

Accidental Sex Education

My wife and I finally had a sex education, a good one, she at forty-three and I at fifty-one. The education was delivered, eloquently, by our seventeen-year-old son. It all happened, accidentally, during the summer two years ago.

Accidentally because all the summer trips--the highlight of each year in our family--were arranged for campus visits. What do you expect? Our son was seventeen and a rising senior. Our mind was all on Ivy League schools or, if not on the really prestigious schools, at least on the smaller ones; on engineering major, premed program, accounting and statistics. You know, we are Chinese in America, or in more assimilated terms, the Asian Americans, in Maryland.

Sex education was not part of the trip plans. Sex education in museums was totally beyond imagination. Candid conversations with our son about sex during museum tours? Once in a blue moon! Coming out and being straight with everything about sex? The sun must have “come out of the West,” to quote a Chinese saying.

You have to remember, we come from a family tradition that had nothing, or barely anything, to do with sex education.

Our son’s maternal grandparents, that is, my wife’s parents, lived their young manhood in China where sex was having a time out during the first half of the twentieth century. They lived in the countryside. They were born in the same village, a sizable one; carrying the same last name, you got it right, the Changs (except they spelt it as the Zhangs). They grew up attending the same elementary school and middle school, and then she returned home to help out her parents in the fields and in the kitchen while her three male siblings went to

school. He proceeded to high school before returning home later to be the salt of the family. Eventually, they came together because the village go-between thought they were a good match: poor but with good health, the last trait very valuable as it guaranteed labor for field work and a longer family line. It was never a myth as to why they could produce that many children--my wife was the third girl and the seventh child among nine siblings--but that fact can not grant them a certificate in sex education, can it?

Our son's grandparents on my side are more civilized. They now live in the City, the one that boasts the Great Wall and Peking Duck (They call it Beijing Duck). But they were not born in the same village, not even in the same province--She was born in Shanghai, and he, in Hunan. However, they happened to graduate from the same university and were assigned to the same government-run factory. She worked in the manager's office, writing production reports and drafting production plans; he was an engineer responsible for drawing all the blueprints for the factory, which specialized in manufacturing heavy machineries, such as bulldozers, back hoes, graders, tractors, or whatever boys were interested in. They did not need a go-between; as city folks, they passed on that. Instead, with the initiation of the Party secretary, the two united into a couple, for the purpose of better serving the proletariat revolution. They had two children, me and my big brother who is left behind to take care of them as I am in this country now. Growing up in an apartment that was twenty-four square meters large, with a tiny bathroom that did not have a shower or sink and with a kitchen that was advanced enough to use natural gas, my brother and I never saw my parents hold each other's hands, hug each other, let alone kiss or display more intimate bodily contact. So though they probably had sex--My brother and I are proof of their virility—they probably can not claim an adequate sex education, either. As a matter of fact, they seemed not even as sexually active as their in-laws.

When it was the turn of our son's parents' generation, that is, my generation, thanks to TV, movies and live examples on the streets, sex got a better footing: There was no longer a bevy of professional matchmakers following your parents to channel your life to one direction; a young woman dating was no longer that infamous though it was certainly not that "pure" either; and occasionally, if you were lucky, you would catch a glimpse of young couples cuddling, pecking, necking, and wriggling in the deep bushes of the city parks. Nevertheless, in high schools, sex and relationships were still a taboo. In colleges, it was still kind of shameful to have a boyfriend or a girlfriend even though longing for one lurked in every human pore and every corner of the campus. By college graduation, we had already reached marriage age though our sex education was still dawdling at the threshold of Sex Education 101, which was characterized by increased heartbeat, flushed face and uneasy body posture. Against this socio-sexual background, my wife and I paired, courted, married, and mated, all in haste. We did not have the so-called moving-in period popular in Western relationships at all, and our son, no matter how you dice it or slice it, was born well after a year of our marriage. Besides, public display of affection was still out of the question. All these telltale facts reveal how far our generation's sex education went. The most we can claim was that sex was what we did, but an education of it was what we missed out.

If we really want to press to the origin, or to the very scintillating moment of our sex education, the farthest we could trace back is the early 1990s. Interestingly, it was our then three-year-old son who did the induction.

