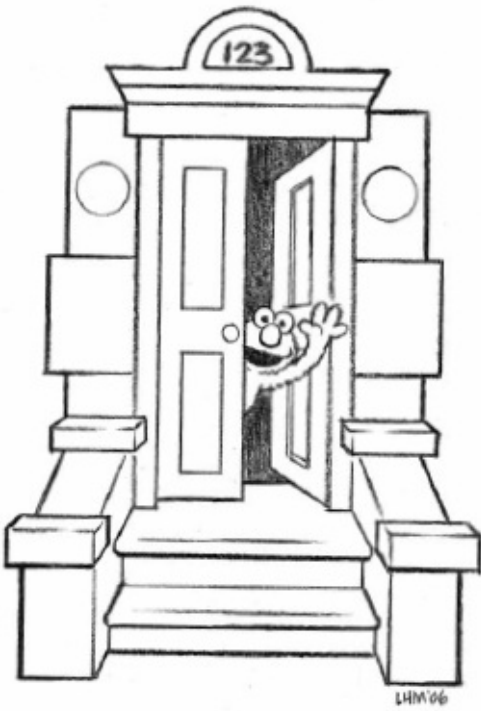


MY LIFE AS A
FURRY RED
MONSTER

KEVIN CLASH WITH
GARY BROZEK



My Life as a
**FURRY RED
MONSTER**

What Being Elmo Has Taught Me
About Life, Love,
and Laughing Out Loud

KEVIN CLASH
with Gary Brozek
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**TO MOM AND DAD,
FOR ALL THE CARING, LOVE, AND SUPPORT**

WELCOME TO “ELMO’S WORLD”—AND MY WORLD, TOO

Once upon a time, a young man was given a special but unusual set of gifts: a fuzzy mop of cherry red fur, crowned with two enormous eyes, which sat high atop an orange egg of a nose that resembled well, an orange egg. The young man seemed to know exactly what to do with his gifts, as you will soon see, but he added one more thing to the mix: a high-pitched voice brimming with joy, and a laugh like no other that would capture, soothe, and delight the hearts of millions both young and old. Yet like Jack’s magic beans, Dorothy’s ruby slippers, and Frodo’s golden ring, the full power of these gifts wouldn’t be revealed to their owner until later in the story...

Like many a fairy tale, mine begins a long time ago in a faraway land, called New York City.

“Give it a voice, Clash,” challenged Richard Hunt, a master Muppeteer and my *Sesame Street* colleague, tossing me a shapeless, soft bundle of red that I caught in midair. Back then I was still a very junior employee, wondering how much longer my dream job as a Muppeteer-in-training would last. Some days, as I worked away at playing chickens and pigs and AMs (Anything Muppets clucking and oinking (and barking, squeaking, or hooting) my way through the television studio in New York, I remembered that I was only a train ride away from Turner’s Station, Maryland, my hometown on the Chesapeake Bay where I happily and unwittingly took the first steps on a path that would lead me right here, to West Fifty-ninth Street.

Without thinking, I grabbed the little monster and put him high on my arm, all at once letting loose with a boundless, childlike laugh—a falsetto squeal that would change my life. “Hello, it’s Elmo!” I called this creature in the happiest of voices. “Hi, everybody!”

Now the adrenaline surged through me, as if a magic wand had been waved, and suddenly I was in New York. In a flash, I was a kid again back home in Turner’s Station, with a blanket strung over the clothesline for a makeshift stage, doing a puppet show for my mom’s daycare kids, lip-synching Earth, Wind & Fire songs. “Another one, another one!” they’d beg, wanting the show to go on. Back then, I had a captive audience. But now, my audience could just change the channel. There was more at stake than my youthful ego—I was working for Jim Henson now, and on one of the most prestigious and popular television shows for children ever created.

But on that day back in 1983, when I greeted Richard as a three-and-a-half-year-old little monster who seemingly came out of nowhere, I wasn’t thinking about that grown-up stuff. Instead, I was soaking up the magic of inspiration, remembering the pure and simple fun of being a child, and

claiming the gift that had literally been thrown at me.

Elmo was born.

MY LIFE AS A FUZZY RED MONSTER is a real-life fairy tale, complete with a rise from obscurity to fame, some wonderful fairy godmothers and godfathers, a villain or two, a cast of loyal townspeople, some pitfalls, and more than a few morals. I started out as a kid who loved to draw and build things, whose imagination was fired not only by the fun-loving family surrounding me, but by the countless hours spent in front of the television, watching everything from *Captain Kangaroo* to *Jonny Quest*, from *A Family in the Family* and *Good Times* to *The Mike Douglas Show*, and, of course, *Sesame Street*.

Gradually I overcame my youthful shyness by performing puppet shows first for neighborhood kids and then all around the Baltimore area, at schools, churches, community events, and later on local television shows. I had always dared to dream large, but even this black kid's imagination could not have come close to inventing the storybook success that I have enjoyed in the nearly thirty years I've worked in this medium I adore.

This is my story, but it's also Elmo's. Elmo connects with people on a level beyond any other character I've performed, and I think I know why. Though he represents youthful curiosity and innocence, behind his childlike simplicity you'll find the wisdom of an old soul, an unfailing sense of humor (and the laugh to go with it), and a loving, lovable hero with a heart worthy of any fairy tale. You'll also discover, as I have, that Elmo is a teacher whose lessons can have a lasting value for adults, not just for the countless children he reaches each day.

What most of us envy about kids is the simplicity of their early years, when having a close family and friends to play with, and unlimited new worlds to discover are the only ingredients needed for a happy life. We long for those days when we would speak our minds and do our thing without worrying about the consequences, mostly oblivious to the past and the future. Children, after all, are masters at the art of living in the moment. And so is Elmo. (It turns out that getting to be three and a half all your life is a pretty good gig!)

