try to answer, but I was too clever for a ruse like that. Until they gave the countersign, I stayed silent.

“Fine...” they’d sigh. “That he didn’t already have.”

Then I’d talk to them.

Come to think of it, I didn’t have a lot of childhood friends. Maybe the cloak-and-dagger stuff scared them off. Oh well, the life of a spy is never easy.

Which is why I still wonder from time to time; what if I had become an international super-spy?

For one thing, it’s a good bet I’d drive something other than a mini-van. Spies get cool sports cars with exciting gadgets, leather upholstery and an exotic blond in the passenger seat. Dads get mini-vans with cup-holders, ground-up cheerios in the upholstery and...well, it’s best if we stop this comparison before getting to the passenger seat.

That’s not to say that the modern dad lacks for automotive high-tech. Instead of knock-out gas to keep the passengers quiet, Dads get in-car DVD players that perform much the same function.

Ejector seats? No. Car seats that perform the opposite function. If James Bond had ever strapped Odd Job into a car seat, Odd Job would be there to this day. For escape-

proof, nothing beats the good-old BabyCo SnugglyKins Twelve-Point Passive Restraint System (tm).

Spies travel with custom-made luggage that has secret compartments and all manner of clever gadgets; like a cigarette box that turns into a transmitter or a paperback book that conceals a bomb. Dads travel with diaper bags approximately the size of a third-world country. No radios or explosives here; just diapers, bottles, formula, teething rings, burp cloths, a change of clothes (for baby and – in case of an especially bad mess – Dad), *Dr. Spock's Baby and Childcare*, an emergency medical guide, a nasal aspirator, a full set of surgical instruments, the number of the pediatrician, the number for 911, baby aspirin, Benadryl, scotch (for dad), band-aids, a changing pad and seventeen pounds of assorted kid-friendly snack foods (just in case). Never let it said that dad isn't prepared. It should also be noted that dad can't stand up straight under the load, but that's not important.

Dads are also likely to be carrying some kind of nifty collapsible item...say a stroller or a playpen. The engineers at KidCo have spent countless hours creating baby tech gear which can be folded neatly for storage in your trunk or closet. All you have to do is memorize the two-hundred-and-seventy-five easy steps, perform them in the correct order, and avoid getting any appendages caught in any of the folding hinges. (Hint: You can always tell the new dads – they're the guys with bandages on their fingers.)

Spies have bugging devices. Dads don't. They have the next best thing...baby monitors. The primary function of a baby monitor seems to be to start violent domestic disputes over who has to get up at three in the morning. Perhaps this is why dads aren't issued live weapons.

At least once in every film, the spy will have to creep, crawl, slither or otherwise sneak into some secure location. With every footstep he risks triggering an alarm and being discovered. The penalty for being caught? Death.

By contrast, most dads have the experience of sneaking out of a sleeping baby's room. With every footstep he risks landing on some surprisingly sharp toy or other bit of baby-support-gear and (through his surprised yell) awakening the baby. The penalty? Death by crying baby and annoyed mom.

Dads face other life-and-death challenges. Your average super-spy only has to contend with simple challenges such as piranha-filled pools or vicious henchmen with amusing names. If things get really bad they can fall back on the trusty cyanide capsule.

Dads confront an unfortunate combination of death and possible suicide when a child offers a chance to "taste this...I made it myself." Running close behind that for dangerous questions are "Do you love me or my brother more?" and "How did the baby get in mommy's tummy?" Any dad would rather have the location of the secret plans beaten out of him than have to answer those questions.

Maybe dads should be spies, though. Sometimes having a baby is a great disguise. Let me tell you a true story.

Years ago, when our youngest son was a babe-in-arms, my wife and I went car shopping. We had a growing family and it was time for me to trade in my still-barely-on-the-outskirts-of-coolville sedan for a solidly-in-the-middle-of-dullsville minivan. At the car lot we noticed an amazing phenomenon. The person holding the baby was invisible.

Really.

If my wife had the baby, the car salesman talked only to me. If I held the baby, the salesman talked only to my wife. Once we realized what was happening, we traded off every couple of minutes just so we could watch the salesman swivel back-and-forth in mid-sentence like a mechanical Santa Claus. Perhaps the CIA should study this. If there was some way to harness the awesome cloaking power of babies, spies could waltz right into any car dealership in the world – completely invisible until they hand their babies to their wives.

Of course, spies have one thing that dads don't – an arch-nemesis. Then again, who needs a super-villain when they have a toddler or – worse yet – a teenager?

Civic Planning
selected by
Comedy4Cast

www.comedy4cast.com

Clinton Alvord's Comedy4Cast was one of the first podcasts I discovered and I was inspired by his work. Each episode is a single, cohesive comedy sketch. Sometimes they're multi-character sketches, sometimes they're in-character monologues, and sometimes they're straight-up essays.

They are always funny.

Clinton has a great ear for comedy and a talent for doing character voices. In particular, his skits which include the Marx brothers are pitch perfect. From time to time he also tosses out a great geek "in joke," which makes the show that much more fun.

Clinton's choice for inclusion in this book is *Civic Planning*.

In *Civic Planning*, Kevin recounts the creation and growth of his own little village, Nowell-by-the-Sea. I must confess, this one hits a bit too close to home for me. You see, I have a sprawling Disney monorail setup in my basement. Like Kevin's village, it began simply enough with just a few items

and quickly spun out of control. Perhaps one day the two communities will meet and form a mighty megalopolis – in 1/24 scale.

Whether you view *Civic Planning* as a cute story about one man's hobby, or a cautionary tale of rampant consumerism and obsession, I know you'll find it fascinating.

–Clinton Alvord, *Comedy4cast.com*

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Like a lot of small towns in America, my little village of Nowell-by-the-Sea was a poorly planned accident. The only difference is that the buildings average about eight inches in height.

The accident started when my wife sent me to a department store in November and I happened to find that they had their Christmas decorations marked half off. (They wanted to clear the stuff out to make room for the Valentine's candy.)

On the display of tiny ceramic buildings, electric bulbs glowed warmly through plastic windows, casting light across the cotton-wool snow. Miniature plaster people stood in their winter best admiring a spiky Christmas tree festooned with over-sized gold garland. My breath caught in my throat and the guy part of my brain said, "This is just like being mayor of your very own town."

That was completely untrue, of course, but when I got home I showed my wife the beginnings of a brand new holiday tradition.

I'd chosen four buildings; a church (the spiritual center of the town and the season), a house (so there would be people to go to the church), a lighthouse (because it was cool) and a train station (so I'd have an excuse to buy a train).

My bride was skeptical about her new role as the mayor's wife and even more doubtful about my abilities in the area of civic planning.

"Where are you going to put it?" she asked.

"Um..." I looked around for likely real estate and exercised my right of eminent domain. "Here, on the back of the piano. We'll just store your parent's picture away for the next few weeks."

"Uh-huh." She didn't try to stop me (at the point neither a citizen's petition or a court order would have done any good).

Now my problem was population...or rather lack of it. The only people in my village were permanently glued inside the little buildings and could only be glimpsed in passing through the windows. So I did what most mayors do. I bought more people. Except I didn't have to fuss with tax incentives, I just went back to the store and plucked packages of plaster figures from the half-off rack.

My village had three major population groups – sailors, children and nuns. Where did the kids all come from? My best guess is that the nuns operate an orphanage somewhere else in the living room; maybe near the grandfather clock. The kids needed some parents, darn it! So I bought more people.

In less than four hours my village went from non-existence to a booming metropolis of twenty-three souls. And yet they had nowhere to eat. A restaurant of some kind seemed to be in order. I settled on a coffee shop.

While I was buying and building, my wife elected herself as the entire City Council and drafted bylaws which granted her final approval on all new buildings. After a brief and

energetic discussion in the Council Chambers (a.k.a. our kitchen) it was decided that Nowell-by-the-Sea wasn't going to get any larger that year.

The next Fall I embarked on a campaign of urban renewal and expansion. In the real world you can't make more land, but in my little village that was no problem. A sheet of plywood allowed me to double the available real estate. (This had a negative impact on the existing property values and lowered my imaginary tax base, but sometimes you gotta break a few eggs.)

When the City Council was distracted with other decorating, I authorized the construction of four new nautically-themed buildings. The existence of a lighthouse implied that the village must be near the water. The only way to grow the economy of Nowell-by-the-Sea was to capitalize its location. My new buildings included a boat manufacturer, a yacht club, a maritime supply store, and a chowder stand. My bold experiment in civic planning worked and I attracted two dozen more residents...who ate more than the coffee shop could provide and needed somewhere to sleep. I added a bakery/tea shop and a hotel. Things were booming!

The City Manager (my wife had disbanded the Council and assigned herself a new role) pointed out that my efforts had exhausted the city treasury, but who cared! My city was growing!

There was one small tragedy. I'd been careless in getting the chowder stand. The photo on the package showed a patron standing beside the stand, playing with a comical stray cat that clearly wanted to steal his food. *My* chowder stand lacked the the patron. Some horrible accident had ripped him from the scene, leaving only the cat and the stumps of his

feet. What had been a heart-warming holiday vignette was now more Norman Bates than Norman Rockwell. A call to the manufacturer yielded a new, intact chowder stand complete with patron. The old one remains in my basement. It seems somehow disrespectful to throw it out.

