

The image features a large blue puzzle piece shape centered on a white background of interlocking puzzle pieces. The blue shape has a jagged, irregular border. In the center of the blue shape, there is a white puzzle piece that is missing, creating a negative space. The text is centered within the blue area.

A Puzzler's Perspective

Dennis Family Christmas 2023

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The older I get, the more challenging it is to understand all the pieces of my family and life, let alone the craziness going on in the world. All of us cope in different ways. While I live and work in an industry of change (banking), my wife has spent a lifetime bringing order to our lives and is far better prepared for these confusing times. Fortunately, after 48 years of marriage, we still see life differently.

She is a master manager who oversaw the raising of 7 kids and the chaos of managing schedules for everyone for 35 years from 1977 to 2012 (starting with the birth of our first through the college graduation of our 7th). Further, she embarked on an advanced degree in grandkids in 2006, when our first grandchild was born to Ashley and Kyle. Since then, Donna has added multiple years of experience with the births and grand-management of 26 grandchildren.

Now as our grandkids continue to grow up, we have found our routines changing dramatically. Of course, Donna continues to work on her juggling skills, with multiple grand-baby-sitting duties, but kids get older and need less sitting and geography enters the picture. Six of our grands are in Chicago (Kyle and Ashley's kids), and five are now in Cali, Colombia (our missionary son Michael's and Beth's kids). That leaves 15 here locally and some of these are older kids. Our Gilbert, Arizona preacher, Jeremiah, has added to our overall family size by getting married in September (welcome to the family, Edna!) which in time could affect our future count of grands. Our missionary daughter in Paris, Rachel, is still single, so no grands in sight there.



Reflecting back on my wife's experiences over the years, her daytimes and her pastimes have changed. In the early years when our kids were in high school, she ran the Booster Club (i.e. never ending concession stands for soccer, track, football and basketball) for 10 years. After the Booster Club, she turned her focus to genealogy and finding dead people, so we visited countless cemeteries across the country (from North Carolina to California) in search of our ancestors. Of course, over all these years, she organized these activities around her love for the Razorback football team. I have often observed that she is such a fan that she should be cremated and have her ashes spread over the Razorback goal lines so that if anyone scores on her Razorbacks, it will be over her dead body. Admittedly, I am a Razorback fan by marriage.

Most of these time fillers are in our rearview mirror (except for the Hogs) and not surprisingly, my wife has adopted a new endeavor, one that I find both fascinating and frustrating. My wife has become a dissectologist.

What in the world is a dissectologist, you ask? No, it has nothing to do with biology degrees or dissecting frogs or fetal pigs. The phrase comes from the year 1767 when engraver and mapmaker John Spilsbury overlaid a geography map on a piece of wood and created the first jigsaw puzzle. Since actual jigsaws were not invented at the time, when Mr. Spilsbury made the first puzzle, he called it a dissected map, thus anyone working the dissected map was a dissectologist.



When the jigsaw was invented in the late 1890's and used to cut puzzles, the puzzles became known as "jigsaw" puzzles. In more recent times, people who work jigsaw puzzles are called Puzzlers, which is much easier to say and is never confused with a biology degree.

The original puzzles, intended for educational purposes, grew in popularity in the 19th century. Over time, with advances in printing technology, jigsaw puzzles became more affordable and appreciated as a leisure activity. Thanks to a couple of World Wars, a Depression (and let's not forget COVID), jigsaws have continued to gain popularity by providing a way to pass the time with families, relieve stress and keep our gray matter working.

My purpose in drawing your attention to my wife's Puzzler pastime is to extract some wisdom, or "Puzzler Principles," from those who love working puzzles. As an optimist, I hope that such Principles will help us dufer puzzlers work puzzles better and better face the challenges we have in our personal life puzzle.



Puzzler Principle #1. My Puzzler wife is not content to work a 50 or 100-piece puzzle or one with shapes in the form of animals or farm implements (especially those that make a barking, meowing or tractor noise when you put the right piece in the right slot). My younger grands and I love those, but Donna insists that 1,000-piece puzzles with clever pictures, or interesting historical themes are the best puzzles to work. We have walls (and even a couple of rooms) of completed *and framed* Razorback Puzzles, Route 66 Puzzles and National Park Puzzles. According to my wife, thousand-piece puzzles are complex enough to be challenging but small enough to be completed with minimal frustration.