As adults, we can't return to those simple days of childhood, but we can draw on their lessons to recapture some very basic pleasures, like that joyful feeling that the sky's the limit. If you are a parent, as I am, you've witnessed a certain no-holds-barred spirit in your youngster and undoubtedly you've looked for ways to nurture that quality, to help your child discover and follow his passions.

That type of nurturing is one of the things that Elmo does best (and my own parents did an excellent job of it, as well), but it doesn't have to end once a little girl or boy no longer watches *Sesame Street*. True, sooner or later, he'll trade up from crayons to computer keyboards, or she'll exchange imaginary friends for trips to the mall with real friends, but there is a certain magical quality of childhood that can be preserved and used as an inner strength throughout adulthood.

Being Elmo helps me tap in to those lessons of childhood every single day of my adult life, and now I want to share what I've learned—about love, joy, creativity, friendship, and so much more—with

you. I believe that this little red monster may hold the key to unlocking that most elusive of fairy-tale treasures: a happy life with promise of a happy ending.

1

LOVE



WHEN I TELL folks what I do for a living (“*What’dya mean you’re Elmo? You’re a forty-five-year-old six-foot African American male with a deep voice, get outta here*”), after they regain the composure, they ask me to explain Elmo’s popularity. Elmo is instantly recognizable in nearly every country in the world. He knows heads of state, A-list celebrities, world-class athletes, Oscar winners, Tony winners, Grammy winners, spelling-bee winners, and lots of babies. If Elmo had a cell phone, it would never stop ringing. Why is this little fur-and-foam bundle of energy such a phenomenon?

I have a one-word answer: love. Elmo connects with children and adults on the purest and most fundamental level, and that is the human desire to love and be loved. It’s as simple as that.

Though I’ve said “Elmo loves you” thousands of times, maybe millions, the thrill remains because children crave hearing that they are loved. (So do most adults, even if they won’t admit it.) And kids love to say it back—“I love you, too!”—and you know they mean it, no matter how many times they say it.

“I love you.” Those are magic words—basic, simple, easy to say, but as adults we often forget their power. We often forget to say them. But Elmo reminds me on a daily basis that love is the foundation for a happy life. And before we can love each other, we have to learn to love ourselves.

BACK HOME IN Turner's Station, a blue-collar community located just east of downtown Baltimore, Maryland, there was plenty of love to go around. In fact, my mom had so much love to give that she shared it with all the neighbor kids, running a family-style daycare center out of our two-bedroom, one-bath home. My siblings—Georgie (the oldest, George Jr.), big sister Anita (we called her Ne-Ne) and little sister Pam—grew up in a kind of kid heaven, where children and love naturally intersected and were never in short supply.

Money, however, was. Officially, my hometown is called Turner Station, but we always referred to it as Turner's Station—just tradition among the locals, I guess. It's fitting that the name confusion exists, because there really are two towns in my mind—the Turner's Station of my youth and memories and the Turner Station of a harsher reality. My father worked hard as a flash welder operator for Raymond Metals to put a roof over our heads, and Mom's daycare work supplemented his income. But that said, I never, ever felt poor in that house, though there were days when all we had for dinner were mayonnaise sandwiches.

Our small brick ranch house on New Pittsburgh Avenue was an unremarkable structure, not much different (at least on the outside) from most others in the neighborhood. It had a side entry and a two-step cement stoop where the neighborhood men often sat smoking and chatting in the quiet of a summer's evening. A chain-link fence kept the constant flow of bicycle, tricycle, wagon, hopscotch, and jump-rope traffic off our small patch of lawn and out of the few geraniums, petunias, and four o'clocks my mother tried to keep thriving in her front-yard garden.

If our property was remarkable in any way, it was because we had two sheds in the backyard instead of the usual one. My father was, and is, an inveterate pack rat. His excuse was that in addition to his day job, he brought in money by being a neighborhood handyman. So any scrap he could salvage from a demolition or remodeling job went into the bursting-at-the-seams shed.

"You can't believe what someone threw away today," he'd announce at dinner, recounting his latest find. Before long, like my dad, I started saving and salvaging my own scraps—old buttons, fabric, worn-out fuzzy slipper, odd bits of plastic or Styrofoam, boxes—any materials that I could turn into the simple puppets I began building and fiddling with as a child.

Now, lest you start picturing a *Sanford and Son* type of junk lot—even though Dad was often told that he looked like Redd Foxx—you need to know that our house sat just a few hundred yards from the Chesapeake Bay. We had a huge backyard dominated by a willow tree, and beyond our lawn a field of tall fescue grass waved in the warm breezes off the water. Depending on the wind direction and tide, the air was filled with the sweet scent of the salty water or the fertile smell of the tacky mudflats we delighted stomping through in search of seashells. On the worst days, the chemical odors from the nearby Bethlehem Steel mill at Sparrows Point overpowered all.

We lived within a half hour ride of vibrant downtown Baltimore, yet our neighborhood was a bucolic mix of homes and vacant fields where we roamed and aired our young imaginations. Necessity remained the true mother of invention, however, and we kids weren't the only creative ones. I still

remember one field where enterprising Mr. Shelton parked a school bus he had converted into a general store. Mom would send me to this mobile pit stop for a few necessities, saving her a trip to Miss Hill's grocery farther away on Wade Street.

My mom was the ultimate "working mother," before that phrase came into vogue. Not only was she busy raising my siblings and me, she had a house full of neighborhood kids in the daycare center she ran. As a result, growing up, my home was filled with the controlled (and sometimes uncontrolled) chaos that children bring. With the four of us there, plus the half dozen or so kids from the neighborhood Mom watched, all that energy exerted a magnetic pull on other toddlers and preteens in the neighborhood.