Each year when they release the new buildings, I identify the five or six (or seven or eight or nine) that count as “must have” and meet with the Governor (my wife has gotten another promotion) to settle on which will be added and which passed by. I’m pleased to report we now have two bookstores, a pub, an acting studio, a pet shop, a carousel, a second lighthouse, a sailing academy, a boat, a seaside bed-and-breakfast, and (the newest addition) a live theater. Counting all of the sailors, nuns, children, parents, and random other folks the population is approaching one hundred. There’s still only one house, but property values are through the roof so all of my little citizens have to live somewhere else and commute to work. And, somehow, I’ve never gotten around to adding the train.

Maybe next year...if I can get the President to agree.

A Rebellious Nature
selected by
You Are The Guest

www.youaretheguest.com

Bill Grady is one of a handful of podcasters who got started in traditional media. He brings his considerable skills as an interviewer to bear in his interview-based podcast *You Are The Guest*. Where traditional media tends to limit the time available for interviews, Bill has the freedom to spend as long as he wants on each interview.

The result is a deep and fascinating program unlike anything else you're likely to find in the mediasphere.

Perhaps that beyond-the-boundaries thinking was what inspired Bill to choose the essay called *A Rebellious Nature*.

I like to rock. That's right, I like to rock. Rebels and rock and roll go just seem to go together. If everything's better with Coke, every situation I want to rebel against goes better with a rock and roll soundtrack. I'll find the songs on my iPod, start the treadmill, and think about all the things I should have stood up for that day if only I had The Who blaring in the background.

Rebels come in all shapes, sizes and forms, and the one's I see the most are the fair-weathered rebels. Personally, I'm shaking up the world until someone asks me not to. However

the real rebels are listed in the local paper in the daily Magistrate Court records and have real attorneys to prove it. Like me, the vast majority of folks my age are rebels until the authorities show up.

And of course, there's always the rebellious nature of our youth that comes out in all of us, especially on a summer's day that reminds us of one back when we were 16. I'm rolling down my windows, turning the stereo up, and playing April Wine's *I Like To Rock* at 11 on the volume scale. Look, the stereo goes to 11, my factory stereo "rules". Who else remembers this song? But then you find out no one else really cares either.

Just like the number of people that really care about getting my purchases right, paying for it correctly, and letting me move on with the rest of my life in a timely manner. Whenever I get into a line to pay for something, I can just about guarantee the person in front of me will have credit or credit card problems. It's to a point where I don't think it's them; it's me putting some sort of curse on them. I almost feel obliged to tap the person in front of me on the shoulder and warn them of the upcoming situation. But I don't, because there's a part of me that wants to see if I'm right again. By the time I get to check-out, I'm just thankful to have an audience with the machine. I really want the debit card machine to like me. A big thumbs up from the card scanner will really make my afternoon.

"Hey, I just got approved! Look everyone, I've just been approved for pop and Fritos". High fives all round!

I fight authority, authority always wins.

So who gave authority to the card swiper at the big box retailer? I guess I empowered it because it could do the job

faster than the new employee who used to do it. You remember them don't you? They'd screw up the inputting of the numbers on your card, and would have to call the manager to get approval. If only there was some way to fix it so the checker wouldn't screw it up all the time, I could just pay and go. I know, how about a machine.

Meet the new boss...same as the old boss.

—Bill Grady, *You Are The Guest*

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On the great feedlot of life, I'm just another barbecue-on-the-hoof, passing time mooing and waiting for the day they award me a gold watch and shoo me into the stunning pen. In terms of domestication, I'm at a ninety-two on a ten-point scale.

I realized the full extent of my tractability at the local Super-Ultra-Mega-Mart last week. As a result of an unfortunate incident involving a counter top appliance and a butter knife, I urgently had to purchase a few things including bread, Band-aids, Bactine and a new toaster. At the checkout, I swiped my credit card and scrawled something on the electronic pad that might have been my signature or a quick sketch of two worms wrestling.

The computer beeped and flashed a message. "Signature exceeds space available."

I squinted. Sure enough. I'd drawn outside the lines.

"Sorry," I said and signed again, more carefully this time.

It didn't strike me until I was out of the store. I'd just apologized to a computer. *A MACHINE!* A hunk of junk hardware no smarter than a fifth-grader had called me out and I just stood there and took it.

What had happened to me?

I'm an American, darn it! A born rebel! Our great nation was founded by guys who felt that their personal style didn't include following the rules laid down by King George...especially the rules about paying taxes.

If a computer had told John Hancock he'd signed outside the lines, he'd just have laughed it off and gone home without his purchases.

Of course, he'd have had to explain to his wife why she couldn't have toast with breakfast. The point is, he wouldn't take abuse from a machine. He and the rest of the Founding Fathers stood up for what they believed in.

When King George didn't back down, they went to war...but not in the way they were supposed to. Instead of wearing brightly colored uniforms and marching in straight lines, they dressed in comfortable clothes and hid behind rocks and trees. After all, they were rebels.

Which brings up an interesting point. The rebels always seem to have the comfy outfits. If you remember the highly instructive movie *Star Wars*, you'll probably recall that the guys fighting the empire wore great outfits. Han Solo ran around in the remains of a rental tux which had seen better days (and for which he was *never* going to get his deposit back). Luke Skywalker spent most of the picture in his jammies. By contrast, the bad guys all dressed in uniforms that marked them as indistinguishable drones.

Much the same principle applies in modern corporations. The low-end employees – computer techs, marketers, and the Special Assistant to the Associate Vice President in charge of Parking – all get to dress in rumpled Dockers and wrinkled shirts. The folks at the top of the food chain – Chief Information Officers, Public Relations Officers, and the Vice

President in charge of the Associate Vice President in charge of Parking – all have to wear pinstriped Brooks Brothers' suits with samurai-sword-sharp creases and school ties knotted tightly enough to restrict the flow of both blood and oxygen.

My suit isn't Brooks Brothers, but my khakis are pressed and I've been known to wear a tie on occasion.

Standing in the parking lot of the Super-Ultra-Mega-Mart, I vowed to change my ways. No longer would I shame the memory of the great men who had written history by doing things their own way; people like Thomas Paine, Walt Whitman, and Kenneth Lay. At forty-three years of age, it was time for me to rebel!

Some people might think this is a sign of an impending mid-life crisis. After all, lots of guys my age decide it's time to make a last grab at their fading youth by buying an expensive new toy like a motorcycle or a sports car. Such corporatized, sanitized, prepackaged rebellion isn't for me. I'm a rebel on my own terms.

For instance, last week I went through the ten-items-or-less line with twenty-one items. That's right. I'm a bad, bad man. When I waltzed through with my dozen eggs, six-pack of soda, and three-in-one oil; nobody tried to stop me. I'll bet they could see I was the kind of tough, non-nonsense hombre who wouldn't take guff from anybody. (Even if it *was* a free sample of guff.)

It didn't stop there. On the way out of the store, I deliberately walked *out* through the *in* door. Sure the door swung towards me instead of away and I nearly got a black eye when I walked into it instead of through it, but that's the kind of risk that a dangerous dude like me is willing to run.

On the way out of the parking lot I tried to pull a similar stunt with the car, but my wife suggested that if I *ever* wanted to sleep indoors again I'd get back on my side of the road and stay there. I complied. Even rebels have their limits.

I've been toying with other ways of indulging my new-found anti-establishment leanings. Maybe when a recipe says to cook something at four-hundred degrees for ninety minutes, I'll choose three-hundred-ninety-five for eighty-seven. When my doctor tells me I should exercise more, I'll just ignore him. (Although, to be honest, it would be difficult to distinguish this from what I already do.) And maybe...just maybe...I'll stop paying my taxes.

Note to any IRS Agents who might be reading this. Of course I'll pay my taxes and I have all of my receipts...from like...forever. Please don't audit me. You might want to check on that John Hancock, though, he doesn't seem entirely trustworthy to me.

Return to Romance
selected by
KidsWifeWorkLife (Chris)

www.kidswifeworklife.com

Young couples who are thinking of tying the knot should be forced to listen to Mike and Chris of *KidsWifeWorkLife* to see what might happen to them in fifteen years...if they're *very* lucky. The good natured banter between the married co-hosts points to a close relationship built on mutual respect and a friendly sort of competitiveness.

Each episode includes a review of a book for young readers (Chris is a professional elementary teacher) and continues through a family-themed discussion of some kind. Past topics have ranged from dealing with near-impossible Christmas wishes, kid birthday parties, and even child nutrition. Listening to Mike and Chris is a like spending some time with your favorite brother-in-law, or maybe just hanging out with good friends.

When I proposed this book, Mike and Chris each chose different essays for inclusion. I didn't want to come between them, so I let them each pick one.

In keeping with my perception of their relationship, Chris chose *Return to Romance*.

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When people say that the romance has gone out of their marriage, they generally mean they've had children. Parenthood is a major toll booth on the expressway of romance.

Before children, married life was one long date with art-house films, live concerts and exotic restaurants. After delivery it turned into Disney movies, recitals and restaurants with play areas and meals which featured a free toy. Our married friends tried to warn us, by telling frightening stories whenever we ran into them in public.

"You won't believe what happened last week," they'd say. "We were picking up burgers on the way home from...excuse me...Jeffrey, we don't eat gum we found on the floor. Now, where was I? Oh yeah, the burger palace and anyway...sorry...Cindy Mr. Bear does NOT want a bath in the fountain. No he doesn't want to dive for monies either. Give him here this minute. If you can't take care of...JEFFREY! Put your pants back on!"

We'd stand politely for ten or fifteen minutes before we got to hear what happened last week. The stories usually ended with a punchline like "the doctor said he'd never seen Lite-Brite pegs in a sinus cavity before" or "the manager barred us for life."

Our brains, fogged by the wonder of being newlyweds, promised us these things could *never* happen to us.

