

## **Gift a Teenager a Swiss Army Knife! Please.**

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Motto: "In an unstable complex system, small islands of coherence have the potential to change the whole system"  
(Ilya Prigogine)

*Ann Arbor Michigan, a decade and a half ago, in a coffee shop*

"Daddy, can I please have your Swiss Army Knife?"

"What are you going to do with it?"

"I need it for this little project. (*making art out of a straw*)"

"Here it is."

*Somewhere in Texas, over a decade ago, from the back-bench of the car*

"Daddy, can I please have your Swiss Army Knife?"

"Mic, you know the rule. No sharp objects in the car. I'll give it to you as soon as we stop somewhere and we get out of the car."

We learn from our parents how to try our best to be a parent in our turn. My Dad never gave me a pocketknife. Or he did, kind of. I got a Swiss Army Knife in Romania, from an American physicist friend of my Dad's, when I was in junior high. I had a brand new but smaller knife, which I had just received from my German kindergarten teacher's husband and then I exchanged the one I had for my Dad's American friend's Swiss Army Knife. I can't blame my Dad. You couldn't buy a Swiss Army Knife in Romania of way back then, and he always helped me get a good sense of using tools and pushed me to trust myself and he put his trust in me in everything I was trying to do. He did his absolute best at times, and I hated him for it all too often back then. With my getting my Swiss Army Knife maybe he trusted me too much though. This is a crime that was never discovered and about which I never confessed to anyone, but I can no longer keep this on my chest after so many years. Here it goes.

*Bucharest Romania, about 1982, Adrian's neighborhood*

Over the weekend we couldn't use the basketball courts at our neighborhood school because the gate to the schoolyard was locked with a chain and padlock. We had used them for a while anyway by simply jumping over the gate, but now the school administration got smarter and added another four feet or more of wire fencing atop of the gates and barbwire on top, just as the concrete fence surrounding the school already had. Makes one think why didn't they put it there on the gates as well in the first place when they put the extra wire fencing over the concrete fence, but that's a different story. The group of children who was always playing in the neighborhood, playing soccer over the small park in the middle of the neighborhood roundabout simply got bored with soccer that day, and decided to go jump the gate to the school yard again that Sunday afternoon. Then we all noticed the new wire fencing. I looked at the gate. Studied the chain and padlock. Pulled out my Swiss Army knife. I showed it to my friends. They looked at it and at me in disbelief. I pulled out the metal saw blade and showed it to them. "Wow." We looked at each other. Then I started to cut the padlock. In less than 5 minutes the gate was open and we were in. We could play basketball. My Dad always said "use

the right tool for the task. Every time. And always remember safety first.” I promise I was careful, Dad. And I used the right tool. Then, and ever since. The administration never managed to figure out who cut the padlock. Nonetheless, they put another padlock a while later, and we cut that one too. After a third attempt we won, maybe just out of the administrators’ laziness to keep fighting, and they stopped locking the gate, and we could go and use the basketball courts on Sunday. It was our schoolyard, after all. There you have it. The crime is confessed. But was it the right tool, after all? I don’t mean just the correctly chosen Swiss Army Knife tool—the metal saw—for cutting a padlock on a gate... I mean more generally.

I am quite elated, and a bit taken aback too, as this year 2019 starts off. It’s going to be a great year.

This is the year when on May 10 we as a nation, and the entire world with us, will celebrate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Promontory Summit, in Utah, where Omaha NE based Union Pacific Railroad got first to complete the Trans-Continental railroad. Our state’s capital’s name itself is witness to the visionary leadership of President Abraham Lincoln who facilitated in part this great achievement, having changed the nation in so many ways, both very good and not so good.

As I write these words, we celebrate 100 years from the ratification on January 16, 1919, of the Eighteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, the Prohibition Amendment. The Twenty-first Amendment of course repealed the Eighteenth 14 years later. Yet, during its staying in effect, Prohibition never accomplished well what it was intended to do. In many ways quite the opposite. When all you have is a hammer, everything starts looking like a nail. Not all tools chosen are always the right ones, it would seem. Sometimes prohibiting something may be not as good as persuading, educating, or a cultural approach.

In July this year we’ll celebrate 50 years from the fulfillment of the

“We choose to go to the moon. We choose to go to the moon in this decade and do the other things, not because they are easy, but because they are hard, because that goal will serve to organize and measure the best of our energies and skills, because that challenge is one that we are willing to accept, one we are unwilling to postpone, and one which we intend to win, and the others, too.”

speech by President John F Kennedy at Rice University in 1962, that in turn led to the United States and the world landing a man on the moon on July 20, 1969. Same year as Woodstock!