Our house was a place where many kids took their first staggering steps, where the smell of baby powder and dirty diapers dueled for dominance, and where each evening my mother leaned her head wearily against the counter as she prepared dinner, while I sat at the table making art with assorted empty cereal and Kleenex boxes, colored paper, crayons, and Elmer's glue. I kept one eye on my creation-in-progress and the other on the paper towel roll, waiting for that last sheet to be torn off so I could pounce on the cardboard cylinder and claim it.

I undoubtedly inherited my "crafty" instincts from my parents, Gladys and George Clash. Mom sewed like a pro, and Dad loved to draw and make things, and they often got into the spirit of creating with us kids. Once, after a huge snowstorm, my parents helped us construct a massive snow fort—squared-off igloo. Mom made a flag for us to fly using iron-on letters on red cloth. Though the snow melted, the name we gave to our winter playhouse stuck, and the red flag found a place in our living room. From that point forward my house was known as Fort McKids.

Between neighborhood children, my many relatives who lived nearby, the daycare kids and their parents constantly dropping by, our home life was structured mayhem. And as on *Sesame Street*, humor was a mainstay. I'm grateful for having grown up in what was basically "kid central," because it later made being on the set of *Sesame Street* feel like I was back with my family. With that many kids around, you can be sure that on any given day, the house was populated by at least one grouch and several monsters, and a cookie was certainly something to be devoured, not savored or shared.

Though our house was modest, my sense of home felt larger than our four walls. It extended into the multitude of other homes in which I felt welcome. As a kid, I loved the *Sesame Street* song, "People of Your Neighborhood," because it perfectly captured the connectedness I felt in mine. The homes of our neighbors, Mr. Bernard and his wife, Miss Rose, and Mr. Melvin and Miss Lee, as well as Miss Adeline, Miss Marie, and Miss Eunice, were nearly as familiar as my own. I can still taste the crabs my father's friend Kakie (never Mr. Kakie, always just Kakie) shared with us.

No matter how much activity was going on in the house, I always carved out time to watch *Sesame Street* and other children's shows. My mother never used television as an electronic babysitter, but I'm like so many of my generation with a fierce devotion to the medium that came into our homes on a small screen and somehow enlarged our world beyond all measure.

Sesame Street first aired when I was ten years old, and as soon as I heard the sprightly opening bars of the theme song, I was entranced. I was one of those up-close sitters. I'd park myself a few inches

from the RCA color television set we had. I was so close, I could feel the static electricity of the screen tugging at the peach fuzz on my face and smell the wonderful aroma of electrically heated dust coming from the vents of that lustrous wooden console. No matter how many times my mother yelled “Kevin! Move back before you go blind!” I’d still feel myself powerfully drawn into that world, and the worn-out seats of my Lee jeans bore witness to the pull I was powerless to resist.

I was instantly taken with this new show, with these creatures called “Muppets”—Jim Henson’s trademark way of combining “marionette” and “puppet”—and little did I know that I was already setting the course of my life to exchange my New Pittsburgh Avenue address for 123 Sesame Street. Love makes you do crazy things sometimes.

HE MAY NOT look like it, but that Elmo’s a love machine.

When parents tell me, “My child lives for Elmo,” I tell them that Elmo lives because of the child’s love for him. I don’t just mean that Elmo is alive in their child’s imagination, though that’s certainly a part of it. That child and Elmo aren’t just experiencing love; they’re creating more of it to go around, and in doing so they make the world a better place.

It works like this: Elmo feeds off the love he receives from kids, from the adult characters on the show, and from his fellow Muppets. He doesn’t just take that love in as a fuel and use it up. Instead, he drinks it in and gives it right back in spades. He’s a kind of love-energy power station, and the more love he takes in, the more love he produces for the rest of the world. The more love he produces, the more love he receives, and the cycle completes itself over and over again. Talk about a renewable resource!

I first saw this powerful cycle in action shortly after Elmo debuted and was gaining in popularity in the mid-1980s, when I did an appearance with him at a school in the Bronx. A group of preschoolers were gathered in the library, all of them bundles of fidgeting energy with their legs swinging like metronomes. As soon as Elmo said, “Hello, everybody! Elmo loves you!” it was like a floodgate had opened, and Elmo and I were awash in a surge of little children. I could almost feel an electric charge in the room, as their shouts of “I love you, Elmo!” reverberated off the cinder-block walls. Elmo laughed and opened his arms wide and tried to scoop up all the love and hug it to his chest, all the while repeating “Elmo loves you, too.”

That may have been the first time in my adult life when I finally comprehended the ancient notion that what you put out in the universe comes back to you. Since that day, I’ve learned to try to put as much Elmo and Kevin love out into the world as I can, knowing that it will have a very positive ripple effect. Elmo and the children taught me that one. Somewhere along the road to adulthood, we seem to forget this little secret about the power of love, but it’s worth remembering.

When children tell Elmo that they love him, they all have different styles of expressing the emotion. Some of the more demonstrative kids throw their arms around his neck, snuggle their faces against his, and with an eyes-closed, sigh-heaving, hand-me-my-Tony-Award gesture that projects to the very last row of the theater’s balcony, they proclaim their undying devotion to Elmo in prose.

purple as Telly Monster. “Oh, Elmo, I love you more than chocolate ice cream! More than I love the new baby! Please come and live in my house forever!”

Older kids are a little more matter-of-fact, as if they’ve been married for twenty years and they’re picking up their keys and their bag and heading out the door with an affectionate but perfunctory “Love you.” Still others are more shy and reserved, like the bashful and nervous teen letting his or her feelings be known to their crush for the first time. I often wonder how these children will express their love as adults and how many of them will remain demonstrative and unembarrassed, or if they’ll naturally pull back into more conservative styles as they grow older. It would be ridiculous if we all greeted each other the way the more enthusiastic kids greet Elmo—imagine how long it would take to get that first cup of coffee at the office with all the morning greetings in full swing!—but still, doesn’t imagining a love-filled world like that put a smile on your face?

