

*Do I need to have been taught what love is
to give it to someone else?*

The Trial



Rosa Gonzalez, at home in Mesa Arizona

Here's the most noteworthy thing to remember about Rosa Gonzalez: *she never wanted children*. She never got that basic imprint of motherly love, what some might call that "childbearing gene." Her life, as she forecast it, just wasn't going to involve needy toddlers. She wasn't even a very good aunt. She held her siblings' babies only when forced, and they unfailingly burst into tears in Rosa's awkward arms.

Now, there are cities full of professional women and men who wholeheartedly echo this feeling. They go around saying things like "I'm too selfish to be a mother," and "I'm not a baby person," or my favorite, "I love my life too much to do that to it." A friend of mine calls them The Petrified Forest – people who would freeze their life in time if they could. "Manhattan's turning into a Petrified Forest," my friend mocked. I winced when she said this, because I used to be one of them. When The Petrified Forest imagines parenthood, their hearts are flooded with the feeling of doors closing, not opening. If you ask, many will explain that their own mothers had to put up with too much – the mothers' lives seemed *compromised, under-attained*. A smaller group will confess that they admired their fathers more than their mothers. While motherhood is still revered in places to the north, south, east and west of the big cities, within those cities a career has become the metric by which a woman's life is often measured. In London or Los Angeles, a woman who manages to be a good mother *and* have a progressive career is put on a pedestal by her friends and worshipped as a demi-god. For a moment, The Petrified Forest swoons. But then, the evidence is tabulated. Every account is weighed – every account of sleep-deprivation, diminished sex life, a promotion passed over, and social events missed. The Petrified Forest sits like a jury, considering the facts, making their calculations, collecting more evidence. In our society today, parenthood is on trial.

But can those analytical calculations ever truly account for the experience between a parent and a child?

Few in The Petrified Forest would imagine that their fear was once shared by a poor Mexican girl in a Texas border town. But Rosa did not go through their extensive calculations. What she knew was this: as the youngest of eight siblings, her father was 65 when she was born. Her mother was 44. They met at the copper smelter as migrant workers. Later, Rosa's mother treated her mental illness with heroin and alcohol. Her father doted on his only daughter, but when he died at 70, Rosa's mother went off the deep end. When Rosa was seven, she ended up in her oldest brother's care. She learned to call her brother "Dad" and her sister-in-law "Mom." She cried a lot. *Other than that*, it was a completely normal tough childhood, in a very family-oriented town. In their neighborhood of El Paso, everyone wanted to have kids. By the time they hit puberty, most girls had names for their future children picked out. Most had put a few of those names to use by their mid-teens. So Rosa *really* felt like she didn't fit in.

It was beyond Rosa's horizon to dream of a career or an education. She didn't really know those things existed. But there was a girl down the road, on the other side of the street, who would invite Rosa over and offer to comb her hair when Rosa was little. She was nineteen, the only girl on the block over the age of fifteen without a baby. What she did have was something Rosa had never seen anywhere else: a really nice mirror dresser, wood stained blonde with a thick glass top, on which sat combs and brushes and bottles of perfume, perfectly organized. A long jewelry box with three smoothly-gliding drawers sat beside a round tub of after-bath powder. Oh, it was nice. It was heavenly. Something about this dresser – the thing you could have if you didn't have children – hinted to Rosa about all the things out there in the larger world. The dresser was a portal to the unimaginable. Rosa loved to sit there, having her hair combed, pretending a dresser like this would someday be hers.

That says everything about the kind of world young Rosa lived in: a mere dresser symbolized the good life. Not a fancy car, not a big home, not a college diploma. A glass-topped dresser.

Children, no, but love, yes. Well, if not love, then sex. It was for sex that Rosa married for the first time at nineteen. Soon after they were married her husband hit her, busting her lip; the next time he came after her, she jumped up on the bed, announced “Come on, death match!” and dared him to get in the ring. The marriage was over in less than six months.

At twenty-three, she met David Gonzalez at the Texas Instruments plant in Dallas, where she handled a soldering gun as an electrical repair technician. He soon proposed. Vince was an accident. Rosa went home to visit her sister-in-law mother that Christmas, and Rosa left her birth control pills at home because she didn't want her mom to know she was having sex before marriage. When Rosa returned to Dallas, she had to wait a couple weeks before going back on the pill. They took a chance, anyway.

