

The Bread Also Rises

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Easter Sunday

We've made it to Easter. It's been a strange and sad Passover and Easter, but we've made it.

Passover

We had planned to have a simplified Passover meal on Wednesday, but the kids didn't do their kitchen clean-up chores and so it just didn't happen. Instead we had it on Friday. We could not find our usual printed Haggadah, but Grace found this one which was very short, and honestly that one was easier to use with very young children. We had boil-in-bag pre-cooked lamb shanks from Costco with gravy. We thought they might not be very good, but they were actually quite good. Grace made a haroset and a very hot horseradish dip. We did not include an egg this year, because Malachi is allergic to eggs, but replaced it with a carved black stone egg that looked impressive and ominous as we dripped out the plagues onto the table with red wine. Our vegetable was roasted brussels sprouts. Our wine was a red wine from Kentucky, a gift from my co-worker Patrick, finished in a bourbon barrel. It was a basic dry red, kind of like a Chianti, but the bourbon finish gave it a nice sweetness, and we thought it went quite well with the lamb. Grace and I sat together and finished the bottle. For us, that was a lot of wine. We also ate the very last loaf of 100% rye bread from the now-closed and fondly-remembered Mother Loaf Breads in Milan; it's been in the freezer waiting for Easter to roll around.

We roasted one additional lamb shank from Vestergaard Farms and Grace and I ate that on Saturday.

Don Pasquale (Metropolitan Opera stream)

Grace and I have not, unfortunately, been able to watch more of the Metropolitan Opera live streams this week. But on Saturday night, we managed to lock the noisy kids out of our room for a while and watch *Don Pasquale* on my laptop.

This opera is of roughly the same style as *The Barber of Seville*, but while that one was over-the-top slapstick humor with an intricate plot that becomes ridiculous because of its sheer complexity, this one has a more straightforward story that is simply funny and poignant without a lot of complicated self-reference, physical comedy, and fourth wall-breaking. I'm beginning to agree with Elias Crim that the Italian operas are just more fun. The Met staging ran for just over two hours for a 3-act opera, so this one moves along at a good clip.

The music of *Don Pasquale* is not as familiar to people who are not into opera already, but it is effective, the libretto is funny, and the duet and trio singing is fantastic. John Del Carlo is terrific in this, but the rest of the cast are great, too. There are many high points in this opera. To point out just three: there is a song when all the servants come in to complain and gossip, which exhibits a very interesting class consciousness. There is a beautiful duet between Ernesto and Norina. And there's a terrific song between the Doctor and Don Pasquale, a very fast "patter song" that brought out the two for an encore in front of the curtain.

I'd like to own this one, so when (if?) I have a steady income again, I might buy the DVD from the Metropolitan Opera's shop. They also have a version of *The Barber of Seville*, but it is not the version we saw, which also featured John Del Carlo. I'd love to have DVDs of both operas with him in them!

Easter

Today I told the kids that if they finished their kitchen clean-up chores in the morning, I would give them Easter candy from our stash, and make bread with them. That seemed to motivate them and so that's exactly what we did. They got jelly beans, chocolate nonpareils, and chocolate-covered blueberries from Trader Joe's while I pored through our stash of cookbooks looking for a suitable hard-to-screw-up bread recipe. Decades ago I learned a bit of baking, making breads from the venerable tome *The Tassajara Bread Book* and *Recipes for a Small Planet*, but it has been a long, long time. There were lots of fancy recipes in our various cookbooks, but I settled on a simple one from James Beard's book *James Beard's Theory and Practice of Good Cooking*. This recipe was for a "batter bread" which supposedly required less kneading than other bread recipes. We didn't have nonfat dry milk, so we used some xanthan gum with a little additional sugar and butter. I proofed the yeast and it bubbled up as expected. We mixed it in our stand mixer to start with. I threw in the optional minced garlic. Actually, I threw in twice as much as the recipe called for, and a minced shallot as well. After mixing, the dough looked quite promising, so we left it to rise in the mixer bowl on top of the stove (the oven was on, which provided a little warmth).