Children approach Elmo differently depending on their age, but they also are inevitably influenced by the kinds of physical demonstrations of affection they receive at home. Elmo wants to reach all kids, and sometimes he can be like that overly enthusiastic puppy who finds everything in the world so fresh and new and wonderful that he can’t contain himself. Just as kids may squeal in delight when they first see a puppy and then retreat in leg-hugging, face-shielding fear when the puppy starts to jump on them, Elmo can evoke the same response. Over time, I’ve learned to think quickly on my feet, to gauge the kinds of responses I’m getting from a child and either tone down or amp up Elmo’s enthusiasm level accordingly. I constantly have to remind myself that even though they’ve seen Elmo countless times on television, they’re meeting him face-to-face for the very first time.

The funny thing is, no two kids are alike. I’ve seen the quiet ones respond with smiles and giggles that escalate to a full-on Elmo love attack—the eardrum-piercing, vibrating, arms-wide, hugging and squeezing and kissing frontal assault. Other shy kids need a little bit of time to warm up to Elmo and his “de-monster-ative” displays of affection. But in the end, they all come around.

If only we adults could just remember to let our hearts do the talking sometimes, like kids do. Back in December of 2001, we held the first and only MuppetFest in Santa Monica. This was a weekend event for the general public and for television industry insiders. Along with projecting clips of the shows on giant screens and discussing the history of the Muppets, Jim Henson’s London Base Creature Shop (where they built puppets used in films such as *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and animatronic creatures like those in *Babe*) held seminars on the making and maintenance of the puppets, the use of computer-generated images in children’s television, advances in electronics and radio-controlled puppetry, and a host of other topics. As performers, we didn’t attend every seminar but we did all gather for the question-and-answer session. We sat on stage at the Civic Auditorium, each of us with a puppet on our arms.

Now, this wasn’t a gathering of kids; the audience was a collection of adults who grew up watching the show, a number of them dressed in full walk-around costumes of their favorite Muppet, and I noticed more than one super-size Elmo. These folks made me realize the connection between the words “fan” and “fanatic.” (Okay, it was a little like a Trekkie convention.) Most of all, the stuff they knew—from behind-the-scenes trivia to highly technical details—blew me away. The questions ranged widely, and we talked about everything from diversity among the cast and characters and the future of the Muppets, to new directions the *Sesame Street* curriculum might take. It was great to have

such an intelligent and passionate audience, and we tried to have fun with it all, but then something happened to put the whole thing into perspective and to remind us why we were up there in the first place.

We'd placed a microphone in each aisle, where people lined up to ask their questions. At one point I noticed a stirring in the audience, and I saw a little African American girl walking down the aisle. I thought maybe she'd gotten up to stand beside her mommy or something like that. I kept an eye on her. She didn't stop by anyone in line; she just kept coming. We were on a raised stage, and when she got right up to the edge of it, she rested her elbows on the stage floor and cupped her chin on her hands, staring straight in my direction. But she wasn't looking at Kevin Clash. "Hi, Elmo!" she piped.

Steve Whitmire was fielding a question about the responsibility he felt in taking over as Kermit after Jim Henson died, so I don't think too many people heard her. I did, but I didn't want to interrupt Steve's response.

"Hi, Elmo," she repeated. "I love you."

This time her voice was louder. I couldn't let Elmo ignore her, so I had him wave, but I knew that wouldn't hold her. I was dying to get Elmo over to her. By this time, the folks in the front rows who'd seen and heard her started murmuring, and Steve and everyone else onstage were looking at the little girl. I went to the edge of the stage. Elmo bent over and hugged her and said, "Hello. Elmo loves you too." He put his arms around her and hugged and kissed her. That girl's smile lit up the entire darkened portion of the auditorium. She hugged him back and they said their good-byes before she gleefully ran back to her mother.

The audience burst into applause. This little girl could not come to an event where her friend waved and not say hello to him. She had to connect with him and tell him that she loved him. All the rest, the reminiscences and the revelations about new developments, didn't matter to her. After that exchange with the child, that stuff seemed to matter a little less to those of us onstage and in the audience, too. That's the power of giving and receiving love.

MANY OF THE qualities that I observed in my mother as she interacted with her daycare kids are ones I use in puppeteering: having eyes in the back of your head, split-second instincts, improvising, taking genuine delight in the fresh point of view of children and the amazing insights they have, and remaining positive amid mayhem—including trying (and ultimately failing) not to laugh when disciplining a misbehaving child. Those are all wonderful skills, but they are things that you *do*. What separates my mother is more than the sum of what she can do; it is who she *is*, some essence she possesses and broadcasts, not via UHF, VHF, cable, satellite, or Internet, but person to person, soul to soul. I've tried to emulate my mother, and as a result, Elmo possesses and shares with the world the same broadcast-quality love.

To be a truly successful puppeteer, to not only entertain but really connect with children, I must reach into my own heart to project love to every boy and girl in the audience—even when I can't see them. My mother set a powerful example for me by loving all her daycare children as if they were her

flesh and blood. When I am performing Elmo in front of the camera, I remind myself that somewhere out there, there's an impressionable kid perched as close to the television as I used to sit, feeling the same electromagnetic pull, wanting to reach through that screen to touch and be touched. Like my mother, like Elmo, I strive to touch the heart of every child I come into contact with, because that connection is so vital.