Puzzles reflect certain pictures of life, and life mirrors certain Puzzler Principles. Most of us have or will have challenges or problems in our lives. And most of us would agree that the smaller the problem, the better. For example, I prefer 50-100 piece problems, but few of us are that lucky and just hope to stay under a 1,000. *Mirroring my wife's puzzle philosophy, I think that the best we can hope for is that our challenges are not too complex and can be solved in a reasonable timeframe with as little pain as possible.*



Puzzler Principle #2. Once a Puzzler determines his or her sweet spot for puzzle size, almost all Puzzlers have one thing in common – they want to know what the final piece will look like. Practically, this boils down to the size of the picture on the puzzle box (larger is better) and the printed detail of the puzzle picture. My wife definitely favors puzzles with larger boxes or even better, puzzles whose box contains an enlarged map-like insert that is larger than the picture on the box cover. That way she doesn't have to find a magnifying glass (which makes her feel old).

Comparing our lives to Puzzler Principal #2 reveals another interesting parallel. *While we do not get a life "puzzle box picture" with our birth certificate, almost all of us have dreams of what our lives will (or should) look like.* Like Puzzlers, we all love big box pictures of our lives, big houses and big jobs, big fancy cars,

an amazing spouse and perfect children. Unfortunately, our personal life pictures are affected by many life experiences that we have no control over, such as how you and your spouse (if you're married) were raised, where you grew up, and even the friends you have.

These are just a few of a myriad of events that will have a large effect on your mind's self-portraits. Sometimes these pictures are accurate, but for the most part, they are not. I would guess that is why we have so many broken marriages, lonely husbands, wives, children and friends. We all know people who are living in families they resent, working at jobs they hate, thinking that life isn't worth living, all because their lives didn't end up looking like the life puzzle picture they envisioned.

3 **Puzzler Principle #3.** When it comes to putting the jigsaw puzzle together, there are two basic types of Puzzlers: those who start with the edge pieces and build the puzzle frame, and those who ignore the frame and start immediately building out pictures or scenes within the puzzle. My wife is a framer. She focuses first on sorting the pieces by those with straight sides, especially the magic four corner pieces. She is extremely organized, and once the frame is done, she methodically turns to the interior puzzle pictures, arranging puzzle pieces by color and puzzle picture location. This is not to say that either method is good or bad, just that Puzzlers are predictable in how they approach a puzzle.

In my seventy years, I have found that like Puzzler Principle #3, *most of us find common patterns to follow when putting our life puzzles together, either on a table or in our lives.* Donna's common pattern is framing the issue, finding the border pieces and then bringing order to chaos. It probably is no surprise that while our seven children are far from perfect, and while they didn't necessarily like being conscripted by a highly structured mom always on the lookout for those 90-degree corner pieces and straight-edged frame pieces, they grew up making their beds, picking up their rooms and developing strong work ethics.

Like good Puzzlers, all of us live our lives based on certain behavior patterns or tendencies. These not only shape our lives, but also the lives of those who follow us - whether we intend it or not. Every one of us will leave a legacy based on these patterns. What kind of Puzzler are you? What kind of legacy are you leaving?

4 **Puzzler Principle #4.** Some puzzles are missing pieces. It may come as a surprise to novice Puzzlers, but a thousand-piece puzzle actually has 1,008 or 1,026 pieces in order to make the correct shape. I bet you have never counted the pieces of a large puzzle, and you probably don't know anyone who has. I have observed that as long as the puzzle goes together with no holes, no one cares how many pieces are actually in the puzzle. On the other hand, *no one – and I mean no one – wants to get to the end of the puzzle after spending hours constructing the masterpiece only to have a lost or missing puzzle piece.*

This Principle can certainly apply in our lives. Take November 3, 2023, for example. For Donna, November 3, 2023, would have marked the 45th birthday of our second daughter. I say “would” because Sarah Marie Dennis would have joined our family, except that even though full term, she arrived stillborn. Both of us had prayed for a miracle when the doctors couldn’t find a heartbeat, but God was as silent as the fetal monitor. November 3rd of 1978 dawned as a terrifying time for a young family having to come face to face with Principle #4, a puzzle piece that turned up missing and our first up close and personal encounter with the uncertainty of life.



