

HOW TO BE A PARENT

Extracts from *Raising a Dragon Son*
by Shaoping Moss, edited by Leonard Moss

MY HOPE

It's easy to become a parent, but extremely challenging to be a qualified and successful one. When we started raising our son, Eli, we were clueless about the business of parenting. Learning on the job has made us veterans, and our experiences educated all three of us.

That was quite a challenge, and it's also quite a job now to tell the story, a story about how we brought up Eli, helping him grow from an infant into an intelligent and mature young man, helping him grow both "roots" and "wings." I am an amateur writer just as I was an amateur parent, eagerly searching memories, e-mails, and records long forgotten until now. But it's been fun to do because the project has been a happy one. I am grateful to my husband for editing it. My hope is that Eli will enjoy looking back at his early years as much as Len and I have, and that his children (as yet unborn) will someday be able to see what sort of fortunate person their father was before they came along.

As a bonus, I may gain some perspective on what it took to raise a child. Writing about it might help me sort out my thoughts, feelings, and facts by organizing them in a memoir. I'll focus on the interaction leading to important decisions. Len and I tried to offer advice and support rather than commands and criticism; our goal was two-way communication. Did I overdo my part, my influence, and come on too strong? The reader must judge.

What does it take to produce a fine young man? All it takes is good raw material, good upbringing, good luck, and a bunch of other goods, to get to the point where we can finally say "so far, so good." That's all it takes!

EARLY LESSONS

The First Challenges

Child psychology was a mystery to me; I had zero knowledge when I became a parent. Years of experiences with Eli have taught me that every child is a complex human being with deep emotions of joy, anger, fear, and sorrow. Nevertheless, because of our ignorance and inexperience, we parents often treat children like lifeless objects, moving them around without considering the impact of our action upon their sensitive feelings.

For example, after we relocated to Easton, a suburban town east of Boston, we transferred Eli to a nearby day school. The first day Eli suddenly started limping. When I asked him what happened to his right foot he remained silent. Now looking back I realize that Eli was gripped with fear, facing the uncertainty of a new school and feeling sad after leaving his friends behind at his previous school. He was being deprived the security of a known and beloved place. I should have offered him understanding, explaining to him what he could expect in the new school. What a foolish and insensitive parent I was then! I didn't realize how essential it could be, when raising a youngster, to explain, or to wait patiently, or to participate in his or her activities, or sometimes to discipline. And most important, to exchange views.

Children are impressionable and observant. Eli used me as his role model, not only noticing the daily necessities I bought for him, but also my words and actions in everyday events. When he was about 8 he sent me a birthday card that listed the things he liked about me—my “hugging,” “ability of understanding,” “good teaching” (she “helps me choose what to eat that’s good”), “good taste in buying a house,” “good choices in job finding,” and “good judgment in health.” Based on what he observed he began to form his own values, self-confidence, and life-long habits.

Installing good habits, of course, can be nerve-racking. Like many infants, Eli would wake up at all hours and cry without a stop. When Eli was 7 months old we were getting desperate for sleep. I was exhausted. Len and I decided that it was the time to try the method discussed by Dr. Spock in his well-known book, *Dr. Spock's Baby and Child Care*. One evening after putting Eli to bed I closed all the windows and doors to keep from disturbing the neighbors. An hour later he woke up and burst out with the usual loud crying. But I controlled my impulse to rush in and pick him up. We let him cry for a couple of hours until he became tired and quieted down. I tiptoed into his room and found him sound asleep. That night he slept through without making more fuss.

Next morning he behaved as cheerful as always, showing no signs of stress. The following night we repeated the same method. Again I turned a deaf ear to his yelling. Once again he stopped crying and slept through the night. On the third night a miracle happened! Hurray! Eli

didn't wake up, not making a sound. After that he slept through every night. It was a major break-through in our first-time parenting, and it taught me that a baby is an intelligent, sensitive creature who takes cues from his parents. If parents are too softhearted towards every whim a baby displays, the child will take advantage of their compassion, becoming the boss. A baby can be disciplined, though not harshly, and it should be started at an early age.

Another problem we had with him was toilet training, and there I *was* a bit harsh. I tried to coach him to move his bowels in the child's toilet I had bought for him, but he was very stubborn, insisting on pooping into the diaper while standing. One day I left him in the living room without a diaper on, hoping that he would try the toilet I had placed next to him. Instead he shit on the carpet. Getting really mad, I spanked his bottom with one hand and forced him to sit on the toilet, holding him tightly with the other hand. Believe it or not—that physical punishment did the trick. After that forced act he began using the child toilet: no more diapers. That was my first and last “child abuse”—the only time I ever laid my hand on Eli in anger.

Doing things together often worked wonders. Learning to walk was difficult but fun for all three of us. Eli would stumble a short distance between us while holding his enormous head with both hands, afraid that he might fall and hurt his head. But he persisted with this game for quite a while, shuttling from one of us to the other like a ping pong ball, laughing the whole time. Finally, when he was 11 months old, he took his first few steady steps while playing on a sandy beach in Florida. He also learned to feed himself with cheerios during that vacation. It was funny to watch him struggling to find his mouth with a spoon, then putting a spoonful of cereal into his open mouth. We thought that changing the environment might have stimulated a little baby's mental alertness.

In later years, following the advice from Eli's doctor to develop mental capability, we subscribed to a service for children's books, receiving two new books each month. Every night at bedtime Len would ask Eli to pick a book and then he read to him until he fell to sleep. Sometimes I read him a Chinese storybook shipped by my sister from China. Soon we built quite a collection of children's books.

We learned to be relaxed when Eli was slow to talk. Trying to ease our concern, our doctor said “Generally, every child develops his speech at his or her own pace. Since Eli was exposed to both English and Chinese he might be a little late in speaking either of the languages.” He assured us that “your son would be fine when he is ready to talk.” With the doctor's prediction in mind we waited patiently. Gradually Eli did begin to speak more and more words, then phrases, and finally complete sentences after he turned three, and he has not stopped talking ever since.

Thank God we seldom had to cope with severe problems, although Eli had his share of health issues and surgery. One scary incident came when we thought that our little infant had

been kidnapped! I was recovering from emergency surgery in a Cape Cod hospital. After visiting me there, Len came back to find Eli and the babysitter gone, but two social workers were waiting in our rented cottage. The babysitter, thinking that our baby of 18 months had been beaten because she saw some black and blue marks on his rump, had carried him to a nearby police station. Len finally convinced the social workers that there was no child abuse by calling our pediatrician to attest to the birthmarks. He went through all kinds of red tape to get the boy back, but he did not tell me the story until we came home from the Cape. He was afraid to upset me after the surgery.

I discovered the incident only after I opened a letter from the Department of Social Services in Cape Cod, which stated “no evidence of child abuse was found.” When I questioned Len about the letter he told me the whole story. The awful shock had made him feel that we had almost lost our son, first to kidnappers, later to stubborn social service bureaucrats. After that incident Len kept detailed records of Eli’s health—a useful lesson.

When Eli was five we had another upsetting incident during Len's second Fulbright teaching assignment in Beijing. Once again, I needed emergency surgery, this time for breast cancer. After intensive fact-finding and discussion, we decided to fly to Hong Kong for the operation. But to leave Eli behind was the hardest decision Len and I ever made. While Len contacted the insurance company to make arrangements to find a hospital and a surgeon in Hong Kong, I asked my mother to come to Beijing to take care of Eli, who was attending Chinese kindergarten that year. Mother, always willing to help her family, took the train from Qingdao to Beijing, and arrived at our apartment a few days before our departure.

But the operation did not go well in Hong Kong, and we decided to return to the States for further surgery. Before we left we made a long-distance call to Eli in Beijing from a telephone booth on the street. Oh, boy! I will never forget that phone call. It was not only terribly expensive—5 or 6 dollars a minute—but also heartbreaking. When I told Eli that we couldn’t return to him soon for medical reasons, he burst into tears, protesting loudly. “You and Dad are not going to abandon me, right? Mom, please come home,” he pleaded over the phone. While trying hard to comfort him I couldn’t control my emotions, tears running down my cheeks and Len sobbing quietly by my side.

Well, we got through the ordeal and returned to Beijing after several weeks in Boston, so all's well that end's well. But talk about stress! Parents and children face all kinds of challenges to the peaceful order they hope will prevail.

A Religious Education

I have learned that raising a child, like a marriage or a job, calls for giving in at times as well as getting your way. Teamwork is important: a child observes and takes to heart his parents

working together or their conflicts. On most subjects Len and I were in complete agreement, but sometimes I (or he) went along with misgivings. Len wanted Eli to have a Jewish upbringing, and the first ritual, performed 8 days after birth, was circumcision. “A man has no place in the World to Come, the spiritual world that souls go to after death, if he is uncircumcised.” Len emphasized the significance of the ritual for a Jewish male.