Grace had made lamb broth with our leftover lamb bones from Passover, and it smelled and tasted wonderful. We decided to make a cabbage and garlic soup with our lamb broth. We had also planned to make bacon and fried potatoes for

a late breakfast or brunch, but there was just too much chaos to finish those things earlier, so they became part of our dinner.

The bread didn't rise very much. It was supposed to double in volume, but it was only grew a bit. We gave it some more time. It still hadn't risen very much. So I decided we couldn't wait any longer. I did the final mixing and drizzled it with olive oil, black pepper, and fresh rosemary trimmed from a plant on our kitchen counter, and we went ahead and baked it in a dutch oven. We started it at 400 for 15 minutes to see if we could get a little "oven spring," but that didn't really happen. We turned it down to 375 for the next 45 minutes, and put the lid on the dutch oven for the last 15. Grace and I reasoned that if it was hard as a rock, we could at least cut it up and make some dense croutons to throw into the soup.

The bread wasn't actually a disaster. It wasn't *right*, but it was far from inedible. It looked like a giant savory biscuit or scone. The crust with the black pepper and rosemary was very nice — thick and crispy. Even though it didn't rise very much, it did have *some* bubbles in it, although it was a bit more dense and chewy than I would have liked. The flavor was excellent. The loaf disappeared very quickly.



Figure 1: a somewhat flat, squashed-looking loaf of sliced herb-topped bread in a cloth-lined basket

We aren't entirely sure what went wrong. Our kitchen may not have been quite warm enough to get a good rise out of the dough. The extra garlic may have killed the yeast — apparently that can happen. Maybe the yeast wasn't really working the way we thought it was. The xanthan gum made it slightly, well, gummy; it is a common ingredient to replace gluten in gluten-free breads, but just didn't work all that well in this case.

My friend Liz joked with me on Twitter that since we didn't have matzoh for Passover, maybe we got our unleavened bread for Easter, instead.

I'm planning to try again with recipe from *Baking with Yeast with Schmecks Appeal*. Edna Staebler in that book provides a number of basic recipes that can be extended into a huge variety of breads. Some of them are breads that use yeast but are also "quick breads," as they also have baking powder in them. I'm hoping that if I do this a few times with the older kids, at least one of them will be interested enough that eventually we can just say "Hey! Potts kid! Go make a couple loves of bread!"

We have also been experimenting with a sourdough starter, but so far it isn't showing a lot of liveliness. It's been pretty cold, though. If it perks up maybe I will try Edna Staebler's recipe for sourdough biscuits, which sounds terrific.

Tonight we will have rain and the next few days don't look promising, with a wind advisory tomorrow, and lows below freezing predicted for Monday and Tuesday nights. But fortunately we seem to have escaped the severe storms (including tornadoes) that did an enormous amount of damage and killed at least six people in Mississippi.

How are local first responders supposed to help people after these storms, while also not acting as vectors for COVID-19?

I have no idea. These disasters stacking up upon disasters are, I think, going to require a lot of terrible choices and difficult improvisation.

Unemployment

My ongoing challenge this week has been trying to get the Michigan unemployment office to pay me. They've approved my claim, and approved my claimed weeks, but I'm trying to prove my identity because, per a letter I received, they were "unable to verify" my identity. So I sent copies of my driver license and birth certificate by mail. My co-workers, furloughed the same day, have received their payments, but mine are stuck, marked on the web site with an "open non-monetary issue."

The state's unemployment offices are all closed. If you try to call, you can't even wait on hold for a representative; the system tells you to try the web site, then hangs up. The call centers where people could normally take your call are all closed. There's an option on the web site to enter an online chat, but it hasn't worked. Most of the times I've tried to use it, it just gave an error. Once, though, it sent me to a virtual waiting room, and told me that I should wait for a representative. I spent a whole afternoon waiting for the system to connect me with a representative, but it never did.