They moved their wedding plans forward, marrying a month later at Little Church of the West in Las Vegas.

Rosa's pregnancy was complicated. It turned out that rather than having two kidneys, hers were joined at the top – a single kidney shaped like a horseshoe. This malformed kidney couldn't filter the doubled volume of blood in the late stages of pregnancy, so her baby was yanked out two months prematurely. David named their son after Vince Ferragamo, the quarterback for the Los Angeles Rams. Rosa's family gathered in the hospital corridors to discuss what to do. “How can Rosa be a mother?” they asked. “We all know she is no good with kids. Does she have any idea what she's gotten herself into?” The doctors noticed this, too. Rosa was not a natural with babies, to put it kindly. Before they let her take Vince home, they made her work two eight-hour shifts in the intensive care unit to learn how to handle a newborn.

By all accounts, Vince was a hyper and relentless toddler that never gave anyone quiet time. Babysitters quit on Rosa routinely. Vince was extremely sensitive to fabrics. He chewed the collars on his shirts. He was so lacking in hand-eye coordination that he fell off chairs. And Rosa, having so little experience with kids, didn't realize any of this was abnormal. She found solutions. She took him to the mall where he could run around. She

developed a way to get her distracted little boy to pay attention: she touched her face every time she said his name. With a touch of her face, he would settle briefly, and she could communicate an instruction. Whenever they went to someone else's house, they sat in the car beforehand and rehearsed what to do inside, how to adjust to the new environment. She never disciplined him in public, but that meant she left a lot of half-full grocery carts in the Safeway aisle in order to drive home immediately. No book instructed her to do this; it just seemed the best way to handle it. Motherhood was turning out to be pretty much what she expected it would be – incredibly hard and thankless work. Rosa was strung out and often at wit's end. But she loved her son; they learned together. She kept on touching her face. She and David chose to have a second child, and this baby, a girl, was significantly easier. They assumed it was the difference between boys and girls.

One day, when Vince was in second grade at Beasley Elementary School, Rosa was called in for a “conference,” which turned out to be more of a bushwhacking. She was ganged up on by the school principal, the school counselor, Vince's teacher, and his teacher from first grade. They sat on one side of a long conference table. They did not let Rosa take a seat on the other side of the table. Instead, they offered her a chair on the other side of the room. A shrimpy second grade plastic resin chair with metal legs. They put her in that chair, her knees nearly to her chin. The court had convened, and Rosa was on trial.

She will never forget the insult of that chair.

Here, mom, this is what we think of you. You get the kiddie chair.

The intimidation was intentional.

We know better than you.

“We're going to move Vince down,” they said. “He's in a Level Three program for math and English. We're going to move him down to Level Four. Special Ed. It's really for the best. He's really got problems.”

To which, Rosa said angrily, “So why am I here? If you’re going to go ahead and do this, why have you called me off work? Why have you not already done it?”

“Mrs. Gonzalez, he can’t concentrate. He stares out the window. He falls out of his chair. He can’t look his teachers in the eye.”

She did not back down. “What I asked was, *why am I here?*”

Reluctantly, they gave her an answer. “Because you need to okay it. You need to sign the transfer.”

Rosa sat there, stewing on her anger. “*You think because I speak more Spanish than English, I am just going to roll over?*” She thought to herself. “*You think because I work in a factory, and because I am not educated like you – you think because there are four of you and only one of me – you think because I am down here by the floor, and you are up there on your pedestal, I am just going to say ‘okay, you must know best?’*”

“My son is smart,” she insisted.

“Something’s wrong with him,” they said. Then, rudely, “He’s very emotional. Is there something going on at home? Are you by chance pregnant?”

She let that one pass, but not easily. “He needs to be challenged,” Rosa answered sincerely, expressing what she believed.

“He disrupts the class. He belongs with other kids like him.”

Rosa stood up. She rose up from that kiddie chair and gathered herself defiantly. “No,” she said resolutely. “I am his mother, and the answer is no.” *I dare you to get in the ring with me!*

Rosa called Baylor Medical Center to ask for help. They sent her to Easter Seals, which was testing children for disabilities. Her seven-year-old was put in a room behind a one-way mirror and presented a series of cognitive exercises like arranging blocks, putting pegs in holes, and drawing a copy of a simple line illustration. The whole time, he had his parka pulled up over his

head, zipped high, and he looked out through the tunnel of his parka collar at the far wall. He was utterly unable to sit still. Arms akimbo. To the doctors who know these things, Vince's brain dysfunction was blatant: he had severe ADHD, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder.

