

Cranking

Merlin Mann | Apr 22 2011

1.

Nothing wrecks your living room decor quite like a giant, rented hospital bed.

The one my Dad laid in for a couple months in the fall of 1974 was an alarmingly stiff and sturdy affair, the frame of which was forged of impossibly heavy iron, with half a dozen jaggy coats of putty-flesh latex paint doing a shit job of concealing the dings and dents kissed by dozens of clutches of burly rental guys trying to navigate unaccommodating residential doors.

Jammed cattywampus between a teddy-bear brown sectional, an antiqued rococo credenza, and what had until recently been my Father's favorite armchair, the hospital bed left little room for easy socializing, let alone aesthetic speculation. This was a living room where a very ill person would mostly die soon.

The hospital bed's defining feature was the theoretical ease with which the human trunk slumped in its top half could be raised or lowered by turning a shitty little crank at the foot of its lower half. Like the bed itself, the shitty little crank was ugly and obtrusive and hard to live with. Mom and I tripped over the crank a lot.

The theoretically useful but ultimately shitty little crank made the hospital bed look like those old-timey cars we'd see in the bad silent movies they showed down at Shakey's Pizza.

Mom and Dad despised the saltines-and-ketchup style of pizza served at Shakey's. To them, LaRosa's over on Cheviot had way better pizza plus a pretty good jukebox. But, I really liked Shakey's. They gave away cool styrofoam boater hats with a red paper band that said, "Shakey's Pizza Parlor." Which I thought looked smashing. So, they used to take me to Shakey's.

In practice, the hospital bed's shitty little crank functioned mostly as a recalcitrant and pinch-inducing mechanism for eroding my father's dignity.

Dad would lay in the hospital bed that filled our living room while my Mom slowly cranked. He'd try to make jokes. (Dad had always been the funniest person any of his friends knew.) The hospital bed creaked. Mom cranked. Dad's tired upper half would haltingly rise and bob with reluctant help from the bed's upper half. Mom sweated at the crank. Dad laid there and watched. Dad couldn't help. He watched. He was in the hospital bed. Mom did all the cranking. Dad watched. He watched while his wife turned a shitty little iron crank, trying impotently to make her best friend just a tiny bit more comfortable as his body worked to finally finish eating itself. But, he couldn't help out. I think he wanted to help out. But, he couldn't help out.

She couldn't really help my Dad. My Dad couldn't really help her. But they sure tried.

She cranked and cranked.

I was seven. I didn't know how to help anyone.

2.

The last time I saw my Dad, he was in a different hospital bed. That one was a much more functional and aesthetically appropriate unit neatly fitted into an overlit semi-private room in the highly-regarded Jewish Hospital located on E. Galbraith Road. We weren't Jewish. We were just sick.

Frankly, I forget what the crank on the second hospital bed looked like, but I seem to recall that it worked just fine.

This was maybe a week before my Dad died.

From what I can gather, he and my Mom had wanted to time things so that I could be with him as long and as late as possible--but not so late that I'd have to see him in the kind of condition I have to assume he was in during the full week he was too ill for his boy to visit him. Pretty bad condition, I'm guessing.

In the almost forty years since Dad's last week in any hospital bed, my Mom and I haven't talked much about it. If there are things to say about that week, I'm not sure even forty years is long enough to prep for them. I know I'm still not ready. I should ask my Mom if she's ready. She was forty then. Just under half her life ago.

What I do know is my Mom lived by that second hospital bed most every minute of Dad's last week. Just like she'd been by the first hospital bed in her living room for the months before. Only now she was the one sleeping on the wrong bed. There are limits to the physical comforts you can offer a woman who's determined to stay by her husband's second hospital bed until it's time.

But she was there that whole time. Up to the last time my sweet Dad ever said anything to anyone.

As he laid in that second hospital bed, I'm told that the last thing my Dad said to anyone was something he said to my Mom. He told my Mom:

Take care of The Big Guy.

That was me. I was "The Big Guy." My Dad always called me "Big Guy," and I always loved when he said that. It made me feel strong. It made me feel tall. It made me know that my Dad and I were best pals.

I still love knowing I was my Dad's best pal.

3.

I don't specifically remember the day our particular clutch of burly rental guys came out to remove the first hospital bed from our living room. I do remember thinking it was weird how quickly the space filled with huge floral arrangements, covered dishes and casseroles, and a pack of outdoorsy men with giant red hands who were new to sobbing inconsolably in front of each other.

But, that hospital bed had been heavy. Really heavy. And even though the bed's wheels had been thoughtfully nested in plastic casters, the raw tonnage of the iron motherfucker left permanent dents in our ugly, broccoli-green carpeting. Six breadplate-sized dents that were still there a year and a half later on the day my Mom and I moved out.

We didn't need a house that big for just the two of us. Plus, the living room wasn't much fun to hang out in any more.

Way too big. Way too big.

4.

I don't currently have a hospital bed. I have a modest but very comfortable regular bed in a regular bedroom where I sleep with my regular wife. She's my favorite part of the bed.