From time to time, my mother encountered children who needed extra love and understanding. These weren't the kids who would draw on the couch with crayons. (Those I prefer to think of as "creative risk takers"—little puppeteers-in-the-making whom I identified with.) If my mother saw a child who needed a supplement to the love and attention they got at home, she would become their advocate on every level. She gave love generously, just the way Elmo does. One child, a shy, sensitive little girl with few friends who was often picked on at school, told my mother sadly, "Miss Gladys, those other kids don't ever want to sit by me."

Her words set my mother in motion. Mom made sure the girl's mother knew how her daughter was feeling and began to build up the child's confidence by telling her over and over that she was intelligent and talented. She defended her against neighborhood bullies, and she even wrote a letter to the child's teacher asking her to be on the alert for other kids who were teasing her.

Slowly but surely, the other kids did want to play with the child. My mother gave this little girl love like she was one of her own, and the result was a child who blossomed. Love was my mother's weapon of choice, and it worked every time. Many years later, as an adult, that girl returned to Turner Station, and she thanked my mother for all she'd done to build up her self-esteem and make her feel valued. And she wasn't the only one of the daycare kids who came back to thank my mother—at least two dozen of Miss Gladys's kids, now well into adulthood, still call her. That gesture always touched Mom, but she keeps things in perspective and points out a simple truth. "Imagine," she says, "you're a child going into someone else's house and expecting them to take care of you. You'd be looking for nothing but a bunch of love." And more than anything, that's what my mother strived to provide.

Mom knew to adjust her caregiving style in dealing with different children, just as I've learned to fine-tune Elmo's tone depending on my audience. My parents naturally made the same kinds of adjustments in parenting me and my three siblings. While we were one very united family, we kids also happened to possess four extremely distinct personalities.

Take my brother, George Jr. The same fearlessness and drive that made him such a standout on the basketball court didn't translate as well off the court, mutating into a willfulness and devil-may-care attitude that got him into hot water more than once. One night in the 1970s, George set out for a party in a John Travolta-inspired ensemble. What afflicted him later wasn't *Saturday Night Fever* but plain old alcohol.

This story has grown legendary in my family due mostly to the role a neighborhood girl played in it. Mary Ann was over the moon pining for Georgie, but she was a bit of a tomboy with the muscles to prove it, a quality that came in handy. Fortunately for George, she was at the party and saw him pass out. Mary Ann simply hefted him over her shoulder and carried him across the rain-slick fields and streets of our neighborhood to get him back to our house, managing to keep George's beloved suit

spotless.

I heard some commotion out on the steps and poked my head around the corner of the bedroom door. Mary Ann burst into the living room propping up Georgie.

My father thanked her for delivering the goods in fine order. Then he steered my brother to the couch and waited for him to come out of his stupor.

“So, you like to drink?” Dad asked.

My father went into the kitchen for a six-pack of Pabst Blue Ribbon, which he set on the coffee table.

“Have another drink, son.”

Georgie waved his hand in surrender. “Can I go to bed, Dad? I don’t feel too good.”

“Not till you’ve had a nightcap. I insist!”

George Jr. never had another episode like that one again. My dad had made his point—that drinking to excess was a nasty habit; that it wasn’t romantic and it didn’t make you into a grown-up. Dad knew that George was strong-willed and he could take this kind of approach with him, but it would never have worked with Ne-Ne.

Ne-Ne lived for praise. As overachieving in the classroom as George was in the gym, Ne-Ne was strong-willed and held a high opinion of herself and her abilities. We still talk about the time she told the teacher who gave her a C in a Black History unit that the grade couldn’t have been right because she knew more about the subject than he did. She employed her sharp tongue on the rest of us and was a master of verbal manipulation. Many times Pam and I felt the wrath of Ne-Ne. (She once tossed all my puppets out the window and into the snow; I got back at her by pitching all her cosmetics out after them.) Funny thing was, though, she demonstrated the territoriality and maternal instincts of a big cat. If anyone else insulted or teased us, she verbally pounced on the offender, making her usual wrath look like a love note.

Pam and I shared an artistic bent and a sensitive nature. As the baby, Pam endured a lot of teasing. Ne-Ne seemed to take particular delight in telling her that she was a little wet chicken we’d seen along the side of road and felt sorry for and took in. Out of earshot of Ne-Ne, I’d tell Pam not to mind what her big sister said. Like me, Pam loved to make things. As soon as she learned how, she’d make elaborate clothes for her huge collection of Barbie dolls. Eventually Pam tapped in to her creativity and love of clothing and playing dress-up to go into fashion design.

Whether they were cheering Georgie on from the bleachers as he raced down a basketball court, sitting in an auditorium for one of Ne-Ne’s modern dance performances or award ceremonies, keeping Pam and me fully stocked with art supplies, fabric, and odds and ends to feed our creativity, my parents always found a way to support and love each one of us. Society was still sending a loud message that black children like us didn’t have much to aspire to, but that negative talk was drowned out by our parents, who taught us that our dreams were worthy simply because they were ours.

Mom and Dad also knew that with big dreams comes the potential for big hurts. When you love someone you want to protect that person, particularly if it's a child, but like all parents, they couldn't protect their children from every hurt and they knew it. I've seen the devastating effects of peer pressure, and now that I'm a parent myself, I'm able to see this issue from a different perspective. I've also come to admire how my parents performed a delicate balancing act of protecting but not isolating us.

In my neighborhood, boys my age did one of two things: They either played drums or did sports. Of course the kids used to make fun of me and my growing interest. "Look at him, he's playing with dolls. He sews. He sleeps with his puppets," they'd taunt. Even my mother's friends would chime in saying "Gladys, get that boy out of the house. He needs to play with the other kids."

Somehow, though, the sting of those remarks didn't last very long. My house was always a safe haven, the one place where I felt accepted and where everyone understood my interest in building puppets. Because my parents treated me and my budding passion with respect—showing their support by driving me to hobby shops and fabric stores for supplies, taking me to my first gigs as a performer and encouraging me to make contact with professionals who would ultimately help further my career—I must have developed a thicker hide than most kids my age. Over time, the teasing and taunting had little effect because I felt so protected and secure in my parents' love, and I genuinely didn't care what the other children (or their mothers and fathers) thought of my hobby.