Donna took the loss and funeral very hard as only a mother could. She carried the child for 9 months, and we prayed for it every night. I never have understood why the puzzle piece that was to make our family of three, four, was gone. Men and women are different (no breakthrough there), and as a guy, I moved on as only a guy can. Yes, Donna moved on too, but women don’t move on as quickly from a lost child as a man can. In fact, every year around Halloween, Donna remembers the lost baby, she remembers what age she would have been, and she hurts, like only a mom could. When the puzzle of 1978 was finished, one huge piece in the middle of the puzzle was missing. For Donna, the missing piece named Sarah still has a prominent place in her heart.



Puzzler Principle #5. Regardless of your initial strategy choice, all Puzzlers begin with a picture and then go to work building out different sections of the puzzle. As my wife works a puzzle, she constantly compares the puzzle pieces to the picture and puts them in the section of the puzzle they will end up going. All unallocated pieces are laid outside the puzzle as various parts of the puzzle fill in the frame.

BUT I wonder, what happens to a Puzzler if the jigsaw puzzle doesn’t provide a picture of the completed puzzle? Or worse yet, has the wrong picture on the box?! Well, in 1997, Jumbo Puzzles created a new type of puzzle called WASGIJ? The name is jigsaw spelled backwards and is pronounced ‘Woz-gidge’. The new puzzle didn’t provide a picture of what the final puzzle would look like. While it was not exactly an ‘overnight’ success story (no surprise there), it has been increasing in popularity since it first came to market. Now, other puzzle makers have created similar puzzles call the “What if puzzle.”

Unlike the Puzzler Principles I have mentioned above, Puzzler Principle #5 says *not all puzzles have a picture of the completed puzzle on the box, yet the puzzle can still be completed.* The Wasgij Puzzle has a different set of jigsaw rules. Even though the Wasgij Puzzle places a multicolor picture on the puzzle box, it is not what the puzzle will look like. The picture focuses on a certain character and Wasgij challenges Puzzlers to use their imagination to envision the puzzle’s outcome through the character’s eyes.

When I began writing this story, I thought that jigsaw puzzles would offer some guidance for our families and life lessons. Yes, solving puzzles with pictures to follow can offer some applications in cases like Donna’s orderliness, family

management and in her Puzzler skills. Also, like the puzzle pictures we follow in jigsaw land, whether we plan to or not, all of us have created pictures of our lives in our minds as to how we think things should progress. We've even talked about the trouble with missing pieces of a jigsaw puzzle.

In puzzles, every piece has a place (or so we all hope), but some events in your life are unscripted, unimagined and don't fit in your mental picture of life. You lose your job, you lose a child, or your watch your spouse or parent succumb to dementia, and your personal world's image dissolves. None of us grow up dreaming about ending up with life-changing problems like these. That's not what the college graduation or wedding speeches prepare us for. Sometimes life just doesn't make sense in a world of puzzles.



But then I found the Wasgij? Puzzle. With no picture to follow, a few clues and only your imagination, you have to put the 1,000 puzzle pieces together, and try not to burn out or die of old age in the process. As I learned more about this new type of puzzle, it occurred to me that for my family, 2023 has been the year of the Wasgij? Puzzle. This year brought some wonderful things (Jeremiah & Edna), but also some things we had not expected nor been prepared for.

As the puzzle box was opened, and all the pieces tumbled out, there was no indication that this puzzle would be any different from the others. The picture seemed clear and innocent enough. A lovely lady and her equally lovely daughter made a last-minute fun trip to a thrift store. Well, it was fun until the day was interrupted by an accidental fall. Even though in any given year, over 300,000 older adults are hospitalized for hip fractures caused by falls, those are just statistics. Until it happens to someone you care about. For this lovely lady, the fall was just the beginning. Broken hips need to be fixed or replaced, requiring surgery...involving risks. A puzzle's frame began to be constructed, with no picture provided of the final scene...

The good news was that the surgery went very well (*a corner piece*) and the patient recovered faster than expected (*another corner played*). Although recovery and rehab take time, the rehab went quickly, and the lovely lady traded her standard shift pickup truck for an automatic Honda Civic. Both the lovely lady, the lovely daughter and the doctor deemed it all a success and everyone seemed poised to live happily ever after... at least for a little while.