So we reproduced.

Our lives were consumed with our children so gradually we didn't notice it had happened until my wife took a "Marital Romance Quiz" in a magazine that had accidentally come home in our diaper bag after a visit to the pediatrician.

She asked, “When was the last time we had dinner out together? You know, just the two of us?”

“Our wedding reception I think. Why?”

“The quiz says there isn’t enough romance in our lives. It’s right! I want dinner where I don’t have to tell someone to eat with their fork or to sit up straight or that they have to try at least one of the Brussels sprouts! I...WANT...A...DATE!”

The concept seemed vaguely familiar. I could remember dates and we’d seen our newlywed friends out on them. How hard could it be? All we had to do was find a babysitter.

The thought scared me. Anyone who would voluntarily spend an evening trapped with two small children was automatically suspect. My wife had no such concerns. “There’s a girl at church who babysits,” she said. “I’ll call her.”

We called the babysitter on Wednesday. That gave us two days to prepare before our Friday date.

We had to completely clean the house. We changed the linens, rearranged the closets, waxed the floors, shampooed the carpets, vacuumed the drapes and bought new furniture. We didn’t want to be embarrassed in front of the four-dollar-an-hour teenage girl. We trusted her with our children, but not the secret of housekeeping inadequacies.

We also wrote down everything we thought the babysitter might need to know during our four hour absence; complete medical histories along with directions for feeding, clothing, bathing, talking to, reporting on, looking at and thinking about the children. We listed instructions to cover every possible situation from minor cuts to an all-out nuclear war. The reference section included the telephone information for all of our relatives (geographically with the nearest first), our

neighbors, the restaurant, the movie theater, and local hospitals. We even listed “911” under emergencies. (Since Al Gore hadn’t invented the cell phone back then, we had to rely on the babysitter’s detective skills if she needed to track us down.)

On the evening of the date we piled up diapers, bottles, baby clothes, baby toys, books for our older son, pajamas, thermometers, blankets, reference manuals, food, and emergency medical supplies in the living room. It looked like the heap of stuff they give to the first baby born on New Year’s Day.

We just wanted to be prepared.

I also spent time preparing our oldest son. All of the parenting books talked about making sure you didn’t emotionally traumatize your children when you went out. Over and over I impressed upon him that we weren’t leaving for long and that we *would* be back. I could tell he was deeply concerned because he didn’t even look away from his toy trucks when he said, “Okay Daddy.”

At dinner my wife and I discovered that we had forgotten how to hold a conversation. After a fifteen minute embarrassed silence, I excused myself. Once out of my wife’s sight, I sneaked around the restaurant and went to the pay phone.

My line was busy! I knew it. The babysitter was probably calling her boyfriend in Australia or something. I slammed down the phone and then noticed my wife using the next phone over. By unspoken agreement, neither of us mentioned the incident.

At the movie I sneaked out during the previews. The babysitter said, “Is something wrong? Your wife just called.”

“My wife?” I said, adopting a thick, British accent. “I’m terribly sorry. I must have rung the wrong number don’t you know. This is Colonel Bruce Partington of Her Majesty’s brigadiers.”

I don’t think she believed me.

I’d love to tell you what movie was playing, but all I saw was a series of disaster scenarios playing out on the screen of my imagination. What if a satellite crashed into the house? Had we covered that in our instructions? Why hadn’t I taken the time to check the newspaper for the “satellite falling from the sky” forecast? What if the earth opened up beneath the house? What if trolls attacked?

Finally, the date was over and we got home. The house was neat and tidy and (to my relief) disaster free. The infant was asleep in his playpen and the three-year-old was asleep in his bed. The babysitter said that except the phone calls it had been a quiet evening.

Cleaning the Fridge
selected by
KidsWifeWorkLife (Mike)

www.kidswifeworklife.com

Listening to Mike and Chris, I get the sense that part of what makes their marriage work is the way they compliment each other so well. Chris handily takes on the role of Mommy and teacher and is happy in both. (Although there was a great discussion during one episode about how she has to “re-train” Mike to help around the house after each summer break.)

Mike is an odd mixture of pragmatist and dreamer who brings incredible energy to his podcasting. (I have a feeling the podcast was his idea in the first place.)

In light of that, I guess it’s sort of fitting that he chose an essay about putting off a particular chore until it absolutely has to be done. Mike’s choice? *Cleaning the Fridge*.

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When my wife said it was time to clean the fridge, I considered running away to join the circus as the new assistant for lefty the lion tamer, or maybe the French Foreign Legion, or something really extreme like the Boy Scouts.

It’s not the contents of the fridge which frighten me. Sure, the fuzz on the cheese is old enough to drink in most

states and has achieved the low level of sentience normally associated with Political Strategists and the guy who designed the shrink-wrap packing on CDs. There's also the vast array of unidentifiable foodstuffs which have been carefully preserved in individual containers. The margarine tub is particularly problematic because we're no longer certain if it contains non-dairy spread or applesauce.

None of that is as terrifying as the thought of cleaning the *outside* of the fridge.

I'm not certain our fridge has an outside anymore. The sales brochure went on at great length about the textured, enameled surface; praising it with the kind of lyricism that used to be reserved for war heroes and scenes of exceptional beauty.

In all the world you'll find no finer surface than the exterior of your Whirlwind Food Companion. Easy to clean and attractive, you may come to know that this appliance is more appealing than any other object in your house, including your mate and (if you have one) your Van Gogh.

I wasn't that enamored with the fridge. I still find my wife more attractive – although it is harder to get magnets to stick to her. Which is probably why the outside of the refrigerator is covered with random pieces of paper and my wife isn't.

The magnets themselves are a clue to the people we've been and the places we've seen.

Years ago, when our children were small and we were concerned that they might not be ready for college by the time they entered kindergarten, we bought a big bucket of magnetic letters. We assumed that the kids would see the letters on the fridge and spontaneously start spelling words.

This theory failed when our oldest (then three) pushed the letters around and formed the words “crentyd bxds.” His younger brother did slightly better with “iopd.” (Clearly ahead of his time, he very nearly spelled iPod.)

A few years back the letters started disappearing. I suspect they fell off and the cat batted them under the nearest appliance. I’m afraid that if I ever move the stove, beneath it I’ll find a frightened collection of letters spelling out “Save Us.”

Now we’re down to two letters – Q and a broken A that looks like a crooked 4. There’s no good way to spell a message with those.

We’ve been replacing the letters with souvenir magnets from the places we’ve visited – Yellowstone, Zion’s National Park, Bryce Canyon, Hoover Dam, Mars, and Oz. To be honest I don’t remember touring those last two, but the magnets wouldn’t lie.

Another side of the fridge is covered with promotional magnets for plumbing services, carpet cleaning services, pizza delivery services, drain cleaning services and towing companies. It looks like we just tore out a random section of the yellow pages and stuck it up as a decoration.

The magnets aren’t just there to look nice, though. They serve the vital function of keeping a forest’s-worth of random paper in place.

A quick survey of the fridge gives you some idea of what’s going on in our life. One whole section is devoted to keeping track of the kids’ schoolwork. Papers, projects, awards and other bits of random educational effluvia are posted in layers. Digging through them is a stroll down memory lane.

The top layer might be a pre-calculus quiz or an essay on *Antigone* or some other academic challenge which makes me glad I'm not in high school anymore. Below that are pages from a fifth-grade report about New Jersey (Embarrassed to Be Martha Stewart's Home State, But Okay With The Whole *Sopranos* Thing!) At the bottom are faded crayon drawings featuring figures that might be our family or the prototype drawings for the Burning Man festival.

Higher on the fridge, over the freezer, we keep expired coupons that we clipped with good intentions, but never used. Some of them date from previous presidential administrations and at least one from another geologic era. Yet we keep them, as if they are some kind of talisman that protects the food in the fridge from evil spirits.

Nearby is a collection of faded cartoons clipped from the newspaper and various magazines. Time hasn't been kind to these; the paper has yellowed and the ink has faded turning the characters into Dorian Grey-esque parodies of themselves. *Dennis the Menace* appears to be morphing into Mr. Wilson and the *Foxtrot* kids all look like creepy sideshow midgets. Oddly, Blondie and Dagwood don't seem that changed by the ordeal.

Newspaper articles have faded as well. According to one that I found at the bottom of a stack of outdated fast food coupons, our youngest son took top honors at the science fair...or was given a Nobel prize...or was convicted in the Enron scandal. The print is a little unclear. In any case, the clipping is a treasured memory.

Which is the whole reason the fridge looks the way it does and why I'm incapable of actually cleaning it off. Every piece of paper triggers some memory and I can't possibly

throw it out. So I examine it, place it back reverently and look for a bigger magnet to hold it in place. Does anyone know where I can get a good deal on one of those electromagnets they use in junk yards?

Rough Roads Ahead
selected by
Dancing With Elephants

www.dancingwithelephants.com

Mayberry isn't gone. It's just gone digital. For proof you need look no farther than *Dancing With Elephants*.

In every episode, Greg invites you to be a part of his family. He interviews his two sons (Nikolai and Caleb) about the things that are important to them. With fatherly patience, he tries desperately to keep them on track...with an average success rate of about forty percent.

Greg is a bit more successful in keeping his conversations with his wife Tonya on track, but she occasionally gives way to a playful impulse that takes the show in an unexpected direction.

In every sense of the word, this is a *heartwarming* show that reminds you that a loving family is a wonderful, safe place to be.

Greg's sons are quite young, so I was surprised when he chose *Rough Roads Ahead* for this book. I can only imagine that he's already dreading the fatherly duties associated with teaching children to drive.