We were still back in China. Sometimes, especially during the cold winter weekend mornings, my wife and I really did not want to get out of bed. There was simply no incentive. Except for taking our son to the Youth Palace to learn picture drawing, to his private piano tutor for a forty-minute practice session, or to my

parents' house to sponge a delicious meal, there was nothing else to expect. We would lie in bed talking, and yes, performing some bodily stunts as well, until the dense morning fog faded, until the sky turned fish-belly white, and until the mild sun gradually penetrated through our gauze curtains and shone on my wife's vanity mirror.

One late winter morning we had lain there, again doing physical exercises, for so long that I had to get out of bed to empty my bladder for the second time. I opened our bedroom door only to discover a tiny creature at my feet. It was our cute three-year-old boy. He was leaning against our bedroom door, tiny frost-bitten hands clasping a tiny red toy car, tiny bare-head tilting up, and tiny red face written with a big, fat question on it. I was so surprised that I instantly forgot my original intention. He almost fell because the door opened towards my direction, and obviously he did not expect the door to open at that moment, either. Despite the surprises, the little eavesdropper still had the wit to put that big fat question that continued to linger on his innocent face into a full sentence:

"Baba, what were you doing with Mama?"

"Nothing, we were sleeping." I answered, squatting down to scoop up the little voyeur and sit him on my lap. I started to talk about his red car, trying at the same time to give my heart the time to slow down.

"There was something. I heard sound."

"Sound?... No, there was no sound. We can sleep together and you will see for yourself." To stop the peeping Tom from more questioning, I took him into our room and quickly sandwiched him between my wife and me. He reacted by first squirming between us and then mounted on his mother, riding her like a pony. Then it was my turn. Only this one was not supposed to be a pony, but a big galloping horse.

For a moment, I wondered how soon my wife and I would have to do "the talk" with our son. I realized

that neither my wife nor I was ready for that.

We were still unready even after we had moved to this country and our son was turning into a teen. We were so busy with establishing our own careers here that we could barely give much attention to sex, let alone sex education. We did put our signatures on some paperwork when the schools asked us to. We also heard from other parents that our son and his peers, starting from the fifth grade, had had several FLE (Family Life Education) video sessions, at the end of which, when the lights were switched on again, the teachers routinely found all the boys underneath their chairs, wriggling and giggling. We also noticed that, with the help of AT&T and Facebook, our son talked with his friends, among who doubtless were some girls. When we were our son's age, teenage girls and boys did not talk with each other; we only talked about each other behind each other's back, and we used vague, ambiguous, or euphemistic terms that we really didn't even understand when we did that. So when our son talked with his peers, we suspected that something more than math problems, videogame software and movies, was involved.

Yet, we did not intervene. We raised our son the way we took care of the plants surrounding our townhouse; unless it was absolutely necessary we let him run his own course. We believed letting the monster run its own course sometimes is the best coping strategy. Hey, we are descendants not only of Confucius but also of Lao Tzu. The only times when my wife and I felt that we had to step in, we would admonish, shyness coated in a joke, our six-foot son, "Do whatever you want. Just don't come back home, bring a chair and sit in front of us, and tell us, like some American kids do, 'Guess what? I am going to be a father!'" Our son would then intone in the classic teenager fashion, "Whatever, you guys are so weird and nasty." Thus, both parents and child avoided the embarrassment of carrying out "the talk."

Now, you probably understand how surprised we were during those summer trips two years ago.

After getting the campus visit to Carnegie Mellon University off the list, after visiting the two museums next door to the University—Carnegie Museum of Natural History and Carnegie Museum of Art—our son suddenly declared that he was also interested in the third of the Carnegie Museums of Pittsburgh—the Andy Warhol Museum. My wife and I have liked museums and we had always encouraged our son to go to museums. But knowing that Warhol was the creator of the Campbell soup pictures really was not enough motivation to taking our son to the museum. It's not like Warhol was a real artist such as Rembrandt or Van Gogh!

"It is only four in the afternoon," our son reinforced his point. Driving back to Maryland did not need much time. Besides, due to the erratic performance of our sometimes active and other times dormant GPS system—we were somehow already near enough to the crossroad of Sandusky Street and General Robinson, where the Warhol Museum is located.

