

The 4th Dimension and Me

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The television was always in my parents' bedroom. It was a black and white (as they all were then) console. The screen might have been huge — 19". In Oak Park, my bedroom adjoined my parents' room. At 10 o'clock at night, a time which my mother thought I should be sleeping, I would peer into their room to watch P.J. Huff's weather which would come on after the sports. I never understood why the weather would come on after the sports. As a child, it seemed to me that weather was more important. It affected everyone. P.J. Huff had a paper weather map with pull-outs. He would pull a string and move the clouds to show the winds blowing out of the great plains. He'd tear a piece of paper near Lake Michigan and lake effect snow would appear. Satisfied with the show, I would lie in bed with my covered-wagon night-light. Sometimes I would melt crayons on the light bulb to change the color of the light.

Once my brothers smelled the melting crayons and searched my room for a fire. They tried to wean me of the night-light, of sucking my right thumb, and of wetting the bed. Of course, I grew out of all of these things as we all do and we all must, but I did so in my own time.

Cliff obsessed that I learn my left from my right. We were walking from the library one day, and I was to tell him the directions home. I pointed. He said, "Left or right." I pointed. So he slapped my right hand so hard that it stung all the way home. But I noticed that he slapped the hand that had a callous from thumb sucking. So I had to keep the callous or be slapped again.

I'd like to think that we got "One Fish, Two Fish," from the library that day. When my mother would read to me of Ned and his little bed, I would giggle uncontrollably. She told me that it wasn't funny. I might grow so tall

that my feet stuck out of bed at night. I did. She was right about that. I sleep along the diagonal.

Bed wetting was another thing. I once had a dream that Anna Mae Rassmussen, the mother of a large number of children, who lived several doors down was the Wicked Witch of the West, and her broom turned into the folding dinning room table, that was on the other side of the wall to my bedroom. There were two paths to the bathroom: one through the dinning room — I couldn't take that for fear of Anna Mae, and one through my parents' room — from which I was forbidden to pass at night. I suspect they feared my interrupting their coitus more than their sleep. Even if I could wake myself at night, there was no route to the bathroom that was acceptable. Even as a man of 56 years, I am happy to say that I still, usually, sleep through the night. I don't like to wake my wife.

Jimmy says that when the "Wizard of Oz" came on TV, we were sent to bed right after the Wizard appeared. That scene was frightening enough. We were much older when we learned of flying monkeys. I have been told that Margaret Hamilton was a very warm and gentle soul. For every generation since, she *is* the Wicked Witch of the West. Anna Mae, despite having more children than I could count, was never very friendly to us. My brothers' passion for fire crackers had something to do with her attitude.

I remember that Captain Kangaroo came on in the day-time at about 10 AM. But it might have rebroadcast in the early evening about the time my mother would have been fixing dinner. The Captain had demonstrated in a most graphic and eloquent manner how to draw a cube. I thought it was an ice cube because you could see right through it. Draw a square, offset it, draw another square and connect the corners. I was so excited I drew pages and showed them to my mom. I think she was pleased.

We moved to Calgary. The mountain air put my mother's multiple sclerosis in remission. My reading skill was limited, but my mother's sight was sufficiently restored so that she alternately read to me from Winnie the Pooh or a book that I called, "Which Witch is Which?" It was not. I learned that it was indeed a "Wrinkle in Time."

In sixth grade, one of my friends was reading a "Wrinkle in Time." I think it was Patty, but she denies it. Bill and the twins would tease her, "A Tinkle in Rhyme." Whoever it was encouraged me to read it. I didn't; my mistake. I didn't read a novel as a teenager until Barbara told me about Vonnegut. So the first, book other than Seuss, Babar, or "The Pearl" that I read was

“Slaughterhouse Five.” I read L’Engle much later in life when my own boys were young, and I made the connection with that which my mother read to me. Which witch is which.

I have since become an engaged reader having read most of the assigned reading from our high school years. It’s a little like the bed-wetting; I want to assure you that I grew out of my ignorance.

Mrs. Which, Mrs. Whatsit, and Mrs. Who. Mom left-off reading about the time that Charles Wallace and Meg meet the witches. We did not get as far as the tesseract. The book vanished from the shelf. It might have been one of those which Jimmy had covered with a Mad Magazine fake cover. He worked so hard to get those perfect. My father was furious until he saw the craftsmanship. Mom’s sight went south before the family moved to Georgia.

Art historian, Linda Henderson, has a copy of the four-dimensional episode of “The Twilight Zone” on her coffee table. She and I spoke about it at length when I visited her. It first appeared on TV in 1962. Thank the google for that tidbit. So I must have seen it on a rerun. It simultaneously scared and fascinated my young mind. I am sure I was older than six when I saw it, but I was no more than ten.