To tell the truth, since I was bought up in the Mao’s era in China I became an atheist. I didn’t believe in the existence of either Heaven or Hell, let alone the World to Come. But it was hard to resist a Jewish father’s wish. So I agreed reluctantly. “All right, I’ll go along as long as it doesn’t harm my baby.” On the surface I appeared to be persuaded, but down deep I was still unwilling to see my little baby to go through the procedure. I felt that no matter what benefits it could bring, physically and spiritually, it was too harsh for a little infant. It was unbearable for a mother to endure the pain. I went along, however, and got through the evening by cowering in the bedroom until the ritual was over, then rejoined our guests.

Afterwards Len tried hard to follow the Jewish traditional requirements for a Jewish male at every important juncture of Eli’s life. At age 4 Eli had to go through the Mikvah (ritual submersion) because he had a non-Jewish Chinese mother. Len explained to me that after the Mikvah Eli would become a good and righteous Jew in the eyes of God and be accepted by the Jewish community, so I went along.

When Eli turned 5, Len suggested that we send him to Rashi, a Jewish day school. The tuition was \$8000 a year. That wasn’t cheap, considering my meager \$23,000 annual salary, and Len’s TIAA pension and social security income. When we were discussing whether we could afford the expensive tuition Len said, “I think it’s a good opportunity for Eli to receive Jewish education at a young age. I didn’t have the opportunity when I was a child because my parents were too poor to afford Jewish schooling for me.” Describing his Jewish ancestry, Len said, “Both of my parents’ ancestral lineages can be traced back to Europe—my mother’s parents came from Poland and my father emigrated from Romania as a child with his parents. Even though I am not an observant Jew I would like Eli to know more about the Jewish culture and develop his sense of a Jewish identity.”

“Ok. Let’s send Eli to Rashi.” I was wholeheartedly supportive. Since I was brought up in China I didn’t know much about the Jewish religion, but I understood that the two highly developed civilizations have one thing in common—they both value education. Traditionally Chinese parents always consider education as the top priority for their children. Certainly I would do everything possible to offer Eli the best education we could afford. If the kindergarten in Beijing gave Eli a taste of Chinese people and culture, the Rashi School would help him understand his Jewish roots, stimulate his intellectual curiosity, and develop his compassion for people of different ethnic origins.

Later, when we moved, we had to transfer Eli to Schechter, another Jewish school. They did not provide a bus, so every afternoon around 3 o'clock Len had to drop everything, jump into the car, and drive all way to Schechter to pick up Eli and two classmates. That daily routine lasted for 6 years. It often interrupted Len's train of thought in the middle of his writing; it was frustrating for a focused person intensively absorbed in his writing project. For that reason he deserved a lot of credit for his willingness to sacrifice his time and energy for his son's education.

And when Eli did poorly in some subject, like math, Len immediately tutored him as best as he could. He never let his son fall behind at school. Parent's support of their children's schoolwork, we realized, can be so important.

But parents can't do it all. Relatives, friends, and teachers come in handy too. "Mr. M," a science teacher at Schechter, cultivated Eli's interest in biology, pointing out the "way to go." The science enrichment course Eli took from Mr. M definitely incubated his passion for genetics. Many years later when Eli was enrolled in the Department of Genetics in Stanford I remembered his science teacher's praise on the 8th grade report card. A good teacher can spot a child's talent at an early age, coaching a particular interest with thoughtful guidance.

Our goal in sending Eli to a Jewish day school was to foster his Jewish identity through interaction with his peers and teachers and by observance of Jewish holidays, rituals, and prayers, at the same time developing his intellect through studying Judaism. Early adolescence is the most formative part of identity creation. We hoped that 8 years of Jewish education would enrich his understanding of his roots and at the same time lay a solid scholastic foundation for his high school education.

The celebration of Eli's Bar Mitzvah at age 13 would be the biggest milestone in that development. It would become a multi-cultural event because we intended to invite many gentile friends. I emphasized this diversity in my address to Eli at the ceremony:

Dad and I came from different cultural backgrounds so you are the product of two ancient cultures—Chinese and Jewish, which have so many things in common. Both have a long history and tradition, and both treasure the values of family, education, hard work, honesty and integrity. For this reason, you are not only mixed in your appearance and blood, but also in your values and beliefs. You are a true hybrid of East and West.

Len focused his speech on his son's growing independence during the first thirteen years:

It's not that we expect you to reach full maturity overnight: we'll always be ready to keep offering advice, information, moral support, and encouragement.

But the fact is you are gradually taking your life in your own hands; more and more you are making your own decisions, gathering facts needed to make those decisions, carrying them out, and accepting their consequences. In other words, you have already shown that you are very capable of taking on responsibility and getting the job done, and we like the way you are doing that, now that you have ideas of your own, duties and skills of your own, and your own distinctive brand of humor and insight.

So we welcome you, son, as a friend and companion in our family. You know that you can always count on Mom and me, but it's a pleasure to see you standing on your own two feet, becoming less and less our "dependent." It's very satisfying to see you taking charge—taking charge of your religion, your social world, your studies, and your pastimes (especially those syncopated Scott Joplin rags). God watch over you in all that you do, as you continue to grow into a fine young man.

CHOICES

Music, Sports, and Fish

Maturity does not take place overnight; the transition from dependence to self-motivation takes years. But the move to a new location that fosters exploration and discovery can boost the process. Eli's move to a liberal, multi-ethnic high school, after the years in traditional Jewish elementary schools, provided that boost. Parental guidance began to take second place as our son encountered stimulating peers, teachers, and activities. The pastimes and hobbies of an earlier time were replaced by new enterprises and ideas. And the support and guidance previously provided by parents gradually became replaced by support and observation.

During his high school years we usually let Eli take care of his sports and pastimes. He let go of some activities like fishing, tennis, sailing, golf, and disc golf, but kept up biking most of the year, swimming and stunt kiting in summers when we were at Cape Cod, and snowboarding in the Berkshire Mountains in winter. He also turned his attention to other hobbies like raising tropical fish in aquaria and building a terrarium for exotic tropical plants at home.

Eli's interest in fish and plants partly came out of his natural inclination, and partly the result of his father's many years of patient guidance and gentle pushing. An English professor for over 30 years, Len was disappointed with his colleagues. He often told Eli "I know that your English is good and you are interested in playwriting. But you should never choose literary study as your career. Do not follow in your father's footsteps. The humanities have been stagnant in my

lifetime; I have gained a lot from teaching and writing, but for your particular abilities science, where so many smart people have gone to make great contributions, is the right field.

Len had subscribed to a number of science magazines such as *Nature*, *Smithsonian*, and *National Geographic*; he took Eli to the library to borrow books on biology and botany; they visited museums and aquariums together and went on a whale-watching tour; and Len even hired a science student at Wheaton College to tutor him in biology. When Eli was in high school we took him to the Woods Hole Science Aquarium in Cape Cod where he was fascinated by hundreds of species of marine animals that lived in Northeast and Middle Atlantic waters. As a result he developed a passion for marine biology by maintaining four freshwater and saltwater fish tanks and a twelve-cubic-foot terrarium in the basement of our Amherst townhouse, raising a wide variety of tropical fish and plants.

These activities were mostly self-directed. He was very good with his hands, repairing his own bikes and a monocycle in high school. Later he continued to work on projects by (among other things), inventing musical instruments in college, installing a huge fish tank in his workplace, building a boat and reconstructing a car while working on his Ph. D. Len had introduced music to Eli at an early age, taking him to events, cultivating his taste in classical music and jazz. I didn't know much about music because I wasn't exposed much to it when I grew up in China, and I didn't want Eli to miss the opportunity to study and listen to it in his childhood. So we started him on piano lessons when he was 7. He persevered for many years and did very well, becoming fluent in Scott Joplin's rags.

But at last he decided to move on to other interests, even though he realized how unhappy that choice would make his dad. In later years he confided his thoughts to an essay he called "The Persistence of Music." Here are a few passages:

I had filled the house with ragtime music and jazz, and entertained visitors with my mastery. Even now there is a twinge of sadness in my father's eyes when the end of my piano playing is mentioned, although he has never said a word to chide me. Despite my decision to stop lessons, however, being introduced to piano at a young age was the greatest service my parents provided my young mind, even later when I became reluctant to play and it became a chore.

I existed without playing music for three years. Freed from compulsory practicing, my interests swung away into aquaria and horticulture. The piano was draped with a dust cover, the first it had known, and was summarily forgotten. But even then, music had a lasting effect. I didn't play, but I did listen—my music collection numbered in the tens of thousands of songs, and my head was never

without a pair of headphones around it. When I heard music, it was not just pleasant sound; it was a language I could understand.

