



Katie Earnhardt's Theory on Eggs-Over-Easy and Life Experience

By Tracy Sottosanti

“Good night, Mommy.”

Parker's voice reached through the darkness and nudged Katie from her sleep.

Willing herself, Katie rolled toward Parker. “Good night, Sweetheart,” her voice croaked.

Parker turned and went back to his room satisfied.

On her nightstand the clock said it was 3:48AM. Katie blinked heavy eyelids at the blaring numbers and turned over, wriggling quite vigorously to get comfortable again. But it was too late.

There was that pup tent again, feeling like it sprung up inside of her physically, it's stakes driven into the lining of her stomach—probably right next to her esophagus—wherein lived all the usual worries that kept her from sleep. Once the worries were awakened and flooding out of the tent into her chest cavity, there was no going back.

First she worried about the fact that there were was not enough energy in her body, nor minutes in the day to accomplish all that needed to be done once the sun came up. Then she worried about whether her bank account balance would measure up to her grocery list. And without discarding or resolving the first two issues, the third worry, which always waited patiently and confidently at the end of the line because it knew it would always get addressed, followed everything else out of the tent.

Parker.

Would Parker be okay? Would he have a good day? Was she sure he was safe in his bed, or had he decided to take a moonlit stroll around the neighborhood?

That was it.

Katie was out of bed, down the hall and hovering over the lump under the covers in Parker's room. She made sure the lump was breathing and gave it a light kiss on its warm cheek.

She turned and went into the kitchen satisfied, and accepting of her sleepless fate on this inhumanly early Saturday morning. Parker needed water, and Parker needed to say goodnight after getting his water. It was one of the rules of "Parker World" with which Katie had no choice but to comply.

Katie had worked with Parker for years to get him to use his words. With each milestone met, Katie's heart would melt at the sound of his small voice.

"Can I have a drink of water?"

"French fries, please?"

"Good bye, Mommy."

"Goodnight, Mommy."

But now her autistic son was ten years old, and at times like this, at 4 o'clock in the morning, when Parker thought it was essential to say goodnight after getting up for a drink of water, Katie had to remind herself how much she loved hearing his small voice.

Automatically, she turned a burner on under the frying pan on the stove. In the fridge she found the last of the butter, dropped it into the pan and watched it melt.

And though she wasn't remotely hungry, she cracked one egg then another. Watching them sizzle and solidify was a good distraction. It calmed her to manipulate and shape the

whites with the spatula. And it thrilled her to flip them over, because it always felt like a miniature victory when they didn't break.

Katie flipped her eggs onto a plate, turned on the light over the kitchen table and picked up her fork. But something stopped her from taking that first bite.

“Take a look at that.” She whispered admiring the eggs on her plate.

The yolks were shades of pink and orange—two small sunsets calling her to plunge in and let the warm middles spill. The whites were unblemished succulence at the disposal of her fork.

She gave them a score of 20 on appearance and smell alone.

Dare she taste them?

Yes, she dared.

Once in her mouth, the warm, buttery yolk brought about a sigh of satisfaction as the specks of lightly dusted pepper tickled her tongue. There was no denying that Katie's eggs had earned a score of 30.

In her half-awake state, Katie believed that she had reached the pinnacle of a life-long thesis because, at age thirty-five, she had cooked the perfect eggs-over-easy.

She took another bite to confirm.

And yes, they were perfect in every way.

Katie's theory that one's life experience was somehow linked to their ability to cook eggs-over-easy, was a notion she didn't even take seriously herself, but she had entertained it with a collection of data none-the-less.

Observations began when she was nine years old. She used to get on the bus at Grandma Betty's house because her mother didn't want her home alone on the mornings

she had to work. Grandma Betty made the best, most impeccable eggs-over-easy on each and every one of those mornings. And to Katie, there had been none to measure up thus far.

With the scientific method firmly under her belt in third grade and the misfortune of being force-fed brown, crispy egg crumbles by a haphazard babysitter on the weekends, Katie started collecting data in a composition notebook.

