Reflections on Fatherhood
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My wife bore, and we raised, five children. It involved to some extent heroic action. By heroic, I refer to, as the dictionary has it, "extraordinary achievement involving valor, enterprise in danger or fortitude in suffering." The extraordinary achievement, of course, is our children's formation. The experience has left me numb, but foolish enough to offer reflections on parenting.

Not for the Faint of Heart

It often seemed like we were guiding our children between the Scylla of modernity and the Charybdis of our own inadequacies. Somehow, we made it.

Fatherhood is not for the faint of heart. It asks normal men to engage in extraordinary sacrifice. Fathers, in partnership with their spouses and in union with Christ, raise children. This task is active, quite different from that implied by the misleading phrase "having children." Kids are not something we "have" or even "acquire" - like a second home, sports car or disposable gadget. Rather, they are the fruit of marital love, requiring energetic and deliberate involvement. In exercising fatherhood, we imitate the self-giving, life-giving characteristics of our Heavenly Father.

Some years ago a colleague's father died. He was a pillar of the community and throngs of people showed up to pay their respects at his funeral. Speakers rose one after another and extolled the benefits his life had conveyed on the commercial and civic life of the city. At the end, the preacher informed the audience that the decedent was also a good church-goer and family man. Not one of his boys spoke.

The funeral was dignified, liturgically sound and well attended. Yet something seemed amiss. It inspired the hope that at my funeral, if anyone spoke, it would be my children. If in their remembrances they mentioned that my life had meant something to them and that they had been loved, my soul would truly rest in peace.

Showing the Kids They Matter

Fatherhood must be lived intentionally. A country song said it well, as country songs tend to do: "There's two dates in time that they'll carve on your stone/ And everyone knows what they mean/ What's more important is the time that is known/ In that little dash there in between/ That little dash there in between." To live intentionally means to purposely place your children near the center of "the dash there in between." Our lives should reflect, and our children need to know, that they matter.

Appending kids to a crowded list of things to do reflects a failure to grasp the magnitude of the father's mission. Our children are the priority list. The tension arises when the priority list conflicts with the reality list. Try as he might the father whose profession requires him to travel or otherwise spend long hours away is not going to make every one of his children's plays or sporting events.

However, there exists a subtle difference between the guilt-assuaging last-minute airport purchase and the intentional gift. The latter says that they were never far from his heart while he was gone. Parenting classes can teach techniques of good fathering, and they are not to be scoffed at. Yet a focus on the mechanics tends to obscure or substitute for the necessary commitment of the heart. Children have an innate ability to ascertain the authenticity of parental action. They can read the heart. So an important component of intentionality is that it is not so much what we learn to do, but what we care to do.

I can think of a few examples of intentionality that seemed to really impact my children.
In law school when the kids began to come, Saturdays were set aside for them. We instituted a family tradition, now going into its twenty-third year, that I would take the kids out to breakfast and my wife would get a break. As the number of kids grew, the tradition was refined. Each child had his or her "turn" to order from the menu while the others shared plates of pancakes. During this Saturday morning meal, I would get a chance to dive deeper with them, and they in turn felt free to share thoughts with me. Some of our most meaningful dialogue came during these breakfasts. Over time, my children have let me know that "Saturday Breakfast" mattered: one child wrote about this family tradition for her college application essay; all the returning college kids have expected the Saturday breakfast routine to continue - often exposing roommates and other friends to the tradition; they would arrange their sleepovers on Saturday instead of Friday so as not to miss breakfast; and even my silent-type, sleep-deprived fourth child makes sure she and I are up on Saturday morning.

Another intentional tradition attempted to redeem business travel. Choosing a different child each trip, we would arrive the night before, seek out a "Holidome" type hotel with indoor pool, enjoy the evening together – often shopping or attending a sporting event - get the work done the next day and travel home together. At the age of 12, the "big" talk would occur (I have diagrams to prove it).

In June, I would travel with the whole clan. We timed the travel to coincide with the playing of the major league baseball All-Star game. We would watch it into the night - some stayed up later than others. In the scope of a lifetime, these individual and group trips seem comparatively small. But I suspect in our children's minds, the sense of intimacy these trips occasioned is significant.