It would take a few years, but guitar would continue would continue where piano left off, and I would make music my own. When I left for college the urge to create music flared to life once more. I was free from my father's judgment, unwaveringly positive though it had been, and music could finally be my independent enterprise. I spent thirty dollars on a used acoustic guitar, and taught myself a few folk songs on it. I found that I could not put it down. I was not nearly as good on it as I would have been if I had sat down again at a piano, but I was not playing purely to accrue skill, I was playing to own my own experience of music. The guitar was mine, and the music I made with it was mine and mine alone.

Take note, parents: throw your child into piano whether he likes it or not. And he may not, but keep him at it. When he's older he can choose what he wants to do, and even if he chooses to finally escape your dreams of concert halls or smoky jazz lounges, music will always be a part of him, and you will have only done good.

Eli's growing independence showed up in sports as well as music. Just as I had little chance to make music in China, or even to listen to it, Len had little opportunity to play sports in his childhood. He swore that he would offer his son all the opportunities he had missed in exploring the world with his hands and mind. So when Eli turned 6, he said "it's time to get him into sports." "I totally agree," I said. "But since I grew up in China I am unfamiliar with sports in the United States. You may have to take the lead in this undertaking and I will support you." Now we both were on the same page. "I heard from our neighbor that the town's Little League baseball team was recruiting new members," Len told me, "and I want Eli to join the team. Baseball should be his first sport." I agreed.

Eli played baseball (ping pong and karate) for about two years until we moved when I started a new job. He continued with table tennis and added swimming, fishing, snowboarding, biking, sailing, stunt kiting, tennis, and disc golf.

Snowboarding was elegant and exciting. To get Eli used to snowy and icy conditions when he was a child, we took him to the park to slide down the snow-covered slopes. On the slopes he often mingled with other kids, enjoying the thrill of sliding down a steep hill at high speed. It was fun and free.

When he grew older, our family often spent a short vacation at the Gunstock Mountain Resort in New Hampshire, for cross-country skiing and snowboarding in the deep winter. Nor-

mally it took us about 3 hours to get there by car. We would stay in a nearby motel, then rent equipment from the resort office and sign Eli up for a snowboarding lesson. Afterwards, with Eli settled happily in his class, Len and I would go to a nearby open space to practice cross-country skiing. At the end of the day the three of us drove to a restaurant for a hearty meal to warm up from the bone-chilling weather.

Snowboarding was a bit hazardous, like most sports, but I backed them all as long as Eli's enthusiasm lasted. The decision was always his. "I did some foolish things as a Red Guard during my years in China," I said, "but swimming and biking did me a lot of good physically and in shaping my character." Life is often filled with unknown risks and unexpected consequences," Len added. We agreed that Eli should not be afraid to take risks in order to live a full life.

In high school and college Eli's most intensive sport was bicycling. It wasn't by chance; bikes were no strangers to his parents. During the year we lived in Beijing I carried Eli on the back of my bike everywhere. In the morning I sent him to the kindergarten with my bike and carried him back in the afternoon. On weekends when Len and I rode our bikes to visit friends in the Friendship Hotel or to the Fragrant Hills for a family outing, Eli was always my passenger, sitting peacefully in the carrier on the back of my bike. Not only did the bicycle become a vehicle for providing transportation but it also helped develop closeness between mother and son when we lived abroad.

That relationship changed as the boy matured. Soon after starting college, Eli decided to join the bicycle-racing club. "Just don't overdo it, that's all I ask," I warned. I was also thinking of how much time it would take when he was racing other colleges from all over the eastern seaboard but I kept my mouth shut on that. Time would tell.

Occasionally I did play a part in his athletic activities. When he got hit by a car on his bike I stood up in front of hundreds of parents during Parent's Day at Brown to give an account of the hit-and-run accident. I had to show my great concern about the safety problem of biking around the campus. I pleaded to President Simmons that "I hope the college will take some measures to improve access to the bike path around the campus, so we parents will feel safe for our sons and daughters." Her response was affirmative and action was taken. I got the job done.

But I want to give his dad credit for guiding his son patiently at different stages of his participation in sports. A research report published at the University of North Carolina stated that games develop a kind of "connectedness" between a father and his child. I do think that Len's close involvement with Eli's sport activities fostered the connectedness between father and son, and in my supportive role I gained a lot, too, reinforcing the union among the three of us.

That was a two-way process. While offering Eli advice along the way, we gained great satisfaction in watching him embrace his passion for music, sports, and fish. He not only followed our advice and example but also developed his own interests, going beyond what we of-

ferred. As a result, he practiced making his own choices and developed his sense of independence. Most important, his increasing freedom enhanced our two-way communication and strengthened our family bond.

Girlfriends

The choices he made from the start of his dating career in high school illustrated that transition. Unfortunately, I did not always understand his motives. I once asked him why he had dated a particular classmate. His honest answer: "I was desperate for a girlfriend and she was willing to accept me." His answer surprised me for I had no idea that he craved female companionship. We parents could be so ignorant about our adolescents.

My ignorance continued during a later social experiment of his. I worried about his intimate relationship with an oddball who had been brought up in an insecure home. I felt sorry for her; as talented as she was, she had trouble starting a career and keeping a stable relationship with a man. Her story showed that a broken family could easily leave deep scars on the children, messing up their minds, often turning them into dysfunctional adults.

But whenever I brought up the topic Eli would insist on going his own way. Len said "I don't think that we can prevent him from dating her, but at least we may give him some sensible advice." So he bought a box of condoms at the CVS drug store and offered it to Eli, advising "no matter what you do, don't make her pregnant. Use some protection when you need to." My hope was that he would learn from those relationships and eventually find a soul mate and life-long companion.

That hope, however, sometimes pushed me to interfere with his move toward independence as he got older. For instance, Brown University allowed a young man and woman to share the same dorm bedroom. It was absurd! It reminded me of a friend's remarks about the campus culture: "Brown is very liberal and open-minded towards gays, lesbians and homosexuals. Students can do anything they want in regard to their sexual orientations." Whether Eli was homosexual or straight was out of my control. It was his choice. What worried me more was that he might make a terrible mistake by being tempted by sexual attraction while living with a female roommate.

Therefore my first action was to call the student residential counselor to discuss my concern. When my talk with the residential counselor didn't get me anywhere, I asked Eli for the email address of his roommate's parents. It turned out the girl was a Chinese and her parents were living in Quebec, Canada. After I exchanged emails back and forth several times with her folks we agreed upon a time to meet in Amherst on their way to drop their older daughter at Cornell University.

“Putting a male and a female student in one room at a university dorm! That was unimaginable when I was in college back in China,” I told them. “I talked to the residential counselor about this, but he didn’t seem to care. He said, ‘it’s up to the students to make their decision.’ That’s why I contacted you to discuss this matter face-to-face,” I explained. Len assured them that “Eli is a decent young man. I can guarantee you that he’ll treat your daughter with respect.” “Your promise has put our mind at rest. I don’t believe that anything will go wrong while they share the room,” the father said trustfully. We all felt relieved after our frank and friendly conversation.

In fact, I secretly hoped that Eli would develop a friendship with his female roommate because I wanted him to marry a Chinese girl. But it wasn’t bound to happen.

I gradually learned to ease up in my role as Mom, but that was not easy to do. At Brown, Eli soon became serious with a talented art student two years older than he. But she required high maintenance, strong attention to her needs and ambitions. She wished to be the center of the relationship. Len and I could see this clearly. We admired her artistic ability and enjoyed her spirit, but we guessed that the couple was a mismatch. Eli preferred a quiet, comfortable girl who offered loyalty and companionship rather than excitement and exceptional beauty. It was hard, therefore, to keep from interfering with unsolicited and probably useless advice even though we knew that he needed to make his own decision. Trying to stay at a distance, we walked a fine line.

Eli took a while to fathom the conflict of goals. He was not as experienced as we had become after making some major romantic mistakes of our own. During a home visit he confided that “she asked me to follow her to New York City after my graduation, and then in turn she might follow me to where I want to go the year after.” Sensing that the arrangement would not patch over their basic lack of compatibility, Len volunteered advice: “This bargain of your following her and her following you may not work in the long run. She is a career-oriented person with a strong will. New York City is the center of art that attracts many young artists. That’s where she belongs. She will not sacrifice her career to follow you.” I echoed Len’s concern. It was interesting to see that these young people were facing the challenge to choose between career and relationship even before they graduated from college. I felt sympathetic.