At the moment, she was up from the table and digging through a file drawer in search of that very notebook. She felt the edges of the stickers all over the front and back cover inside of a file simply labeled “me,” and pulled it out. The stickers said things like “Outta this world!” and “A-Okay Student” and “Fantastic!” with a rainbow of shooting stars going off. They were from elementary and middle school science projects, tests, quizzes etc. Katie had collected them until her science teachers stopped giving them out.

Armed with a pencil, she sat back down at the table next to her eggs, and opened the book to go over her notes, but some papers were tucked inside. They fell into the messy yolks on her plate. Katie snatched a napkin from the holder on the table, unfolded the papers and wiped them off as she read.

“Case Medical Center Application for Continuing Education” was in bold letter at the top of the first paper. In Katie’s handwriting was her last name, middle initial, then first name. That was as far as she had filled it out. The rest was blank. The application must have been from when Parker was a baby, because that was the last time she had considered going back to school.

When Katie started to notice that Parker was not quite reaching the milestones that he should, a lot of things went to the wayside. Her career, her marriage, her dreams to study

at Case as a microbiologist, were all a second thought after his diagnosis came in black and white.

“Hm.” Katie shrugged thoughtfully then set the papers aside and looked at the hypothesis on the first page of her notebook. It had changed over the years, but not much. At the top of the page in her third-grade handwriting it said:

“If someone is older, then they will make better eggs.”

At the bottom of the page, in her college-aged handwriting, it said:

“If one has more life experience, then they will be able to cook better eggs-over-easy than one who has less life experience.”

And though she kept the log for years, there were still only nine participants because, as Katie had discovered, cooking eggs for someone was somewhat of an intimate task and required Katie to have a certain degree of familiarity with her test subjects, i.e. her mom, her dad, her grandmother, her babysitter, her college roommate, a boyfriend, her ex-husband, and a couple of her neighbors.

Katie would be the tenth participant, which was technically the very least amount of subjects she would need to form some semblance of a conclusion to her hypothesis.

She had to exempt all chef’s from the study due to the fact that they’d had professional training, and didn’t have to figure out eggs-over-easy all on their own. Though as a nice side note, she had collected data on *one* cook who worked at the café where she waited tables while Parker was at school. Under the category of qualifying life experience she had noted:

“Works seventy hours a week. Gets paid next to nothing. Pays child support to ex-wife for his two girls. Only speaks to his girls once a week on Tuesday at 8pm. Supports girlfriend and her three boys. Probably sees none of his seventy-hour-a-week paycheck.”

Then, under the category of *“Quality of Eggs,”* she had noted:

“His tomato-basil omelets are heavenly, better than anything else I’ve tasted on earth.”

Katie turned her notebook over, unfolded a chart glued on the inside of the back cover, and began go over the data penciled into the boxes.

Madelyn McClelland.

Just seeing the name in her notebook was like a punch in the gut—courtesy of life’s general unfairness. As her stomach clenched Katie made herself say the “Katie’s Life” mantra that she had come up with years ago to keep herself sane.

“No one ever said that life would be fair, just hard, and sometimes beautiful.”

Katie closed her eyes and repeated the mantra quietly, because she did not care for the whiny and mocking tone she’d said it with the first time.

“No one ever said that life would be fair, just hard, and sometimes beautiful.”

Katie opened her eyes and looked at the name again. Madelyn McClelland was her beautiful, athletic, annoyingly type-A, overachieving college roommate at Notre Dame. And as far as life tribulations were concerned, Katie was convinced that Madelyn had gotten off easy. Too easy. Everybody loved Madelyn and everything came her way.

And though she wasn’t proud of it, Katie still tried to dodge her phone calls, because lately Madelyn talked the whole time about how her gorgeous and wealthy husband left towels on the floor, and breakfast dishes in the sink, and didn’t wake up with their three-

year-old, Chloe, on weekend mornings. And while Madelyn complained, Katie would think about how she'd wash the breakfast dishes with her tongue and like it, if only it meant that dirty dishes were her biggest problem.

One morning last month when Katie and Parker went to visit Madelyn and Chloe, Madelyn asked Katie if she would like some breakfast.

Very pleased to finally have an opportunity to collect data on Madelyn, Katie replied. "Yes please. I'd love some eggs."

