



Alexandru ... the great?

Here we are again ... yet another family member with a birthday falling on a Sunday, just in time for A Story A Week. This person certainly didn't have to wait too many years before his turn came; it's my grandson Alex's first birthday today!

When I visited Vancouver around a year ago it was just a couple of weeks after he was born. There certainly wasn't much communication between the two of us, but I was still able to write a couple of entries in this story series about the experience of becoming a grandfather. This summer, I made another trip over to Canada, but his 'waking time' never seemed to coincide with my 'visit time', and even when it did, he was of course not so comfortable with this 'stranger'.

On the very last day of my stay in Vancouver though, he and I did get a chance to spend a bit of time together. Our family had a brunch meeting in a restaurant before I headed off to the airport to return to Japan, and he was not only wide awake, but willing to let me hold him and stroll around together. (The restaurant wasn't busy at all, and we had a whole section all to ourselves ...)

He's not very talkative yet - of course! - but he listened quietly while I chatted to him about this and that as we walked around among the empty tables. What did I talk to him about? I told him about his mother - and what I had felt and thought 24 years ago while carrying her around in exactly the same fashion.

I was a brand-new father back then, eager to face the challenge of bringing up my new young baby, and very confident that I knew how to do a good job at it. I would read to her a lot, and thus turn her into a good reader; I would play many games and puzzles with her, and thus develop her intelligence; I would always speak to her in an adult manner - no baby talk - and she would thus grow up speaking like an adult ... I had many ideas about what to do!

Well, I did all those things, and plenty more besides. And when her sister came along a couple of years later I continued along in the same vein, with this carefully thought-out plan for bringing up my children.

Now I learned many things during those years of being a 'daddy', among them being the realization that things don't always go as you plan, and that there are limits to how much influence your child-rearing policy will actually have on the development of your child. When I look back over the 24 years, I sometimes wonder if anything I did or said had any affect whatsoever. My two daughters - despite having nearly identical upbringings - are quite different in character and temperament, as indeed, are my brother and myself.

I'm not suggesting that none of the things we do as parents have any use at all, but I now realize much more clearly that the fundamentals of our personality are built-in from the beginning, and there is not too much that parents can do to change them. If I were responsible for Alex's care now, I would do pretty much all the same things that I did with his mother, because I think they were sensible and useful, but I would have no illusions that I was helping to build his personality. All we can do is sit back and enjoy the show, as our child gradually grows into the framework that has been prepared for him by his genes.

At least that is my view on this topic *this* week. Ask me again in a few years, and I suppose I'll have yet a different reply. Isn't it incredible that we understand so little about human development - the most important topic there could possibly be!

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