To my knowledge, our modest but very comfortable bed is not fitted with a shitty little crank. Which is nice for everyone.

And, every single morning at almost exactly 6:00 AM Pacific Time, my three-year-old daughter wakes up, jumps out of her crank-free, regular, big-girl bed, tears out of her regular bedroom, and--even before she gets her hot milk or takes off her pull-up or tells us to turn on Toy Story 2--she dashes into our regular bedroom, runs up to our regular non-hospital bed, and screams, "DAD-dy! DAD-dy! DAD-dy!" until I wake up and say, "G'mornin', Sweet Bug! Did you have nice sleeps?"

Sometimes she tells me whether or not she had nice sleeps. Often as not lately, she tells me to make her hot milk and turn on Toy Story 2. Both of which I'm totally fine with.

Thing is, she screams "DAD-dy!" like the most impossibly great thing in the world has just happened. Every single morning. Right by my bed. Without a crank in sight.

And, you know what? Something impossibly great has happened.

Because an annoying, rambling, disagreeable little man like me gets to have this alarm clock in piggy-patterned footie jammies run up to a regular, crank-less, healthy-Dad, non-hospital bed and make him feel like he's The Greatest Thing in the Universe.

Just like I think she's The Greatest Thing in the Universe.

Just like I thought my Dad was The Greatest Thing in the Universe.

And, although I'm confident that I will always think my daughter is The Greatest Thing in the Universe, I'm also all too aware that this feeling will not always be reciprocated in quite that same way or with quite that same enthusiasm that we both enjoy right now.

She won't always run to my bed in footie jammies.

I'll only get that particularly noisy and personalized wake-up call for a little while. And, I only get a shot at it once a day. At almost exactly 6:00 AM Pacific Time.

Then one day? I won't get it any more. It will be gone.

5.

Many mornings over the past six months or so, at almost exactly 6:00 AM Pacific Time, I was not in my regular bed. I was not even at home. I was sitting in another building, typing bullshit that I hoped would please my book editor. Who, by the way, is awesome.

And, if I noticed what time it was, I'd always wonder whether my daughter had run into our bedroom yet.

I'd wonder whether she had seen my side of the bed empty again. And, when I thought about my empty spot on the bed and how disappointed she'd be to scream "DAD-dy! DAD-dy! DAD-dy!" then see I'm not even there, I'd die a little.

I'd die a little, because as I thought about her, I'd think about my Dad. And as I thought about my Dad, I'd start thinking about hospital beds with cranks--then on to dents, and covered dishes, and rooms full of sobbing outdoorsy guys, and so on.

But, by then it might be 6:10 am Pacific Time. And I didn't have time to think about my family. Not now, right? No, I had to keep working. I had to stay in that other building and keep typing bullshit that I hoped would please my editor. Who is awesome.

So, I'd type and type. I'd crank and crank. I'd try and try. I'd want very much to go home, make hot milk, and watch Toy Story 2. So much, I'd want this.

6.

Anyhow, this has been my on-and-off job for the past two years. I type. And, I try to type things that will help and comfort people, but mostly I try to type things that will please my editor. Who is awesome.

Sometimes I do my job at 6:00 AM Pacific Time. Sometimes I do my job at 5:30 PM or 11:30 AM or really any time in between. Sometimes I do my job while my family goes to birthday parties and holiday dinners and a couple vacations and I don't even know how many (non-Shakey's) pizza nights--all without me. Without Dad.

In fact, a depressing amount of the time--really up until this week--I would do my job until I hadn't the slightest idea what time it was or what bullshit I was typing or what my crank was ever meant to be attached to in the first place.

But, even when my shitty little crank was not attached to anything, I did keep cranking. Because, Dads do their job. It's what they do.

They crank. They crank and crank and crank and crank.

Sometimes the cranking made something special that will be really useful to people who badly need the comfort and help. But, a staggering amount of the time, my cranking has produced joyless and unemotional bullshit that couldn't comfort, help, or please anyone. Especially my editor. Who is awesome. There's no point in doing anything if it doesn't

eventually please my editor. Who is awesome.

This has constantly hung over my head. For two fucking years.

But, this has been my job. It's a job I often did late. It's a job I often did poorly. And, it's a job where I often didn't pull my load or live up to even my own expectations and standards. Which is far from my editor's fault.

She's been awesome.

7.

Anyhow, I've tried to do my job. But, I've often failed.

I've sometimes failed to make things that will help and comfort people. And, God knows I've failed to please my editor.

And, worst of all, more often than my heart can bear at 2:34 pm Pacific Time on Friday April 22nd, I know I've failed to be home for several of my daily shot at "DAD-dy! DAD-dy! DAD-dy!"

It's now become unavoidably clear to me that I've been doing each of these things poorly. The job, the making, the pleasing, and, yeah, the being at home. And I can't live with that for another day. So, I've chosen which one has to go. At least in the way it's worked to date. Which is to say not working.

I'll let you guess which.

Because, that? That choosing? That's what my book needs to be about. Not about pleasing people. Not about cranking on bullshit. Not about abandoning your priorities to write about priorities.