Consequently, after living together for about two years, he broke off with her, with a little push from us. But Eli’s solitude did not last long. He resumed a friendship with Sara, a classmate he had met during their first year at Brown. Once again I fretted, this time about her health. “Have you ever thought of the consequences of her illness?” I asked. “She had depression in the past,” he answered, “but she is OK now. This disease is curable with medication.” He brushed off my worries, unconcerned. “You know I have Marfan’s syndrome. I can’t expect my girlfriend to be 100% perfect in health since I’m not perfect myself.”

Although Len shared the same reservation with me about Sara's medical problem, he took the matter calmly, saying "We can advise Eli about any potential problems, no matter whether it's health or something else, but it's really up to him to make the choice. If worse comes to worse he has to learn how to handle it." Both Eli's arguments and Len's reasoning seemed to make sense. So I accepted and approved the new relationship. After they both graduated from Brown they rented an apartment in Somerville near Boston and lived together until they got married in the summer of 2015, in the redwood forest of Northern California. Perhaps I had been pointlessly meddlesome and overanxious regarding my boy's girlfriends. Well, live and learn.

College

Choosing a high school for Eli had been done mainly by Len and myself. We did a lot of research on location, rank and reputation, student and faculty quality, science courses, and enrichment opportunities outside the regular courses at the school and in the town where we decided to relocate. I also had to consider the possibility of a good library job in the area. Eli came on our inspection tours, and gave us valuable input, but he was not yet old enough to take primary responsibility despite his increasing maturity.

In his senior year, however, the responsibility for choosing and applying to colleges became more evenly divided. Everybody told me that college application was a huge undertaking, that navigating through this complex process would be a tremendous challenge for both the senior and parents. And it was!

We knew that the only way to achieve Eli's "American Dream" was through a good education. To get a degree from a top college would open many doors to our boy, allowing him to develop his potential in a professional career and live a better and richer life. I understood why so many Chinese parents wanted to send their children to the Ivy Leagues. So I told Len "I'll spare no efforts and expense to provide Eli with a good education because it's the most precious gift we can give him." I believe that having a first-rate education is like giving the child a pair of strong wings that will help him fly high to reach his goals."

In reality, both Len and I were ordinary folks with neither big money nor powerful social connections: Len came from a humble immigrant family and I was myself an immigrant. Therefore, for Eli to get into an Ivy League university he had to show that he was much better than those students who had wealthy and influential parents. But I was not deterred. I had confidence in Eli and was determined to help him meet the challenge and get into the best college possible.

The pressing priority was to take college applications seriously and plan carefully; and the first thing to start the process was to consult a high school guidance counselor. But some parents complained that many of the counselors shouldered a heavy workload, trying to help too

many students with their college applications. Naturally it was hard for them to know each student well enough to come up with well-suited advice. So I didn't take the counselor's recommendations too seriously. Instead, I used her recommendations as the reference point to start my own research.

First of all, I advised Eli to polish the resume he had created for an internship at a UMass lab, listing all the academic accomplishments he had achieved in high school, all the awards received so far, and all his extracurricular activities, community services, work experience, and athletics. And he should explain in detail his plans for college. This should be the first step he took in getting ready to apply. Secondly, I borrowed several books from the Amherst public library to learn how to handle the college application and the intricate details of every step in the process.

When I heard that the parents of one of Eli's classmates were spending \$4,000 to hire a tutor to help their child prepare for the admission tests (SAT), I asked Len "what should we do?" Len's reply was "I think that hiring a tutor for Eli to improve his math and vocabulary is not only costly but also wouldn't do him much good in the long run. He has already made a systematic approach to acquire knowledge and improve his skills. He has already prepared for the SAT."

Nevertheless, although I shared those thoughts I also believed that "practice makes perfect." So I asked Eli to practice with the sample tests in the SAT books I had gotten from the library and with the up-to-date examples at the College Board website. I also urged him to sign up for the SAT at the local test site as early as possible, so he could repeat it as many times as he needed, and then select the one with the highest scores. Once he practiced, we trusted Eli to handle the test on his own without tutoring by an expensive teacher or attending extra classes.

The next important thing to prepare was the college application essay. In all of the books I read the authors couldn't emphasize more how critical the essay was, calling it "a crucial door opener" for admission. So once again I went to the local library to borrow a bunch of books on how to write a good essay for the application. I urged Eli to read the sample essays in those books and to put his full attention on writing an eye-catching first-rate essay.

After that the next imperative thing to do was to go on college tours. In the summer of 2006, three of us visited five of the seven schools on our list—Dartmouth, Brown, Brandeis, Amherst College and UMass at Amherst. Dartmouth made a great impression on us; we all felt that it might be an ideal school. Eli's response to Brandeis: "I felt as if I returned to Solomon Schechter Day School. The students I talked to sounded like my old schoolmates in the Jewish school." That eliminated Brandeis.

Brown came next. "It's is a tough place to get into," Len said, but I was not convinced. "I've confidence in you," I told Eli. "Definitely you should apply." When Len asked Eli what he thought of Amherst College he answered "It is very nice, but it reminds me of the Amherst Re-

gional High School. They both have almost the same size of students and faculty. I don't want to be confined to such a small environment, and I prefer to go to a larger place to broaden my life." So we ended the tour right there and proceeded to UMass.

UMass is the flagship of the university system in Massachusetts, about two or three miles from our home in Amherst. In the book of "Best 377 Colleges" by Robert Franek, the author quoted some students: "If you want to party, there is one available for you almost every night." And "a lot of people came here for academics but fall into the party scene." An article in the local newspaper, *Hampshire Gazette*, called it "Zoo Mass" because of the student riots after some sports event. Those negative comments left a bad taste in my mouth.

After completing the college visits, the three of us sat down at a table and discussed the pros and cons of those colleges. Soon Eli came to the conclusion that he would apply to Dartmouth College for an early decision. If he couldn't get into Dartmouth he would send his applications to the others on our list.

Dartmouth rejected him. A few days later I met Marylyn S., an admissions office at my workplace, Mount Holyoke College (a women school). "My son Eli is a very good student with almost all A's in his high school courses," I complained. "He has also gotten excellent recommendations from his teachers and received 2,340 points in SAT scores; and he has an outstanding record of extracurricular activities. So I don't understand why Dartmouth rejected him."

Marylyn listened to me attentively, asking a few questions from time to time. She nodded her head when I told her about Eli's grades, SAT scores, and extracurricular activities. But after reading Eli's "Funk" essay she raised her eyebrows and said clearly "the culprit is the essay. It is vague and obscure. It does not give a clear picture of Eli's character and achievements. You must tell Eli that he needs to rewrite his essay before he sends out his applications to other colleges."

Marylyn's analysis of the problem was succinct and clear. I thanked her for her help and went home to tell Len and Eli about what I learned. Since our strategy to get him into Dartmouth through early admission failed, Eli had to apply to the other six colleges we had decided on. The deadline was January 1, 2007. Only a month left. Now Eli must come up with a new topic and rewrite the essay for the application. Right away I hurried to the Amherst public library to borrow more books on essay writing for college admission. I read quite a few of them and selected some good ones for Eli to read.

"Could you write something that will show your personality?" I asked. Surprisingly, Eli said "I do have an essay that was requested by my English teacher when I asked her to write me a letter of recommendation. The essay sounded good and Marylyn wholeheartedly approved it. But I worried about Eli's poor handwriting: it might affect the legibility of his application to Brown, which required a print copy. So I got up early on Christmas Day, picking up a few good ball-pens, and carefully filled in the Brown application, page after page. Then I assembled the

forms and the essay, together with other materials, including letters of recommendation from his piano teacher and our neighbor, and finally sealed the bulky envelopes. After that I drove to the post office to mail the application packages before the deadline. Now with a great load taken off my mind we just needed to wait patiently for the results.

Believe it or not, that old essay worked! It opened the doors to almost all the colleges and universities he had applied to. They all accepted him except Cornell, which only offered a guarantee of transfer admission in the sophomore year. Mission accomplished: Len and I felt that helping Eli get into an excellent college had been our biggest challenge in his first 17 years.

Now, after doing the math, we had to discuss the financial situation with Eli, seeking his input. He did not insist that he had to go to Brown, but he really liked Brown's open curriculum and the students he met on campus. Spending big money on his higher education wasn't a problem for me because I had decided long before that I would do everything I could to provide him with the education he deserved. This was a major investment in his future.

On Labor Day of 2007, Len and I brought him to Brown in our two family cars, carrying his belongings plus two bicycles. When the time came to say good-bye he seemed a little anxious. After all, this was the first time for him to live on his own, away from home. "I'm sure that you will do fine," I told him. "Play safe and take care of yourself." Len said, jokingly, "You don't need to study non-stop all the time just to get all A's. Enjoy your four golden years at Brown." We each gave him a big hug before we left the campus, feeling a little sad after seeing our little bird flying from the nest.