Because I couldn't verify that anyone had received my letter, I signed up for an online fax service and also sent the documents by fax. But the payments are still stuck.

I'm afraid that my claim is going to be automatically rejected by the system because no one told it that they had received proof of my identity.

So on Friday, I sent notes to Senator Jeff Irwin (my Senator) and Representative Rebekah Warren (my Representative). Both of them actually got back to me very quickly, which surprised me. Their staffers are going to see if they can get hold of anyone at the Unemployment Insurance Agency (UIA).

I'm not the only one to have this problem. I have heard from other friends on Facebook that their claims are also in limbo and they cannot contact anyone. The Detroit News has covered the issue. There's just no getting around the fact that this is an unprecedented surge in the number of people applying for unemployment; ten million people in Michigan applied in the two-week period ending March 27th.

On Saturday, I discovered that the Unemployment web site had entirely removed the "chat with a representative" option and added the "send a message" option, which had been missing for weeks (although the online help tells people to use it). It seems there never was anyone at a call center (or working remotely) to participate in an online chat, so I was waiting for absolutely no reason, other than a poorly-designed web site that hadn't been updated to reflect reality.

It's hard not to be resentful about wasting all that time sitting at my desk hoping that this time, I'd finally get to talk to someone who could assist me.

Our Mortgage

I finally got some paperwork from Wells Fargo, after almost a month. They want me to sign an agreement that they will not charge me late fees or begin foreclosure proceedings for three months, allowing me to not make my regular mortgage payments due at the start of April, May, and June. I already blocked the April withdrawal, to protect what is left of our dwindling bank balance. But according to this paperwork, the full three months' worth of payments will be due immediately at the end of those three months.

I'm not signing that agreement. Even if I do receive all the unemployment compensation I'm entitled to, and the supplemental unemployment, *and* a stimulus check, *and* food benefits, it isn't clear to me *at all* that I'll be able to pay almost \$7,500 in July.

I did have a conversation with my boss on Saturday. He is still optimistic that my employer will be looking to re-hire at least some of its engineers soon. But he doesn't have a timeline yet, and no one does. So I have to hope for the best but plan for the possibility that this job won't be coming back. And in that case, I'll need to have as much cash on hand as possible.

Your Suggestions

On Facebook this evening I asked “what do people want me to talk about in tonight’s newsletter?” I got several answers right away (recently people have been on Facebook much more than they usually are!)

- Bernie dropping out, pandemic progress, family updates.
- How is everyone doing? Is it scary for the kids? For the grownups?
- The benefits of having a large family.
- Family updates (another request)

That’s a lot! The first, especially, is a huge topic. And it is 10:30. So I’m just going to riff on those things off the top of my head.

Bernie Dropping Out

This was disappointing, but it was also not a surprise. Technically, he hasn’t entirely dropped out; he’s merely “suspended” his campaign. But that is a meaningless distinction to most voters and to the media.

I wanted him to stay in. I’ve made a number of donations to his campaign. When he shifted from fund-raising for his own campaign to fund-raising for charities collecting money to respond to COVID-19, I continued to donate to those charities. But then I lost my job, and donations were abruptly off the table.

Sanders’ campaign was destroyed by an unprecedented collusion between Democratic party leaders and the media. We’re just starting to learn that Obama was the shadowy power broker involved in convincing the remaining candidates to abruptly exit and endorse Biden. We do know that a lot of calls were made. Michael Moore reported on his podcast that he got a call, inviting him to support Biden.

Had Michael Moore endorsed Biden, it would have been just like the scene from *Terminator 2* when the Terminator tells young John Conner that his foster parents are dead. I would have turned to Grace and said “Michael Moore is dead. We need to get out of here.”