My book needs to be about choosing a hard thing and then living with it. Because it's your thing.

But, that part's gone missing for just a little too long now. Certainly not missing from my handsome and very practical rhetoric--it's been missing from my actual life and living. In a quest to make something that has increasingly not felt like my own, I've unintentionally ignored my own counsel to never let your hard work fuck up the good things. Including those regular people. Including, ironically, the real work. Including any good thing the crank is supposed to be attached to.

So, I'm done fucking that up. I'm done cranking. And, I'm ready to make a change.

I'm not sure precisely what that change will look like, but, at the risk of invoking Godwin's Law, I have a pretty good idea that this particular performance of "Edelweiss" you're enjoying right now may immediately be followed by a dramatic chase, a hopeful escape attempt, and only if I'm extremely lucky, maybe an eventual stride over the Alps.

As I'll explain in a minute, it most likely means I don't have My Book Contract any more.

Who knows? We'll have to see.

8.

All I know is tonight's Friday. And, that's Daddy-Daughter Night.

And, my book agent says my editor (who is awesome) will probably cancel My Book Contract if I don't send her something that pleases her...today. Now. By tonight. Theoretically, I guess...uh...this.

See: my agent very helpfully suggested I send my editor a chapter full of "email stuff." My editor really likes "email stuff." And, it was theorized by my agent that sending this "email stuff" might please my book editor just enough that she might not cancel My Book Contract. For now.

Well. If you've made it this far, you, like my editor (who is awesome), will have realized that this is not a chapter of "email stuff."

It's a very long, wooly, histrionic, messy and uncomfortable story about hospital beds, piggy jammies, and styrofoam hats. I seriously doubt it will please my editor. Who is awesome.

So, no, I really hope she doesn't cancel My Book Contract. But, it does occur to me that said contract is the last and only thing my publisher has to intimidate me into doing things I don't want to do. Things I think will harm my book, my integrity, and my life.

Once that threat is made good, the game ends. They can sue me and yell and stuff. Which would suck, but at least no one would be demanding my book have fucking pussy willows on the cover. Which, as I sit here, feels more and more unbearable to me.

In any case, I don't control anything that anyone does. It took a long time for me to really get that.

It's such a funny thing. Threats--like hurricanes and rectal exams--are only scary until they arrive. Once they're over, they're just the basis for funny stories. But, you do nearly always survive them. And, if you didn't survive? It wasn't because of a lack of fear. Like I say, the universe doesn't particularly care whether you're scared.

Oh, well. I like my editor. She's awesome. I hope she doesn't cancel My Book Contract. I hope we keep working together.

But if it goes away today, tomorrow or further on? Well. As a favorite novelist of mine used to say: "So it goes."

I'll figure this out tomorrow. Or Monday. Or later. Tonight is Daddy-Daughter Night. And, no fucking way am I missing two in a row.

9.

Now, as far as My Goddamned Book? Truthfully? Wanna hear the really complicated part?

This is not me quitting the book. No fucking way. This is me doubling down on the book--on my book.

I will finish my book very soon. Not because of (or in spite of) any contract, and not because of (or in spite of) any editor, and certainly not because of (or in spite of) any tacit demand for empty cranking.

I will finish my book because I want to finish it. Because it is very, very important to me to finish it.

But, again, let's be clear-- what I finish will be my book. And, it will be done my way. And, yes--you Back to Work fans knew this one was coming--my book will have my cover that I choose. It will not have fucking pussy willows or desert islands or third-rate kerning. It will be, to quote my editor (who is awesome), "messy."

My book will help and comfort the people that I want to reach. And, yes, much like my editor, my book will be awesome.

I truly hope my book pleases her.

10.

So, there you have it. An article that's clearly not a chapter of "email stuff."

Me? I'm off to prep for "Daddy-Daughter Night."

And, tomorrow morning, unlike last Saturday morning and countless other days before it, at the crack of 6:00 am Pacific Time, I will be available in my regular crankless bed to ask my daughter whether she had nice sleeps. And I will tell her and my regular wife that I think they're the Greatest Things in the Universe.

And, maybe after I make hot milk and watch Woody worry about cowboy camp, I may even think to myself about how proud my funny Dad would be of his pal, The Big Guy. For doing what needed to be done. To be someone special's Dad for as often and as long as he can. Just like he did. Even when it gets hard.

Even when it gets really hard.

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Thanks for listening, nerds. You'll hear more when I hear more.

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About *Merlin*

Bio

Merlin Mann is an independent writer, speaker, and broadcaster. He's best known for being the guy who created the website you're reading right now. He lives in San Francisco, does lots of public speaking, and helps make cool things like You Look Nice Today, Back to Work, and Kung Fu Grippe. Also? He's writing this book, he lives with this face, he suffers from this hair, he answers these questions, and he's had this life. So far.



Merlin's favorite thing he's written in the past few years is an essay entitled, "Cranking."

Joining a Facebook group about creative productivity is like buying a chair about jogging.

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