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Here are a few handy things to keep in mind while training your young person to drive:

- Objects in the rear view mirror are closer than they appear.
- So are objects in the windshield.
- Before you set out, do a walk-around inspection of the car with your young person to look for any potential hazards such as flat tires and also so you'll be able to remember the car as it was.
- No matter how hard you push on the imaginary brake pedal on the passenger's side of the vehicle, the car will not stop...until you scream "STOP" loudly enough to be heard over a hurricane and clutch the dashboard in the classic "I'm about to die" position.
- No matter how much it seems like it, the other drivers aren't all psychotic lunatics out to run your young person off the road.
- Remember, your young person will never be as good at driving as you would like.
- Nor are they as bad as you think.

The process of learning to drive starts – bizarrely – in a classroom which is most likely in a large, immobile building. Students prepare for the rigors of operating a motor vehicle by reading books, taking multiple-choice tests and watching gore-filled accident films. When the teacher thinks they're ready, the students go to another (but still immobile) building and take *another* written test. Somehow, all of this pen-and-paper work is supposed to prove this young person is ready to take a learner's permit out on the actual road.

In my mind this is as stupid as saying that reading sheet music qualifies someone to be a jazz musician. The test is administered in a quiet room where the student has plenty of

time to read and consider each question and no one ever pulls out in front of them unexpectedly. When they come to the question about speed limits in residential zones they have time to ponder whether the answer is “25 Miles Per Hour”, “30 Miles Per Hour” or “Whatever I Can Get Away With.” Out on the road, everything happens at once. The new driver will have to; make decisions about speed limits, watch for cross traffic, check the mirrors, find a cool song on their iPod, send text messages on their cell phone, and make rude gestures at other drivers all at the same time. No written test could ever prepare anyone for that.

If the nice people at the Department of Motor Vehicles wanted to make sure kids were *really* ready for the road, they’d use some kind of expensive, motion-controlled simulator; preferably something with a padded interior. After strapping in securely in a twelve-point-restraint, drivers-to-be could prove their mettle in the worst road situations imaginable; gridlocked traffic in Manhattan, winter weather in the Rocky Mountains, and being stuck on a two-lane country road behind an eighty-seven-year-old driver who has left their right-turn blinker on for the past thirty-eight minutes. To add to the fun, the examiner could use an intercom system to shout helpful instructions at the student driver in the calming manner of an frightened parent.

“Turn left! No! The other left! You know...ummm...right! Slow down! You’re going to get too close! Speed up, you don’t want to get rear-ended! Watch that truck! Mind the bicycle! LOOK OUT!”

Any young driver who could make it through that without crashing, losing their temper, or deciding that a license wasn’t worth the effort would *definitely* be ready for

practice on actual roads. A separate test in the simulator would determine whether or not the learner's parents were ready to ride with them.

Until I started sitting in the passenger seat while my son drove, I'd never noticed how many utterly crazy people there are on the roads. Before I had a teenage driver, I saw the roads as the rivers of commerce; vehicles flowed like fishes, each in its place and headed to some reasonable destination like upstream to spawn and die. Now it looks more like a gathering of toothy ocean predators who are all intent on causing grievous bodily harm to my tender child. Really. Riding in the passenger seat I feel about as safe as a bleeding surfer at a "Sharks Anonymous" meeting.

We started his learning in an empty parking lot. I'd watched this child miss getting his laundry in the hamper from a distance of two feet. I wasn't ready to risk having him possibly hit another car. To be extra safe, I cheerfully ordered him to keep it at a reasonable speed – three miles an hour was about as fast as I could stand. For several hours we tooled around the parking lot as his skills increased and I gradually let him accelerate to the breath-taking velocity of ten miles an hour. At first he was hesitant and unsteady, like a newborn foal, but before long he took the corners with ease, pulled in and out of parking stalls, and handled every threat I could shout at him. In less time than it takes for a celebrity to fade from public view, my son learned to handle a car safely.

My son's carefree confidence did nothing to ease my fears. Somehow, I'd feel better if he felt worse. He carefully checks both ways before pulling smoothly onto the road, slotting into place like a Nascar driver easing into the middle of the pack. He drives easily through traffic, while I drive my

fingerprints into the dash. Unexpected hazards don't phase him, but propel *my* pulse-rate into the low five-hundreds. The better he does, the worse I feel.

The reason for that is simple. A license isn't a license. It's freedom. It's independence. It's one step closer to the day that I'm standing in the driveway watching him pull away; out into the road where I can't protect him.

Hiking Tips
selected by
101 Uses for Baby Wipes

www.101usesforbabywipes.com

Dennis Gray, creator and host of *101 Uses for Baby Wipes* is a highly successful podcaster who has earned an audience of tens of thousands.

Dennis focuses on the highs and lows of being a family man. He has dispensed useful advice on a host of dad topics (including surprising uses for baby wipes), interviewed authors, and shared his struggles with dadhood.

Dennis is also the brains behind the *Daddy Panel* podcast in which assorted podcasting dads get together to discuss parenting issues, and share ideas and laughter.

The overriding point of Dennis' podcasting is that we are *not* alone and that every dad is facing the same challenges. That can be a real comfort.

Dennis lived in southern Utah for a while when he was younger and has fond memories of exploring the beautiful, rugged landscape. To commemorate that part of his life, he chose *Hiking Tips*.

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It's summer and for a lot of you that means exploring the great outdoors on foot.

Let me give you a word of advice.

Don't.

It's crazy.

Hiking is what our ancestors did in the days before motorized transportation. When the pioneers trekked westward do you think they said, "Gee, what a beautiful day to spend walking several miles through desolate wilderness!"

Of course they didn't. They didn't have blister band-aids, or Camelbacks, or GPS units, or any of the other essential modern hiking gear. For heaven's sake, they barely had boots!

My point is they had an excuse for hiking. You don't.

I don't expect you to heed my counsel, though. I'm a hiker myself. So here's some advice to get you safely down the trail.

Tip #1 – Have the Proper Equipment

First and foremost you need sturdy boots that give good ankle support. If you twist an ankle out on the trail your hiking companions won't help you back. If you're lucky, they'll shoot you like a horse with a broken leg. If you're unlucky, they'll leave you to the animals. (See tip #2.)

The best way to tell if you have the right boots is by their weight. Good boots are defined as boots which weigh so much you can't lift your feet more than an inch above the ground. If you can't move your feet, you can't stumble. If you can't stumble, you can't get hurt.

Your other vital piece of trail equipment is a "Hydration Unit." These used to be called canteens, but modern hikers wouldn't be caught dead with something that primitive.

Savvy hikers (defined as those who have money to burn) use backpack hydration units that carry enough water for everyone on the trail and weigh so much the hiker can't

move. Just like the boots, these hydration units should be considered safety devices.

Tip #2 – Know the Dangerous Animals in the Area

One of the many mortal dangers you'll face in the wilderness is the fact that it is *wild*. That means it's full of wild animals like cougars and bears *and* environmental activists. Contact with any of these can be very dangerous.

Before you set out make sure you know what kind of animals to expect and what to do if you encounter them. For example, experts say if you meet a cougar you're supposed to make a lot of noise and try to look big.

These same experts say that when you encounter a bear, you're supposed to curl up in a ball. Or is it the other way round – look big for a bear and small for a cougar? All of the experts *do* agree that the best thing to do if you meet an Activist is to sign whatever petition he has and then back away slowly.

Tip #3 – Know Where You're Going

Your local bookstore is full of helpful hiking guides with names like “50 Fun Hikes for the Total Masochist” and “25 One-Day Death Marches.” You can study the guides to pick which trails you think you can handle, which you want to avoid, and which you want to recommend to people you don't like very much.

As a bonus, you can carry the guide when you hike. It probably won't keep you from getting lost, but at least you'll have the book to read while you wait for the Search and Rescue teams.

Tip #4 – Avoid Hikes With Excessive Gravity

My wife and I recently went hiking in Zion Canyon in southern Utah. Unlike Disneyland, which is meant to be easy

to walk in, Zion is meant to be hard. That's not to say that all of the hikes are hard – just the ones recommended by other hikers.

We had violated tip #3 (Know Where You're Going) and started up a hike named "Angel's Landing."

The last part of the hike involves crabbing across a sloping rock face hanging onto handrails made of chain. At least we no longer had to worry about the animals. (See tip #2.) Even dumb animals were too smart to be up where we were.

We were up so high we could peek in the windows of passing space shuttles. Anyone who opens an oxygen mask concession at the top of the trail will make a fortune. Helicopter rides down would be a good business, too.

Heedless of all of the gravity that occurs at that altitude, we made our way across the rock face until we could see...more chains. And a narrower rock face. And more chains. And the teeny-tiny top of the trail perched on a rock several million miles above the canyon floor.

Seriously.

If we had looked at a trail guide before we left, it would have said, "Don't even think about attempting this trail unless you have a DNA test proving you are at least three-quarters mountain goat."

Maybe it was the thin air or the space shuttle exhaust or the threat of imminent death, but we decided we'd gone far enough. I felt good about that. Sure, I wasn't finishing the trail, but I'd conquered gravity. I'd shown I was a man's man. I'd...hey, where's my cell phone going?

Gravity reached up and snatched my cell phone off my belt. It skittered merrily down the rock face and finally came

to rest on the precipice of a cliff. I toyed with the idea of stepping away from the safety of the chain so I could try for the phone, but powerful tentacles of gravity clutched at me every time I so much as looked at the phone. I can only imagine what they would have done if I'd actually tried to go to the edge. Last I saw of that phone, it was still sitting there, mocking me.

