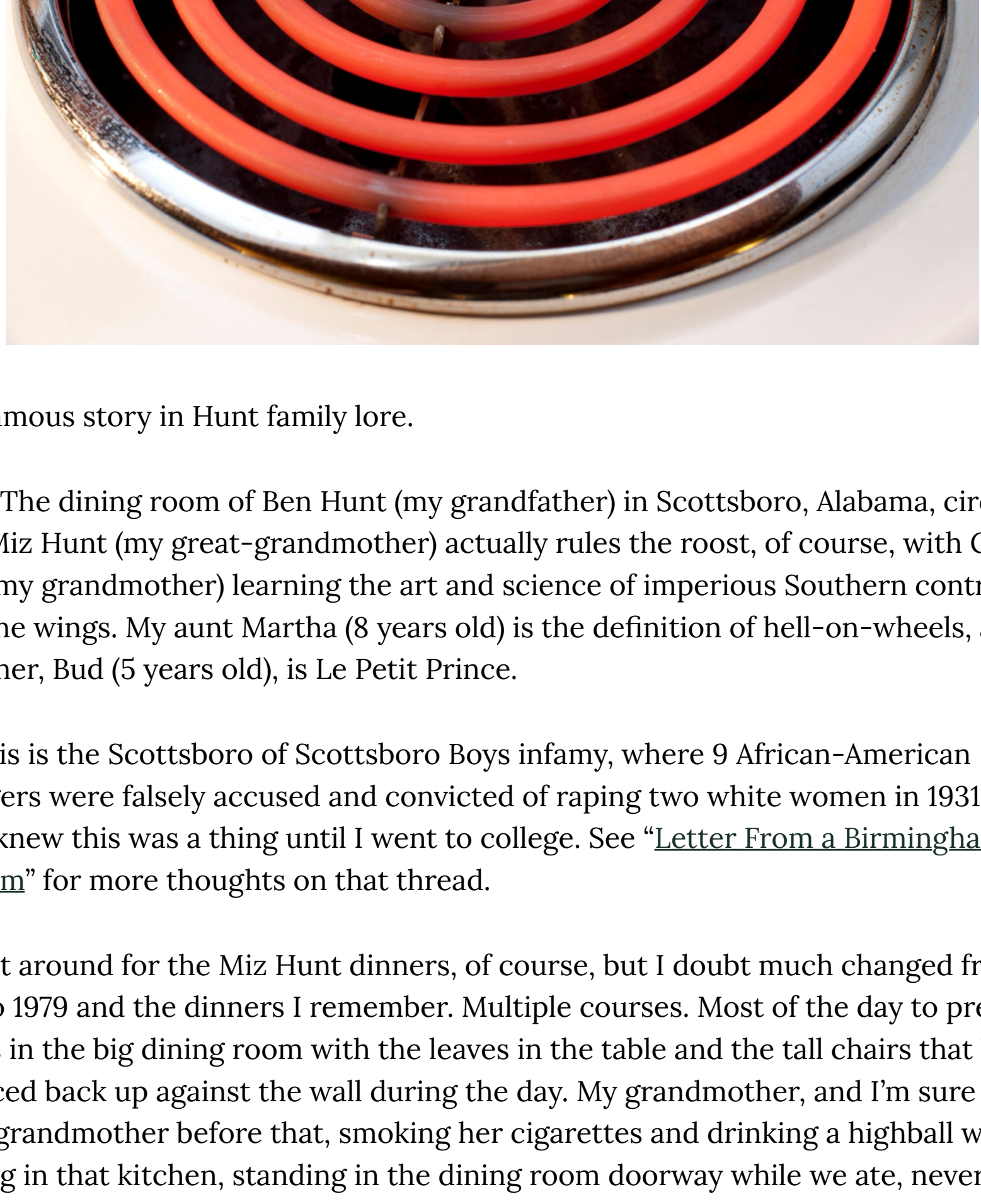
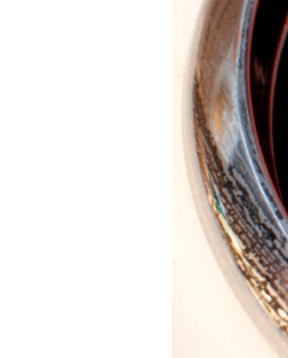


Oh, hell, Martha, go ahead and burn yourself if you want to.

October 29, 2018 by Ben Hunt



It's a famous story in Hunt family lore.

Scene: The dining room of Ben Hunt (my grandfather) in Scottsboro, Alabama, circa 1939. Miz Hunt (my great-grandmother) actually rules the roost, of course, with Grace Hunt (my grandmother) learning the art and science of imperious Southern control from the wings. My aunt Martha (8 years old) is the definition of hell-on-wheels, and my father, Bud (5 years old), is Le Petit Prince.

