

# Inquiring Minds: A Young Girl, A Spider Poem, and A Test

#57 April-May 2020 “A Poet is a person who is passionately in love with language.” [W.H.Auden](#)

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## A Challenge Inspired By A Ten-Year-Old

During the school shutdown at the start of the Covid-19 crisis I started helping our granddaughter



Lois by phone or video call with her math and other subjects, one hour a day, 4 days a week. Her first assignment was to practice a poem she had memorized the week before. I had never heard of the poem nor the author, but found *The Spider* by [Robert P.](#)

[Tristram Coffin](#) to be a delightful piece of writing and science. Impressed by her easy recitation and the beauty of the poem, and wanting to support her efforts and challenge myself, I promised myself to learn this poem.

Easier said than done. Maybe it was because of several concussions before or after or because of some unknown mental disability, memorizing anything has always been a real challenge for me. The last poem I memorized was [Robert Frost's Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening](#). and it took me a full week to memorize Lincoln's [Gettysburg Address](#)—which I loved and taught but now struggle to recall. That was when I was in the eighth grade. Now, some 60 years later where memory lapses foreshadow death itself, I had serious doubts that these calcified neurons could resurrect themselves and meet the challenge.

But I was determined. For two weeks I practiced, but even though I could recite it by myself, the mere thought of reciting it aloud to another person, even my wife, made me nervous. For I had built up such a mental block that my brain would shut down under any other pressure. But after much trial and error and reciting it as a mantra to help me fall back to sleep when I awoke

in the middle of the night, I was finally able to recite it for Lois. Please read and enjoy this beautiful and insightful poem about one of nature's oft maligned creatures, written by a man who preceded Frost as a noted New England poet of his day and a winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1936. -JB

### The Spider

by Robert Coffin

With six small diamonds for its eyes  
He walks upon the summer skies,  
Drawing from his silken blouse  
The lacework of his dwelling house.

He lays his staircase as he goes  
With his eight thoughtful toes  
And grows with the concentric flower  
Of his shadowless, thin bower.

His back legs are a pair of hands  
Which can spindle out the strands  
Of a thread that is so small  
It stops the sunlight not at all.

He turns himself to threads of dew  
Which will harden soon into  
Lines that cut like slender knives  
Across the insects' airy lives.

He makes not motion but is right,  
He spreads out his appetite  
Into a network, twist by twist,  
This little ancient scientist.

He does not know he is unkind,  
He has a jewel for a mind  
And logic deadly as dry bone,  
This small son of Euclid's own.