Gifford Park Elementary will open this year. It was time, as there are 20 years from the closing of Yates School. Yes, we waited that long without a school. The Whistle Pig predicted it all along, as it was wandering around the neighborhood in search for its new

“home” to open in August, where he finally found its place as mascot. Perseverance always pays off. For the neighborhood, just as for the groundhog too!

*Brussels, Belgium, September 4, 2008, at Marie Hélène’s home*

“Adrian, here’s your Swiss Army Knife, and the champagne cap. You’re an engineer. You can make me an engagement ring.”

“(Just a bit surprised, then taking the knife and champagne cap) See, I knew I asked you for good reason!”

I’m elated that we’re here in Gifford Park when our neighborhood school will open this year, where we are at home and we enjoy so much interacting with and learning from everyone, and where everyone brings all of their special talents to the community as nice as only here could happen. The Stanleys’ dinner and service, and everyone’s entire preparation of and participation in the Christmas party was a blast, just as the Holiday market was a real success again. Yes, we got more elephants in support of Madagascar wildlife rescue, but you probably imagined that already. The excellent food, the celebration, and the fellowship with dear friends were all very hard to depart from...

When we as a community set down to help Omaha Public Schools to understand and adopt what we wanted from our neighborhood school we asked for many things, among which two were quite important to us but never materialized in the end. First, we wanted a learning vegetables garden, for the children to continue to learn at the school in a more formal way what they are already learning at the community garden and in the neighborhood, namely that tomatoes essentially don’t grow on shelves at the grocery store. Second, we wanted some public space open to children to use to play over weekends and evenings, outdoors in the summer and indoors in the winter, to continue at school and to expand the community spirit that soccer and tennis and other Gifford Park activities provide to all the children in the neighborhood, and to ensure that home schooled and public school children continue to engage and play with one another at school over weekends just as they do in the community outside of school time. The two demands were not met. The first due to lack of space right next to the school—parking trumps education on vegetables--and security concerns of crossing a street to get to potential garden lots that OPS owns. The second was too complicated to design and execute, or we simply don’t know why it was overlooked.

These two “little” things that we never got make me feel a bit taken aback. Also, I had supported naming the school Alan J Heeger Elementary, in memory of the 2000 Nobel Prize winning physicist who was here in the neighborhood studying eight grade at the Yates School 70 years ago this year. He is turning 83 this year. It didn’t happen that way. That’s OK. There are other better tools to promote curiosity and STEAM with children than the name of the school. Just as there are other fitted tools to continue to persuade the school administration and OPS as a whole to hear us and to adopt and nurture our community values.

“Always use the right tool for the task.” That’s what a Swiss Army Knife means, and what it teaches. Handing over your knife to a child to use, or gifting her a Swiss Army

Knife of her own as the time comes means you trust her to choose the right tool, with safety in mind, even when you are not there. You trust her, and you trust yourself that the lessons you tried with her over time worked and she got it. “Always use the right tool for the task” is always much beyond the Swiss Army Knife though. Any tool. Just make it the right one! A conversation could be it. A smile could be it. How about coffee or tea? A book could be it, too. Diplomacy. Insistence with perseverance could be it. Showing things in another perspective. Borrowing a tool or solution tried elsewhere that worked. Yes, someone else may have figured out a solution to your issue before you, and all it takes is to borrow theirs, as opposed to reinventing the wire to cut butter... I mean the wheel. Sorry, the butter-cutting wire is from French. I wonder... was the wire to cut butter invented before or after the wheel? Who cares, as long as we use the right tool for every task.

Not everything happens the way you want it all the time. It turns out there was a way to open the gate at Adrian’s old school in Romania that didn’t involve the metal saw on a Swiss Army Knife. I’d like to hope that in the end the parents discussed with the school and agreed to let the gate open. Maybe there is a way to improve Gifford Park Elementary once it opens, and cutting padlocks has nothing to do with it.

*Gifford Park, Omaha, Nebraska, a few years ago, at home*

“Daddy, can I please have your Swiss Army Knife?”

“Go to your room and open the desk’s left top drawer.”

*“(Running down the stairs while ripping the wrapping and opening up the box) Daddy... that’s my own Swiss Army Knife. Thank you.”*

“I figured it was about time you got your own. I got mine at about your age.”

Gift a Swiss Army Knife to a teenager, girl or boy. It is a sign you trust them. Teach them to always use the right tool for any task. From a metal saw to adopting a solution from a book she self trusted to discover, or to insisting with perseverance for all that is worth promoting and adopting. They will certainly rise up to the trust you put in them. Someday the teenager of today might just change the world with a Nobel Prize they may get for using or maybe even discovering a new tool, or who knows for what...

It’s going to be a really good year of celebration of achievements, of today and tomorrow in our neighborhood, and in the world. We will keep persuading about our values and solutions.