When the kids realized they weren't getting to me in a way that would cause me to stop doing what I loved, eventually they just left me alone. "He's being creative and building things," my parents would tell the other parents. "If he's enjoying himself, we don't really care if he's out playing with other kids or not." My family taught me that it was right to ignore the clamor of the crowd and go your own way.

I received this message over and over: You are loved just as you are. As an adult, I have never forgotten the value of that, and it's a message that Elmo and I try to express as frequently as possible.

By the time I was fifteen, I was capable of staying up all night, sitting at our kitchen table working on puppets. My mother, a gifted seamstress who even made fabric coverings for her shoes to coordinate with her dress, taught me to sew on her old Singer; my father helped me build puppet stages out of scrap wood he'd salvaged. I found materials to build puppets with and spent whatever money I had on supplies. Surrounded by piles of felt, fabric scraps, fake fur, foam, and glue, I could sit for hours happily lost in building puppets.

Once I snatched my mother's fluffy beige bedroom slipper, bending it in the middle before transforming it into a hand puppet. When I showed her that I'd turned that slipper into a puppet named Rocky, making it sing and dance to Neil Sedaka's "Laughter in the Rain," she forgave my thievery with a smile. Little did she know that this was just the beginning of my making off with personal items in the name of puppet creation. I think of it now: What few material possessions my parents had, I was eyeballing—and going after with a pair of scissors! But they hardly batted an eye.

. . .

“WHEN YOU’RE A parent, everything changes. You’ll see things differently—just you wait.” Over and over, after my wife and I found out we were going to have a baby, we’d hear those words, and truth be told, we’d roll our eyes. But, of course, those folks turned out to be right once our daughter, Shannon, was born. We immediately began to look at the world differently, to consider the needs of someone other than ourselves, and to give those needs top priority. (We quickly learned that when a diaper needs to be changed, it needs to be changed *now*, not at the next commercial.) We worried about different things, after Shannon. We found joy in different things, after Shannon. And most of all, we had an increased capacity to give and receive love, after Shannon. Though Genia and I are now divorced, our child brought love into our lives in a way we never expected.

At this point—ten years into Elmo’s life and five years before “Elmo’s World” would debut—the fuzzy red monster was already a big part of my life, as were children. By now, I’d worked for and with kids for most of my life, but I never really thought about being a parent myself.

When I found out that Genia was pregnant, I was overjoyed to know that I was going to be a father. I wanted to see my baby right then and there! I had no idea nine months could take so long to pass. Elmo was an important part of my life, and I was eager for this brand-new child to meet him. Genia had a fantastic job as an oncology nurse at a Johns Hopkins–affiliated hospital, which kept her in Baltimore; I was in the thick of it at *Sesame Street* in New York, five days a week. When I came home on the weekends, I could hardly wait to talk to our baby, though for now I thought it was fun for Elmo to do some of the talking. Genia would be lying on the couch, and I’d sit next to her on the floor. Elmo could snuggle up to her growing belly and tell her all about her parents: how we met, where we lived, who her grandparents and aunts and uncles were.

“Baby,” Elmo would say, “your daddy can’t *wait* for us to get together!” In my mind, the meeting of Shannon and Elmo would be the union of two of the most powerful love forces in the universe.

In my heart, I knew Elmo was reaching my baby girl, but I wanted to do more to welcome her into the world: I wanted to do a video diary told from Elmo’s point of view. When the big day arrived, and we knew it was time to head for the hospital, I called both our moms and Ne-Ne, and helped Genia get ready to go. Then I ran down to the workshop to get Elmo and the video camera. “This is it, baby!” I said to the camera. “You’re going to arrive today!”

By now Genia’s mom had arrived at our house, along with Ne-Ne (who had to do some of the Lamaze sessions in my absence, and who is still as close to Genia as any sister). Genia’s contractions were progressing and it was time to go. As I videotaped everyone preparing to leave, I had Elmo say “And there’s your grandmommy and your Auntie Ne-Ne getting into the car to take you to the hospital.” I panned the camera over to Genia and had Elmo say “And there’s your mommy!” In the background, you can hear Genia saying “Put the damned camera down and get in the car!”

I wanted all of those memories to be preserved in a special way. When Shannon was still a baby, I asked a talented director and editor named David Gumpel, who worked with Jim Henson, to do for me what he’d been doing for his own kids for a while. He put together a music video from the footage I shot over the course of Shannon’s first year. He spliced in some of our still photographs with the video, for a very special presentation. But I wanted more. Liliias White, a Tony award-winning actress and friend, and a regular on *Sesame Street*, sang a song Jill Scott wrote and arranged called “Sha S

My Baby.”

I treasured that video and frequently shared it with a very young Shannon. I knew that she had no memory of those events, but it had been such a special, magical time for us and we wanted her to know how much she was loved. As a little girl, Shannon seemed confused by it; I really think she felt some connection, but she didn't know why. It scared her, and we couldn't show it to her. Over the years, that video has been relegated to a shelf, but every now and then when I get the urge, I watch it and relive the joys of those baby days.

I remember an exhausted but happy Genia and me, shortly after Shannon's birth, relaxing with the baby asleep in her bassinet. When you're a brand-new parent, you can happily pass a lot of time just looking at your baby. Shannon's face was creased with that classic newborn frown, but she looked so angelic with her downy halo of hair. I don't know if I have the words to explain what happened to me in that moment, but it was as if I were truly seeing her for the first time. Until then, it had been almost as if I had been seeing her through Elmo's eyes—I'd so often used Elmo's voice to talk to her in the womb, to narrate the video.