ADHD is a highly controversial disorder. Ritalin (and drugs like it) are often administered to children with borderline symptoms who have been "diagnosed" by teachers or parents, not doctors, and the cavalier reliance on drugs has drawn criticism. As a consequence, those with severe symptoms, like Vince, end up being looked at skeptically. There is, in the air, a suspicion that ADHD is an excuse, not a condition.

Rosa and David Gonzalez did not want this label on their son. To them, he was just a kid being a kid. They didn't want the principal of Beasley Elementary to see the Easter Seals results. They didn't want anyone to have that ammunition to use against their son.

"It was my absolute lowest point," Rosa remembered. "It really pushed me off the ledge I'd been clinging to for so long. *Nobody* wanted their kid labeled."

Did she ever worry that somehow she was responsible for her son's behavior?

"Plenty of other people blamed me. I was too busy defending myself. But I did wonder if I could blame it on a chemical in his brain."

Yet if there was a treatment for Vince, how could she deny it to him?

Indeed, she asked herself, "If your son had diabetes, wouldn't you give him insulin?"

Didn't she want her son to learn to catch a ball?

Didn't she want her son to be able to stand with his feet together without falling over like a board stood on end?

Didn't she want him to learn?

Didn't she want him to stop eating his clothing?

Rosa and David gave Vince the Ritalin during the school years, not in the summers. "I wanted him to deal with it," Rosa

said. “Now I know how cruel that was. He needed it all the time, of course. But it was *so* controversial back then. No mother wants to have to make this choice.”

“Did the drugs make much difference?” I asked.

“Some. He was still up at 5:30 every morning. To guide him through his evenings and mornings, we had checklists and special blue binders. I gave up on him picking up his room. Oh, I tried it all.”

Symptoms include: constant night terrors.

Solutions include: applying “magic” lotion that makes them go away.

Symptoms include: inability to get dressed.

Solutions include: setting clothes out on floor in shape of a person the night before.

Symptoms include: saying hurtful things to other kids.

Solutions include: scripting “nice” phrases.

Symptoms include: perpetual lateness.

Solutions include: warm towels, chores set to timers, rewards.

She tried it all. She went to support groups. She took Vince to neurologists. They told Rosa that if she could just hang in there, Vince would likely grow out of it. Would he ever, really?

Many parents of children with severe ADHD, as well as parents of children with other disabilities, develop not so much a different *kind* of parenting as a different *level* of parenting. A different intensity. They do the same things as regular parents, but a lot more frequently. If parenting is a 24/7 responsibility, then parenting a child with disability is a 60/60/24/7 responsibility. They are on call every second of every hour. They never take their eyes off the child. They come up with solutions – language, games, goals. They reinforce what they said a thousand times before. They parent an 8-year-old like they might a 3-year-old. Parents get so overwhelmed, they run out of steam. Many are on the verge of simply giving up on their kid. They’re desperate to know if there’s a light at the end of the tunnel. *Will my child truly be better for all*

this effort I'm putting out – or is that just something I want to believe?

Symptoms include: utter hopelessness.

Solutions include: prayer, shopping.

Symptoms include: marriage strain.

Solutions include: counseling, eating.

Symptoms include: anger.

Solutions include: tutors, hiring attorneys to fight schools.

Rosa had survived her father dying, her mother going crazy, her first husband bloodying her lip, her son being unexpected, her son being premature, her son being hyperactive – now she would have to fight the school system. Her son needed all sorts of inventive systems just to make it through the nights and mornings at home, but what he really needed was to be pushed at school – he needed to be challenged by his teachers. He needed to be in the hardest classes. He was smart – *she knew it* – that was the only thing he had going for him.

Once her son was labeled, every new situation was a reenactment of that trial at Beasley Elementary School. Every teacher, every school, every summer program. Rosa did not give up. She kept on touching her face, grabbing Vince's attention, using that special bond to steer him in the right direction. Eventually, around his sophomore year of high school, his D-grades suddenly turned into A's, he was moved into the honors classes, and he began working with autistic children. He was appointed to the youth legislature of the National Hispanic Institute, where he was urged to consider great things. By that, the mentors there meant something tougher than the community college Vince planned to attend. He listened. A year ago, he graduated summa cum laude from Arizona State with a degree in religious studies. The ceremony was held in the late morning at the campus basketball arena. Rosa and David and their daughter Bonnie stood in the stands, surrounded by family and friends. Rosa soaked a lot of tissues. *Summa Cum Laude!* With Highest Praise. That was a label she didn't mind.

