



The Bulletin

msgsQ&A

***Mathematics and Statistics
Graduate Students Association***

Childhood. The mere word, if you meditate on it, opens up a dusty box of incredibly powerful moments which transcend simple categorization between good and bad, as they have shaped us for what we are today. Most people wax eloquent about childhood. I prefer to be more careful. Nostalgia tints memories with such a warm reassuring glow that we tend to forget the specific circumstances and mindset we were in. True, there were moments of wild carefree abandon, but that's not all it was. There was still routine to be followed, days where you wake up and have no idea how to even begin to finish the insurmountable tasks (read homework) ahead. I would dare to say that difficult situations were even more paralyzing back then because we had no prior experience to refer to. Still, it cannot be denied that the discovery of a new taste can scarcely be beat by any other experience.

I hope that was not too grim to deter you, dear reader, from scrolling further. In any case, the answers to this month's question ---- "What is the best memory of your childhood?" are appropriately sunny. They made my day when I read them for the first time. Our interviewees have been kind enough to share moments from their youth that have stayed in their hearts and minds ---- ever ready to bear them back to a time when things were much simpler and even the smallest pleasures made a major impression.

I am aware that I am treading well covered ground here which has already been explored by the masters of the yore. I will leave you with one such piece of work in the next page which I hold dear. Also this is the last issue before we go out (or in) for hibernating during winter. So stay warm and enjoy your holidays to the fullest.

*Editor,
Abhishek Guin,*

“Childhood”-By Rainer Maria Rilke

***It would be good to give much thought, before
you try to find words for something so lost,
for those long childhood afternoons you knew
that vanished so completely -and why?***

***We're still reminded-: sometimes by a rain,
but we can no longer say what it means;
life was never again so filled with meeting,
with reunion and with passing on***

***as back then, when nothing happened to us
except what happens to things and creatures:
we lived their world as something human,
and became filled to the brim with figures.***

***And became as lonely as a shepherd
and as overburdened by vast distances,
and summoned and stirred as from far away,
and slowly, like a long new thread,
introduced into that picture-sequence
where now having to go on bewilders us.***

The day trips that my family and I took during the weekends were among the best experiences from my childhood. Unlike summer vacation, which involved a lot of planning for my parents, these excursions were short and spontaneous. My father usually decided upon the destination the day before, based upon the weather and the season. We lived in the Baltimore area, so the trips were within a three hour drive and included such places as Gettysburg, Lancaster, West Virginia, the mountains of Maryland or the Eastern Shore. I remember really enjoying seeing nature in its full flourish and the games that we used to play in the car.



Janet Burgee

We didn't have the "contemporary" games that keep children busy when traveling these days, so we had to improvise. For example, we sang along the route, searched for license plates from other states, and spotted different type of trees.

Through these outings, I believe that my parents demonstrated the value of connecting with family and setting aside a special time for that - separate from work, school and other responsibilities.

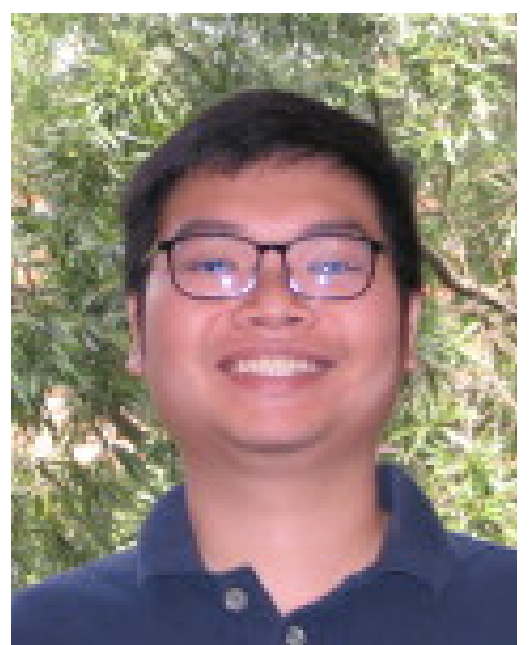
Since I had to find ways to keep myself busy for a three hour trip without complaining and asking if we were "there yet," I feel that I developed into a more patient traveler and a more patient person overall.

My husband and I have also provided these same experiences to our own children as they grew, and they now continue to do it with their own friends and families! Looking back, the most important lesson that I think I've learned from those special weekends is that it is important to spend time with people you love because they will not be there forever. Those trips, as simple as they were, meant so much to me.



I vividly remember the first time I traveled by the train. I was in elementary school back then. Accompanied by my mom, we were visiting one of my uncles in another city in my country (Vietnam). It was an overnight trip and the first long distance journey that I experienced.

When I was a child, I used to get my bike and go around. I liked discovering new places and locations within my city. Thus the journey to a new city was a whole new experience. Moreover, trains were not so popular back then so I was even more eager for the trip.



Luan Chip Nguyen

The experience was amazing. It was during summer so I could take in the beautiful scenery passing by; we went through different provinces of my homeland. The fact that I could even sleep on the train was a source of sustained excitement.

Moreover, a funny incident happened during that trip. When we reached our destination I went outside to play, it started raining heavily and I got soaking wet! But since all my clothes were in the laundry, I had to wear some of my mom's clothes to walk around. I got yelled at for it but it was fun!



*Muruhan Rathinam
Professor, Mathematics*

I am going to preface this by mentioning that I need a more neat definition of “best childhood memory” to define one of mine!