Suddenly I didn't feel the need to have Elmo speak for me. I could just be Daddy with our child in that moment. I don't know if, in those months leading up to Shannon's birth, I'd used Elmo as my messenger because I was afraid and unsure of what to expect as a father. I knew I could trust Elmo to reach her since he rarely failed to touch the heart of any child he met. He'd gotten me this far, but now it was time for Kevin to do his job as a father, and it was a task I took to with a passion.

That night, for the first time, I told my darling little girl that I loved her in my own voice, one on one, eye to eye, and soul to soul. She opened her eyes and smiled at me—I don't care if some people tell me it was just gas.

I thought I'd known love before, but I'd never felt anything like this. I'd seen how my mom shared her love with children, both her own and her daycare kids, and I'd tried to emulate her when I was performing Elmo. But in that intimate moment with Shannon when our eyes and hearts locked, I knew that with Elmo I was simply acting—yes, I was acting from the heart, basing my performance on my genuine love for children, on my happiest memories of childhood, and tapping a reservoir of good intent. But what Shannon and I shared then and ever since is no act, no trick of the camera.

Eight years later, flying home from MuppetFest, I thought about the sophisticated videotape I made of Shannon's first year, and of all the talented people I'd gotten to contribute to it. And then I thought again of that little girl who just wanted to see and touch Elmo and tell him how much she loved him. How simple it is to express our love.

People ask me how being a father to Shannon has influenced my performance as Elmo. I tell them that each time I put Elmo on my arm, I am drawing on the completely unconditional and near-mystical connection I feel with my daughter. It's true what those other parents told Genia and me all those years ago—being a parent changes everything.

Something inside me changed, as well, and for the better. Elmo had taken me to a marvelous place in my life, and after my daughter was born, it was time for me to take him even further.

THOUGH ELMO IS quick to say “Elmo loves you,” he doesn’t express his feelings through words alone. Elmo backs up his words with warm hugs and a gentle rain of kisses for any child who wants them.

Sometimes, for some kids, words simply aren’t enough. Though I felt very loved and protected as a child, open displays of Elmo-style affection weren’t a part of our family culture. This is not uncommon even in the closest families. It’s just personal. When I first started working with Elmo and people brought their kids on set, or I was doing a live appearance, I was stunned by the transformative powers of a loving touch.

When I’m doing a live appearance with Elmo, the kids don’t really see me; they are focused on their buddy. If I were to remain standing, they truly wouldn’t see me because at six foot one, I tower over them. By necessity, to bring Elmo to the children, I have to get down on their level physically (and with my forty-five-year-old knees, it gets tougher every year). When I place Elmo in front of them, I’m amazed at what happens when I have him look directly into their eyes, put his arms around them for a hug or a kiss, or just caress a cheek or shoulder with one of his fuzzy red hands. As Elmo comes to life with these physical displays of affection, so do the children.

Though youngsters are far more uninhibited when it comes to accepting Elmo’s love, he has a dramatic effect on many adults, as well. A few years ago, I was in Baltimore doing an appearance as part of a Sesame Workshop educational outreach program. The room was filled with 154 educators and other professionals, parents, and concerned citizens who wanted to assist with our school readiness program. I was to be the unannounced guest speaker, and when I walked in with Elmo, the audience, who only moments ago had been engaged in a serious, issue-oriented discussion about education, suddenly transformed into a rowdy mass of preschoolers who wanted to hug and kiss the fuzzy red monster. I guess you’re never too old to love.

Elmo’s love has a magical way of traveling through TV sets, but when a child can physically touch him, the power of his love is magnified, as if it somehow becomes more real. Think of what happens when you touch another human being. When you reach out to hold someone’s hand, or hug them or kiss them, you’re affirming that your love truly exists.

I learned through puppetry that to make the illusion believable, the puppets have to interact physically with one another—and especially with humans in the performance. Whenever we have guest stars on *Sesame Street* who will be doing bits with Elmo, I remind them that in order for the performance to be authentic and credible, they have to touch Elmo and let Elmo touch them.

Elmo has taught me that on-screen or off, touch makes the magic of love more real.

THERE’S ONE LAST lesson on love I’d like to share, and that is that before you can love someone else you have to love yourself. Through Elmo, I pass that message along. I learned it from my parents, who taught me the importance of self-respect early in life. With that belief in myself, I gained the freedom

and courage to pursue the life I am trying to live now.

When I talk to children and young adults as Kevin—not Elmo—I always try to impress upon them the importance of having self-respect, of listening to their hearts and going after their dreams. I tell them a little about my background and how I got into puppetry, and then point out that my story mirrors the message of the characters on *Sesame Street*: No matter who you are—a big yellow bird, a grinch in a can, a frog in a trench coat, or a furry red monster—you can love and be loved and find your place in the world.

With Elmo as my partner, with my family as my inspiration, I've learned that love works best when we keep it simple, when we remember to say it and show it, and, most of all, when we share it.

2

JOY



NEARLY EVERY SUNDAY, we'd exchange worn jeans and T-shirts for carefully pressed clothes and shiny shoes, and pile into the family car—the 1919 Get Out and Push, as we kids called it—to gather as a family at the New Psalmist Baptist Church. When the reading was over, we'd get up on our feet for a pew-vibrating, hand-clapping, Lord-praising song. “Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the lands...” I basked in the sound and fury of it all.

To me, there is no greater “joyful noise” than the sounds of music and laughter, and our home at Turner's Station was infused with both. Music was such a part of our lives that I can't recall our house ever being silent. It just made us feel good.

