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March 1, 1986 (letter 11)

Dear Colleague:

Jenny Ostergren fell off the radiator the other day and Bob had to rush home and then to the hospital. Jenny lost a tooth but was not otherwise seriously hurt. I am reminded of the movie Kramer vs. Kramer, in which the father ran frantically through the busy streets of Manhattan, carrying his semi-conscious son who had fallen off a monkey cage, to the emergency room of the city hospital. It was a tense and dramatic moment, and I thought I was watching something out of the ordinary. But, in fact, my colleagues with young children tell me that it's a fairly common event. Children are falling off radiators, car hoods, piano tops, all the time. Parents are constantly poised to catch small falling bodies. Andre Dubus expresses this anxiety well in a short story.

He had always been a fearful father: when his children were young at the start of each summer he thought of them drowning in a pond or the sea, and he was relieved when he came home in the evenings and they were there; usually that relief was the only acknowledgement of his fear, which he never spoke of, and which he controlled with his heart. As he had when they were very young and all of them in turn, Cathleen too, were drawn to the high oak in the backyard, and had to climb it. Smiling, he watched them, imagining the fall: and he was poised to catch the small body before it hit the earth. Or his legs were poised; his hands were in his pockets or his arms were folded and, for the child looking down, he appeared relaxed and confident while his heart beat with the two words he wanted to call out but did not: Don't fall. ( Finding A Girl in America, 1980, pp. 9-10).

Now that I have drawn your attention to parental love, let me balance the ticket and turn to a darker side of human nature. The Germans have a word Schadenfreude, which means happiness at the misfortune of others. During World War II, Allied propagandists used this word as evidence of something sinister in the German national character. But the Germans also have the beautiful word Mitleid (compassion). Moreover, with Mitleid goes the companion word, which is even more beautiful, Mitfreude, for which an English translation might be "sympathetic joy," an awkward expression. Buddhists have always argued that "sympathetic joy"--that is, delight in the good fortune or achievement of another--is a higher virtue than compassion--feeling sorry for the unfortunate. Buddhists have always known that much of Mitleid is in fact Schadenfreude, artfully disguised. What is truly difficult is Mitfreude. "Sympathetic joy" is common enough when there is no competition: thus adults can often take honest delight in the athletic prowess of a child. Otherwise, it is the most severe test of friendship. (E. Conze, Buddhist Thought in India, p.87; D. W. Harding, Social Psychology and Individual Values, p. 150).

Best wishes,

*Zi- Lu*