As usual, our son left us behind immediately after we checked in at the ticket counter. The young lady taking tickets said, "Take the elevator to the top," and he took it, all for himself. By the time we reached the seventh floor of the warehouse building that is the largest museum ever devoted to one single artist in the world--Actually that description was not accurate because we saw Marcel Duchamp everywhere in the museum as well--and then worked downwards, floor by floor, we would never see him again. Since we could not find him, we concentrated on the artist or artists, with doubt or at most lukewarm enthusiasm.

The renowned Marcel Duchamp *Fountain* and Andy Warhol *Toilet* were the first pieces that captured our full attention for we had read about them somewhere before. We examined the fountain in and out, left and right, up and down, but no matter how hard we tried, we just could not find where the elusive beauty named

Art was. Finally, we conducted eye contact and lackadaisically moved on.

We became more enlivened when we saw the *Come Painting* and the *Faulty or Wayward Landscape*.

They were ugly and disgusting. My wife whispered repeatedly: “These are outrageous, outrageous, and outrageous. He (meaning Warhol) has no shame. We need to find him (meaning our son)! We need to find him!” But our son was nowhere to find. As a result, we came into contact with *The Campbell Soup Cans*, the *Mona Lisa* and *The Lovers*, even the picture of *Mao*. Those works elicited some pleasure, of course not because we saw Art but because our memory matched reality. The helium balloons were the only things in the museum that brought us some genuine fun. Calling the piece *Silver Clouds* made sense; calling a roomful of balloons art, not so much. Still, playing like children brought our thoughts to ours. It also increased our desire to find him. Yet, he was nowhere to be found.

We plunged on, doggedly, and came down to the floor—We were so troubled and upset that by that time we could not remember which floor we were on anymore—where a white curtain stood between us and the display inside the room. For a moment I had the illusion that I was in a hospital where I accompanied my wife to see her gynecologists. My wife obviously shared my impression, too; she turned her face to me, puzzlement in her copper-sized eyes and clinched lips. The sign next to the curtain warned that adult material loomed beyond; that was hardly sufficient warning. The room teemed with photos of homosexual men, caught in the moment of various kinds of sexual poses. The scenes were absolutely shocking, devastating, decadent, disgusting, bizarre... All the English words associated with dirtiness crossed our mind. My wife almost fainted had it not been for me to act quickly and dragged her out of the room. Once we had escaped back to the safety of the stairs, she started to run, her high-heeled shoes tapped loudly on the concrete floor. Nothing could stop her until she had propelled herself out of that scene from Dante and into the safety of downtown Pittsburgh, a

city used to be famous in China not for its steel but for its sky high crime-rate.

We waited in our car, which was parked in a small parking lot diagonally across the street. We waited and waited, but our son just did not appear. I got into the car and then out, then in, then out, uncertain if I should go back and search for that obviously impressionable teenager or tend to my wife who was still badly shaken with tear-stained cheeks. What was that scoundrel doing; how could he stay there that long?

After eons, the bastard finally showed up at the entrance of the warehouse building. He hesitated for one second, glancing towards our direction, and then started to walk. He walked sprightly: light in eyes, agility and vigor in steps, and a huge grin on his brace-wrapped teeth.

“Man, that was quite a scene!” Before I could open my mouth, he started to comment.

“So you liked what you saw?” I was not only shocked but also frightened, “You did not feel disgusted?”

“Why should I? Those guys are brilliant, smart, cleaver! I wish I had their talent, no, that’s an understatement, their genius!” He did not seem to be only answering my questions. He was genuinely admiring them; I mean Warhol and that Frenchman.

“You think those stuff are art? If I pile hundreds of Chinese bean curd boxes together, will you call them art?”

“No.”

“Then why should you think of theirs as art?”

“Because they pushed boundaries in their time, boundaries in doing art, boundaries in living a lifestyle, boundaries in...” The seventeen-year-old held one hand up, using the fingers to number the boundaries, the other hand on his hip.

“Then why my bean curd boxes are not pushing boundaries?”

“Because you have not found the boundaries, man!” With this declaration, the shameless bastard crawled into the car. I almost wanted to kick him in the butt had it not been for the fact that in this country hitting your own child is also a crime.

