

me as they crossed in front of the sun already half hidden by the horizon. I pulled the car away from the gas pumps, cut the engine, rolled down the windows, and sat watching as the giant flock curled and dived and swept across the sky gone hazy blue and deepening. I saw them curving back toward the oaks—a river of birds, a grand black current winding through the heavens. They alighted in the branches squawking and calling, the sound growing louder and louder as they came, thousands of them, burdening the trees, until a roar of squawks, each piercing, filled the dusk.

Another car stopped next to mine, and a young couple got out and leaned against the side of their car, laughing and pointing and shouting to each other.

Then, for no reason I could discern, the birds stopped and lifted off, with the sound of a single wingbeat—silence and then a rush of air with a dampened pop, as though an enormous thick quilt snapped once in the wind.

The young man walked over to me as the birds flew high above the pasture, weaving and turning. “It’s like God writing on the sky,” he said, “it’s like the signature of God.”

And I heard myself answer him in a changed voice, though not a new one. “It’s something,” I said, and I started my car, and I waved to them as I drove away from there, a child heavy with hurt, wanting his mother.

WILL BAKER
My Children Explain
the Big Issues

FEMINISM

I am walking up a long hill toward our water tank and pond. My daughter Montana, 23 months, has decided to accompany me. It is a very warm day, so she wears only diapers, cowboy boots, and a floral-print bonnet. At the outset I offer to carry her but she says “I walk,” and then, “You don’t have to hold my hand, daddy.”

This is the longest walk she has taken, without assistance. I see droplets of sweat on the bridge of her nose. Just before the water tank there is a steep pitch and loose gravel on the path, so I offer again to help.

She pulls away and says, “You don’t have to hold me, daddy.” A moment later she slips and falls flat. A pause while she rolls into a sitting position and considers, her mouth bent down. But quickly she scrambles up and slaps at the dirty places on her knees, then looks at me sidelong with a broad grin. “See?”

FATE

I first explained to Cole that there was no advantage in dumping the sand from his sandbox onto the patio. He would have more fun bulldozing and trucking inside the two-by-twelve frame. Heavy-equipment guys stayed within the boundaries, part of their job, and the sand would be no good scattered abroad, would get mixed with dead beetles and cat poop.

Next I warned him firmly not to shovel out his patrimony, warned him twice. The third time I physically removed him from the box and underscored my point very emphatically. At this stage, he was in danger of losing important privileges. Reasonable tolerance had already been shown him and there was no further room for negotiation. There was a line in the sand. Did he understand the gravity of the situation? Between whimpers, he nodded.

The last time I lifted him by his ear, held his contorted face close to mine, and posed a furious question to him: "*Why? Why are you doing this?*"

Shaking all over with sobs of deep grief, he tried to answer.

"*Eyeadhoo.*"

"What?"

"*Eyeadhoo, eyeadhoo!*"

One more second, grinding my teeth, and the translation came to me. I had to. I had to.

EXISTENTIALISM

Cole is almost three and has had a sister now for four months. All his old things have been resurrected. Crib, changing table, car seat, backpack, bassinet. There have been visitors visiting, doctors doctoring, a washer and dryer always washing and drying.

He has taken to following me around when I go to work on a

tractor or pump, cut firewood, or feed the horses. We are out of the house. It doesn't matter if it is raining. In our slickers and rubber boots we stride through a strip of orchard, on our way to some small chore. I am involved with a problem of my own, fooling with a metaphor or calculating if it's time to spray for leaf curl. The rain drumming on the hood of the slicker, wet grass swooshing against the boots, I completely forget my son is there.

"Hey dad," he says suddenly, and I wake up, look down at him, and see that he is in a state of serious wonder, serious delight. "We're *alone* together, aren't we dad?"

EAST AND WEST

My other daughter, Willa, is a Tibetan Buddhist nun on retreat. For three years I cannot see her. She writes me to explain subtle points of the doctrine of emptiness, or the merit in abandoning ego, serving others unselfishly.

I will write back to remind her of a party I took her to in 1970. The apartment was painted entirely in black, and candles were burning. There was loud music and a smell of incense and skunky weed. It was very crowded, some dancing and others talking and laughing. People were wearing ornaments of turquoise, bone, feather, and stained glass.

I glimpsed my six-year-old daughter, at midnight, sitting cross-legged on the floor opposite a young man with very long blond hair. He had no shoes and his shirt was only a painted rag. They were in very deep conversation, eyes locked. I did not hear what the young man had just said, but I overheard my daughter very clearly, her voice definite and assured.

"But," she was saying, "you and I are not the same person."