

TV Dads

by **John Repp**

One of the raising-a-kid pieties to which my wife and I felt most committed before our son's birth went like this: "No Television 'Til He's Two." Not for our child that mindlessness. He'd have engaged parents, not zombies slumped in front of a screen. He'd grow up with actual people using actual language, not an upholstered purple dinosaur singing idiotic songs. He'd make his own make-believe, and we'd help. Why, we'd scarcely miss the tube, what with all the exciting and educational adventures new parenthood would bring.

After all, we'd lived four thriving years in a valley that defeated all but a few of our occasional attempts—even my prayerful antenna adjustments during the late stages of the NBA playoffs—to attract a viewable picture from the one network affiliate whose signal reached us. Despite being confirmed addicts, we usually felt better off for the lack, but whenever conversation, music, and reading seemed too much like work, we fed our jones with rented videos. On those stupefied nights, we'd lie contented in the rural dark, the twenty-five-year-old set with the Flash Gordon remote flickering its soothing light into the living room.

Then, in a span of three hallucinatory weeks, we moved to the city; had a baby shower; piled up the baby supplies the shower hadn't supplied; sterilized and stocked the baby's room; ran up heart-palpitating sums of consumer debt to replace appliances, tweak the plumbing, and fix an electric service box that resembled something in a Tim Burton film; laid in two week's worth of post-birth food; and, just past dawn on an unforgettable day, careened to the hospital, where, ninety minutes after his parents staggered into the birthing room, Dylan swooped out and screamed for the first thirty minutes of his life.

This proved a portent. For three months, he caterwauled, screeched, howled, and shrieked whenever he wasn't asleep or making his daily, five-millisecond visit to the

“quiet alert” state. “Day” and “night” lost all meaning. We shopped at 1:00 a.m., ate breakfast at noon and dinner at ten, began doing laundry long before dawn. We crawled toward sleep like castaways inching up an infinite pumice beach, only to realize again and again we’d landed on an island without fresh water or edible fruit. We tried every colic “cure” known to science or folklore, for a time resorting to a homeopathic concoction that stained our teeth green as it failed to calm the urge to toss The Beast into the nearest snowdrift.

I exaggerate, of course, but any veteran of colic would tell you I exaggerate only a little. Though teamwork, willpower, music, and near-despairing prayer helped most during our ninety-day trial in the wilderness, the gift Dylan’s grandparents made of a new Sony did provide some welcome sedation along the way. As hysteria ever-so-slowly gave way to occasional crankiness, we evolved an evening ritual that answered our needs for the next few years: Dinner at six; kitchen and Dylan clean-up until the Pennsylvania Lottery drawing at seven (the kid loves the jingle and the studio’s array of institutional blues and greens); *Frasier* and *King of the Hill* reruns; bed for everyone at eight.

Not only did an hour a day of non-cable television generate no guilt, cause our son no discernible harm, and intermittently relieve my wife of the baby’s simian demands, but, to my abashed surprise, it also provided me images of fatherhood resonant enough to appear now and then in a dream. I refer not to Hank Hill, the good-hearted, yet profoundly damaged protagonist of *King of the Hill*, the best animated television series this side of *The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show*, but to Martin Crane, Frasier and Niles Crane’s gruff, retired-cop father.

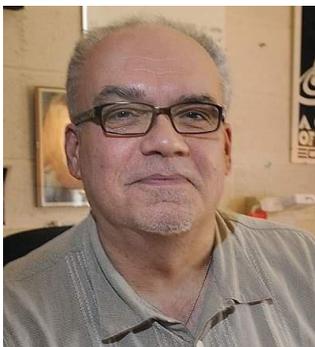
Though loneliness and self-deception bedevil the father as much as the sons, Martin displays several times during a typical *Frasier* episode his (and the show’s) saving graces: common sense, a talent for cutting to the chase, a willingness to laugh at his own flaws, and a clear-eyed love for offspring so hyper-cultured they may as well be aliens. “Why do you make everything so complicated?” he’ll say with a bemused shake of the head, and I chuckle as a lump rises to my throat. Almost to the day he died, I played Frasier/Niles to my father’s Martin countless times, usually taking his bemusement as reproach, his “I’m just a simple man” as self-pity when he was more

likely so baffled with love and confusion there was nothing more to be said. It infuriates me and shames me and breaks my heart that nothing I could ever say—and, like the Crane boys, I said a lot—had any chance of changing how little we understood one another.

In my recurring dream, I'm Martin Crane's son. We climb a steep, treeless hill covered by dead grass. The low, grayish-black clouds threaten snow. He's a hundred yards or so ahead of me, half-hopping along with the help of his four-legged cane. Stumbling as I try to keep up, I'm so convinced "they're" about to pounce I spin around every few steps to face "them." Every time I do, I see nothing but the frozen slope behind us and the unmarked plain beyond. When I resume climbing, he's further away, though just when I think I'll never catch up—this happens over and over again—he turns and waves a "Come on! This is *great!*" wave, a crinkly, regular-guy grin brightening his face.

Each time I've had the dream, it ended with one of those waves, leaving me filled with love and longing and the desire that Dylan always look for me on his climb. I'll wave him along, even the tiniest detail of my bearing telling him he can *do* it, it's OK, despite the harm any "they" might try to do. I want both of us to live the Martin Crane philosophy: "Do you're best. If you screw up, try to make it right, then move on. Learn to laugh at yourself. Let go of the past. And above all, have fun!"

That's the dream, anyway, a far more demanding dream than No-TV-'Til-He's-Two, for this one means believing there's a chance my son and I will love *and* understand one another, at least some of the time. It also means admitting my father and I may not have been the strangers I need to think we were. Large and dogged and mysterious, he *did* help me get here, after all, his callused hand reaching back for mine at the most unexpected moments.



A native of the Pine Barrens region of southern New Jersey, **John Repp** is a widely-published poet, fiction writer, essayist, and book critic. His latest book is *Fat Jersey Blues*, winner of the 2013 Akron Poetry Prize from the University of Akron Press.