

When We're 64

October 01, 2007

Even the most discerning reader of the heavens would not have foreseen any conjunction in our natal stars. Rochel grew up in a tightly knit Jewish suburb of Toronto. Custom dictated that she live at home when she went to the University of Toronto. Her parents' dire circumstances in Eastern Europe allowed them little time for advanced schooling, but they shared their community's emphasis on education and respect for teachers — even to the extent that Rochel's father honored her teachers' advice and allowed her to go away to graduate school. Otherwise, she might still be in Toronto living a very different life. Still, her parents were perplexed by her commitment to an academic career. When she called home to report that she had been granted tenure at the University of Pennsylvania, her mother asked if this meant she finally would stop studying and get her “mother's degree.”

Randy grew up in a small town in Minnesota. Insofar as he thought about it at all when he was in high school, he was under the vague impression that Judaism was another of the small Protestant sects that abound in the Midwest. In his household, university life was an open book. His father had a Master's in metallurgy and grew up on the University of Wisconsin campus in Madison, where Randy's grandfather headed buildings and grounds. Randy's mother got her PhD in psychology about the same time that he did, later becoming a professor of special education. Randy knew that he wanted to pursue a career as a behavioral neuroscientist very early on.

What brought us together was the University of Pennsylvania. It hired Randy in 1966 straight from graduate school; in 1968, it hired Rochel away from Brown. When Rochel arrived, Randy lost no time in paying court. Rochel was skeptical and her parents got their wind up, but his persistence and his conversion to Judaism eventually carried the day.

Another obstacle was the nepotism rule, which — at Penn and almost everywhere else — prohibited a married couple from having appointments in the same department. It was suggested that Randy move from psychology to the medical school, but he demurred.

eventually, the provost, David Goddard, called us to his office and said, with a twinkle in his eye, that the University of Pennsylvania did not wish to be responsible for our living in sin and so implicitly set aside the nepotism rule. It helped that we were hired separately, but it also was a sign that the times were changing: The rule was formally abandoned the next year. By the time we left Penn, there were three tenured couples in the psychology department, and our arrival at UCLA made four tenured couples in that department.

The nepotism rule was one of the many socio-cultural factors that had hindered the academic careers of talented women in the previous generation. When Rochel was first hired, she got some taste of what they had faced when she tried to negotiate a better salary, citing a competing offer from a highly ranked university. The head of the department asked her, “Doesn't your mother think that's a lot of money for a little girl?” Generally speaking, however, it was far easier for a woman to pursue an academic career in

our generation than it had been.¹

Raising a family when both parents are pursuing demanding careers can be a challenge, but several factors combined to make this not too great a problem for us. We lived within bicycling distance of the university, in a townhouse with space for live-in help. One of Philadelphia's charms was the amount and quality of the housing you could afford with two young professors' salaries. It also had good public schools and after-school options, all near us. Rochel took up the habit of eating lunch at her desk with the not-too-successful plan of working less at home. Randy was an enthusiastic and fully participatory parent and did his share of the diaper changing and then the delivery of "quality time." Importantly, our son Adam introduced new dimensions of quality time to our daily lives. He came to share our love of travel at an early age and happily joined us on our trips to Europe and the far corners of the world, including Australia, Botswana, China, Israel, South Africa, and the upper regions of the Congo River.

We have not worked together on our research for the most part. On an average day, we hardly see each other between the time when we arrive at work and the time we leave; we seldom discuss business at home; and we do not serve as couriers for each other's work-related messages. We do, however, share an interest in the foundations of mathematical cognition, an area in which we have frequently collaborated — writing books and reviews on this topic together and co-supervising a few graduate students and post-docs. Our ability to write together has sometimes been a source of astonishment to other couples, more than one of which has averred that working together would be the end of their marriage. For us, it has been a pleasure, rarely, if ever, a source of friction, though often a source of intense and prolonged discussion.

The discussions have often turned around our shared conviction that learning was a more inner-directed process than was recognized by the associative learning theories in which we had both been schooled. By the time we met in Philadelphia, we had independently concluded that conceptualizing learning in those passive and unstructured terms did not do justice to the active, directed, and focused nature of the process. Much of our delight in each other has come from working out the implications of the view that innate implicit structures guide learning in both children and nonhuman animals.

We both have been fortunate in our students, from whom we constantly learn. Many of them have gone on to distinguished careers in science. Seeing them and their families from time to time is one of life's warmer pleasures.

We consider ourselves lucky to have "grown up" professionally in the 60's. It was a time of optimism, expansion, and creative development in the arts and sciences. Fortunately, "s/he still needed me/fed me when we're 64."

¹ See the essay in this series by Jean and George Mandler, "Some Ins and Outs of Being a Couple in Psychology," *Observer*, January 2007.
