Twitter Thread by john roderick



john roderick
@johnroderick

So, yesterday my daughter (9) was hungry and I was doing a jigsaw puzzle so I said over my shoulder “make some baked beans.” She said, “How?” like all kids do when they want YOU to do it, so I said, “Open a can and put it in pot.” She brought me the can and said “Open it how?”

“With a can opener!” I said, incredulous. She brought me the can opener and we both stared at it. I realized I’d never taught her to use it. Most cans now have pull-tops. I felt like a dope. What kind of apocalypse father doesn’t teach his kid how to use a manual can opener?!?

So I said, “How do you think this works?” She studied it and applied it to the top of the can, sideways. She struggled for a while and with a big, dramatic sigh said, “Will you please just open the can?” Apocalypse Dad was overjoyed: a Teaching Moment just dropped in my lap!

I said, “The little device is designed to do one thing: open cans. Study the parts, study the can, figure out what the can-opener inventor was thinking when they tried to solve this problem.” (The can opener is also a bottle opener, but I explained that part wasn’t relevant.)

I went back to my jigsaw puzzle. She was next to me grunting and groaning trying to get the thing. I should say that spatial orientation, process visualization and order of operation are not things she... intuits. I knew this would be a challenge. But it was a rainy weekend.

Eventually she collapsed in a frustrated heap. I said, “Explain the parts.” She said, “This little wheel is meant to cut, these gears turn the wheel when you spin the handle. This other wheel looks like a gear but isn’t.” She couldn’t figure out the clamping step, a key element!

I said, “The tool is made to be pleasing but it doesn’t have any superfluous qualities. Everything that moves does so for a reason.” She said, “I hate you.” I’m sure she believes that she does. I said, “You understand everything except how the tool addresses the can.” She sighed.

At this point she said, “I don’t want baked beans” and marched off. Apocalypse Dad went into full ‘The Road’ Mode! “Sweetheart, neither of us will eat another bite today until we get into this can of beans.” She screamed “AUGH!” like Lucy Van Pelt. She read a book for awhile.

Soon she was back at the can. The top was all dented now, the lip of the can practically serrated from failed attempts. We studied the tool some more. She really wanted it to be oriented up and down or across the top of the can. The sideways orientation is very counterintuitive.

She was fixated on orienting the tool in a few configurations and couldn't imagine other possibilities. I compared the can opener to other tools. By now we were working on anger-management and perseverance too. She suggested she open the can with a hammer. There were tears.

I told her stories of some of the great cans I'd opened over the years. She rolled her eyes. We talked about industrial design and what a funny little device the opener is. I showed how I open cans with a Buck knife. I rhapsodized about cold Spaghetti-Os straight from the can!

Eventually she had it all figured out. She had the placement of the tool, she could turn the handle and the can would spin (we were down on the floor by this point), but the "kachunk" of puncturing the lid still eluded us. We'd been at it for SIX HOURS on and off. We were hungry.

I'd been tempted many times along the way to guide her hand. I wanted her to experience the magnificence of the can opener SO MUCH I couldn't stand the suspense. Neither of us likes baked beans that much—the cupboards are bare—so it seemed like a paltry reward for this work.

I'd forgotten how finicky the tool really is, particularly when it comes to the puncture. She had it all lined up! But the cutting wheel is a little wobbly (by design) and you have to really get on top of it to clamp it down. You know the feeling? You can misfire the damn thing!

Finally she squeezed down on it and, although it was a misfire, a light went off in her head. Many times throughout the day she'd yelled at me, "My brain is fuzzy! I can't think of anything else to try!!!" and I'd say, "When your brain doesn't work, trust your hands."

She felt the tool click over the lip of the can. I saw it in her hands. By this point she'd developed a little ritual of addressing the tool to the can: starting with it on a vertical axis and rotating it to the horizontal while clamping down in a single motion. A choreography.

She looked at me expectantly, excitedly. After six hours of trying you don't want to express too much hope. Was this another blind alley? The can had been through hell, label ripped off, dented, sharpened and burred, a veteran of a thousand psychic wars. She knew, though.

She set up again, carefully, and brought the Swing-a-Way to bear on the can of S&W baked beans with the meticulousness of Roger Moore extracting a detonator from an ICBM in The Spy Who Loved Me. A soft pop resounded in the room, so different from all the other sounds we'd made.

She didn't look up. She knew the action. A little baked bean sauce appeared. She savored each twist until the lid, as I hoped it would, rewarded her by standing perfectly at attention, saluting her effort and ingenuity. She was elated and carried it to the kitchen in both hands.

She knew this was a commonplace task and a common tool but also that this was serious business. She knows her dad, and the stock I put in these things. A more mechanically inclined kid might have figured it out in minutes. She factored the scale, but was rightfully proud.

I'm proud of her too. I know I'm infuriating. I know this is parenting theater in some ways. I suffer from a lack of perseverance myself, and like all parents throughout history I'm trying to correct my own mistakes in the way I educate my child. She sees through this.

The Swing-a-Way can opener is a little voodoo doll for us now. It will reappear as an allegory many more times in her life, you can be sure. She knows this too. But this is an allegory of triumph. I wish I had more of those for myself. I wish I had more stories like this.

The only problem is now she wants to open every fucking can in the house!