I hope these tips will keep you safe on your summer hikes. And, if you disagree with anything I said, I'd be happy to discuss it. Just call me on my cell phone.

Parking Mad
selected by
Tech Talk for Families

www.techtalkforfamilies.com

Ain't technology grand? Every day some high tech company announces a new product or service designed to make your life easier, to help educate your children, or to eliminate the washday blues. Keeping up with all of that can be a full-time job.

Fortunately, it's a job you don't have to worry about. Dale, Teresa, Kimberly, Dani and Hannah have you covered. In each episode, the family previews and reviews new tech to tell you what's worth having and what's worth ignoring.

What makes the show most engaging is the low-key, listener-friendly approach that Dale and Teresa take. Listening to an episode is like the good old days of *TechTV* before it turned into the adolescent-targeted *G4*.

I'm not sure what it says about Dale and Teresa that they chose *Parking Mad* as their essay, but I can't wait to hear how driving lessons go for their daughters.

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If you lived through the eighties, you probably remember the highly instructive *Mad Max* film series in which Mel Gibson played an enigmatic loner who traveled a post-apocalyptic wasteland trying to find a parking space. Just

kidding. He was traveling the post-apocalyptic wasteland looking for gas so he could drive his car *long enough* to find a place to park.

Even at the end of the world, parking spaces will be in short supply.

Which is why I'm deeply disappointed that my son's state-approved driver's education course didn't spend more time on parking. They pretty much stopped at "park between the lines." Comparatively, this is about as useful as stopping sky-diving lessons after *Step One, Jump out of the airplane*. There's got to be more to it if you intend to arrive safely.

It's a matter of proportion. Of every hour I spend driving around town, at least forty-three minutes are invested in finding a parking space. Why, then, don't they spend three-quarters of the driver's ed course on parking?

A comprehensive course would include a handy guide to trip planning and calculating the time necessary to identify the optimum parking space. Picking a stall isn't as important as, say, selecting a new justice to serve on the Supreme Court, but it is far more important than choosing a china pattern, a name for a child, or even a presidential candidate. All of those things can be changed. Once you've pulled into a parking space it's yours for the duration.

Don't believe me? Try this simple experiment. Next time you're in a parking lot and someone pulls in, tap gently on their window until they roll it down and stare at you. Tell them you had your eye on that very space and would they mind moving so that you can put your car there instead. With a smile and nod they'll pull out and give the space to you. Right?

Of course not. They'll defend the space as if it represents the last piece of sovereign ground left of their ancestral home. Were it large enough, they'd deploy troops at the borders to repel you or, at least, build a fence to keep you out. They believe that the act of putting a vehicle in the space makes it *their* territory. When, in fact, it is only their territory in the same way that planting a U.S. flag on the Moon made it the fifty-first state.

Sometimes a driver will spy an apparent space in the middle of the lot only to find that it contains a very short car or a motorcycle. Given the disappointment and rage that ensues, most experts agree it is perfectly permissible for these drivers to use their automobile to gently ram the offender's vehicle out of the way. A recent case involving this unwritten rule is headed for the Supreme Court...if the attorneys can ever find a place to park.

People get possessive of parking spaces they haven't even claimed yet. If two drivers coming from opposite directions see an empty stall at the same time, they'll both politely pause and gesture for the other car to take the space.

Not really.

They'll both pause and gesture, but only with the intent of expressing the idea that since they saw the space first and they are clearly in a hurry to get into the mall and buy a new cell phone so they can rush back to work before the lunch hour is over, the space is obviously theirs. In the highly efficient gestural language of drivers, this entire complex concept can be embodied in a single upraised finger.

The drivers rev their engines and lunge forward, risking a collision and death for the privilege of getting a good spot. Most people don't realize that this ritual is actually a modern

re-enactment of the medieval jousting contests which, in turn, came about when two knights realized there was only one horse stall left in the stable. Come to think of it, parking would be a lot more interesting if we issued drivers lances.

Other parking contests have more in common with the chariot race in *Ben Hur* – especially around the holiday season. Drivers enter the lot, burdened with the cold and the thought that they *must* get into the mall because Aunt Millie's Christmas won't be complete unless they buy her yet another ceramic figurine of a pale child with enormous, soulful eyes and a disproportionately large head. Seeing no stalls in the immediate vicinity, they begin circling in hopes that something will open up. At the same time fifty or sixty other drivers are engaged in an equally fruitless quest. If a spot happens to appear, all of the drivers dash for it – sort of like automotive musical chairs.

Young children wishing to amass vast fortunes could exploit this situation and hire themselves out as scouts to weary drivers.

Parking lots are bad, but garages are worse by a factor of at least five-point-seven percent. Multi-story parking terraces are obviously designed by disgruntled junior members of architectural firms. While the senior partners get all of the glory jobs – giant sun-obliterating towers of glass and steel, monuments to progress, and sports stadiums in which the home team might someday win a victory – the junior partners get assigned concrete layer-cakes with identical rows of stalls on every level. They take out their frustration on the hapless drivers by devising complex “traffic control” systems in which half the “exit” signs actually lead deeper into the cement labyrinth. The only way out is in and cars aren't so

much parked as abandoned by starving owners who decide to take their chances on foot.

None of these vital topics were covered in my son's driving course. Which is why I'm going to jump right in my car and head down there at once...just as soon as I find my lance.

Improperly Motivated
selected by
Pizza Go Here

www.pizzagohere.com

Anyone who says the American family is a decaying institution should listen to a handful of the available family podcasts. The RSS feeds are full to bursting with examples of healthy, supportive, loving families.

The Beckwiths are just such a family.

Dad Matt, wife Dawn, and daughters Emily and Makenzy share their day-to-day lives with listeners in such a friendly and infectious manner that it makes you want to move in with them. The episodes are well-produced, focused and always interesting to listen to.

The age-spread between Emily and Makenzy is fairly wide, so it looks like Matt is stuck with a teenager in the house for the next several years. That's probably why he chose the essay entitled *Improperly Motivated*.

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It was spring again and my once disciplined lawn had forgotten all of the lessons I taught it last summer and had fallen into disarray. My orderly sea of green had become an unruly mess with tufts large enough to hide zebra-stalking lions.

So I mowed.

While the mower's snout growled and chewed its way through the grass, I pondered the eternal mysteries. Why are we born? Why do we die? Why weren't my teenage sons mowing?

Well, to be honest, the answer to that last one is pretty simple. Yard work isn't cool. Teens who voluntarily engage in household chores are about as common as Frat Boys campaigning for temperance.

The problem is a matter of marketing. The very name of the activity — yard *work* — puts kids off. If we parents want to motivate kids, we need to make chores sound more exciting.

Instead of talking about a lawn mower, let's use a better name. Something like “the whirling blades of death” should do the trick. Given the popularity of grim films like *Hostel*, *Saw*, and *Blades of Glory* what teen could resist using such an enticingly named tool?

Other implements could be renamed as well. Line trimmer? Nope. Call it the “Dandelion Decapitator” and teens will beg for a chance to use it. Killing weeds sounds a whole lot more fun when it's described as “using chemical agents to eliminate all LGIs” — so long as we don't mention that LGI stands for “Leafy Green Intruder.”

With a little imagination, it would be easy to re-frame all exterior maintenance as an epic battle against the forces of chaos. Instead of telling my sons to go out and mow, I could entice them with a movie-trailer-style narration:

In a world of peaceful greenery, darkness is coming. Crabgrass is growing. Monstrous machines and chemical weapons will come into play and two teens will be pushed to their limits in an all-out war.

Another good approach (more suited to the peace-loving teen) is to attach some kind of cool lingo to the task. Skateboarding is huge because of its insider jargon. Anyone possessing even a passing acquaintance with the laws of physics and gravity knows it is a bad idea to put your body on a small wheeled board which features a complete lack of controls and then hurl the entire assembly (body and board) off the precipice of an concrete canyon. Frankly, I'll take up the sport when standard equipment includes roll cages, ABS braking, and airbags. Yet teens are mad for it. They go on and on about things that involve "half-pipes", "540s", "360s" and (I think) "olives." The whole secret-language-that-parents-don't-understand thing makes it worth the risk of a severely broken neck.

So we should describe the action of starting the mower as "yanking the power pull." Cutting the grass could become "grinding the green." For advanced practitioners, trimming around trees and telephone poles is actually "doing a 360 green shave."

Maybe it's not the language. Maybe it's the fact that there are competitions for skateboarding and the kids want to prove that they are the best. How else to explain the *X Games*?

I'm thinking that ESPN could be of some help here by creating a whole new series of contests built around good yard care. Oh sure, for the first couple of seasons the games would show up on ESPN2 just after the Championship Match for the International Federation of Curling. That'd be okay, though After all, if a couple of guys sweeping ice can be a contest why not mowing and weeding?

Like any good sport, we'd need sponsorships; maybe the Toro mower company or the good folks at Weedeater. They could build special competition-class machines; lawnmowers with larger, sharper blades, carbon-fiber doodads and special professional-level color schemes. These machines would be exclusively available to registered competitors and those people who have that special something called "too much spare cash."

The competition could be held in a stadium where the field has been allowed to go to seed and sown with genetically engineered crabgrass that is resistant to all known weed killers.

(ASIDE: ESPN could save some money on this by just transplanting the crabgrass from my yard. It seems to have naturally developed this resistance. Really. No matter what noxious chemical I spray on it, I swear I can hear slurping noises followed by a voice that says, "Is that the best you can do? Ha! Come back when you've got some *real* weed killer. Hey come back! I'm talking to you!" If it weren't for the fact that I can walk away, I'd never get any peace.)

