

Personal Essay

Submitted for assessment as Writing the Zeitgeist Assignment 1, Jun-2019.

--

He was understandably nervous when he first tried to stand in his hired orange rollerblades.

My stepson, Xavier, or Zavi as we all call him, was in dire need of a sport. He'd been swimming for years, but a scheduling change had made it harder for him to attend the sessions. Scott, Zavi's father and my partner, had been encouraging him to choose something. I was gently suggesting soccer or basketball, something team-based. Or, if not sports, then scouts.

'There's valuable life lessons in team sports,' I told Zavi. 'Learning to work together. Learning to work hard and develop a commitment to a team. Not to mention a bit of reliability.'

The reliability was the hard part, because we needed something Zavi's mum would engage with. She was busy, of course, with two other children. Zavi was our only priority.

When he suggested giving hockey a go, I struggled to contain my excitement. I'd been a goaltender, had played for over ten years, had only really given it away when I moved from the city back to the country, despite the country team being my first formative introduction. I still have my team uniform.

'I'll look into it,' I said, and was pleasantly surprised to find that a juniors training academy had just started at my old haunt. Even better, my old coach was taking it. We'd missed a week, but they were happy to accept a late entry.

Returning to the club was not without some trepidation. When I'd returned to the country a few years prior, I'd played locally for the in-house no-pressure league. However, finding the time was hard, and the commitment I was eager to instil in Zavi

was hard to maintain myself. Plus, the lies got harder. Sports clubs, especially those in rural country areas, have an infamous indignity of supposed ingrained homophobia. I played for a season or two before bowing out due to lack of time, and a fear of being found out. To be fair, nothing had been said, then or since, and my anxiety stemmed from generalised attitudes in society.

I'd moved back to my parent's house following a difficult breakup with an ex-girlfriend, my tail between my legs and my credit card and rating well in the red. My job remained in the city and I was, still am, commuting four times a week. The intention was always to lick my wounds, pay my debts, and move back closer to work. The intention was not to meet a handsome man on the internet and fall in love with his little family.

Technology was the genesis of our relationship; a little app full of 'singles in your area' through which we talked for weeks before finally meeting and I deleted it soon after because I knew I was done and that was it. Six months later, Scott introduced me to Zavi and we bonded over a shared appreciation of LEGO, though I still struggle to convince him that my collector's editions aren't toys. It would be another twelve months before I could tell my father, and when I did it wasn't easy, but I know he now loves them both, in his own way, and secretly appreciates the excuse to get back into radio-controlled cars.

Technology brought us together, and it provides an ongoing platform for us as well. Both of us are gamers, online addicts travelling a digital world through our avatars saving digital peasants from digital dragons for fame and glory. When Zavi was old enough, he joined us with his own account, along with a stern, if not somewhat ironic, reminder not to chat to strangers on the internet. Now, game time is family time. And Zavi still loves to play 'Remember when' around the dinner table and some of his tales revolve around saving the day in that digital world.

Along with those digital bonding experiences, games can also provide some real-world skills as well. When Zavi was struggling, as most kids do, with his maths homework, we started to look for engaging ways to aid his development and

retention. I stumbled across something unexpected: miniature wargaming. I'd been into miniatures when I was younger, enjoying the assembly, the colour coordination and selections, the painting, and the leaving them in the empty upturned Ferrero-Rocher-box-turned-display-case on the shelf. I'd never really played with my modest collection, but if I had I'd have realised how much these kinds of games could contribute to a kid's mental development: maths, creative thinking, coordination, critical thinking, and strategy, all valuable skills to learn that would prepare him for adulthood. If I could get him thinking about maths without realising it though, everything else was bonus.

Again, I found myself dusting off an old collection, and I could see his excitement as we unpacked the old boxes. We started some projects, building and painting some buildings and scenery. He started working on the models of his miniature army. He took to painting terribly, but I could see the thought behind his eyes that told me his engagement was there even if his skills weren't. They'd always come later if he stuck with it. I've heard him tell his grandparents about it at least twice.

He tells them about hockey too. He's come a long way from the nervous boy in the orange skates. He didn't say anything when we pulled up to the skating rink for his first session, nor when I sat him down and went to collect the hired gear he'd use. There was no sense buying anything before he knew whether he enjoyed it.

He looked at the inline skates, though, his eyes widening. 'What are they for?'

'You said you wanted to try hockey,' I said, glancing around the indoor rink, growing increasingly less certain that I'd actually explained exactly what kind of hockey I'd played. 'Didn't you say you did it with school?'

'Yeah, on the oval.'

Kudos to him, he still wanted to give in-line hockey a shot, and he assured me he could skate though I quickly learned that this was a brave lie. Still, with his kneepads and helmet came an invincibility, and he took off onto the rink, leaning very heavily on his stick for balance. An hour later, Zavi was a pro. He'd taken to it like a duck to water.

I'd read an article somewhere, once, that said it's okay not to love your step-children, and I used to think I understood what that meant. When Zavi skated past us—some of the other parents and myself—the coach called out to watch out for the dads.

'And step-dads,' Zavi mumbled at me with a grin, and I knew that whether it was okay or not, the article didn't apply to us.