Yes, this is the Scottsboro of Scottsboro Boys infamy, where 9 African-American teenagers were falsely accused and convicted of raping two white women in 1931. I never knew this was a thing until I went to college. See "[Letter From a Birmingham Museum](#)" for more thoughts on that thread.

I wasn't around for the Miz Hunt dinners, of course, but I doubt much changed from 1939 to 1979 and the dinners I remember. Multiple courses. Most of the day to prepare. Always in the big dining room with the leaves in the table and the tall chairs that had to be placed back up against the wall during the day. My grandmother, and I'm sure my great-grandmother before that, smoking her cigarettes and drinking a highball while cooking in that kitchen, standing in the dining room doorway while we ate, never sitting down herself until the very end of dinner.

Apparently, however, for this particular dinner in 1939, all of the adult Hunts and a few family friends were, in fact, sitting down at the table. There was some sort of baked dessert in the oven, and someone needed to go fetch it.

My grandmother Grace decided to send her daughter Martha to bring the dessert in for the table, admonishing her to be VERY, VERY careful because the oven was EXTREMELY hot.

Miz Hunt, who I imagine was more than a little perturbed that her daughter-in-law had taken it upon herself to send Martha to bring in the dessert, nevertheless relented, but repeated the warning. "Martha! You must be very careful. Do NOT burn yourself!"

Now my aunt Martha was ... how to put this ... a person who enjoyed the bright light of attention. No shrinking violet, she. So naturally what transpired was a back-and-forth routine where Martha would shout out from the kitchen how scared she was, and her mother and grandmother would shout back that she must be VERY careful and whatever she did, she MUST NOT burn herself.

At which point my grandfather, a large man who may or may not have had a glass of rye or three by this point in the evening, growled loudly, "Oh, hell, Martha, go ahead and burn yourself if you want to."

Dessert was then served.

I have often thought about this story over the course of raising four daughters of my own, and I thought about it again when I received this email from a young ET pack member.

Hello Dr. Hunt,

I've been following your blog for about a year now and your writing and ways of viewing the world have really clicked with me. Thank you for providing all of this writing to me for free for so long, and I have recently decided to subscribe to the paid version for this month.

I do have a question for you that might seem a little strange since I think I'm a bit younger than your usual audience, (Second year in college)

You started my interest in investing and last summer and I interned at a fund doing quantitative research, which was fun and interesting but I still feel like I don't have any discernible direction where I can commit to doing something for the rest of my life. I also spent many years before college working 40 hours a week while in school to be able to afford it so I don't like the idea of me wasting that by spending so much time not knowing what I'm trying to get out of it.

Coming into college I wanted to work in politics, policy research or something similar and that led me to study political science and statistics, with an initial plan to go to law school if I could find a way to afford it but I go back and forth on these ideas all the time and realize that I have very little clue. And while I enjoy the math and political science I learn, things like Epsilon Theory expose me to so many interesting things going on in the world that I have a hard time focusing on any one thing. So to sum it all up I am curious if you've ever written something that might relate to figuring out how you want to spend your life, or have any advice you could offer.

Thank you!

M.

I could have written this exact same letter in my second year at college!

Seriously, word for word, that was pretty much me. And unfortunately for M., I no more have Answers for his questions now than I did for my questions then. Like everyone else in this world, I stumbled and bumbled my way through.

Looking back, though, I do have some strong views on a PROCESS to guide any younger person's stumbling and bumbling through life. It's a variation on the [Clear Eyes, Full Hearts](#) process, of course, but it's more prescriptive and (appropriately, I think) avuncular. [It's also a good example of what a regret minimization strategy \(as opposed to a reward maximization strategy\) looks like.](#)

In order, it's this:

- **Build your intellectual capital.** I've known so many people in my life who have enormous intellectual horsepower, but who were in such a ferocious hurry to get somewhere that they never built their intellectual capital. So when they got to wherever they were hurrying ... they had nothing to say beyond the narrow confines of their day job. And they knew it. It's one of the most disappointing outcomes in life - to be very successful in your chosen field, but to find it AND yourself to be oddly empty. Can you catch up? Can you be a late-in-life learner? Sure. But just like losing 20 pounds on a diet gets exponentially harder the older you get, so does adding meaningfully to your intellectual capital. Build it NOW.

- **Get your passport stamped.** We live in a world of credentials. I'm not saying that's a good thing or a bad thing. I'm just saying that it IS. The most important credential you can have today is some sort of degree from an elite university. It doesn't matter if it's an undergraduate or graduate degree, and I'm not going to argue with anyone about whether a school is "elite" or not. The second most important credential for a young person is a 2+ year stint with an elite institution in an elite city. Again, don't @ me. There are work-arounds and effective substitutes for both of these credentialing mechanisms. But your path will be immeasurably easier if you get your Team Elite passport stamped NOW.

