

THE ESSAY » BY THOMAS KLASSEN

# Our long march to school

Every walk is a struggle of wills, with me coaxing and refereeing and the twins stopping any time something catches their interest

When our twins started junior kindergarten in September, I decided to walk them the few short blocks to school each morning.

I saw myself as a latter-day Socrates strolling with students to the academy while imparting wisdom.

After all, as a university professor, I figured I knew a thing or two about preparing young minds for a bright future.

However, it has become obvious that my logistics, time management and supervisory skills, not to mention my wisdom-imparting skills, are wholly inadequate.

The walk to school, which should take a handful of minutes, invariably stretches into a half-hour, all-consuming struggle of wills.

For most of that time I am coaxing, bargaining, refereeing, repeating myself ("Could we walk just a little faster, please?") and warning ("Don't walk on the road!"). Never once have I uttered anything resembling wisdom.

Alexander is determined to step on every living creature he encounters, and to collect as many leaves, pine needles, flowers, pebbles and acorns as he can carry.

Claire, on the other hand, must make friends with those animals left alive: dogs, cats, birds and squirrels.

It is impossible for the twins to walk at the same rate as each other, or me, or even on the same sidewalk. Claire often walks on the other side of the street, invariably dashing across the road to join me when I'm not looking. When not doing this, she loves to run to people's front porches and pretend to press the doorbell.

On the rare occasions when we all manage to hold hands, one child will want to race ahead while the other is utterly incapable of lifting a foot.

Or, the child on the right will want to hold my left hand, which the other child refuses to relinquish.

I've tried driving them to school, and although this shortens the process, it escalates the violence. Strapped in the back seat of the car, the twins begin a form of extreme cage fighting that involves shoving, kicking, screaming and throwing any object not firmly affixed to the vehicle.

Besides, when I drive them, I feel like a failure. It's announcing to the world that after four



JOSÉE BISAILLON FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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years of parenting, my children can leave home only when secured into a padded, sound-proofed, two-tonne vehicle.

The morning struggle – for control, attention and power – begins even before we leave home. Alexander refuses to wear pants with buttons, while Claire must have underwear that matches the colour of her pants.

Breakfast is a debate about what goes on bread. We now have spreads from apple butter to tzatziki to meet the twins' ever-changing tastes.

However, this does not avoid the clashes and disagreements. Alexander insists that spreading peanut butter and then jam on bread is not at all the same as spreading jam and then peanut butter.

A bowl of fruit elicits an immediate skirmish as one twin grabs it from me and bolts, while the other yells as though deprived of all his or her worldly possessions.

I've learned to prepare two sets of identical dishes to be served at the same time, while seating the twins at opposite ends of the table. Consequently,

the breakfast table looks like a meeting of North and South Korean diplomats.

As I finally get the twins out the door, I wistfully consider my spouse, who while everyone was still sleeping, silently escaped to her job in corporate finance.

I imagine her in a hushed office leisurely examining financial spreadsheets with colleagues who bring her a cup of hot coffee and fresh croissants.

I'm afraid to ask her if this is the case, for fear that it might be. That she tells me little of her mornings reinforces my sense that the start of our days is far from equitable.

Just as we reach the school, our long-drawn-out march takes on a completely different tenor once we pass the gate into the school grounds. Suddenly, the twins become mature and sensible little people. Magically, they walk at the same rate, speak quietly and in turn.

We start to have adult-like conversations about their teachers, such as Mr. Tank (actually, Tang) the gym teacher, and Mr. Beiro (well, Ribeiro) the librarian. They tell me about the re-

cent chase the fox run (the Terry Fox Run). They discuss their best friends, who change daily, and who they will marry.

To my astonishment, they greet their friends in a grown-up manner and wait patiently in line for the teachers to open the school doors.

The change in the twins is so instantaneous, so dramatic and complete that it defies rational explanation.

As Claire and Alexander stride into the school building I dearly want to keep them with me a little longer. The tears I see in other parents' eyes, I now realize, are not shed over parting with their darlings, but from leaving children who have suddenly been mysteriously transformed.

As I walk back home, I longingly look for houses for sale that border on the school.

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