After we moved to Georgia, but before her health completely deteriorated, my mother was showing me the diamond on her finger. It is about 2.1 karats, but it has a flaw — a small shadow off-center. She told me it is a nine-cut. I asked her to explain. She took out a card table, some notebook paper, a protractor, a ruler and a compass. She showed me how to measure 40 degree angles and draw all of the interior edges on a nonagon — nine sided regular polygon. You draw a circle as the outline of the protractor, mark each angle, 0° , 40° , 80° and so forth. For a ten-year old, the control of the protractor and the ruler, as well as measuring the angles from 160° to 200° were at the edge of my dexterity. Still I became fascinated. At the first vertex, you draw seven new edges, at the second you draw six, and continue. At the seventh vertex, one more edge completes the picture. I spent weeks doing this, and I picked up the habit. I redraw the figure every once in a while. A variation is the subject of a drawing I should be working upon this evening.

I did not know she was showing me the projection of higher dimensional figures. I wonder if she had remembered Captain Kangaroo.

We had a maid, Pauline. She would come to the house after school, watch me, and fix our dinner. I don’t remember how many times a week that she would come. But here is the thing. Pauline had two children, Michael and

Linda, who were about the same age as I was. Very rarely, Pauline could not get her cousin or sister to watch Linda and Michael. She would abjectly ask if it was alright for them to come over to our house. My father always asked them to come. I feel that on some occasions he insisted. Those days were always happy for me because I had someone to play with. Once, after my family had moved to Atlanta, Linda and Michael spent the day with me. We had a great time. I was in sixth grade at the time. If you haven't guessed by now, Linda and Michael are black. Pauline gave me more than my share of her love.

I saw Linda the other day. She said my dad once took the three of us to the grocery store. It must have been a year before Dr. King was assassinated. The cashier tried to rush us out. My dad always watched the register and he knew the total was not right. Linda says that they had to re-ring and re-bag the entire order. As a grown woman of more than fifty years, she thinks of this scene with a pure delight.

Have you ever seen the "Alfred Hitchcock Presents" episode, "Where the Woodbine Twineth?" In it, an evil step-mother tries to destroy the fantasy world of a little girl who is no more than ten. Her father buys the daughter a black-faced doll who comes to life and plays with the girl. The story ends with the step-mother chasing away the black girl only to find that the daughter has turned into the doll. The story still scares me. My own step-mother shared so many of the personality traits of the character in episode. In the south in the 1960s, we were culturally separated from the black children. Please understand, that separation was not due to anything that my father said or did. He would have been happy for Michael and Linda to be with me every day. I think Pauline had her reservations. The neighbors would have flipped!

Some of the white girls who I knew in Atlanta have grown into the evil step-mother character from the Hitchcock episode. I try to look beyond their conservative politics, and they way they grew into women whom they thought they should be. I remain a little boy at heart who draws cubes and diamonds. Now I do so professionally.

Pauline did much of the house cleaning, but she could not, would not, clean up my toys. My play was elaborate. I would build structures with Lincoln logs, park a full set of matchbox toys in front of the house, and invade the scene with troops of army men. I thought I was James Bond. I wore a trench coat and carried an attaché case. When my room was beyond

disaster, Pauline would hide my trench coat. It would disappear into the fourth dimension. So I would put away all of my toys, hang up my clothes, and make my bed until it reappeared in three-dimensional space. To this day, I use the same method to find a lost book or research paper in my office.

Jimmy's wife Delores died a couple of weeks ago. I saw Linda and Michael at the funeral. Linda was lovely. Michael lives around the corner from Jimmy. Jimmy would be sad if I didn't tell you that I had known Delores for 47 years. She had lived through many of the things that I am telling you about. When you lose someone whom you love, you start to think of all of those whom you lost and loved. I keep in contact with the women who grew into the evil step-mother because I value the friendship we had as children. When Delores died, I rethought about my own relationship with my mother.

It has been years since she visited my dreams. My dad frequents them more often. Usually when he is in my dreams, our lives center around the mundane. The dreams with mom are more stark. I know she is dead, and I ask how she came back to life.

About a month ago, I had to repaint the bathroom in a beach condo that I own. It seems that the large drawing of the hypercube (tesseract) over the hot tub was not always appreciated by the renters. The rest of the walls were too dark, and it was time for a change. I got paint all over my most comfortable pair of blue jeans. After they had been through the wash, my wife asked me if I wanted to give them away. I was ambivalent. Old jeans are the most comfortable of leg coverings. Even with paint splattered upon them, they are functional.

We watched the television production of "A Wrinkle in Time" the other day. It was close enough to the book, but not a spectacular production. I wanted to watch it because I was thinking about my mother, the diamond, the tesseract, and how I have become somewhat of an expert on the fourth-dimension.

I thought my wife had given the jeans to Goodwill. This morning I found them neatly folded in the locker room at the gym where I take my morning swim. My heart is in good shape. I swim nearly every day. But I think it skipped a beat when I saw the jeans on the bench. I really thought I had put them in a bag to Goodwill. For a fleeting moment, in my awake state, my mother seemed to step out of the fourth dimension long enough to say, "Yes, I knew what you would become, and that is why I read to you about tesseracts and told you about the higher dimensional simplices."

It is a nice thought. But I reckon that it is not true. I think after we painted the bathroom, I wore the jeans to the gym and changed into a better pair. I just had left them in the locker. You may ask why did I spoil the story with this paragraph. I did so in memory of my mother. She was a realist.