The next week we went back to Pennsylvania, it was for U Penn. The unbuttoned Benjamin button was interesting. The earliest and biggest computer in the world—The tour guide did not really show it to us; he only pointed to a mysterious room--was fascinating. The many firsts--the first university in the country, the first university geared towards everyday people, the first technical university, and the first primarily secular university--were all very exhilarating for campus visitors. Even our son was pleasant--He was very happy because he knew some of his schoolmates were also on the campus on that day.

Despite the Warhol experience, my wife and I still decided that we should visit some museums in town. To avoid another disaster, we had googled the options near campus. Since our son might go to a medical school, we determined we should visit the Mütter Museum--He'd better make sure he liked to deal with broken bones, bloody arms, deformed hearts, and crooked spinal chords. Aside from that, we had also heard that the Mütter is not your regular museum; I remembered it had been recommended on Yahoo.com as one of the ten weirdest museums in the world you should not miss.

So at half past three in the afternoon, we three entered the museum. This time our son could not disappear from our view because the Mütter was much smaller. It turned out that the museum was indeed quite fascinating. It housed pre-twentieth century medical equipment, supplies, skeletons, skulls, human organs. Heck, they even dissected John Wilkes Booth for display. My wife's eyes were as bulging as those of goldfish when she saw the from-silkworm-to-butterfly transformation process of a human fetus. I was interactive with

the skeletons of the dwarf and the giant, trying to imagine how their shortness or tallness changed their view of the world around them. Swift's depiction of Lilliput and Brobdingnag kept flooding into my mind.

It also turned out that our son had a wonderful time there as well. He was not very into the display. He was particularly turned off by the large number of syphilis-affected eyes that stared at him from a wall. But he was tremendously amazed by the novelties sold at the gift shop: super-sized sperms; injection pens; skull-shaped USA maps; dinosaur-egg sized female eggs; and Aids, STD, syphilis, and all other kinds of stuffed toy viruses, which bore cartoonish human faces and came in red, black, brown or whatever color you could want.

"Hey, why you spend so much time here? Go look at the displays," I urged him. After all, we needed to see if he was pre-med material. College trips cost time and money; there is no reason to waste museum tickets, either.

"These are amazing. Those are all old-fashioned stuff. I am not going to study medical history. I can call that up on the net whenever I need it. Why should I look at them now?" He sounded like that curt and impatient teenager again. "But, these are very creative. Think about it. I can give some of these toys to my friends, and I can legitimately ask, 'How about some sperms for your sister? Do you want AIDS? Need syphilis for today? Please give this STD to Tom for me...'" My son chuckled. He was absolutely too indulgent in entertaining himself to mind his public duty.

"Stop acting childish! If you do that, you will cause yourself trouble. I won't buy them for you anyway." I turned to my last resort as a parent—financial control.

"If you don't buy them for me, that's fine. But, they are still fun. I just have to describe them to my friends. You think my friends will mind having some fun? If studying the human body does not bring fun, why

should we study it?”

“You are being embarrassing. I took you here to study science, not to be a fun-seeker.”

“I am studying science, studying the sexuality of human beings. Science should not just look at the human body through clinical eyes; it should also study it with fun...”

My son ignored me for the next ten minutes as he rambled on and on about the relationship between playing stuffed sperms and studying science. He talked about sex and sexuality like a blue streak. My wife and I were dumfounded by how articulate he was, and later in bed we wondered what we were thinking when we were his age. Of course, our memory bank was blank and it bored us into fast sleep.

Penn State University in Pennsylvania was the last university we visited in the summer. On the way back, my wife and I decided to take a huge detour and spent a night in Red Roof Inn so that the next day we could take a good look at the Andrew Wyeth collection at Brandywine River Museum in Chadds Ford. We knew that would be a safe choice.

We went there because of “Christina’s World.” That painting used to show up on the front or back cover of the Chinese *Reader’s Digest* when my wife and I were college students. It was also instrumental in cementing our romantic relationship—we talked about how beautiful Christina was, how beautiful America was, and how wonderful it would be if someday we could check out if America was really as beautiful as Wyeth depicted. Of course, back then we did not know that the painting does not represent the bulk of artwork in the twentieth century that’s characterized by varied modern sensibilities, impressionism, Dadaism, Cubism, etc.; that the artist had two bases, one in Maine and another in Pennsylvania; that Christina was in real life a handicapped woman and her farmhouse in Maine was dilapidated and unromantic. It was only when doing

online research before the trip that we realized that the painting was not housed in the Brandywine Museum, but displayed in another museum in New York City. Nevertheless, we still put the museum on the agenda—if we could not see the original painting, at least we could see its many siblings. In our wildest imagination, we did not come to the premonition of what awaited us there on that trip.