Reading Eli's e-mail-newsletters reassured us. We both felt happy that his initial entry into independent life went smoothly. Nevertheless, "old habits die hard." Interestingly enough, we couldn't get away from our tendency to monitor Eli's activities, even at a distance. With the Jewish New Year getting closer Len wrote to Eli "Happy New Year! Rosh Hashanah is Sep 12-14 and Yom Kippur will be Sep 21-22. I suppose there's a Hillel at Brown, if you choose to attend services. Mom and I plan to go tonight at UMass."

Len wanted Eli to hold on to his Jewish identity by attending services at Brown. However, I felt doubtful that the son would fulfill his father's wish in view of Eli's disappointment with the religious indoctrination at the Jewish Day School. Too much rote repetition and not enough thoughtful analysis. And sure enough, like father like son. Len was turned off by the mandatory rules and regulations of religious institutions, and so was Eli.

For my part, I anticipated that Eli might have trouble adjusting to the learning style at college. I checked the Brown online catalog and found a few books on how to polish study skills, such as "Texts and Tests: Teaching Study Skills across Content Areas" by Rona F. Flippo, and "The Art of Learning: A Self-help Manual for Students" by Katherine M. Ramsland, and emailed him the titles.

Meanwhile I offered him some tips on how to study at college. I said “From my experience in college and graduate school I found that the ways to study in high school and college are very different. The course assignments are homework-oriented at high school, which means that you can get a good grade as long as you do your homework and prepare well for the exams. However, the approach to study is very different in college, where many courses are project-oriented. To get a good grade and accomplish a successful project requires more than just reading the textbook; you need to build a knowledge base by reading a lot of relevant books and articles. Of course, you don’t need to read the books from cover to cover, but skim them for useful info. You also need to seek your professor’s advice to make sure your project is on track.”

Above all, I pointed out, “the most important thing you should bear in mind is your long-term career goals, for which you need to build an extensive knowledge base and acquire a good set of skills by taking relevant courses, participating in interesting extracurricular activities, acquiring internships and getting involved with hands-on work experience. This way you will gradually expand a base of relevant knowledge and build credentials for your career.” I concluded my advice by saying “I’ve included your Dad in this email, thinking he may offer you some suggestions from his own life-long learning experience. We can discuss this topic when we visit you during the Parents Weekend.”

Eli shot back an email, sounding impatient with my unsolicited advice. “Long-term plans can wait until I gain more of a foothold here, I think. I already have a goal: for now I’m just going to focus on acclimating. I’m already involved in several activities that are going to help me.” Sensing my grumpy mood after getting Eli’s unenthusiastic response, Len spoke to me gently. “You see,” he said. “We’re still trying to supervise Eli’s activities—I’m concerned about his Jewish activities and you about his study skills. I think our worries are needless. We must trust Eli to take charge of his life and his studies at college.” “I know,” I agreed, but added “we will eventually cut the umbilical cord, but it has to be done gradually.” So I replied to Eli “What I said is just a general principle. I’m sure that you will figure out efficient study and research methods, not to mention long-term goals, through your own practice.”

While mom, dad and son were all trying hard to get used to their physical and emotional separation, Brown sent us a letter inviting us to attend the Parents Weekend in late October. The college understood the psychology of the newly-emptied-nest experience of parents and their just-left-home children, who were all suffering from “separation anxiety syndrome.” The letter indicated that the popular annual event would provide parents with a glimpse of their child’s life at Brown.

And the weekend did help us all adjust to the new facts. We saw that Eli was learning the ropes of college life while attuning to the rigorous study routine. He was on the right track. And sure enough, Eli’s four years’ undergraduate education at Brown, in addition to other benefits,

brought out his originality, allowing him to develop his brainpower by following his intuition and imagination.

What a difference from the way young people are trained in China, where the emphasis of study is on endless memorization and exams. Absorbing known facts and information takes precedence, not original thought, hands-on training, and practical experience, and students are required to study standard texts in order to take standard tests, constantly drilling on boring data. At school, each teacher is obligated to use every bit of students' energy mechanically and unimaginatively, while at home, parents are responsible to make sure their children's time is taken up with homework, not even sparing the weekends.

"The cause of the problem lies not just in our educational system," one Chinese expert concluded, "but mainly in our culture." Having been born and raised in China, I can understand that diagnosis. Even though the test-oriented education system may produce a great number of bookworms and technical talents, it will not produce original minds geared to pursue new advances in many domains of knowledge—the humanities, sciences, and social sciences. It will not cultivate imagination and the free spirit of inquiry among young people, allowing them to challenge authority and pursue their vision. Hence the quality of college education should not be judged by test scores and grades, or the physical appearance of a campus, but by the values, mindsets, and original thinking of the teachers and students.

Eli was fortunate to be born in America and blessed to receive his higher education from a liberal university like Brown, which offered him plentiful resources and a flexible curriculum to stimulate his mind. When he left the college, he not only took away specific knowledge and skills; he also cherished the ambition to pursue professional innovation, and that was the most important thing of all! His well-considered approval of his college education made us think that the \$200,000 we spent was the best investment we ever made in bringing him up.

My friend Marylyn gave me credit for that: she praised "a great mother who passed on good genes, instilled a strong work ethic in him, and provided opportunities for his personal and academic growth and development." That was nice to hear, but ninety percent of the praise should go to the fine specimen of humanity we were blessed to nurture. I would also share the praise with his dad. It takes the efforts of two parents to raise a child.

Work

When Eli became a teenager I asked Len about the right age for Eli to go out to work after school. He said "the sooner the better." Then he clarified his view. "The purpose of letting Eli work at an early age is not to make money, but to develop his work ethic and sense of responsibility. He should learn how to make his own way in the world." Therefore, we decided early on that we would only pay for the big-ticket items such as clothing and school events, plus

\$20 monthly allowance for doing household chores like washing dishes. So he always supported his hobbies with the money earned from delivering newspapers or doing chores for others, and with the profits made from selling the bikes and a motorcycle he repaired. We truly believed that engaging in those jobs would foster a good attitude toward work, experiencing what ordinary folks endured in daily life while developing his interests and skills and occupying his mind and hands with meaningful activities. As an added bonus, manual skills would help Eli carry out various tasks in later years.

Furthermore, to help Eli gain independence and have access to work opportunities, we signed him up at the Pioneer Valley Driving School in the fall of 2005 when he turned 16. After taking a series of classes he received his Drivers Education Certificate. Soon he passed both the written and road tests and got his driver's license. He not only gained the freedom to drive to work and to his social activities, but eventually took on the role of the family driver on our vacation trips to Cape Cod and other distant locations.

During Eli's junior year in high school, Len talked to me about giving a boost to the boy's growing scientific activities: "Do you know some science faculty at Mount Holyoke who might help him gain more experience?" "Yes," I answered, "I know a professor of chemistry. I can invite her over for a chat." Following the professor's advice, Len checked the website of the Department of Biology at UMass and collected a list of faculty names, their research interests, and their email addresses. Then he handed the list to Eli, asking him to compose a letter of inquiry and send it out with his first resume.

Two offers came out of the inquiries. After deliberation and discussion with us, Eli decided to take an offer to work at the Plant Physiology and Genomics Lab. The main consideration was that the research focus there closely matched his interest in plants. He was paid \$8 an hour, not bad for his first "professional" job at age 17. And the professor became Eli's friend as well.

Besides that work, I asked Eli to be my tech assistant when I taught technology workshops at the Continuing Education Program in the Library School of Simmons College. I paid him \$50 for helping me teach each class. Eli's work experience taught me a lesson that as parents we should watch our children closely at each stage of their growth, seizing every opportunity to help them broaden their interests, extend their horizon, guide them in acquiring practical skills in preparation for starting their careers, and most important, giving them a chance to exchange views with their peers and teachers.

Later, in his college years, we gave advice when Eli had to choose between two summer internships. One offer was a museum job in Nantucket. "That work," I said, "will be fun. You are good at teaching and taking care of marine fish and plants. However, the Eco-Informatics Summer Institute run by the University of Oregon in a scenic forest sounds like a great training

ground. There the work might be more exciting and will give you a leg up in gaining research experience and skills.” Len presented his opinion: “Don’t forget that there’ll be many activities in Oregon besides research projects, such as hiking in the high mountains and white water rafting on the McKenzie River.” Taking all the factors into consideration, we gave him a thumbs-up for that choice, and he agreed wholeheartedly. What a difference from our college days, when this kind of internship was unimaginable. We felt a little jealous!

