The Big Questions

ANNE CUSHMAN returns with more about her young son, Skye, who keeps her thinking with his many questions. As the Zen masters say, look not for answers but at the nature of questioning mind itself.

PHOTOS BY LOU HAWTHORNE

Anne's son, Skye

MY SON SKYE was three years old when he became a vegetarian while waiting in line at the meat department at Whole Foods.

His qualms about flesh-eating had started a few days earlier, when he learned that while soy burgers were made from soybeans, salmon burgers were not, in fact, made from salmon beans. ("Not a fish that swims in the sea!" he had laughed in disbelief when I explained what a salmon was. And then, concerned: "How do they get it to stop swimming in the sea and be a burger?") Now I was pushing him through the produce aisles, as he perched in the basket of a heaped shopping cart gnawing on a sesame-seed bagel.

"I'd like a pound of ground turkey," I told the white-aproned man behind the meat counter. Skye spun around in his seat. The week before we had admired wild turkeys waddling through the tall grass at Spirit Rock Meditation Center—their red wattles, their curved beaks, their drooping tailfeathers. "Turkey? Where??" he asked.

"Um…right there." I gestured, reluctantly, at the heap of shredded raw meat in the glass case. He leaned over and stared at it, then looked at me suspiciously. "What do you mean, *ground???*" he asked.

Skye's almost six now, and he hasn't eaten meat since. I cook mainly vegetarian food at home, and until recently, he's been gracious about my occasional carnivorous moments. But lately, he's been getting in my face about it. "Did that chicken want to die?" he asked as I gnawed on a drumstick while he ate cheese ravioli. "What did it think when it saw the farmer coming to kill it? Did it run away? Was its mother sad?" When he pressed me for details about how the chicken died, I told him that someone had probably cut off its head. "Didn't that hurt the chicken's feelings?" he asked.

I've explained to him that life endlessly devours life, that eating usually involves killing another living thing, and that the important thing is to do it with gratitude and respect. I tell him that different people make different decisions about what kind of living creatures they're willing to eat. (I know I'm stepping into controversial waters here, but even Buddhists have differing opinions on how to interpret the non-killing precept, with sincere practitioners—including monks—running the gamut from vegans to omnivores.) But, he argued, "You can eat the fruit of a tree without killing it."

Was I going to have a little Jain in my home, living on fruit and nuts and wearing a white mask so he didn't inhale any insects? Even bread-baking raised tough questions when he learned that yeast was a living organism that got killed in the oven. "Does yeast know it exists?" he asked, frowning. "Does it think, *'I'm yeast! And I don't want to die!'*?"

Last summer, Skye melted down when he saw me smash a giant cockroach with my flip-flop in the bedroom of our vacation beach house. "That cockroach wanted to live!" he sobbed. "And now they're going to put you in prison."

"Sweetie, they don't put people in prison for killing cockroaches," I explained.

"But they put the man who shot John Lennon in prison!"

I clarified that John Lennon was a Beatle, not a cockroach, and that people usually did try to get rid of cockroaches in their homes, because they carried germs and could make people sick.

ANNE CUSHMAN is a contributing editor to Tricycle *and* Yoga Journal*, and the director of the Mindfulness Yoga training program at Spirit Rock Meditation Center.*

"Does '*get rid of*' mean '*squish*'?" he asked.

"Sometimes," I admitted (although once on a retreat I met a Thai monk who persuaded ants to leave my tent by chanting the *Heart Sutra*). Skye thought for a while. "What does '*get rid of George Bush*' mean?" he asked.

When it comes to unanswerable questions, chickens and yeast and George Bush are just the beginning. Last summer, just learning to read and write, Skye insisted that we Google a question he laboriously typed into the computer himself, with me helping him sound out the words: "Why do people kill other people?"

I told him you couldn't find answers to that question on the Internet (although our search did bring up a slough of articles on gun control). In the months since, we've revisited the topic of war and violence again and again. We've talked about ignorance, and pain, and starvation. We've talked about battles to control resources such as food and water. We've talked about people who believe that if you're hurt, hurting someone else will make you feel better, and people whose mommies and daddies weren't able to teach them that it's always better to use your words.

But every answer leads to more questions. Why didn't their mommies teach them? Why don't we send them food instead of fighting them? "It's mainly *guys* who kill people," he said over dinner one night.

"Why do you think that?" I asked.

"Because when I see the newspaper and there are pictures of wars it's almost always men. Why do men fight wars and women don't?"

Scraping up the the last of the ice cream out of his bowl one evening, he asked me cheerfully, "When I'm dead, will I remember *me???*"

The biggest questions of all tend to come at bedtime. "Where did the earth come from?" he asked as we snuggled under his comforter and looked up at the glow-in-the-dark constellations on his ceiling. "Where did the very first people come from? Will people still be here to watch the earth when it dies?"

I offered a two-minute summary of evolution and the Big Bang. "But why did apes start turning into people?" he pursued. "And where did all the stuff that was in the Big Bang come from?" And then, a few minutes later: "That explosion—what was it called? The Big Bang? Is that what made San Rafael?"

When he heard about Skye's existential queries, my 83-year-old father—a Catholic retired Army general—sent me an e-mail: "Why not just tell Skye that some people say that God made all things, visible and invisible, and leave it at that? Then he can work out the rest as he goes along."

Just refer the inquiries up the chain of command to the ultimate Commander-in-Chief? I resist the idea. But as the questions keep coming, I have to admit that I swim in a sea of mysteries. Every few minutes, Skye confronts me with my own ignorance. I do not know how plastic is made. I do not know if the earth always had a moon. I do not know how computers print or how film is developed or whether yeast poops. Many of the things I used to know I no longer remember—how to solve quadratic equations, the reasons for the War of 1812, the difference between mitosis and meiosis. And many of the black-and-white things I used to be sure of (what good people are supposed to eat and not eat, why Skye's daddy and I are no longer married) have now dissolved into shades of grey.

Anne and Skye

For some answers, Skye and I can turn to the dictionary or the encyclopedia or the Internet. I bought him a beautiful book about the origins of the universe called *Born with a Bang*, which tells him that every particle of his body is made from stardust formed in a mother star that exploded billions of years ago. Curled on the couch by the fire with him in my lap, I read it aloud to him, and we marveled together.

But ultimately, I want for him what I want for myself—to be able to live in the mystery itself, and trust its creative unfolding. I want him to wrestle with the challenge of how to live with peace and integrity in a complex and sometimes violent world. I want him to learn, as the poet Rilke wrote, to "love the questions themselves like locked rooms or a book written in a foreign tongue." I don't want the illusion of definitive answers to form a tough skin on his tender heart, which still vibrates with equal sympathy for yeast, for soldiers, for cockroaches, for John Lennon.

Skye still thinks that I can give him answers. But the truth is that he is the one who is teaching me. His endless questions remind me again and again of the joy and heartbreak and unsolvable koans that surround us at every moment. And they remind me to be grateful for the chance to be alive in the middle of this vast unknown.

Every night before dinner, Skye and I hold hands and he offers an improvised blessing. Last week, as the relentless spring rains beat down on our roof, he took my hand, looked at our baked tofu, rice, and salad, and said, "Thank-you to the beautiful earth for making all this food. Thank-you to the rain for helping to grow it. Thank you to all the great people we love. And thank-you to the Big Bang for making it all happen."

That's the first time I've ever said "thank-you" to the Big Bang. But I have a feeling it won't be the last. ♦