Hidden in the woods, the museum building looked modest and low in height. It included not only the works of Andrew Wyeth, but also those of his father (N. C. Wyeth), his sister, son, and daughter, with the most impressive of works by Andrew Wyeth himself tucked away on the second floor, that is, on top of the gift shop. As a result, Andrew Wyeth's works could be easily missed unless you know what you were looking for. Our son, not as interested in realist art museums as we thought we were, took the lead, and disappeared into the building in no time. We guessed that he would do a fast tour of the museum and be done with it or us.

We were not wrong. By the time my wife and I finished marveling at the Brandywine River flowing against the back wall of the museum, closely examining the *Treasure Island* prints by N.C. Wyeth, poring over each of Andrew Wyeth's pictures—James Loper portrait, Carl portrait, *Spring*, *Night Sleeper*, *Crescent*, *Loden Coat*, and so on and so forth--and emerged from the stairway, our son seemed to have already been aging for centuries on the stone bench near the gift shop. His eyes filled with boredom typical of teenagers whose parents' appeal was thought to have long passed its expiration date.

"How was it? Did you like the paintings?" I asked, smiling in hope of starting a positive conversation.

"Okay." His response was lukewarm.

"Did you seriously look at them at all?" I half questioned, half reprimanded, keeping my voice low. In three-foot vicinity museum employees stood in uniform. They walked about from time-to-time, pretending to be casual and non-intrusive, but you know they're following you not only with their eyes but also their legs. If

you don't believe me, take out your camera, flash it, and you will see what I mean.

"Of course," he gave me that rebellious eye.

"Then can you tell us something about what you saw?" My wife stepped in to aid in my parenting.

"I saw the dead guy in the boat (*Adrift*), the water barrel that is going to fall (*Spring Fed*). Also the guy with the motorcycle. Actually, he's cool, but that's not Andrew Wyeth." This time he finally used sentences.

"Did you see the big trees (*Pennsylvania Landscape*) and the legs in boots? (*Trodden Weed*)" Encouraged, I decided to not miss the most important pictures.

"Sure. It's always farm houses, farm trees, stones, slopes, rivers, portraits, what have you. This artist seems weird. He's preoccupied with death, deformity, and debilitating landscapes. He does not seem to be very social, and he hides his sexuality in his paintings."

"What?" I was surprised by our son's comment, "What do you mean, hiding his... in paintings?"

"I saw the *Night Shadow*, and all the other Helga paintings." He was referring to several nude pictures that Andrew Wyeth did. "He painted them against his wife's wish. He did them stealthily, without her knowing them, for more than a decade."

"So?" I started to stammer, unprepared for the conversation to take this direction.

"So, he was hiding his sex life. Besides, you guys said that he drew pictures of the Brandywine area, right? Look how many flowers we see here, but how come he did not draw flowers, not many at all? He was either insensitive to those subjects or deliberately hiding."

"Why did he need to hide?" I thought the insensitive part was a totally bogus comment, and not even worth discussing.

"I don't know. I only know the lack of sensuous pictures indicates his obsession with sensuality. That's

why he turned to nudes.”

“Aren’t nude pictures sensuous or sexual?” I decided not to shun the words any more. If a seventeen-year-old dared to use them, so should I. “He did not turn to nudes to hide. He said he was trying to find a breakthrough for his artistic style.”

“That’s what he claimed, but he must have felt the urge to show off his virility when he broke his promise to Helga.” The bastard was referring to Wyeth’s promise not to publicize the Helga pictures while she’s still alive. “You guys think his pictures are so healthy and so clean for me. Now you regret, ha?” The voyeur became self-conceited as he perfected his skill to peep deeper into what he viewed. He must have felt the pleasure of challenging us.

“Why should we regret? We just did not expect you to see things that were not there.”

“They were there. Absence is always a kind of presence.”

With that, we all fell into eloquent philosophical silence.

After that summer, after our son went to college, my wife and I realized that we would not have much time to visit museums with him anymore. Not that we needed it, either.

Word Count: 4659