The eggs-whites were brownish and crunchy, the middles exceedingly overdone, and Katie didn't get to eat much of them because she was busy chasing Parker through Madelyn's huge and gorgeous home. For some reason perfectly logical to Parker, he wanted to see inside all of the closets, which were also gorgeous. Never-the-less, Katie drove back to her tiny, shabby bungalow in a better mood than usual that day.

Katie moved onto another name in her notebook, and began to reflect for a moment on a short-lived relationship she'd had in college with Mack Palermo, a shallow meat-head who played on the football team.

His eggs didn't look great, but Katie loved them. She stayed with him a whole month to get to the bottom of things, because there was Mack Palermo, who came from a good family in Michigan, was living the college high-life, and making perfectly tasty eggs-over-easy. He was also messing up Katie's entire thesis. She finally broke up with him over excessive binge drinking and sloppy drunkenness, and marked him down in her notebook as an anomaly. But later that year, the news came out that Mack had been sent to rehab for substance abuse. Bingo! Katie was finally satisfied that her thesis hadn't been disproven. Obviously there had been *something* driving that boy to drink.

Then there was James Earnhardt, Katie's ex-husband. He never did manage to make Katie's eggs without breaking the yolks, so they always earned an automatic zero for appearance. He got an amazing job offer in Chicago shortly after Parker was diagnosed, and decided that the best plan for his life included the job, but did not include Parker and Katie.

Katie shrugged. At least the court-ordered child support paid her mortgage every month.

Katie heard the creak of Parker's mattress and the shuffle of his socks down the carpeted hallway. He was up again. He squinted his eyes at the light over the kitchen table and came to stand in front of Katie.

Without making eye contact, Parker said, "It's night. It's time to sleep." Then he turned and sat on Katie's lap like she was a chair or a couch.

She wrapped her arms around him. "You're right, it's time to sleep. But someone woke me up," she said quietly into his ear.

Katie watched one side of Parker's mouth go up into a half smile. Quickly, he squinted his eyes like he was laughing at his own private joke before his face relaxed back into a blank stare.

She nuzzled her nose into his bed-head curls. "What's so funny?"

Parker blinked innocently.

Parker always made life sound simple. Night *was* the time to sleep. But with a BA in microbiology, Katie knew that Parker was anything but simple. She knew how clumsily the best scientists struggled to understand the human body, and how clueless they really were. Her Parker was a mystery, and always would be.

Katie picked up her pencil, marked down her perfect score on the data chart and recorded some notes. She whispered to herself, “Congratulations, Katie. You have achieved a worthy amount of life experience,” then she began to snicker, and snorted loud enough to startle Parker.

“Eat your eggs. They will get cold.” Parker mumbled the words in a monotone as he curved his sleepy body into Katie’s.

Katie’s breath stopped in her throat when she glanced again at her uneaten, perfectly made, eggs-over-easy.

This is a moment, isn’t it? She thought to herself as she felt the curtains on the puppet next to her heart fall closed.

She shut the notebook and put Parker back to bed. Then she crawled under her own comforter feeling reassured, for the most part, that she was more than qualified to handle her complicated life, or at least the next day, and she fell asleep peacefully.

Subject Relation	Appearance 1-10	Taste 1-10	Smell 1-10	Total Egg Quality 1-30	Life Experience Rating 1-10	Observed Life Experience
Elizabeth (Betty) Smolinsky Grandma	10	10	10	30	10	Mother of ten kids. Has 50 plus grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Husband died of Alzheimers.
Danielle Babysitter	0	0	0	0	0	Sixteen-year-old babysitter.
Mack Palermo College Boyfriend	3	7	10	20	5	Succumbed to substance abuse issues due to pressures placed on him as a college athlete at Notre Dame.
James Earnhardt Ex-Husband	0	0	4	4	3	Who cares.
Madylyn McClelland College Roommate	1	1	1	NOT Perfect	1	Perfect. Perfect. Perfect.
Katie Earnhardt Self	10	10	10	30	10	Divorced. Single mom of disabled child. Thirty-five year old waitress with a BA major in microbiology.