

The wonder years



Which can also be read as “I wonder how he got to be like that”.

In the first installment of my series of self-reflective posts about how I’ve led an interesting life after all, we begin at the beginning.

It’s perfect!

I’ve always been good at problem solving. My personality is built on logic and process (which makes some later topics quite curious). It’s led to a practical view of the world that often gets confused as pessimism.

I think that all stems from my earliest adventures in meticulous and detail oriented activities.

First, it was jigsaw puzzles. Starting out with plain stuff and moving swiftly into bizarre and (supposedly) impossible puzzles, I would work on these over at my Grandparents’ house, where they kindly set up a table for me to work on.

Grandma would then buy me a container of puzzle glue, which, when applied to the back of the puzzle, locked all the pieces in place. The stuff smelled bad, but the puzzles looked great.

Next up was model building. My favorite was airplanes (not rockets, just airplanes). I spent countless hours twisting off little plastic pieces and using just the right amount of the gosh-awful smelling glue to build my masterpieces (which I would then hang from the ceiling on fishing line). My two

biggest prizes were an SR-71 Blackbird and a P-40 Flying Tiger (getting those teeth *just* right was critical).

It occurs to me that I inhaled an awful lot of harmful fumes during my youth, though I can't ever recall acting like Lloyd Bridges in Airplane.

Finally, I moved into Dell Crosswords. Not just the crosswords, but the anagrams and the anacrostics and, my favorite, the logic puzzles. I ended up subscribing to the monthly mag just so I could do more puzzles.

That, along with some probably ill-chosen parenting (if your child is already showing perfectionist tendencies, you probably shouldn't pile on...thanks, Dad), no doubt led to my over-harsh self-judgement on my accomplishments later in life.

Seduction of the Innocent

In the 50's, during the heat of McCarthyism, a book was published called "Seduction of the Innocent" which blamed comic books for all sorts of bad things done by juveniles.

While I can't attest to that (ultimately disproven) theory, I *can* say comics had a huge influence over much of my childhood and teen years.

For one thing, I took up drawing at an early age. How early, I'm unsure, but I actually still possess art "books" (just sheets of paper in a folder) of my "art" from my early double digits.

Most of my art was (predictably) either super heroes or fish (coming soon). It was, of course, awful. Or amazing, depending on who judged it (see the previous section for the reason for my punishing self-review).

I would continue drawing, pretty consistently, for the next 40 years.

I would also continue and increase my reading for the next 40 years. Comics, of course, but also science fiction and fantasy. Omnivorously. I began amassing vast quantities of comics and books (we'll explore this more tomorrow).

That meant, at an extremely early age, I had an advanced vocabulary that tended to make my family tell me I should be a lawyer. Of that, I had no interest, but I always was and am proud of my large vocabulary and endeavor to employ it as often as socially acceptable.

Song, song blue

Another interesting stage of my early life was singing.

Not in any formal sense. Gosh no. By the time I hit elementary school, my natural shyness was blossoming into significant back-of-the-class social discomfort.

But, before my voice broke (and got more nasal...thanks, Dad), I could hit some pretty high notes. Maybe not Frankie Valli, but impressive.

One day, on the steps outside the school, for some reason I can no longer recall, I was coaxed into singing a popular song (at the time) called "One Tin Soldier". Clearly, I was channeling my future distaste for war and violence (since I was only 9 at the time and unlikely to be marching in protests over Vietnam).

Apparently, I did an impressive job and suffered a repeat performance before my social anxiety forced a preemptive retirement from the musical field.

So, I could write, draw, solve problems and sing. I was like a renaissance tyke.

Plenty of fish in the sea

Especially back when I was young.

My entire youth was nothing but a series of fish stories.

There were the times we faced catastrophe:

- out of gas in the Keys and drifting to Cuba
- stuck under a freezing thunderstorm in the middle of the Everglades, with only oars to move the boat
- out several miles in the Keys and watching lightning exploding the water less than a mile from us
- having a propeller fall off the boat we rented (again, in the Keys).

There were the times I faced the wrath of the fishing gods:

- the Allimud, some deep canal creature in the Everglades that, when it surfaced briefly, was too long for a mudfish but inexplicably caught on the bottom of the canal (it eventually snapped the line).
- the Cudagrouper, reeling in a large grouper from the rocks in the Keys only to feel a sharp tug and end up only with the grouper head, gills forward.
- Cudagrouper II, the Return. Who, in their life, has had this happen twice? Me!
- the Tarpon Terror. Little boy me, fishing off my Grandparents' dock, terrified by a humongous tarpon swimming directly for my dangling line. The fish was bigger than me! (I yanked the line out of the water)

All of these stories, but for the last one, came with my Dad on the trip with me (thanks, Dad). These were not only some of the most memorable times of my life, they were also some of the best.

Plus, my sister and I kept salt water aquariums and Dad would often drive us down to the Upper Keys to catch fish for our

tanks. I've since gotten squeamish about yanking little creatures out of a big ocean and sticking them behind glass walls with leering faces. And that was long before Nemo.

So, it was an interesting childhood. It got more interesting in teenhood. That's for tomorrow.