In the summer following his senior year, Eli took up another rewarding internship, this one at the NASA Ames Research Center in Mountain View, California. During his senior year, Eli had made the decision that he would not go to graduate school right after college, and instead find a job in the biotech field to get first-hand work experience. So he started looking for a professional position in his last semester at Brown. Soon he got an offer for a one-year appointment at Ginkgo Bioworks, a thriving start-up company in Boston. After that he gained over one year further experience at Broad Institute in Cambridge.

From newspaper boy to DNA analyst he had come a long way to broaden his workplace skills, with a gentle push from his folks now and then. We were happy to see our little eagle flying away from the nest. Equipped with four years’ college education and armed with current scientific knowledge and modern technology, he could fly further and higher.

CAREER

But Len and I were not entirely satisfied. The position at Broad was well paid, but we felt that the more urgent need was to locate a career direction, not monetary reward. We were academic people. Len had a Ph.D. in comparative literature and I had two Master's degrees, one in English literature and the other in library science. We knew that for Eli to stay current in a field going through rapid changes he must improve his credentials by obtaining advanced education, preferably a Ph.D. in a specialized discipline. He was gaining invaluable experience through daily routine work and attending professional conferences and workshops. Nevertheless, Len and I felt that the job seemed to be a dead end because as research assistant with just a B.A. in science he would not be able to survive in the long run at a prestige institution like Broad. Although Eli was comfortable in his current job, he began to realize that there was not much future for him to stay on, playing the role of support staff. The sooner he went back to school the better.

But he was not sure what area to move into—to become a research biologist or a computational biologist. He was reluctant to give up his comfortable position and plunge into grad school without a clear direction. How to solve the problem? We thought that we ought to give him a push to go to graduate school, hoping that he would find a focus there for the next phase of his career.

So Len and I came up with a list of points we wanted to discuss with Eli on the importance of moving on to grad school right away:

- Status. He will never achieve professional status unless he gets an advanced degree in the field of biotech.
- Leadership. He will have a greater influence in the workplace and to get there he definitely needs a Ph.D. In a leadership position he will be able to direct innovative projects.
- Passion. Contrary to a common idea, most people don't have a clear-cut research focus when they start a graduate program. They define specific career goals when they go through the process of training, exploring, and finding professors to guide them through the process. To get a head start, Eli could take a course at MIT or Harvard to test some particular interest before he jumps into a program.
- Timing, now or never. A person goes through life in stages. It's important to do the right thing at the right time. It will be difficult to get a Ph.D. once he starts a family since it will distract him and dilute his energy. It will take much longer to finish his studies.
- Money corrupts. Indulging in easy money in an easy job could seduce him from long-term goals. There will be many changes in the economy, in the biotech industry, in the institution he works for, and in his relations with his bosses and colleagues. Gradually he will lose his competitiveness and become stagnant. Although a Ph.D. is no guarantee of job security, yet it gives a person more opportunities to deal with any challenges that may arise.

In summary, Len told him, "one thing you must be clear about: you will never become a true professional unless you get an advanced degree in your field. We know that you like to do creative things. But in order to do that you have to be in a leadership position, which will allow you to have greater influence in the workplace, with the power to decide the direction of the work."

"Don't follow my example," I added. "At Mount Holyoke College," I added, "I missed an opportunity to get into a leadership position because I prefer project work, trying to avoid workplace politics. So they hired a person who was less qualified than I. Then when we had different views about work-related issues that person felt her authority was threatened and did all she could to undermine me. As a result I was marginalized and eventually forced out. Therefore, even though I tried to avoid politics, I still became its victim."

Getting an earful of our advice and suggestions, Eli promised that he would think carefully about his career goals and apply to a bioengineering program at Stanford. Nevertheless, a few weeks later he called us with the bad news that he did not get into Stanford. "I have good creden-

tials,” he explained, “but they were not the right match for the program. And maybe they sensed my uncertainty” “What I need to do now is find the right program.” The determined tone in his voice eased my concern. I knew that Eli had a strong motive in advancing his career. He was competitive and still in the running.

But finding his professional “passion” was easier said than done. A couple of months later, he surprised us by sending us an email saying that he found a job posting for a position of Digital Learning Producer at the Exploratorium in San Francisco. He thought it was an ideal job for him since it involved with a lot of hands-on work in designing scientific experiments. Never a dull moment in bringing up a child.

I understood why he was attracted by the job at the Exploratorium: it would allow him to combine his knowledge of science with his passion for hands-on construction while designing devices for scientific education. Len and I decided to inspect the place personally. The Exploratorium was a wonderland for children, exposing them to many fantastic scientific activities. However, I was not convinced that it was the right place for Eli. Creating exhibits, especially in a museum aimed to stimulate youngsters, is certainly valuable labor, but it might not bring out his particular talents as a scientist as fully as possible. “They seem to offer everything scientific, but nothing in depth,” I whispered at Len’s ears. “It may be fun for children to explore a great variety of demonstrations, but it wouldn’t be so great a place for original research.” Len echoed with my concern.

I had thought Eli was clear-minded about his career goals, at least in general. Now he was thinking to change his plan. I felt frustrated and upset. In order to persuade him to reconsider, I did some research on the Web, comparing a computational biologist with an exhibit craftsman, and emailed him the results. There are several issues, I wrote:

1. Unstable employment, moving from one short-term job to another, working for a series of employers rather than one employer. Many museum craftsmen are self-employed. This may affect the stability of your family life.
2. Physical challenge, lifting heavy objects of 40 to 50 pounds constantly when setting up the exhibits. Could your Marfan syndrome allow you to do this line of work?
3. Pay: the median annual wage of set and exhibit designers was \$46,680 in May 2010.
4. Educational background: You will need to take quite a few courses to be qualified. As the Chinese saying goes “男怕入错行，女怕嫁错郎,” which means that it’s disastrous for a man to get into a wrong profession and for a woman to marry a wrong man.”

A few days later, still unsure that my analysis of the museum job was convincing, I drafted another e-mail to Eli and then asked Len to take a look at it. He whole-heartedly approved. “We have no intention to impose our views on you,” I wrote. “If after carefully comparing the pros and cons of your options you still want to pursue a career as an exhibit designer, we have a few suggestions:

1. Try to get a temporary job as a computational biologist when you relocate to the Bay Area. The job will offer you an income while you explore other opportunities.
2. Start volunteering at the Exploratorium in your spare time to get experience in both the practical work and the human environment.
3. After testing the water, if you really enjoy the work and feel comfortable with the people in the museum setting, you could start taking courses at a nearby community college to build up your qualifications.
4. After a year or two apply for a job as an entry-level designer to get started in your new profession.”

Then I emphasized, “Eli, please remember that the reason for us to throw these ideas and advice at you is not to interfere with your goals. Just the opposite: now as always, we’d like to help you enjoy productive work and live a pleasant life. We’re sure that you will find the way to do that.” At the end of the letter I signed with both Mom and Dad to show him that my presentation was a joint view. Since childhood Eli always respected our opinions. This time he again took our views seriously and responded positively:

Mom and Dad,

I really appreciate your taking the time to write such carefully thought-out ideas for me. My own thinking is going around in circles on the matter, and an outside perspective is very helpful, especially when it's motivated by the same goals I have—an enjoyable and productive career.

Life is often full of unexpected surprises. While I was worrying about Eli’s obsession with becoming a museum designer, Len coincidentally spotted an article titled “San Francisco Exploratorium Employees Brace for Layoffs” on the *NBC Bay Area News*. “The Exploratorium’s big move to Pier 15 was expected to draw huge crowds,” the article stated, “but the numbers aren’t what the museum had hoped for. And now dozens of people are slated to lose their jobs. Because of the miscalculation, 80 positions are slated to be cut, 34 of them full-time, along with some seasonal workers, and about 20 positions that were set to be filled but will now be slashed.

People are angry, upset, crying A lot of people feel some creative part is being let go from this institution.”

While we were coming to grips with this stunning news, another article on the same topic, “Exploratorium Forced to Cut Back,” was carried in the science section of the *New York Times*. It reiterated the same story that because of low attendance they had a \$9 million hole in their operating budget. So the administration decided to reduce their staffing level of 435 by about a fifth.

What was shocking was that the majority of the people who built and refined the exhibits were laid off in three weeks. “This kind of work is what Eli has set his heart on,” I told Len. “Thank God he hadn’t applied for the position of Digital Object Producer. Otherwise he would be the first one to go.” I was especially disturbed when I read complaints from laid-off employees that the museum’s leaders didn’t offer any concessions like taking pay cuts themselves to help make up for their miscalculations. Once again, the jungle law ruled—every man for himself. It was the staff at the lower rung of the corporate ladder who were put on the chopping block.