On the day of competition, every contestant would don their special protective gear (eye protection, a helmet because it looks cool, and knee-pads in case they have to get down-and-dirty with the crabgrass), present their weed whackers to the judges for a final inspection, submit a blood sample to ensure that they haven't taken any weed killer, and go forth to clean the weeds out of a two-meter square. Points would be awarded for speed and style, but deducted for any weeds missed. Contestants who try particularly difficult maneuvers — say a "grinding the green" and doing a "360 degree green

shave” at the same time could earn extra points if they didn’t lose any of their vital limbs in the process.

Once we had the Lawn Games up and running kids would be going door-to-door to find the gnarliest lawn to practice on. Instead of paying for yard care, homeowners could charge kids for the privilege. I honestly don’t see a downside to this. If you’re part of the ESPN creative team, give me a call and let’s talk. I can hear the advertising now:

In a world of weeds and crabgrass, a new breed of competitor is about to emerge...

Irritable Dad Syndrome
selected by
The Zedcast

www.zedcast.com

Podcasting is a truly international phenomenon. Anyone with a computer, a microphone and an internet connection can have a world-wide audience.

One of the best examples of an early podcaster is Canadian Bruce Murray of the Zedcast. Bruce is a bit of a renaissance man – storyteller, voice actor, photographer, writer, and podcaster. His show covers a lot of territory from skits to stories to travel narratives, but it is consistently entertaining.

Bruce – like so many of the podcasters represented in these pages – is also a dad. So it's not especially surprising that his selection is *Irritable Dad Syndrome*.

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You'll forgive me if I'm a little terse right now. I'm recovering from an attack of Irritable Dad Syndrome. Although you may not have heard of IDS before, it is a serious problem in this country. IDS afflicts virtually all fathers at some point. Fully half of the fathers in America suffer it at least once a week with a few unfortunate souls finding themselves stricken daily.

Attacks of IDS are triggered by things in the environment which frustrate or annoy dads. For example, someone – let’s pick a hypothetical person at random, say an adolescent male – might put a milk jug back in the refrigerator with a scant sixteenth-of-an-inch of liquid remaining. Technically speaking, this isn’t really a quantity of milk as much as it is a film of milk! If it spilled there’d be no need to cry over it because the whole mess could be easily cleaned up with a Q-tip. Now why would anyone do something like that? Why not drink the rest of the milk? Why entomb it like a Holy Relic? WHY! TELL ME WHY!

Sorry. I got a little carried away there.

Virtually all high-level IDS attacks are preceded by low-level incidents of FDS (Frustrated Dad Syndrome) or ADS (Annoyed Dad Syndrome). These incidents aren’t hard to predict and follow regular, established patterns. A typical case might involve the unexpected absence of toilet paper in the bathroom. Dad’s sitting there when he suddenly realizes that the current roll of toilet paper is a single layer of tissue wrapped around a crumpled paper tube. Not yet panicked, Dad checks the strategic toilet-paper reserves in the bathroom and finds them empty. Why would anyone do that to Dad? How many times have I...I mean “he”...said “When you put the last roll on the holder bring up more toilet paper from the basement?” Is that so hard? It’s not like ROCKET SCIENCE FOR CRYIN’ OUT LOUD. I MEAN HONESTLY...

Sorry.

Got carried away again.

Some attacks of IDS are quite sudden. There is little or no warning...

COULD SOMEONE PLEASE CLOSE THAT DOOR?
I'M NOT PAYING TO AIR-CONDITION THE WHOLE
STATE!

Oops.

Sorry about that. It won't happen again. I promise.

IDS isn't a particularly new condition. In fact, anyone who has a dad has probably witnessed it. Dad will be going along doing his thing – say using a snowblower, or fixing the transmission on a '79 Camero, or negotiating a peace settlement between warring nations and some part of the process will veer off in an unexpected direction.

The snowblower dies with a dramatic cough worthy of any Academy Award winning actor and then just sits, immobile and unresponsive. The transmission falls out, right in front of Dad's unbelieving eyes, and spontaneously converts itself into a pile of useless junk. One of the warring nations launches a sneak attack on Dad's country.

Then – *BANG!* – Dad experiences IDS.

Often IDS manifests itself in the use of language which is normally associated with sea folk or members of particularly disreputable motorcycle gangs. This may be the first time that Dad's children are exposed to the full extent of his vocabulary. Given that these same children will grow up to be teenagers, it's certainly not the last.

Dad may also begin to ask rhetorical questions. He'll do this even if he's alone at the time of the attack. Researchers aren't certain as to the rationale behind these questions, but they feel that understanding and answering these questions may be the key to cracking the IDS riddle.

My own personal experience with IDS goes back to childhood when my father seemed to be obsessed with the

location of his tools. If I borrowed something – a hammer, a screwdriver, a table-mounted reciprocating saw – he expected me to put it back *exactly* where it came from. And I mean *exactly*. Across the garage wasn't good enough for him. If it came out of the toolbox, he wanted it back in the toolbox. If it came off the peg-board on the wall, he wanted it put back right on top of its spray-painted silhouette. He failed to see the humor when I traded the rubber mallet and the sledge hammer.

“Do you think tools put themselves away?” he asked, locked full in the grip of an IDS attack.

Well no, I thought, but it'd be cool if they did.

On days that I felt like testing the limits of his vocabulary, I'd say something like that. Most of the time I kept my mouth shut.

And I started to put the tools back just the way he wanted.

Fortunately, my early exposure to IDS has inoculated me and I'm not a sufferer. I don't get frustrated or annoyed by...

WOULD SOMEBODY PLEASE SHUT THAT DOOR! THIS IS THE SECOND TIME I'VE ASKED. IS IT TOO MUCH TO EXPECT A LITTLE HELP FROM ANYONE AROUND THIS HOUSE? MIGHT IT BE POSSIBLE FOR ONE OF YOU TO SHOW SOME INITIATIVE AND CLOSE THE &*\$%^\$# DOOR!

Sorry. Sorry. Just a momentary lapse. I won't let it happen again.

There is no cure for IDS. However, there are effective treatments. Removing the possible triggers from Dad's environment has been shown to be very effective. If people would just be a little considerate around here, things would

go a lot better. Have you looked in the microwave lately? It looks like something exploded in there! What were you doing, nuking a critter made of pizza? What is this dripping from the top? Cheese? Cheese stalagmites? That's disgusting...whaddya mean *stalactites*? Don't get smart with me! Just clean the darn microwave when you use it! Do you think other people want to see that mess? HOW CAN YOU EVEN EAT FOOD THAT CAME OUT OF THERE?

Sorry.

Sadly there's no real hope for sufferers of IDS. Which means – even more sadly – there's no hope for the rest of you either.

Random Acts of Giving
selected by
Tokyo Calling

www.tokyocalling.org

The roots of podcasting are found in the blogosphere. Many of the earliest podcasts were audio blogs. The hosts shared their lives and themselves freely and regularly with their audience.

As podcasting grew and the content became more varied, different podcasting styles emerged. Some of the best (and most durable) podcasts have stayed close to that original blog-based vision.

Scott Lockman's *Tokyo Calling* is one such podcast.

An expat teacher living and working in Tokyo, Scott freely shares his life and thoughts with the audience. He often records in the field and his descriptions (paired with the ambient sounds) lend a "you are there" feel to the show. His very personal musings and reflections, leave you feeling as if you've just read a letter from a dear old friend.

Scott is father to three young girls whom he often mentions on the show, so I suspect that his choice – *Random Acts of Giving* – had real resonance for him.

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I think that I may be getting old. As evidence, I offer the fact that this past Father's Day I received socks and a ties and

I was happy about that. A younger man might have wanted something more exciting like a 40" high-def plasma screen TV, or a laptop computer with built-in wireless networking, or a video iPod with the accessory kit. No me. No sir. Who needs all that high tech gear when you can look stylish at work and feel comfortable in your shoes?

Like most parents I've often found myself on the receiving end of random acts of gift giving from my children. It starts with the toddlers' instinct for generosity. Their bighearted nature is matched only by the haphazardness of their gift selections.

"Here daddy," they say, holding out a stem which until recently had served to keep a dandelion head aloft. "This is for you."

As a Dad you smile and say thank-you while you watch fluffy dandelion seeds drifting like snowflakes across your freshly-weeded lawn. You accept the stem with its one or two remaining seeds as if you were being presented with a rare orchid brought back at the cost of a dozen lives.

It's a Dad thing.

As soon as your child's attention has wandered (approximately ten milliseconds later) you hide the stem trying not to dislodge the remaining seeds.

You don't need to fret about losing your gift. In a minute or two your child will return with another "gift" – a stone, a twig, a prize rose from the neighbor's garden, a clump of dirt, a handful of mud, a deceased insect, a live insect, assorted insect parts – really any random object that happens to be somewhere in your child's line of sight. They'll grin and hand it over and say, "For you, Daddy!" Then they giggle and run off to find more flotsam to give you.

Sometimes I wonder if this isn't a vast children's conspiracy. Maybe the kids all meet somewhere and compare notes.

"Oh yeah?" one will say to all of his little friends, "I gave my Dad half of an earthworm and he said 'thank-you'! Top that!"

It doesn't matter. No matter what oddity your toddler presents, you say "Thank-you sweetheart."

It's a Dad thing.

You would think that having another parent – say, your loving spouse – involved in the gifting process would help. Surely she'd temper their impulses, right? Yeah, you'd think that.