It’s now blindingly obvious that Warren stayed in the race only to deny Sanders a handful of delegates. The fact that she has not endorsed him, giving him her delegates, speaks far louder than words; it tells us that her commitment to some of Sanders’ signature policy issues was only ever tissue-thin. And the fact that she has not endorsed Biden tells us that she has, instead, endorsed herself; she may want to try to trade her delegates for the Vice Presidency. But I don’t see it happening. The Democratic donors can’t accept even her modest noises about limiting the power of billionaires and the largest corporations.

The election is FUBAR’ed.

No one is talking about it, and there is little evidence I can point to, but to

people who study elections, it is blindingly obvious that several states were stolen. The discrepancies between results and exit polls were simply too large for any other explanation to make sense.

Sanders might have stayed in past Wisconsin, but to quote those ubiquitous online ads, the Democrats found a way to force him to drop out using “this one weird old trick” — human sacrifice! The Democratic party leadership simply wouldn’t unequivocally press to delay the Wisconsin election, or even to convert it entirely to voting by mail. They colluded with Republicans to suppress turnout *and* endanger the lives of everyone who felt they had to go to one of the crowded polling places in person.

Sanders came to the realization that he simply wasn’t willing to be culpable in the deaths of poll workers, voters, and the people they came in contact with. Because he’s a moral human being.

Counting votes and not suppressing turnout and not murdering voters ought to be three very, very low bars. But they were entirely too high for us this election season.

The United States Post Office is the next institution to be toppled; Republicans are happy to let it happen, because it means it won’t be possible to conduct the remaining primary elections, or the election in November, by mail, and they have long wanted to let it collapse as part of their drowning of government in the bathtub.

The Democrats won’t lift a finger to stop them.

And so, for leftists, this means that electoral politics are meaningless at the level of presidential choice. Biden won’t beat Trump. We must turn our energies again to organizing from the ground up, to save lives.

Pandemic Progress (combined with “Is it scary for the kids? For the grownups?”)

The media is starting to reduce their coverage of the deaths, but that doesn’t mean people aren’t dying. The official numbers seem to be trending down in some areas, but I think this is largely illusory. We aren’t counting the deaths. We aren’t testing. I have no doubt that the official numbers are far too low. We may only be counting as few as a quarter of the infections and as few as half the deaths. A huge political challenge of the next few years for journalists will be to try to come up with accurate body counts. Remember the hot disputes over how many people were killed directly and indirectly by the American invasion of Iraq? It will be like that. Epidemiologists and biostatisticians will be publishing articles in *Lancet* trying to estimate the number of deaths that occurred over and above some “baseline” that are statistically likely to be caused directly or indirectly by COVID-19. They will do that because the official numbers will be widely understood to be a sick joke.

I still hear from liberals who somehow believe that Trump is working on a “plan” to “reopen” the country.

There’s no plan.

To review: the Obama administration served the oligarchy. All presidents serve their constituency; the only valid question is “who do they see as their constituency?” Especially since *Citizens United v. FEC*, they see their donors as their constituencies. Voters have almost nothing to do with it.

This meant that the Obama administration did a pretty good job serving the economy and the business community. So when SARS arrived, they followed the advice of their public health experts on minimizing the impact on those sectors. This also happened to save lives, but saving lives was largely just a follow-on effect, because killing lots of employees is bad for business.

The Trump administration is a kleptocracy and America is now a failed state. Because Trump is a billionaire, he doesn’t serve donors as his constituency, and he certainly never served voters. It’s entirely a gift, and his true constituency is his own family, clients of his own businesses and his family members’ businesses, and those politicians who are willing to plant their lips the most vigorously on his buttocks. That’s it. There’s nothing more thoughtful than that going on at all.

So the “reopening” will happen just as badly as the initial reponse happened — in a completely *ad hoc* way. Some states will lift their restrictions. Some businesses will attempt to start up. But because there is no coherent public health leadership in place, and almost no sense of consensual, common, shared reality at all any more, and entirely insufficient testing, people will wind up back in situations where they will then immediately become infected and act as vectors and infect others. So even in communities that thought they were done with this, there will be brushfire outbreaks all over the place. Public health officials, having no guidance from the top down, will scramble to try to bolt thousands of barn doors after the horses are long gone.