Dad and my Aunt Dorothy and Aunt Odessia sang in the church choir, and my uncles all sang in church, too. For me Sunday mornings meant services and a visit to my Grandma Banks's house in Baltimore. My Uncle Ed was confined to a wheelchair, so he couldn't attend church in person. I'd go to Grandma Banks's, and Uncle Ed and my grandfather would be watching services on their old Philco, their heads bobbing in time with the music.

I'd hang back in my shy style, but the gospel music was so moving my toe would start tapping and I'd start swaying, all caught up in the sounds of Mahalia Jackson singing “Move on Up a Little Higher.”

Higher.”

I'd catch my grandfather's eye and drop my gaze, embarrassed. He'd come over to me, squat down and put his arm around my shoulders. “Hey, Kevin, it's okay to show your love for something. If you feel it, let it show, especially if it's for the Lord.”

Gradually, in the years to come, I'd learn there was no harm in letting my joy out. In fact, doing so would bring it back to me tenfold.

Gospel wasn't the only music I loved. Growing up as I did in the 1960s meant growing up with the sounds of Motown. I loved the Jackson Five, the Chi-Lites, The Stylistics, and Earth, Wind & Fire. I still can't help singing along in falsetto (Motown style, not Elmo style) when I hear “Oh Girl” and “Betcha By Golly Wow,” and of course my feet get happy with “ABC.”

As my musical tastes broadened, I got into jazz in a major way, listening to Dizzy Gillespie, Sarah Vaughan, and Billie Holiday. Louis Armstrong became a favorite, especially for his gravelly voice. One of the first *Sesame Street* characters I performed, before Elmo, was Hoots the Owl (created out of a workshop with director Jon Stone). I based his voice on Armstrong's.

I wasn't alone in this joyful appreciation; everyone in my family loved music and whether we were gathered in front of the television set watching Ed Sullivan, listening to my dad's old 78 rpm Blue Note label albums or my sister Ne-Ne's latest 45, music was a nonstop presence in the Clark household.

While she was fixing dinner or sewing or just plain relaxing, Mom was never without a song. Even now, I can hear her singing, “Shoo Fly Pie and Apple Pan Dowdy makes your eyes light up, your tummy say ‘howdy’...” Like all of us, she had a wide repertoire including tunes from the Carpenters to bluesy Dinah Washington and Mr. Nat “King” Cole.

If you came to my house on any given day, you'd hear music, and you'd also hear laughter. With so many kids underfoot—me and my siblings and our friends, mixing with my mother's daycare kids—laughter was inevitable (as were tears). I loved spending time with all the babies and little kids entertaining them with my first puppets and making them laugh. Once I stepped away from the laughter and went out into the world, I became shy and withdrawn. In fact, I was so uncomfortably shy on some days that if I was walking down the street and saw somebody I knew coming toward me, I'd dash across the road to the far sidewalk.

But my shyness disappeared as soon as I slipped on a homemade puppet and entertained the other kids. I was too young to make sense of my split personality—the shy guy versus the entertainer—but I did know that from an early age, I had a strong urge to make others laugh and to bring them joy. Using my puppets, I rarely failed to get the reaction I wanted from my first audiences, and my confidence began to grow.

Over and over again, I'd watch entertainers on television and study them. On *The Mike Douglas Show*, I saw Richard Pryor, Totie Fields, and many other comedians do their thing. My dad would buy comedy albums—Pryor, Moms Mabley, and Redd Foxx (we weren't allowed to listen to some parts

and of course Bill Cosby. I listened to Cosby's classic live recording, *Wonderfulness*, till I practically wore the grooves off that record. I would laugh until I cried, listening to him recount the story "Chicken Heart," and a few other hilarious bits. (Imagine how thrilled I was when many years later Elmo and I got to work with Cosby on *Sesame Street*.) The sound of laughter and applause was "wonderfulness" in itself, and more and more, I began to crave anything close to that type of audience response when I did my own performances for the kids.

I wasn't the only Clash kid on the prowl for a laugh. With Ne-Ne as our ringleader, Pam and I would peel price stickers off the groceries Mom would bring home. Once Dad was settled in his favorite chair for a quick predinner nap, we'd make our move, silently surrounding his sleeping figure and putting the stickers on his face. We especially loved to put one on his lip and watch it flutter as he breathed. We'd scatter and then Dad would wake up, rub his face, and come to dinner with a few bits of sticker clinging to his skin, totally oblivious. We'd sit around the table staring down at our food, our shoulders quaking. Mom was our accomplice, her trademark nervous sniffing masking her effort to not crack up too soon.

"What's so funny?" he'd ask, and we'd bust out laughing as he touched his face.

Now we live in the Comedy Central era, so our kid-stuff stunt may not seem like much in the world of entertainment, but we got a huge kick out of seeing our dad with a .99 tag on his forehead, and the thought of it still makes me grin.

My dad liked to play a prank or two himself. One day he came home from work and, instead of going for his chair, he stood in the kitchen while we helped our mom get dinner ready, his long coat still buttoned up. I saw something bulging near his chest. I also noticed that he was standing funny with his shoulders hunched up around his neck and his arms folded across his chest like he was freezing.

"Kevin, how was school today?" he asked, and this time the space just under his left armpit seemed to inflate.

I looked at him and saw that his eyes were dancing and the corners of his mouth were twitching. Something was up.

He kept asking Pam and me more how-was-your-day questions, and his coat was acting like Jiffy Pop on the stove. Suddenly I saw something brown poking out from the space between the buttons—puppy's leg. My dad couldn't keep the little creature under control much longer, and he unbuttoned his coat and pulled out a tiny Chihuahua that we eventually named Pepper.

In the years to come, that crazy little dog would make us laugh as much as any comedian, but in that moment, it was my father who delivered the joy.

ELMO'S LAUGH, AS infectious as it is frequent, is an important part of his personality, and it's part of mine as well. When I feel happy, I often punctuate the ends of my sentences with laughter, just like

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