When my oldest son was three he presented me with a shiny gold lamé tie that was approximately as bright as the noonday sun, but only about three strands of thread wide. I have to be completely honest here. If it were a car it would have been a green-and-orange Yugo. If it were a person it would have been a hairy guy named Buzz in a beauty pageant. Ugly and useless is a hard combination to find, but this tie was the blue-ribbon winner in both categories.

"He wouldn't let go of it," my wife explained when I gave her my best *what-were-you-thinking* glare.

I wore it proudly to work. Whenever anyone commented – or even looked like they might be *going* to comment – I said, "Father's Day." They'd smile sympathetically and back away knowing that I'd fully succumbed to the madness that is parenting.

As kids get older, they get more creative about the gift giving. No longer content to simply collect and distribute random objects they begin to make things. They are aided

and abetted by well-meaning elementary school teachers whose brains have been reduced to quivering lumps of jelly by years of exposure to white glue, finger paints, and large numbers of exuberant children.

We are treated to crayon drawings that make us look like blocky giants with spiky hair and disproportionately large hands and feet; or random accumulations of Popsicle sticks which appear to be held together with whale snot; or stones which have been been splotted with random colors so they resemble something collected under the flightpath of a flock of paint-eating pigeons. If you didn't know better, you'd swear these crafts are the output from the art therapy program at a state mental institution.

But you smile and say, "Thank-you."

It's a Dad thing.

I think the teachers coerce the kids into making these gifts as revenge. After all, the poor teacher has to spend every day with our kids while we're off at work or home napping or generally having a life.

These handcrafted trinkets present a new problem. Specifically, how long do you have to keep them? Clearly such a wonderful offering needs to be displayed prominently in your home. How many years before they can be safely stored in a box in the basement? How about safely stored in the county landfill? What psychological trauma will you inflict by throwing them out? Do you want to see your child on TV saying, "I wouldn't have mutilated those seventy-eight people if Dad had only kept my second-grade art project."

Of course not. So, like me, you probably have all of the artwork your children have ever created including a random

lump of clay that was supposed to be a whale but actually looks more like a gray mutant tadpole with three tails.

Funny, though, that I'm starting to miss those gifts. The socks I got this year are comfortable and exactly the kind that I would have bought myself. The ties match my wardrobe perfectly and don't elicit even a single comment when I wear them to work. The days of handcrafted gifts are gone and I'm a little sad about that. Well, there's always next year. Maybe somebody will give me a dandelion stem or a painted rock. I'm kind of fond of them.

It's a Dad thing.

The Mighty Crackberry
selected by
The Sonic Society (Shannon)

www.sonicsociety.org

One of the most exciting aspects of podcasting is that it has brought about a revival of audio drama. There are dozens, if not hundreds, of independent production companies creating new audio dramas and releasing them as podcasts. Keeping up with all of them – even just *finding* all of them – can be a real challenge.

That's where *The Sonic Society* comes in. Every week the producer/hosts Jack Ward and Shannon Hilchie present new content from the podosphere. The weekly episodes of *The Sonic Society* are available as downloadable podcasts as well as being broadcast on radio CKDU out of Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Jack and Shannon are passionate about audio drama and their love for the form comes across clearly in every episode. That enthusiasm is infectious and it only takes a few minutes of listening to share their excitement.

Shannon's lighthearted eagerness and boundless energy nicely offset Jack's more thoughtful approach. Together they make an awesome hosting team.

In making her selection, Shannon writes: "I choose show number ten! As that is my lucky number."

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Blackberries don't float. At least mine doesn't. I dropped it in a bathroom sink this week and it plunged straight to the bottom.

To be fair, though, my Blackberry isn't a fruit. For the uninitiated (definition: *anyone who actually has a life*) let me introduce the Blackberry.

It resembles the offspring of a shotgun wedding between a handheld video game and DVD remote control. It combines the functions of e-mail, web browsing and a cell phone in a package which is too big to be a convenient phone and too small to be useful for anything else. The annoyingly small screen is nicely matched by the frustratingly small keyboard.

And I'm completely hooked on it.

No matter where I go, day or night, I can send and receive e-mail for work. I carry my office on my hip. I'm never away from my job. I've taken (and sent) e-mails from the top of a hiking trail, waiting in line at a movie theater, sitting at the dinner table, and even during bathroom breaks.

On the street – Wall Street, mostly, where business is supreme and little else matters – they call these little beauties Crackberrys.

Which is why there were two very different reactions to my story about dropping mine in the sink. Those of you who are normal human beings were asking, "Why were you using it in the bathroom?"

My fellow addicts were asking, "Why didn't you hang onto it better?"

For safety's sake, I should have left it in its case. When I got my Blackberry, I also bought it a particularly nice leather holster. The sort of thing you might have seen hanging from

Doc Holliday's hip. Ifn I'm in a meeting and I sense trouble brewin', I pull back the side of my sport coat to expose the Mighty Crackberry. Then, just to make sure my message is understood, I snap open the safety strap.

If anybody in the meeting gets out of line, I can whip out my weapon and send an e-mail faster than they can blink. From the wide-eyed stares they all give me, I can tell they're intimidated by my prowess as a cell-phone slinger.

They're probably less intimidated by my spelling.

My particular model of Crackberry doesn't have a full keyboard. Some of my fellow addicts have larger models sporting keyboards that look like the shrunken-head version of the one you'd find on any computer. Not me. I opted for a Crackberry that vaguely resembles (but is still much larger than) a regular cell phone. So I only get twenty buttons. This means that most of the keys have more than one function. A given key could mean '5' or 'g' or 'h' or '?:'. The Crackberry does its best to figure out what I mean based on what I've already typed.

Trouble is, my Crackberry isn't very smart. If I miss a key stroke (easy to do since the keys are approximately the size of a grain of rice) then the poor thing gets completely overwhelmed and starts spitting out gibberish.

This can reduce even Shakespeare's glorious prose to garbage. A couple of misplaced clicks and Hamlet's soliloquy is rendered as:

To be or not to be...that is bygr question. Wagetee it is nobler in the mind to suffer the slunga and seepwa of outragois fortune or by taking up adma against a sea of troubles end them.

Let's see your so-called great actors like Hopkins, Brannan, Ferrell and Sandler try to make sense of that speech. (Although, I must admit, this is probably exactly how Shakespeare looks to most of my sons' generation.)

Normal communiques don't fare much better. A month or so ago some colleagues and I had been invited to an upscale business lunch. Wanting to sound smarter than I really am, I wrote back on the Crackberry and said:

We owild be deligyrd to accept your invitation.

"Gee," one of my colleagues said when she received a copy of the message, "When you put it that way it sounds like a medical condition."

Despite the linguistic betrayal, I still love my Crackberry.

I love it so much I accessorize it. The leather holster was just the beginning. For Christmas my wife gave my Crackberry a Bluetooth headset. This is a tiny, wireless, Star Trek-like device which hangs on my ear and allows me to talk hands-free. When I'm using it, a light on the side blinks a steady blue beat, matched by a light on the Crackberry. Two devices, in harmony and happy – and when they're happy, I'm happy.

If you walk through the airport, you'll see people like me, strolling along the concourse chatting into our wireless headsets – completely disconnected from reality, plugged into the hive-mentality of modern business; mindless robots mechanically obeying orders beamed directly into our brains.

Which is why dropping my Crackberry into a sink full of water was such a big deal. If the Crackberry died, it would take days (and reams of paperwork) to get a new one. I'd be

off the grid. Disconnected. Forced to think and act on my own!

I lifted the dripping Crackberry out of the sink and stared at the screen. All my familiar friendly icons were gone, replaced by a blank white glow. True, electronic tabula rasa.

No one could contact me. I couldn't call them. They couldn't call me. E-mail was utterly out of the question.

Like an old zoo specimen finding his enclosure door unexpectedly open, I shrank back from the idea of freedom. I couldn't possibly deal with the nightmare world outside on my cage.

A few anxious moments with the hot air hand dryer put the Crackerry right. When I saw the familiar icons and the blinking green "mail waiting" light I breathed a sigh of relief. I'd been plugged back in.

Average, Ordinary, Everyday Superheroes
selected by
The Sonic Society (Jack)

www.sonicsociety.org

Jack Ward is an enthusiastic proponent of audio drama (or sonic cinema, if you prefer), but he is also a producer of the same.

Fans of the Joss Whedon series *Firefly* are indebted to Jack for his two amazing fanfic mini-series; *Old Wounds* and *Wedding Day*. The two shows were produced with voice talents who captured both the sound and the feeling of the original cast.

Jack (along with Shannon's help) also produces an on-going series called *The Jack and Shannon Show*. This zany series captures the energy and wackiness of Jack Benny's radio show and runs frequently during episodes of *The Sonic Society*.

Podcasting isn't particularly lucrative and most of us don't make enough to quit our day jobs. Jack is no exception, yet he continues to produce amazing content on a regular schedule. So, it's entirely fitting that Jack's selection is *Average, Ordinary, Everyday Superheroes*.

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Superheroes are big in America right now. Larger-than-life characters including Spiderman, Mr. Fantastic and Al Gore all use their special skills to try to save the world.

Spiderman slings webs, Mr. Fantastic stretches himself, and Al Gore writes books. Every one of them is fighting some kind of super-villain from mutants and aliens to corrupt politicians.

The trouble is that the real world is a little short on actual super-villains. When was the last time you were driving down the street and some lunatic in a goblin costume buzzed you on a hover board? That sort of thing happens about as often as lottery winners who actually *do* stay at their jobs. What I really need from the tights-and-capes brigade are heroes who actually take on the things that cause difficulties in my own personal, day-to-day life.