Without losing any time, I sent the appalling news to Eli, plus the web links for the two articles. I warned Eli “you see how ruthless the workplace could be—from grand celebration to layoffs in just a matter of four months. The cruelty is that the workers are always the victims of mismanagement. The CEO and administrators know how to protect themselves. You should never go to work in a jungle-like place.”

After going through a bitter experience at work myself, I hoped Eli would learn from this case about the dark side of the American workplace and understand that he had to carefully choose his career and work environment. Meanwhile sensing that my pushy behavior had gone too far, however, Len suggested “let’s give Eli more time to think about these issues. Once he has a clearer idea, he can chat or write to us.” Accepting his sensible advice I left the matter at that. Eli came through again. After a couple of months’ deliberation, he informed us that he would continue in the field of computational biology by applying to the doctorate programs of several prestigious universities. I responded enthusiastically, encouraging him to go ahead.

Dear Eli,

I’m delighted to hear that you have made up your mind to pursue a doctorate in computational biology. I think it’s the right decision for achieving your life goals, intellectually, professionally and financially. As your Mom, I know you have too much brainpower to be a “henchman” in any job, too much ambition to be under some mediocre boss’s thumb, and too much sense of responsibility not to be able to provide for your future family. So surge ahead with your original, hard-earned field.

I felt a burden lifted from my shoulders after Eli reassured us. This episode made me believe that bringing up a child is like taking care of a tree. You need to nourish the sapling with water and fertilizer, treat insects and disease, and prune the offshoot branches diligently before the tree grows into a vigorous and strong giant. Yet we parents should never impose our views and beliefs on the child, no matter whether it's about choosing a career or a spouse. We could offer advice, just as we have, but respect his temperament and be as flexible as we expect him to be. The ultimate decision has to be made by him, and must come from his guts.

It was now September 2013. Eli had three months left to meet the deadlines of the graduate schools. I told Eli "Mom and Dad had helped you with your undergraduate applications, but for the graduate schools we can't do much since we lack knowledge in your field." "Don't worry," Eli assured me, "I can handle the applications myself. For letters of recommendation I'll ask my previous boss at Ginkgo Bioworks, my current boss at the Broad Institute, and Lynn Rothschild, my internship adviser at NASA Ames. They will definitely say good things to back me up." He was confident and self-assured. "But we'd like to read your applications through," I said eagerly. "Perhaps Dad could edit your applications a bit."

Yes, all our efforts probably seem overdone, but they may have had a net benefit, one that Eli understood and approved. Here is an extract from his application essay to UC Berkeley:

My own impetus to reach for the highest levels of learning comes from many sources, but my parents, by overcoming significant barriers to their efforts to obtain an education, modeled the necessary spirit and perseverance. Their hunger to learn, manifested in entirely different ethnic worlds, has shown me the transformative force of education, and it has fed my ambition to work for a Ph.D. ... There's potency in the lived lesson; my parents have demonstrated to me more powerfully than any hortatory cliché ever could the value and satisfaction of learning.

Finally the exciting news arrived: "I've gotten into Stanford." Why did all four graduate schools accept him? There are many things that parents, no matter how admirable their intentions, can instill in their children. In addition to his excellent academic record and professional experience Eli also spoke and wrote well. He was mature socially, and that may have made him irresistible.

"There is a difference between you and your parents," I remarked, "you have very good people skills and a certain charm. You know how to talk to people diplomatically and pleasantly,

whereas my directness sometimes puts people off. That skill may account for 50% of a person's chance in any competitive situation." "I think it accounts for more," Eli insisted. "I'm so glad that you've learned that important truth at your age," I said. "I was clueless about it when I was your age, and I'm still not good at it."

I believe he acquired this quality on his own, after relating to bosses, colleagues, girlfriends, interviewers, and total strangers while traveling—adaptability, flexibility, accommodating to the unexpected. He commented on that quality in an e-mail:

I thought I knew all about it, dealing with what life throws you. No, I didn't get it—actual problems feel much, much worse than abstract problems, and exhibiting a bit of flexibility is more of an exercise in resilience and psychological fortitude than I had appreciated. Challenges are hard! Adventures sometimes suck while you're having them! Maintaining composure and not only solving the problem but solving it with poise and grace—that's hard. I don't know what the hallmark of a great adventure is, but if I was told that it's calm in coping with the unexpected, I'd believe it.

A NEW ADVISER

Once Eli relocated to northern California with his fiancée to start his studies in computational genetics at Stanford, our job was just about done, after 25 years. Now he would have another adviser. "Our wedding will be private and small," he announced. "Unlike other young couple who invite hundreds of people we will just ask the immediate family members, a few relatives and friends." "That's fine with us," I responded with enthusiasm. "It suits our style," Len agreed.

During the ceremony I could not keep from summing up our long successful partnership, pausing momentarily at several points to let Len give more details on specific events. I used the opportunity to stress the importance of family roots and cultural values, and I hoped Eli would pass them on to the next generation.

Dear Eli,

Today we have reached the highest point in our family life. Dad and I are delighted to see you and Sara getting married in this magnificent redwood forest. 28 years ago back in Beijing when Dad and I decided to get married, little did we know what a wonderful son would come into our life. Since then we have watched every step in your growing up with pride and happiness. Now you have

grown from a cheerful and charming little boy into a handsome groom, bringing a beautiful bride into our family. At this joyful moment I remember some of the highlights:

The first successful steps

Len: When Eli was 8 or 9 months old he learned to sit and then to walk but skipped the crawling stage. Often he tried to stand up from a sitting position but kept falling, hitting his big head against the edge of a table or the carpet. Without giving up he persisted, and finally walked the short distance between Mom and Dad.

Avoiding the “terrible two’s” and “rebellious teens”

Shaoping: I often heard other parents complaining about how difficult their child behaved at age 2 or as a teenager. So when Eli was two, we expected him to have a temper tantrum now and then, but it never happened. As a teenage boy, we expected him to be difficult and self-willed, but Eli promised us that he would never be rebellious. And, sure enough, he hasn't been—yet. Why Eli saved us so much grief by skipping those difficult periods is a mystery to us. But I'm not complaining. I hope it continues.

Venturing down the steep slopes of Gunstock Mountain

Len: When Eli grew older we took him to Gunstock Mountain in New Hampshire to learn snowboarding.. Once he learned the basic skills in a class he began to venture out to the slopes. He skipped the entry-level track for beginners, thinking it too boring, and then quickly passed through the intermediate level and started on the track for the advanced snowboarders.

I remember that I held my breath while watching him being lifted to the top of the mountain, then disappearing from sight. When he reappeared I saw that, unlike many reckless teenagers who flew down the steep slopes on their snowboards like chickens without heads, tumbling along the way, Eli cautiously glided down the steep track, occasionally weaving around a little, until safely reaching the foot of the mountain. I was proud of his courage and relieved at his caution. As he described his snowboarding experience in his college application essay, “I go more for the tranquility, the meditative clarity one attains when trying not to die.”

Delivering his first public speech at the Bar Mitzvah

Shaoping: According to the Jewish tradition a boy at age 13 must go through an important ritual that marks his entrance into Jewish adulthood with pride and dignity. At his Bar Mitzvah the boy reads a portion of the Old Testa-

ment, and then he has to deliver a speech to explain the meaning of the text he has read. This is most challenging since he needs to relate the old teachings to contemporary dilemmas.

Len: It was a triumphant speech. We were proud of Eli for a job well done at age 13. As I said then, and my words are just as relevant now, “we are very satisfied with the way you are taking your life in your own hands: more and more, you are making your own decisions, gathering facts needed to make those decisions, carrying them out, and accepting their consequences. You have already shown that you are very capable of taking on responsibility and accomplishing a mission. We like the way you are doing that.”

Receiving your undergraduate degree from Brown University

Shaoping: In May 2011 we attended Commencement Day for both Eli and Sara.. We were delighted that Eli received his undergraduate degree in Computational Biology, and at the same time we got to know Sara, a lovely girl now part of Eli’s life. They both were bright students and they both loved music, often playing classical duets on piano. While Eli now likes cello and guitar, Sara enjoys French horn. What a compatible pair of music lovers!

Being admitted into Stanford as a Ph. D. student

Shaoping: We are especially proud of Eli getting admitted into the Genetics Department at Stanford after two failed attempts. We are happy that he has found his career path after puzzling about it for a while.

Choosing Sara as your life-long companion

Len: Since the marriage between Shaoping and me was interracial, it has drawn good qualities from our genes and our different cultural backgrounds—Jewish, Chinese, European and American, and it has produced Eli as a superb hybrid. Now the mixing of genes continues.

Shaoping: Last summer, leaving their jobs in Boston, Eli and Sara made a cross-country trip to California towing a homemade trailer. Along the way they overcame some difficult situations and the 4000-mile trip cemented their relationship. The first thing Eli did when he came to our home was to make an announcement that he and Sara were engaged. That happy news was music to our ears.