In the southern states the death tolls are going to be enormous. The situation in Florida is going to be horrific. Largely, we’ll just stop hearing a lot of news from these places.

I have no idea what comes next. There will probably be a brief improvement in the markets and employment and economy, in the same way as you can get a fresh corpse to jerk around if you apply enough electricity. But will we be able to get its heart going? I don’t really know.

Is this scary for the kids? Yes, but it’s actually not scary *enough*. We have tried to get them to participate in projects like sanitizing our groceries, and to make them understand why we aren’t going out much and why we are wearing masks. But they don’t *really* understand it enough. Today the kids’ aunt dropped off a box of Easter candy and they immediately brought it inside. We had to take it from them and put the box into quarantine. They don’t understand that the

boxes or packaging could be contaminated with virus particles. We made them wash their hands with soap and water, but if we're going to stay safe enough, they actually need to be *more frightened*. And we're not quite sure how to make that happen.

Is this scary for the adults? Hell yes. I don't want to die of a cough. I don't want to see my wife die of a cough, or Joy. I don't want to see my children die of a cough. The adults are meeting and writing out notes to make sure we all understand each other's wishes, as far as medical directives, end-of-life decisions, and burial preferences — even what should happen to our kids if Grace and I both die of a cough.

I find my heart racing quite frequently. I'm unable to concentrate much of the time. I am snapping at the kids, and then feeling terrible about snapping at the kids.

Grace is experiencing, I think, anxiety attacks, and this is such a new experience for her that she at first she didn't recognize what was happening.

The kids are not at their best.

This isn't a vacation.

Hard Thinking

For anyone who'd like to do some hard, hard thinking about the pandemic, I'm going to recommend this controversial article. It's called "Plan A for the coronavirus" by Curtis Yavin, *aka* "Mencius Moldbug." Yavin is a "neo-reactionary," or perhaps "neo-monarchist."

I do not agree with his ideas about how our government should be structured in the slightest, as he is perhaps the ultimate *statist* and I lean towards anarchism, distributed non-state communism, or at least minarchism, although I have not figured out how to reconcile my belief that we need a strong *welfare state* with my other beliefs; in other words, I don't *have* a self-consistent ideology and I think about the best I can do is an eclectic picking-and-choosing of elements from several ideologies that are so far away from the Democratic-Republican spectrum of neoliberal ideas that most people I know have never even heard of them at all. In my view, protecting the public health is one of the few legitimate uses for a state, so we need a state, but the nature of that ideal state is far from clear.

I absolutely agree with Yavin, though, that America is, at best, a *failed* state. Yavin, provocatively, argues that it barely *is* a state:

The terrible truth the virus has revealed is that the US and UK — as opposed to post-Communist Asia and post-Napoleonic Europe — are not even countries. They are free-trade zones. Our governments are not governments. They are bureaucratic anarchies with ceremonial

elected monarchs. Pitting them against this ruthlessly objective virus is sending Don Quixote to Vietnam.

Yavin’s “plan A” is a mix of radical authoritarian intervention and modern monetary theory and it is, indeed, extreme. But I think we need to be willing to consider his arguments piece-by-piece and consider which pieces may be worth implementing. It may be too late for this pandemic. It may be too late for the country. But this is not the last pandemic.

Did I mention that yes, this is scary, and yes, I’m scared?

Family Updates

I don’t want to speak for Joy; you can find her on Facebook. My previous newsletter contained some of her notes about how she’s been shopping.

We’re working on a number of garden projects. We just had a big load of garden soil delivered. We’ve been spreading that out into a large bed in our front yard, and will also fill several smaller beds. It is really unfortunate that the weather is going to be terrible for gardening, at least for a few days. It’s also not very encouraging that Michigan’s Governor Whitmer just closed all the garden centers. We had some seeds and some supplies on hand, so I think we’re going to have to just declare that we will do what we can with what we have now.