Consider road construction, for example. I live on the west side of town and every year the city thoughtfully closes all of the major roadways between my house and the freeway.

The roads that are freshly laid every summer degrade by the end of the next winter and need to be replaced. Instead of asphalt, I suspect they're using chocolate frosting on a road base of graham cracker crumbs; roadway renovation with the Keebler Elves as prime contractors. Or maybe the good folks of the city council who live on the east side of town want to keep me in my place.

Whatever the reason, I spend the summer months stuck in my car, crawling alongside the endless procession of orange barrels while some guy with a long ponytail and a reflective vest motions me to slow down even more. What I want is a superhero who can repair the road overnight.

Or, at least, a superhero who can keep traffic moving during the construction. Maybe he'd go by the name "Flagman." I imagine he'd have a bright orange costume and the superpower of being able to open additional traffic lanes

at a moment's notice. Who knows, he might even make it possible for people to arrive at work on time.

Another handy-to-have-around superhero would be someone called "The Plumber."

Virtually every serious problem with my house has been related to water in some way. The trouble with the bathroom floor back in '93? Water leaking from the tub faucets. The time the ceiling collapsed over the bay window in '98? Water leaking through the roof. The unfortunate soaking incident of '04? Well, to be honest, that involved gross misuse of the kitchen sprayer but an excess of water was still the unfortunate end result.

The Plumber would have a couple of useful superpowers. His coolest power would be the ability to absorb water into his skin like a sponge. Even if the furniture was actually floating, he could walk into a room and dry the place out. He'd have to spend the next three days in the restroom, but such is the life of a superhero.

His more useful power would be the ability to talk the homeowner (me) out of performing ill-advised self-repairs. Imagine me standing in my kitchen, red toolbox open on the table, pipe wrench in hand, staring at the kitchen faucet trying to decide where to begin.

"Stop homeowner!" the Plumber would shout, appearing in my kitchen unannounced like an uninvited relative. "You don't want to do that!"

"But I..."

"Trust me. Here's ten dollars friend. Why don't you go to the movies?"

Now that I think about it, The Plumber would probably be part of a team of home-improvement superheroes. Sort of

like the Justice Friends or Super League, only more useful. The members would include The Roofer, The Drywaller, The Painter, The Tile Master, The Electrician, The Glazier and The Free-Labor Carpet Guy. Of course, they couldn't ever swing into action unless they had clearance from their leader The Home Improvement Lender.

My wife thinks the whole idea is ridiculous, but lately I've had suspicions that she's hiding a secret superhero identity. Just keep it between us, but I think she might actually be the superhero known as "Precog." She's shown signs of knowing exactly what I'm thinking before I do.

Really.

Last week we were out for a drive in the country and I just happened to go back home via a route that took us thirty-six miles out of our way, but (coincidentally) passed right by a major electronic retailer.

"Gee," I said innocently after I'd pulled into a parking stall. "So long as we're here we might as well stop in."

"Uh-huh," my wife (aka Precog) said. "Desktop or laptop?"

"Neither," I said, incensed. Did she really think me that shallow? The HD Plasma TVs were much more important to me than computers.

As it turned out, she used her precognitive powers to point out that we'd soon be paying college tuition for our son and a flat screen was definitely NOT in our future.

She also accused me of being a closet superhero; The Eternal Optimist. I'm not really, but I've met him. He's the guy who starts every NBA season by saying, "Yeah, this is the year for the Utah Jazz!" Nothing, not even the fact that the team hasn't *ever* won the NBA Championship, can

convince this guy that it might *never* be the year for the Utah Jazz.

He's also the guy at work who greets every new memo from corporate headquarters with gung-ho enthusiasm, even if the memo orders employees to hurl themselves bodily beneath competitor's delivery vehicles. "Come on," he says. "It'll be fun!"

Fortunately, reality has a way of getting to The Eternal Optimist and he usually morphs into The Quiet Realist. The kind of guy who does the best he can with what he's given, keeps to himself, and doesn't look for superheroes to save him any more and solves his problems by himself.

Anniversary Presence
selected by
Short Cummings Audio

www.shortcummingsaudio.com

It might seem a little odd that I'm including a selection in the name of *Short Cummings Audio*, but let me see if I can explain.

About fifteen years ago, I was a stringer for a local paper. To fill space one day I wrote a funny piece about traveling with a two-year-old. The editor liked it and asked for more in that style. *Short Cummings* was born.

I joke that I wrote an allegedly humorous column, but that there was never enough evidence to convict.

After I'd been writing for about a year, the paper underwent an editorial change and my services were no longer required. I archived my old files and turned my hand to other kinds of writing.

From time to time my wife would pull out the old columns and tell me I should take up writing them again. To my mind, without an audience, there wasn't much point. However, when I started looking for a format for a podcast, it all sort of came together.

So, in love and gratitude for her love and support, I'm including the essay called *Anniversary Presence*.

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My beloved and I recently celebrated our twenty-first wedding anniversary. After putting up with me for more than two decades I figured she deserved something special. I checked with the Nobel people to see if they had a category for endurance in a marriage. No luck.

So an award was out. I checked the web to find the traditional gifts for people whose marriage is of legal drinking age. Any guesses? Elegant dinnerware? Fine fabrics? Sweet foods? Nope. Nickel, brass and iolite.

Which raises an important question; what the heck is iolite?

Turns out it's a shiny purple rock that's part iron, part aluminum and all cheap. It is officially described as resembling quartz with "a greasy or vitreous luster." Makes you want to run right out and get a big ol' iolite necklace for your sweetie, right?

The metals aren't much better. Brass and nickel. Why not bronze? At least you can take bronze in the Olympics. Whoever heard of a brass medal? What kind of brass gifts are there anyways? Brass candlesticks? Tacks? Knuckles?

And nickel? Giving her a nickel-plated revolver seemed like a very bad idea. What was left? A big bag of nickels? *Here honey, Vegas is only eight hours away. Go play the nickel slots and have a great time?*

So, with no help from the traditionalists, I was on my own. Like most guys, I'm a little uneasy at the prospect of gift shopping. It's not that we don't like browsing – anyone who has ever followed a guy around a hardware store knows we can stroll the retail floor with the best of 'em.

We're nervous because we fear that we'll never get it right. No matter what we buy, it will be the wrong size, the

wrong color, or even the wrong gift altogether. And the woman we love will be disappointed. People claim that it's the thought that counts.

I believed that right up to the year that I bought my wife a full ironing ensemble – board, iron, cover, and starch – for Christmas. Turns out the thought only counts if you've been thinking about jewelry or perfume or clothes...but not appliances.

The most dangerous gift to buy for a woman is clothing. Clothing presents a variety of choices that bewilder the average man. Assuming he can remember our wife's "colors" and pick the right style, he still has to get the right size. Fellas, here's the advice of a man who is entering his third decade of marriage.

If you're buying clothes for a woman, buy 'em small.

Buy 'em too large, you'll have to face the unanswerable question: "Just how big do you think I am?" This is the kind of question trial attorneys love—no matter what answer you give, you'll incriminate yourself.

Of course, you might try to avoid the issue altogether and give the lady a gift certificate. Bad idea. (In fact, as bad ideas go, this is right up there with *Enron's* accounting practices.) The only way to make up for this gaff is with diamonds or negotiable securities...or both.

Usually it's easier (and safer) to buy jewelry in the first place. It's never the wrong size or color, and it's always "just what she wanted."

So, you'd think that I was smart enough to buy jewelry and have done with it. Right?

Nope.

I went shopping. Only I did it in a completely guy way, by clicking through on-line retail websites until something caught my eye. I bought her a servant.

It's not like I was on the Domestic-R-U's website and found ad copy reading;

Just In Time for Your Anniversary, Christmas, Wife's Birthday or other gift-giving occasion: It's the Jeeves 2000.

Complete our on-line credit evaluation loan application and we'll send you your very own live human butler carefully packed in a shock-resistant travel case with enough food and water to survive two full weeks in transit.

Be the first in your neighborhood to have your very own genuine British servant!

No, some kind of web-induced-guy-amnesia kicked in and I decided it would be a good idea to buy my wife another appliance. I ordered a device called a *Roomba*.

It's an automated vacuum cleaner that resembles a gray-plastic Frisbee on steroids. When you turn it loose, it scoots around the house randomly vacuuming crumbs off of the floor. Sort of the inverse of our teenage sons who wander the house randomly dropping crumbs *onto* the floor.

Press the 'Clean' button and the Roomba scurries off and automatically gets itself stuck under the couch where it chirps pathetically until someone comes to rescue it. Once it's set free you press the button again and it heads right back under the coach.

Actually, the Roomba works pretty well. For the first time in at least fifteen years we're keeping pace with the food

fallout from the kids. Our living room can no longer compete with the plant floor at a cracker factory in the category of “crummiest.”

Still, even if the thought *did* count and my wife *did* like the Roomba, it didn’t seem like enough. So I thought about it and gave her what she really wanted...what we’d agreed upon twenty-one years ago. I gave her me.

We both work, we have two teenage sons, and we volunteer for a variety of religious and community responsibilities. We don’t always have the time we’d like together. My wife didn’t want presents. All she wanted – wonderfully and inexplicably – was my presence for a few hours. So we took two days off – no e-mail, no work, the cell phone for emergencies only – and went away. We hiked in the mountains, lingered over a two-hour dinner, spent the night in a nice hotel, and did a little shopping. *What* we did mattered less than the fact that we did it together. After twenty-one years that seemed like the least I could do.