Rosa had always believed her son had it in him. She just hadn't always believed that she had it in *her*. It took her 22 years to discover that she had been a great mother all along. 22 years to find out maybe you don't *have* to start with a desire to be a mother, maybe you don't *have* to be experienced with kids, maybe you don't *have* to have had someone show you how to love. Maybe you just need to give yourself a chance to grow into the role.

The decision to be a parent is a personal one. Nobody should intrude on that process of discernment. But it is a mistake to assume that the decision can be reckoned with tools of analysis – with a scorecard – when it is fundamentally a mystical experience.

Rosa wishes she had a chance at more in her life. She worked, she raised two children, and she remained married to the same man. She wishes she had another purpose in addition to her children. Her whole family wishes that for her. They wish she did not have to struggle through so much. But life gave her *this* chance, and she ran with it.

Rosa did not just develop into a great mother for her own children. She helped kids in the neighborhood get through their gang problems, suicide attempts, drug addictions, and comings out of the closet. “Every one of my friends considers her a mother for them,” Vince assured me. “My mom is an irrepressibly lonely person who will always want children, always want to give parts of herself away. She cries at a light breeze. She has a heart bigger than her chest. *Everybody* is her child. My sister and I just have good seats in the auditorium.”

Three months after graduation, it was time for Vince to move on. David took him to I-Hop for breakfast while Rosa helped pack the Budget truck. David bought him an atlas; Rosa bought him a cooler packed with high-energy cola. His girlfriend's parents came over. Everyone cried, and then Vince got in the truck, girlfriend beside him, and they waved goodbye.

They moved to Chicago, where they found a small apartment off Des Plaines Avenue in Forest Park – suburban Chicago. The El rattled along behind their building. Vince came to Chicago to continue his work with autistic children, only to

discover his Arizona certification was not valid in Illinois. He landed at the local Olive Garden. This was good for him; the grind of bussing tables forced him to admit a few things. First, that he wanted to marry his girlfriend; they were soon engaged. Second, that he really wanted to be a religious scholar, and so he would be. The day after we met in Chicago, he flew to Israel to study Hebrew for eight weeks. Then his Mom flew to Chicago, and the three of them – Vince, his fiancé, his mother – drove to Atlanta, where Vince began the master’s program in Jewish Mysticism at Emory University.



Vince Gonzalez, on the morning before his trip to Israel

Any parent would be proud to have Vince as a son. He is discerning, never unthinking. He is remarkably willing to peer into the mysteries of human experience. Not a day is taken for granted. He is not interested in shortcuts. There is an integrity to the way he engages with life.

Though studying Jewish Mysticism, Vince has not converted to Judaism, and in fact he is not affiliated with any religion at all. “I am to religions as an auto mechanic is to cars,” he explains. He works on them all. He is interested in the question of how different people throughout history experience God – “What is God if you’re a 13th century Spanish Jew, versus a 20th century California New Ager?” Articulating people’s spiritual experiences will be the thrust of his research at Emory.

His skillful analysis made me wonder whether his interest was entirely intellectual – did *he* actually believe in God? To answer this, Vince shared a story from the Book of Acts, when Paul traveled through Greece. The Athenians built temples and made sacrifices to many gods; they even built altars to nameless gods, sort of a pagan Player To Be Named Later, to make sure the yet-to-be-discovered Gods would not be angry with them for being ignored. Paul stumbled across one of these altars, inscribed “To An Unknown God,” and was fascinated by it. When he reached Athens, Paul claimed that it was their Unknown God who made the world. It is from their Unknown God that all things – life and breath – have come to us. (This idea appealed to the Athenians, but Paul later lost the crowd when he brought up resurrection.)