- **Train your voice. And use it.** Again, it's one of the most disappointing outcomes in life - to know that you're a creative person, to have something important that's going to burn you up inside if you don't share it with the world ... but to lack the words or the music or the art to do so. In my experience, the unhappiest people in the world are mute creatives. To paraphrase Langston Hughes, sometimes they shrivel. Sometimes they fester. And sometimes they explode.

Every creative person should start a blog to express and develop their art. Do not distribute it. Do not publicize it. Do not play [the ego-driven Game of You](#). Erase it all every six months if that's what you need to do, because odds are you have nothing interesting to say! But start training your voice NOW, because one day you will.

And then there's a fourth instruction - the most important instruction of all - which you can probably already guess from the set-up of this note. See, I can tell M. and I can tell my daughters what NOT to do until I'm blue in the face. Because I've burned myself on lots of stoves, personally and professionally, and I'd love to prevent M. and my daughters from making the exact same mistakes that I made.

But they're never going to be the exact same mistakes.

Burning yourself on a stove because you made a bad decision in the immediate area is getting the Answer wrong. It is an idiosyncratic event error specific to your life. There may be surface similarities to the node mistakes that I have made, and certainly we feel the pain of the burn in the same way. But my burns are my burns. Your burns are your burns. And that's exactly how it should be. We all need some burns. But they have to be OUR burns.

Ending up in a less than satisfying life because you made a bad decision in the metagame is getting the Process wrong. It is not idiosyncratic to your life, but has been shared and endured by unassisted humans for thousands of years. It is not an event error. It is a category error.

Getting the Process wrong leads to an entirely different sort of regret than getting the Answer wrong. It creates profound regret, a regret that can't easily be fixed without damaging yourself and damaging others.

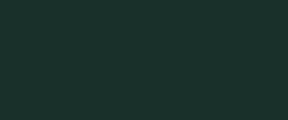
I can't advise you on the Answers. I won't advise you on the Answers. But I will advise you on the Process. Because that's what we do for our fellow pack members.

So hell, Martha, go ahead and burn yourself if you want to.

And you will want to. And that's a good thing.



October 29, 2018 by Ben Hunt



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Mark Kahn

Maybe I'm too close to ET (been reading it since day one's "Epsilon Theory Manifesto" well worth the many re-reads I've given it / encouraged you to start with it or go back to it if you haven't already), but this note is better than any high school or college graduation speech ("follow your passion, take chances, help others - fine, good, blah, blah, zzzz...") I've ever heard. I am painfully practical (it was the only thing that counted to my Depression-Era parents - "follow your dreams" was considered stupidity in my house / "get a job" was THE GOAL.... Read more >>

23 hours ago

Rob H.

One of my favorite blogs. Wait But Why, did a long piece earlier this year about picking a career path in a world with many new unconventional options (something that most of the old geezers on this site can't relate to) - <https://waitbutwhy.com/2018/04/picking-career.html>

As an aside, I can't recommend that site enough. Their long piece on AI is one of the scariest things you will ever read and their multi-part series on Elon Musk is fascinating.

22 hours ago

Ben Hunt

Yes, I'm a Wait But Why fan from way back.

17 hours ago

Sir Steven Wilkinson

I am the father of four teenage children, all chugging through the maturing process somewhere between 14 and 19 and I have been asking myself what sort of pithy advice, which potted and pickled version of my experience I can pass on to them to make their process somewhat less - how should I put it - erratic, than my own? So I studied this response with its tripartite cluster of advice and am left wondering if poor M is any the wiser for the intervention. Ben, nothing you write is ever trite or superficial and all of these three... Read more >>

22 hours ago

Ben Hunt

You have an unlimited number of words here, Steven, particularly when they are as well chosen as these! Thank you for this contribution to the pack.

17 hours ago

Thomas

I salute you, Sir! Sometimes just giving young people a solid answer is good enough. Trust in their ability to decipher whether it's genuine or utter bollocks. It is a terrible crime that the world we live in is being so thoroughly marketed and fearfully repressed to the point where young people can scarcely grow at all. Of course there is no reliable magic formula that can breakthrough the deceits and conformity, but anybody encouraging the up and coming generations to confront what makes "your blood boil most" is a bonafide champion for the future.

14 hours ago

chudson

Fantastic advice and just forwarded it to a young friend. Invest in yourself, build skills, build a network, and fail quickly.

22 hours ago

Ben Hunt

Right on.

16 hours ago

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