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Reading is fundamental, and writing is too

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Last Saturday night at six sharp, Melissa and I were standing in the middle of the The Bubble Lounge in Tribeca on Manhattan's Lower West Side. Tribeca is hip and trendy, just like me.

The Bubble's management encourages an atmosphere of "casual elegance," which fits me like a glove...of the catcher's-mitt variety. The décor features disintegrating bricks that need to be repointed and HVAC pipes hanging from the rafters.

For Bubble events, women spend thousands of dollars for a dress the size of a shrunk handkerchief. Size matters: the less there is, the more it costs.

I, of course, wore my best cocktail attire, as the invitation specified. (I was not just some casually elegant walk-in, bumming free hors d'oeuvres.) My jeans and boots still bore a few barely noticeable remnants of my recent dig in our cattle barn. I obeyed the direct order that I was forbidden to wear any shirt that had holes, frays or sweat stains. This meant that I had to buy a new one, retail!

The Bubble Lounge offers more than 300 varieties of champagne and sparkling wine, all of which accomplish the identical task sooner or later. I was nursing a diet soda in which floated a single, casually elegant ice fragment. Cubes are no longer hip and trendy. I knew enough not to ask for them from the bartender who kept cocking his head toward the door.

We were there with 110 others to cheer our daughter, Molly, on the publication of her first book, *All Downhill From Ivan Puffenbarger*. (www.mollyseltzer.com)

I'm invited to events like this because I have big hands and am sufficiently coordinated to be able to clap loudly.

Her title needs a little explanation. Ivan is a respected, successful Blue Grass cattle farmer who also makes maple syrup and sells farm gates. When Molly was about a year old, she heard me say his name in reference to about a dozen gates he was going to deliver.

She liked the complexity and musicality of his name and decided to master pronouncing it. For weeks, she tottered around the house driving us nuts with "Ivan Puffenbarger, Ivan Puffenbarger." I figured she'd end up announcing train schedules at Grand Central Station. Melissa hoped she'd call the Kentucky Derby.

Molly may now think that pronouncing those six syllables at that age was her highest intellectual achievement and that everything since was a snap in comparison. I disagree.

Writing a book at 25 is something. When I was that age, I was still working on the letter C with Big Bird.

Her essays are vignettes about life as a young, single woman with her first full-time job in New York City. They are gems of poignancy and humor.

Nonetheless, I found disappointingly little about the dawn-to-midnight work schedule of farm chores she now claims I imposed on her after the age of two. She doesn't tell about her announcement that I was "...the worst Daddy in the ninth grade," because I wouldn't let her stay out past 10 p.m. on her first date. (My response was: "You better believe it, and I intend to be the worst Daddy in all succeeding grades.") She also fails to include my bad behavior when she had a Pittsburgh hairdresser clearcut her waist-length hair so that she would look hip and trendy.

I have razored out several pages and taken a black marker to the parts that Melissa should not read.

Molly started writing in the ninth grade when she entered a short story in a USA Weekend contest for high-schoolers. She placed second out of 5,100 entrants. I was told that novelist Wally Lamb, the judge, had given her first, but the magazine felt uncomfortable awarding that prize to a freshman. She went on to graduate first in her class at Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University and now works for Bloomberg News.

I included the last paragraph only because I finished reading Amy Chua's, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, on Saturday morning. Chua describes how she clubbed her two daughters into becoming high academic achievers and musical prodigies through shame, guilt, screaming, belittling, extortion, blackmail, bluffs, bribery, lying, name-calling, humiliation, abuse, disregard for the child's desires, endless practice, denial and brute brow-beating.

She claims this "Chinese model" of ends-justify-any-means mothering produces academically successful kids, at least one of whom -- Chua's youngest -- describes her mother as "insane," "weird" and "crazy." Amy Chua is selling a lot of books.

I was not a "Chinese mother." I would suggest things and offer Molly opportunities, but I didn't force her to practice anything or do anything. She cherry-picked my suggestions, excellent as they all were.

I tried to figure out with her where her talents lay. Our job, I thought, was to give her a chance to see what she could make of each one. She tried drums and violin, but neither worked for her.

Had we tried to bully her into activities of our choice, she would have just said "No!" Rebellion and hatred would have followed.

Parents have to fit their style of parenting to the individual kid. We encouraged her -- but did not compel her -- to try things that did not come easily. She learned a lot about life from playing center game after game against girls who were bigger, faster or more athletic.

Professor Chua thinks I am a western, wishy-washy, namby-pamby parent. I think she is a criminal lunatic.

As Martin Luther King said about longevity the evening before he was killed, achievement "has its place."

We are proud of Molly's accomplishments. But we take more pride in the kind of person she has always been, a good kid despite having a father who did not force her to pick rocks out of the back pasture 12 hours every day to acquire a work ethic and master classical geology.

When she played high school basketball, she won all the good-sportsmanship awards. Opponents nicknamed her, "Peachy," because she was a nice guy in a knock-'em-down league. I may be fonder of that handle than she is.

No one I ever guarded ever called me "Peachy," though Melissa came close once when she stuck in an "r."

Molly embraced team in basketball, crew and journalism. Her friends on Saturday night showed that she still has team.

I told Melissa, by the way, that we were not buying more than 3,500 copies. She said I was incorrigibly stingy and would benefit from cleaning the cattle barn again.

I can report that being casually elegant is hard work, even if you have a natural gift for it.

Good stuff—All Downhill From Ivan Puffenbarger. Clap. Clap. Clap.

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