

From *Almond Crunch* To *Almond Joy*

One of my favorite aunts was a career high school teacher. Having been born at the dawn of the 20th century, Allene Gray somehow managed to work her way from humble origins on a hardscrabble farm in the fertile Black-Land Country of East Texas.

Negotiating the Great Depression, my aunt eventually earned a master's degree in Latin from the University of Texas at Austin. During 38 years as a career high school Latin teacher, "Miss Gray" had the privilege of educating well over 2000 students. Her pupils included a future Texas Supreme Court justice, a future Rhodes Scholar, along with a handful of soon-to-become collegiate All-American football players—most of whom, ironically, ended up playing for UT.

Anyway, by the time I reached high school, you can probably guess which foreign language I "chose". Long story short, Ed and Juanita's baby boy enrolled in Latin... as a freshman.

Some things in life are just not negotiable.

The first Latin sentence I learned? "Britania est insula." ("Britain is an island.") Then of course there are Caesar's immortal words: "Veni, vidi, vici". (For those of you keeping score at home, this is: "I came, I saw, I conquered").

Oh, and another Latin word popped up for me back then—the one for "almond", or *amygdala*. (Cue "The Twilight Zone" theme song here).

As many of you know, the amygdala is the tip-of-the-pinkie/almond-sized structure best known as the "fight-flight-fear" center of the brain. For anyone out there who has been reading neuroscientists Drs. Allan Schore/Joe LeDoux's snail-mail over the years, you know that the amygdala plays a key role in why it is that so many children with complex trauma/attachment struggles, well... struggle. As our own Sebern Fisher likes to say, "Early maltreatment causes the amygdala to be hijacked."

Borrowing from frequent events of the 1970s', how exactly does the amygdala get hijacked via Braniff Airlines, to Cuba? Well, research indicates that the amygdala comes on line at 6 months in utero. What if the birth mother during the third trimester is experiencing incredible stress from regular abuse at the hands of a ne'er-do-well, live-in male? Or what if she is doing drugs? Or what if both are occurring? Well, she is experiencing a toxic ongoing barrage of stress hormones which deleteriously affect the developing fetus and its amygdala. And let's say that once the child is born, the same environmental chaos continues—doing further damage to the amygdala.

Say hello to *Almond Crunch*.

For the adoptive parents of such a youngster, what are the options? Fortunately, our complex trauma/attachment intervention tool box is getting better and better. As I've stated in previous articles, we're constantly learning more about approaches

such as neurofeedback and sensory integration therapy. In addition, improvements in psychopharmacology have played a vital role by way of preventing a youngster's *Almond Crunch* to spoil, taint, and inhibit good quality attachment/trauma psychotherapy. Mixing metaphors here, we need to adequately till the garden before any tasty chocolate can be grown.

An *Almond Joy* doesn't just appear out of nowhere.

Similarly, so many of our children's amygdalas need attending-to—as a precursor to realistic expectations vis-a-vis talk therapy. If you have a child who has done well with psychotherapy alone, count your blessings. If not, perhaps we need to check in on the amygdala. I'll take an *Almond Joy* versus an *Almond Crunch* any day.

In the meantime, dear parents, *pax vobiscum* and *carpe diem!*