

Tutors teach themselves, too



BARB GUY

Last fall I made a new friend named Hugo. Soon after, he turned 12. I've seen him every week since then, when we get together to study along with other Franklin Elementary students and members of the Salt Lake Rotary Club.

When I signed up to be a tutor, I had visions of being given a girl who loves to read, a precocious girl with a big vocabulary, enamored of language. We would read and write together, spending afternoons lost in a garden of words.

Instead, I was paired with Hugo, a boy who needs a friend to study math with. It pains me to admit this, but I managed to graduate from high school (and college) without ever taking algebra or geometry. Then I married a scientist.

When I was little, my dad told me never to rely on my husband to teach me to drive. He had known someone who did this and it killed their marriage. Luckily, I learned to drive long before I wanted to marry.

But when I did get married I approached it my dad's way: My Mr. Science has many valuable things to teach me (including algebra and geometry), but in the teaching we would surely come undone. Better to let him do all the heavy-duty math that would come up around the house. So I had long ago said goodbye and maybe even good riddance to math.

Right away, Hugo charmed me out of my girls-in-the-word-garden preconceptions. I let go happily, instantly warming to a new vision involving the adorable, gentle, art-loving, dimpled Hugo. But it has been a challenge. I have literally felt my skin go cold when the teacher, the sixth-grade teacher, handed me the math assignment to work on. I have, more than once, had absolutely no idea how to do it.

I've coped in a number of ways. Early on, I privately confessed to the teacher, asking if maybe Hugo had some spelling, reading, social studies or history to study. No. So when Hugo and I were facing a problem I didn't know how to do, Hugo's pencil dangling expectantly over an

immense expanse of blank paper, I'd say, "Okay Hugo, what does Ms. Noble say to do?" If he could tell me, we'd go forward with Hugo teaching me how to solve the problem.

I bought myself a CD-ROM to study with. I've even bravely asked Mr. Science for help with my homework, and so far we're still together. On occasion he'll come with me to class; he's been charmed by Hugo, too.

Sometimes I get the next week's assignment from Ms. Noble. Then, as I'm ready to fall into bed, I realize, "Oh dang, I have homework!" I get back up and work problems so that I'm ready.

Or, when necessary, I just tell Hugo. He must already know that adults aren't perfect, or at least that I'm not, and he may as well learn that it's OK to say so. So I just admit to him that I forgot how or never learned how. Then we ask. Sometimes we have epiphanies together. There's never a garden, but it's still fun.

I'm teaching Hugo his times tables - which I do know, thank you. My dad taught them to me, all the way to 12, the summer before I went to kindergarten. We'd sit on the back steps on summer nights watching the stars come out, practicing the times tables over and over, the ever-increasing number of twinkling

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stars providing perfect evidence of multiplication.

I don't know where my relationship with math went wrong. There's a lot of discussion that girls who grew up in the 1960s and '70s were steered away from math, that any interest or curiosity was socialized out of us, that many women, no matter how bright and capable we may be, are missing a lot of math.

My women friends have memories of math or science teachers saying that girls won't need to know such and such, or aren't capable of learning it. Where are those teachers now? I assume they're all rotting in the past. They'd sure better be. If there's still one around, as my friend Lynne says, six women in pink hoods should visit him in the night.

I often lament my terrible shortcomings as a tutor to my friend, Adrienne, who teaches people to be teachers. She encourages me. She says that my weekly date with Hugo is important; that by just spending time with him I'm helping, no matter what we do. According to her, by being a kind adult who cares for him and is interested in his life, I'm having an impact.

She also says that the best teachers make sense of things together with their students. That's a relief.

By not being the journey I was expecting, of course it has been

much more. I've met a sweet, funny boy who is a good, dedicated student and he has become my friend. He brings me presents and thank-you notes and I do the same for him.

Hugo has taught me that boys are great. Through working with Hugo I'm learning that math is fun and that it makes sense and that it's never too late to learn whatever you might have missed along the way.

I'd like to thank Hugo for being my tutor and my friend. There's so much I never would have learned without him.

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