

WHENEVER MY FATHER HELPED ME with my high-school algebra homework, I cried. Sometimes I cried because I found the problems confusing, but more often I cried because my father wanted me to solve equations his way instead of using my teacher's prescribed method. I was afraid of losing points for doing the problems wrong, even if my answers were right.

My father had earned a degree in electrical engineering on the GI Bill in the 1950s. To him math described how the world works. He was bothered that my homework problems weren't teaching me what I could *do* with math, and he tried mightily to help me see how the equations were relevant to life. "Do you get the big picture?" he'd always ask.

Sometimes I understood what he was telling me, but the *why* didn't interest me much. I just wanted to finish my assignment and keep my A average.

Throughout my teen years, no matter the topic under discussion, my father would often ask, "Do you get the big picture?"

I did not go to medical school as he had hoped. Instead I became a reference librarian. My tendency to focus on details has served me well in my profession, but with age I've come to realize that I sometimes ignore the larger context and end up missing the point.

One day, while reminiscing about my childhood with my seventy-nine-year-old father, I mentioned how he used to ask me if I got the big picture. I wanted to tell him that now, finally, I do.

"Did I?" he said. "I don't remember saying that."

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