However, as time passed, the lovely daughter and her husband began to get calls from the lovely lady with the Honda Civic. She struggled with remembering how to open the tricky Honda gas tank, but that was okay, it was tricky. Notes were written on how it worked, but the calls continued. The car questions morphed to lawnmower questions, for the lovely lady always enjoyed mowing her yard with her riding lawnmower. But mowers are tricky too, so more notes were written as reminders (and taped to the mower).



Time passed, and the TV became a source of frustration and anxiety as the remote control didn't turn the TV on or change channels. We all know remotes are tricky!! Notes were written and put on remotes, but over the months, the notes didn't help since a flip phone was never meant to turn TVs on or change channels, even though the lovely lady assured us it was a remote. Often the lovely lady spoke of her frustration with her memory, never understanding why she forgot so many things. To be fair, her two lovely daughters reminded us that the hip doctor had said that anesthesia or inflammation of the brain from the surgery could result in brain cell damage which is "associated with cognitive decline." *The third corner piece painfully fell into place and darker sections of the puzzle began to be visible.*

Time seemed to move slowly until the lovely lady began taking 100-mile trips to check on her old house (which she had sold two years earlier) to look for lost cats. She had no memory of the trips. Or the speeding ticket. And the kids had to take the car away, which turned out to be the final corner piece frame on the puzzle. *Why was this puzzle looking so much like a cliff that the lovely lady was falling off?*

Age happens slowly and almost imperceptibly, but for the lovely lady and her kids, dementia slipped in the door because of an accidental fall and began to steal the mom that loved and raised them and replaced her with a stranger. Over time, their sweet, saintly mom was replaced by a child who sometimes begs to drive her Honda home and be free again to putter around her yard and plants. *Sadly, when the puzzle was framed, it became clear the lovely lady would not be able to go home again.*

Every jigsaw puzzle tells stories of frames and pictures. There are pictures on boxes and in our minds, and they all tell stories and provide lessons for our lives. Like Wasgij?, many life pictures are difficult to make out and there are times everyone may have trouble finding a place in a puzzle for a parent or grandparent lost in dementia.

5.7 million
Approx. # of people in the U.S. with Dementia or Alzheimer's. The disease is the only top-10 cause of death in the U.S. with no cure.

The creator of Wasgij? challenges Puzzlers to use their imagination to complete the puzzle because the ultimate picture of the puzzle can only be seen through the eyes of one character in the picture. Every puzzle has a creator just as every life has a Creator. To understand how the pieces fit together for the lovely lady, and even for our missing puzzle piece, Sarah, we have to look through the eyes of the One who created us and envisioned our life puzzle before us. In Psalm 139, David comments on life from God's perspective:

O Lord, you have examined my heart and know everything about me. You know when I sit down or stand up. You know my thoughts even when I'm far away. You see me when I travel and when I rest at home.

I don't understand why God allows a sweet woman to be struck with dementia, but I know wisdom comes from seeing life through God's eyes. God knows everything about her life and the impact she has had on countless people including her lovely daughters and their families. He understands her heart and her disease, and she will always be the center of His one-of-a-kind puzzle for the lovely lady.

In the same Psalm, David lets us see another picture through God's eyes:

You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body and knit me together in my mother's womb. Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex! Your workmanship is marvelous.

For Sarah, God was with her as her puzzle of life was woven together in the womb and every moment of her very short life was already known by God, her creator. He knew there would be a missing piece in our 1978 puzzle.

From the beginning, God knew that His creation was missing the perfect corner piece to close the frame of His divine plan. While man could not see what the picture should ultimately look like, God could. At the perfect time for His creation, God sent his Son to complete the puzzles of our lives. He was humbly born in a Bethlehem stable and honored by shepherds and kings. He led a perfect life and now 2000 plus years later, he is still in the business of completing puzzles in the image of His Father.

Are you struggling with your own puzzle? We encourage you to slow down and reflect on the perfect puzzle piece that may very well be missing from your life, Jesus Christ. Only by looking at your life through the eyes of God and His Son, Jesus, can you put all the puzzle pieces together and create the picture God has intended for your life.