Vince now makes his prayers to an Unknown God. He does not name this God, or claim it under a religion, as Paul did. Rather, the very appeal is in admitting *it is unknowable*, that it cannot be defined one way for all. “If there were a being out there, it makes sense that this being would be interpreted six billion ways by six billion people.” Thus the 13th century Spanish Jew interprets God differently than the 20th century New Ager – but they are both experiencing the same unknowable God. Vince draws a parallel between the way autistic children experience their teachers and the way we experience God. The autistic child spends most of his life in a haze of distraction. Now and then a teacher or parent gets through, and for a brief moment this child feels gloriously in touch with a higher power who seems to know everything. In this same way, we experience God. We get moments. Not miracles, but moments where God simply seems to be saying, *pay attention*. Lately, God has been saying this a lot to him.

“The gods speak a language to which we are all autistic,” Vince summarizes eloquently.

Imagine being the mother of this child. Imagine being a 47-year-old Spanish-speaking Mexican-American woman, a factory girl whose parents were migrant workers in El Paso – imagine you’re Rosa Gonzalez, and this is your son: he is speaking like a Prophet, using big English words, making freeform extrapolations

and radical theoretical connections. He is engaged to be married, he has direction, he pays his bills. He is not out drunk in the bars, or standing on street corners, or sleepwalking through life. He is all this, and he is only 23. Rosa is thinking one thing: "He came from me? I made something *this* beautiful?"

It makes you wonder.

It made *me* wonder how Vince got so interested in spiritual experience in the first place. Was there a teacher at school? Did mom drag him to church a lot? Did he read a particular book? But it was nothing so secondhand as that.

"Oh, I have had spiritual experiences my whole life," he answered.

"Your whole life?"

"Oh, yes. Ever since I was a little kid."

"Those 'moments,' as you describe?"

"Precisely."

I was a little surprised, because Rosa had not mentioned her son's spiritual experiences. Not once, in some sixteen hours of interviews. How could Vince have been having spiritual experiences his whole life, and his mom – with whom he was extremely close – not know about it? For some reason, that old trick question popped into my head: A man and his son were in an automobile accident. The man died on the way to the hospital, but the boy was rushed into surgery. The emergency room surgeon said, "I can't operate, that's my son!" How is this possible?

The surgeon was his mother.

I saw on Vince's face a smile of recognition.

Before he left Arizona, Vince gave his mother a book. In the frontispiece of that book he wrote a note. In the middle was this phrase:

"Remember, mundanity can be elevated to art by perception alone."

Vince knew his mother had been concerned about her appearance lately, as well as concerned how her appearance

reflected on her life. Vince wanted her to know what he thought – he was reminding his mother that her life was beautiful, that she was art, that she was beautiful, and later in the letter he said exactly that.

We all have a choice whether to see the mundane or to see the beauty.

Most of the time, our family life is dangerously mundane. Most of the time, we are in the living room, plopped on the couch, and it all seems pointlessly ordinary. Now and then we get flashes – we feel tapped in to a very intense parallel universe of unbearable feeling. But we do not hang out in that state of connected-grace for very long. We tend to forget about it. We are back to the living room couch. We ask, *what is it all for?* So we could sit on the couch together doing nothing particularly significant?

Do not be fooled by those incredibly ordinary stretches into believing it is not something profound. Do not be fooled into forgetting about the special moments.

We all undergo this trial. We are all tested by this very situation. Routinely. The routineness of this test is part of its trick.

What Rosa remembers about her son's childhood was being at wit's end, thinking she could take it no more, feeling perpetually out of steam. She remembers it being a grind she could not escape.

But Vince remembers it in a different way. He perceived something else entirely. This is what he was trying to tell me; this is what it was like for him:

“I have had spiritual experiences my whole life.”

The child spends most of his life in a haze of distraction.

Now and then, a parent gets through, and for a brief moment this child feels gloriously in touch with a higher power.

Rosa is touching her face. “Vince.”

We get moments.

God is tapping his shoulder. “Vince, pay attention.”

The surgeon is his mother.

God speaks a language to which we are all autistic.

It's all a blur. Then:

“Vince. Vince.”

This is important. Pay attention.

Don't be fooled.

What is god, to a seven-year-old hyperactive boy running circles in a mall?

Is that god really unknown?

For much of our life, we have all been that boy, distracted and confused by all the incredible opportunities, wondering what to make of our lives, tossed around by endlessly shifting circumstance, hopping restlessly, flickering like a candle in an open window, processing our calculations – until someone who loves us comes along and says, “Hey, I need you.”

For this, we should thank them.

Let us take a lesson in finding purpose from an orphan girl who just wanted a glass-topped dresser.

Let us take a lesson in perception from her 23-year-old son.