From our experience we know that marriage is not always an easy thing. It is like a long journey; full of ups and downs, twists and turns, but perseverance and teamwork have kept us together happily over all those years. We hope the two of you will continue that journey, working together as a team to overcome

any problems that may arise down the road. We also hope you will never forget your roots, in Eli's case Chinese and Jewish roots, and continue to carry on the good values from those different cultures into your own parenthood, passing your legacy on to the next generation.

Always remember that your parents are here for you and we will always support you every step of the way. We love you both unconditionally. You both have been a source of joy and strength for us. Thank you for bringing us to this great climax in our two families.

Eli: Even though it's a very abstract subject right now, I already think a lot about how I was parented and how I might parent my own children someday. My goal is to emulate your approach as closely as possible—it is hard for me to imagine a better approach to parenting than the 'East meets West' dynamic in our household.

HOW TO BE A PARENT: WHAT WE LEARNED

In *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mom*, Amy Chua depicts in detail her strict ways in raising her two daughters. The girls grew up talented but driven: her older daughter gave a performance at Carnegie Hall at age 17, and both her daughters were admitted into Harvard. Their successes confirm the fact that in some ways “academic achievement reflects successful parenting.” Nevertheless, no sooner had Amy's book come out than it stirred up an uproar among Caucasian mothers in America. They were angry at her restrictive ways in bringing up her daughters; some even cursed her as “a child abuser.”

The debate about Amy's book started my thinking about the difference between East and West in child rearing. To tell the truth I enjoyed reading Amy's books. I may not agree with her point of view 100%, but I admire her courage and talent in writing such an insightful book. I agree with Amy's philosophy that children need discipline and it's especially important in the early years, although I disapprove her extremely strict ways in treating her daughters, setting up so many unreasonable limits in their daily life. I agree that parents should pay attention to their children's daily activities, but not micromanage them to her level of detail.

There are certain dangers as well as obvious benefits. Properly supervised children are probably more articulate and broadly knowledgeable than children were a generation or two ago. However, if a parent treats her children as the center of the universe, investing so much emotion, time, energy, and money in them as many Caucasian mothers do, they may suffer a devastating sense of failure if they don't meet the expectations. They may become so isolated from any ad-

versity that they don't develop the resilience and confidence to deal with problems on their own, the self-discipline necessary to navigate life as independent persons.

Many Asian parents, unlike upper-middle-class couples with a lot of financial resources, may not have the means to indulge their children; yet they still may have unrealistic hopes. Driven by insecurity and a strong desire to succeed, they too may closely monitor their children's daily activities, restrict their interests and hobbies and direct their careers, expecting them to excel in their education, get highly paid jobs and have a socially acceptable marriage. As a result, their children too, like some kids raised in affluent families, may never gain a sense of independence. They too may be deprived of self-fulfillment.

At the other extreme, the "anything goes" attitude of some parents does not work so well either. I disapprove some Caucasian mothers' "laissez-faire" attitude that allows the children to do anything they want without guidance or supervision. Comparing the "Demanding Eastern" parenting model with the "Permissive Western" model in child rearing, I reflect on how Len and I raised our son in some ways like the Eastern model discussed by Amy Chua and in some ways unlike it, often in contrast to the Western model set by many mainstream American parents. Therefore, after learning from the two different parental models, and above all from our own instructive experience, I summarize my conclusions in five points.

- First and foremost, Len and I didn't believe in the micromanagement of a child. We are not holy authorities. The three of us learn from each other; we all listen as well as speak. Therefore we never hovered over Eli, like "helicopter" parents, taking over and directing his life. We never forced him to do or believe in certain things.

Instead, we provided him with a wide variety of essential resources, available for him to promote his independence and develop his own interest in friendships, music, sports, hobbies, religion, and other subjects that he might or might not wish to pursue further. But we never indulged him with material things; we encouraged him from age 13 to go out to work part-time. Since then he has labored at many jobs and internships, developing a strong work ethic. That principle has enabled him to study diligently as an undergrad and graduate student because he knows that his future lies in his own efforts.

- On the other hand, we were always ready to jump in to assist him whenever he needed extra help, offering guidance and advice especially at difficult times and at every important juncture in Eli's life. We coached him in math in the 5th grade; advised him how to handle sex as a teen; helped him find a job and an internship in high school; supervised the process of college application; guided him to find the direction of his career; and encouraged him to pursue graduate studies.

Thousands of years ago Confucius advocated that “因材施教,” which means that education must follow the principle of teaching students in accordance with their aptitude.” The sage’s wisdom reveals the secret of raising a child. It teaches us that as parents we must understand and nurture—but not command and direct—our child in order to balance accurate and useful assistance with his desire for self-determination.

- Third, we almost never scolded or punished him (except that I spanked him once when he refused to sit on the potty at age 2), but instead reinforced his good work and accomplishments with encouragement and praise (especially from his father), thus creating a positive environment at home and strengthening his sense of security, self-confidence, and self-esteem at a young age.
- Fourth, Len and I worked as a team, bringing diverse values, beliefs, customs, and habits from Jewish, Chinese, and American cultures into our family life without friction or favoritism. As a Jewish father and Chinese mother we complemented one another with our cultural values, points of views, and temperaments. For example, when Eli brought back his report card from school I often focused on one or two of the lowest grades, criticizing him for not working hard enough, while Len would marvel at all the A’s, praising him for a job well done.

This contrast did not become a conflict, a bone of contention; my tiger mom’s critical attitude blended harmoniously with Dad’s approval. A comfortable mixture of principles and attitudes of different kinds can stimulate a child to begin forming a strong identity. It helped Eli reconcile, in fact to be happy about, his dual or even three-fold identity as a Chinese, a Jew, and an American. He proudly proclaimed “I’m essentially the sum of my parents, a hybrid.”

- Last but not least, we strongly believed in the power of teaching by good examples, by deeds instead of words. No secrets in our lives. Children are impressionable and observant. They not only take notice of what daily necessities their parents provide, like clothes, food, and games, but also whether their parents treat each other with affection, trust, respect, understanding, and two-way communication. They observe how their parents make decisions about buying a house, taking on a new project or a job, or cooking healthy food. On the concrete examples they see demonstrated by their parents they construct their values and beliefs.

In essence, parents are the first teachers of children, who observe and emulate their parents in daily life, treating them as their role models. The behavior of parents is the foundation for the development of a child’s character. Well, that is what I learned. And here is Len’s input: Becoming a father was a pleasure, but being a dad was a greater pleasure. I feel real good about the job

we did. Of course, we were lucky and Eli was responsive and I had retired so I had time and a free mind. But still, we can take credit for getting some things right. Here is what *I* learned:

- Two-way talk: I talk, you listen, then you talk and I listen. From sharing of opinions, feelings, judgments, and facts we arrive at a workable, mutually comfortable decision that empowers both parties. To accomplish this collaboration we try to avoid distrust, condescension, and fixed attitudes—not easy to do, but the rewards are significant when two typically segregated identities, whether male and female, senior and junior, American and foreign, teacher and student, or any other pair of contrasting human variants, come together and respect each other’s competence, thought, and history. Two-way talk provides an adaptable forum for creating successful relationships and (hopefully) for solving otherwise intractable problems that threaten our well-being. And there is no better medium for this kind of useful communication than intimate dialogue between husband and wife and between parent and son or daughter.
- Some parents and some children never adjust fully to the central fact of childhood, the fact of *growth*, an evolution beyond the merely physical toward independence and self-motivation. Coordinating on matters of sex, money, work, and other topics can be impeded not only by practical necessities but also by a lack of flexible thinking, a legacy of rigid attitudes, principles, and feelings, important as these may be.
- The two keys to the survival of a social body are the same qualities that allow personal survival in family and professional life—adaptability and constancy. Strangely, they form an evolutionary contrast, a paradox, a perpetual need to balance a flexible position or temperament with a fixed position or temperament. How in the world do we reconcile them? Quite a challenge, requiring two parties to listen as well as speak, to respect and approve as well as criticize and discipline, to protect and nurture as well as push toward independence. The surest technique to accomplish this balance of objectives—two-way communication (see my autobiography, *Along the Way*).

Len and Shaoping: Some of these lessons were hard to come by and not always carried out very well. Both Mom and Dad were clueless when their son came along. They learned on the job. It took a lot of work but there was also a lot of fun and satisfaction. It was a two-way process, involving not only the development of the child but also the maturation of the parents. It was an epic journey for both. Now our young man is flying further and higher in the boundless sky, supported by a pair of powerful wings—excellent education and real world experience. Now he will take over the lead in the fabulous flight of life.