- Veronica has reached the “trying to change her hair color” stage. All the salons are closed, and we don’t have money for that kind of thing anyway, and we don’t really want to go out and try to buy hair products for her. So she’s been experimenting with peroxide. It doesn’t do a lot on her hair. We are trying to discourage her from attempting to actually use bleach. Veronica is supposed to take Elanor out for a walk in the neighborhood every day. She’s been doing it most days. She sleeps very late, hides in her room with headphones on, and we keep running into stonewalling as far as getting her to follow through reliably with requested chores. We are trying to prioritize maintaining the best relationships we can with all the kids, so unfortunately the stonewalling is, at least in the short term, working for her. It’s a terrible precedent, but we don’t know what else to do. All the kids old enough to work on math assignments on Khan Academy are doing so, except Veronica.
- Sam is a real *mensch*. He spends much of his free time reading, but he also reliably puts baby Malachi on his back in a baby carrier and takes him for long walks. He’s generally quick to jump in and help with child care whenever we ask, and kitchen chores, and gardening chores. His mild autism means that he’s often a bit oblivious to details. His “cluttering” speech impediment means that he’s often difficult to understand. The combination of both those things means that when he tells a joke, it’s often nearly incomprehensible to anyone but me, as it involves some combination of concepts from computer science, physics, and science fiction. Jokes are

never funny if one has to listen to an explanation to understand them, but even when I understand Sam's jokes, they are usually too abstract to seem funny. But we have greatly appreciated Sam's steady patience and assistance, and I would never want to see him stop trying to express his sense of humor.

- Joshua, our very emotional Brony child, bounces back and forth between being insulting and sarcastic one moment and loving and helpful the next. Joshua is like a box of chocolates — you never know what you're going to get next. When he's good, he's very, very good, but when he's bad, he's awful. We admire his energy and raw intelligence and try to encourage the good Joshua to come out and the bad Joshua to stay in. He loves to make complicated, legalistic arguments about why we're wrong. We're hoping he'll be able to channel that skill into some sort of useful career and soon, because it's really starting to piss us off.
- Pippin is our enigmatic child. Pippin was the one who missed out the most on having me around, during the year and a half when I was away from home half of each year, so we don't have much of a relationship, and this is frustrating to me; I'm not *really* sure how to fix it. He is the quietest of the kids, the most intraverted and introspective, except when he's not; he's pretty clearly also on the autism spectrum, but we don't have a formal diagnosis for him. He's doing quite well in his academic work. He reads far above grade level. He doesn't speak with "cluttering" or "stuttering," but speaks somewhat haltingly, and minimally. Pippin has a lot of difficulty regulating his emotional responses. When the other kids, especially Merry, get on his nerves, he lashes out, usually going directly from reading quietly by himself to screaming, with nothing in between. Pippin is probably the Potts child who is most like I was as a child.
- Merry is our 100% all-American boy. In other words, he's "normal," which makes him the strangest of the Potts children. He loves to run and jump, and loves to get filthy, and loves to make noise. He has a moderately severe stutter. He often entertains himself by picking fights with the other kids, especially Pippin. He loves to destroy everything he can get his hands on. His approach when confronted about his fight-picking and destructive tendencies is generally to lie his ass off at first, but eventually he'll come clean. Did I mention that he was a normal boy?
- Elanor is three. Her developmental delays are starting to become more obvious since she doesn't really speak reliably yet, although she will occasionally say a word or two. She grunts and groans and bellows and points and gestures and makes some ASL signs. She isn't potty-trained at all yet. She loves to put on her puffy pink jacket or her pink dress. She loves to play peek-a-boo in any form. She loves to laugh and she will run around with the other kids, when she's in the right mood, laughing her head off. Her favorite movies seem to be Godzilla movies. She does not go to bed easily. At all. We've been told that she has sleep apnea, but we

think that may only happen when she is positioned on her back (and they insisted that she sleep on her back when they did the study). She normally sleeps on her side or face-down and we've never actually noticed anything that seems like apnea when she sleeps in these positions; she doesn't even snore. So we're not quite sure what will happen next.