Now that being out of the way, there is quite a significant memory that I treasure from when I was about 7 years old. At that time, since both of my parents used to work it was our maternal grandmother who was essentially running the household. She was rather strict; so we really enjoyed the time my mother was at home, which unfortunately wasn't a whole lot due to her work. During that time, I got sick with pneumonia.

My mother decided to take leave for a couple of weeks to take care of me. She would spend time with me reading stories and talking to me. It is a very warm and happy memory that I have with my mother and I talk to her about this even today.

Another vivid memory I have from my childhood is one of my dreams. It was strange and possibly one of the most interesting dreams I've ever had. The sun and the moon were fighting with each other in the sky; the sun was trying to lighten up the things and the moon was trying to sabotage that. I came out of the house to notice that it was raining and the sky was purple. Then I saw my cousin wearing funny looking glasses, which he said was to protect his eyes from the light. I was and still am intrigued and fascinated by this dream.



My father and I have shared an interesting and a dynamic relationship. Until my teenage years, my father ran quite a tight ship. He was by no means harsh or abrasive, but he seldom had to repeat himself when it came to me or my brother. Occasionally though, you could see a crack in his armor, that would reveal the more human side of him. One such instance was when we went shopping in Ernakulam city (Kerala, India). We lived in the outskirts and going shopping in the city was sort of a mini picnic. My father on these occasions would pretty much be a walking sign board reading “only buy what is necessary.”



Abhishek Balakrisna with his brother

Despite this, I dared to fall in love with this beautiful cricket bat (for the uninitiated, cricket is the Indian equivalent of baseball). Given the coward that I was, I decided to work through my mother, who was more likely to cave. After a few statements along the lines of “It's not like ask you to buy me stuff every day” and “you don't have buy me anything for the next whole year”, my mother finally gave in and decided to talk to my father. As was expected, my father could not be less enthused by the proposition. I was sulking all the way back home in hopes that my father would notice. This move had to be executed with great precision, because overdoing it might be counterproductive as I would risk being labelled a drama queen. The next day, my father came back from work with a rather mischievous smile. At this point, despite being mad at him, his smile confused me. The mystery was soon solved when I saw the very same cricket bat from the day before in his hand. As the anger from the previous day was melting from my face, I realized that he had to go all the way back to the city to get the very bat I liked (which surprisingly he remembered). This was uncharacteristic of him to say the least. Although for most of my peers the first time they were gifted a cricket bat would not have stayed in their memory, the sheer unexpectedness of the event along with the fact that something like this was completely unprecedented, makes it one of my favorite memories from my growing up years.



*Dr Justin Webster
Professor, Mathematics*

My favorite childhood memory is more like pivotal incident...from which I have very vivid memories. When I was around 10 years old, I saw a commercial on a children's TV show about NASA's Space Camp. The premise was that kids go to camp for a week at one of NASA locations and "train" to become an astronaut. They teach you about flight, space, and rocketry, and children get experience the "zero G" environment and wear an astronaut's suit!

After seeing the commercial, I conveyed to my parents how badly I wanted to go. We lived in Oregon and the camp is far away in Huntsville, Alabama, with a substantial registration fee.

My parents gave me an absolute and direct "no" when I asked...but behind my back they made plans to send me with one of my grade school friends. When my birthday came, they surprised me with the ticket. This was the first time I remember crossing out days on a calendar, waiting for the big day when I would fly across the country to learn how to be an astronaut.

The camp was everything I had hoped it would be, and I made many new "astronaut" friends. One of the coolest things I recall was getting to try some of the freeze-dried food eaten by actual astronauts in space. For the most part this was awful, except for the freeze-dried ice-cream that we all liked!

Some years before this trip, I discovered that I was red-green colorblind; I couldn't (and cannot) differentiate blue from purple. But while at Space Camp, undergoing these amazing and fascinating experiences, my belief that "I will be an astronaut" only continued to grow. That is, until we learned the unfortunate sequence: one can't be an astronaut if one is not first a pilot, and one cannot be a pilot if one is color blind. Hence my astronautical ambitions were thwarted!

As a consolation, I resolved to myself that "I will be an astrophysicist" which eventually became "theoretical physicist," then eventually "applied mathematician." Many of the concepts I study in my PDE research are related to flight and rocketry.

In all, this was an experience I will never forget! And the astronaut suit? I still have it, though it doesn't fit me anymore.

The best memory of my childhood that I can recall is actually the funniest one. When I was around 4 years old I had this crazy idea of transforming into a butterfly. I was a stubborn and mischievous child so I believed that if I became a butterfly I would be free to do whatever I want to! Butterflies drink nectar from flowers so I tried to drink some too, realizing later that it wasn't feasible. So I started eating flowers!

After few days I started vomiting and my mum - who had no idea about this - took me to the doctor. When I went there, the doctor asked me "What did you eat?" and I replied like it was completely normal "I ate flowers". Then the doctor told me that I shouldn't be doing that and it is very dangerous. When I came back home I gave up my dream of becoming a butterfly.

A few weeks later, a man came to my house to sell some milk. He was bringing with him a goat and he was telling us how independent and free a goat can be. So you can imagine where this takes us, I wanted become a goat! To achieve this, I started eating leaves. I stopped a couple of weeks later when I realized that I was not going to turn into a goat. I kept this a secret from my mom for many years until I became 18 at which point I told her that back in the day, I was eating leaves trying to become a goat.



Nadeesri Wijekoon with her brother