- Malachi is not quite eighteen months old yet. He's a delightful little boy with curly hair and a huge grin. He has started saying words occasionally, but he has also taken to copying Elanor's bellowing (we were hoping, instead, that as he started to speak, she would start to copy him). He is still an extremely demanding baby; he nurses on demand numerous times a day, and wants Grace to hold him for hours each day. It's very, very difficult for Grace to get things done during most days because he will accept no substitutes. But when he does get distracted for a while, he plays well with the other kids, and loves to walk around out in the yard with them. Malachi has a slightly twisted leg which means he doesn't crawl properly. He's been seen by a pediatric orthopedist, who says that in previous years they would have done surgery for this, but they've since found that this sort of twist will most often straighten out by itself as the child grows and walks on the leg. So we're just watching to see if the twist improves. He also had a severe egg allergy. Hence, no eggs in the house, which is very frustrating because eggs were a huge source of quick and easy meals for us. We were ready to have him tested again with a "baked egg challenge" in the doctor's office, to see if it has improved over time, but we had to cancel that appointment when we went into lockdown.

The Benefits of a Large Family

That's a complicated topic and it is getting quite late, so I'll try to address it very briefly. I don't want to speak for Grace, but I know that for her, having a large family is a source of great joy, although it is also exhausting, as she is now an older parent. She's an extravert, and grew up with a large family, and has frequently told me that our family didn't feel "normal" to her until we hit about five kids.

In contrast, I'm an introvert and grew up in a very small family — just me, my mother, and younger brother — and I'm about five years older than she is. So for me it is a mixed bag, and perhaps more exhausting.

I find it very difficult to understand people speaking when other people are speaking, or even to speak when other people are speaking. This has gotten worse as I've gotten older, not better. So it's hard for me to have conversations in the house at all, even with Grace, except during those rare times when everyone is asleep or out of the house. It's easier when I can interact with one or two of the kids at a time. So one of the things I enjoy most is taking one or two of them for a walk and trying to talk then.

I've worked more than full time for their entire lives, and I've had painfully little

vacation time. Most weeks, Grace gets to see them at their best — rested, awake — and I get to see them at their worst — tired, and when we are trying to get them to do chores in the evening and get ready for bed.

Add to that the fact that several of the kids have speech impediments or related difficulties communicating, and the truth is that I often feel that I don't know *how* to interact with them effectively, even when we get uninterrupted one-on-one time.

I dearly love it when I can read to the kids or operate in my “professor” mode — actually lecturing on a topic that they have asked me about, and going into it *deeply*, and taking follow-up questions. But the mixed ages at the dinner table make this extremely difficult just now. I look forward to the younger ones getting older, but by then the older ones might be on their way out the door. And that's a source of sadness and frustration for me. I feel, often, as if I've never really gotten to have the time I wanted to have with them. In particular, I continue to feel mournful about the eighteen months when I was gone for half of each week. I really regret that, but I saw no alternative.

As the older kids get older, some of the joys of having a larger family are becoming more clear. The older kids really are often capable of not just entertaining the younger ones, but of helping to model the behavior we want for them. And when they aren't fighting, they often are delightful together. For a time at least, the oldest three would wash dishes together in the evening and sing songs together, sometimes even the fast raps from Hamilton, the musical (Joshua has every word memorized). Listening to them run through it together is both hilarious and amazing.

As I've been down here for the last couple of hours working on this newsletter, I've heard Elanor, Benjamin, and Malachi break down screaming and crying at least five times. That's not unusual.

I started writing tonight's newsletter about three and a half hours ago. It's now after midnight. I've got to get on to bed. Several members of my delightful large family are now screaming their heads off simultaneously. Grace could probably desperately use my help up there. So, that's a wrap!

I haven't been able to finish reading a book in several months.

Thank you for reading and have the safest and best week you can!

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