Birthdays were always emphasized. We tried by our emphasis to say to each child on his or her big day, "you are remarkably and uniquely you, and we love you." We made the birthday a day of individual attention in the context of family togetherness. This became increasingly difficult as schedules multiplied and kids left home. But we always began and ended the day focused on the birthday girl or boy. And our older ones have kept it alive by making sure to call or otherwise meaningfully connect with their sibling.
To teach the corresponding lesson that despite the specialness of the child, the world did not revolve around them, we surrounded them with siblings and taught them that there were limits to our provision of their material desires. We established a co-pay system by which they would be required to pay half of any non-essential item they wanted. Among the many lessons learned were **delayed gratification**, the value of money, the necessity of hard work, and ultimately the realization that the material good sought after was not a prerequisite to happiness.

All of these approaches, and many others, were designed to communicate life lessons in a natural, inconspicuous manner, reiterating the message that kids mattered.

No Wasted Days

By virtue of their position, fathers will inspire. Gordon MacDonald, in his book The Effective Father, captured the inspirational reality of fatherhood. He tells the story of John Boswell, the famous biographer of Samuel Johnson. As an adult, Boswell frequently recalled a day he went fishing with his father. He often reflected upon the many things his father had taught him during the course of that fishing trip. A researcher decided to check the father's journal to see what reference he may have made to this event. The journal entry said: "Gone fishing today with my son; a day wasted." The father had unknowingly impacted his son for a lifetime. He not only touched a boy's life, but ultimately affected the world. Anybody who has read The Life of Johnson knows the great contribution Boswell, the son, made to the world in creating a record of the life and thought of that eighteenth-century giant, Samuel Johnson. But Boswell's father was clueless.

We so often are clueless. MacDonald's story resonates with me. When my oldest son was seven, we made a trip together. I was scheduled to argue a case in the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals in Baltimore, Maryland. Walking out of the courthouse after a challenging oral argument, I turned proudly to my son and asked: "Bobby how did I do?" His nonchalant response was deflating: "Dad it's kilogram not 'key-lo-gram.'"

The rest of the trip, a series of less-than-successful sight-seeing efforts, was equally deflating. The paddle boats at the Inner Harbor were harder to paddle than they looked; the trip to Memorial Stadium in lieu of the closed Camden Yards was anticlimactic; the Orioles had to pick this week to play out of town; and the service at the pizza place was slow. Exhausted, we got back on the road for the long ride home. My sense of defeat soon turned to victory. Sitting next to me, my son exclaimed: "Dad, this was the best day of my life." Being a father, there are no wasted days.

They Are Watching Every Move

We must be aware that observant children follow closely the things we say, but especially the things that we do. All of us are familiar with the poem "Little Eyes Upon You": There are little eyes upon you and they're watching night and day. There are little ears that quickly take in every word you say. There are little hands all eager to do anything you do; And a little boy who's dreaming of the day he'll be like you.

This was brought home to me recently when my oldest daughter, a journalism major, wrote a "profile" of her father for her class paper. Seemingly she had noticed everything: from the trivial - my favorite take-out orders, silly jokes, and the brand of beer I drank; to the more sublime - how I treated other people, how often I went to Mass, and what message I left them when I dropped them off for school. She had remembered it all. What an incalculable gift I received when I read the concluding sentence of her profile: "[My Dad] is a man of contradictions on paper, but not to those who know him. He may be a tough lawyer, but he is a father in every decision he makes and everything he does." Whatever else we do in life, make no mistake: in our kids' eyes, we are fathers.

Conscious that a child's eyes and ears are upon us, we can influence the course of a life. Whether it is being faithful in prayer and Mass attendance, participating in pro-life activities, choosing a career path for meaning over money, or treating a spouse with love, we model the message for our youngsters. Our child's conception of God as a loving father, and his sense of relation to those around him, will be influenced by his experience with us. Will it be the embrace of a loving father or the cold shoulder of a distant and disapproving authority? Our actions matter more than words. Well it is said that that we preach the Gospel everywhere and sometimes have to use words. It is the wise father who senses the eyes and ears of the world in the little one holding his hand, and conducts himself accordingly. Wiser still is the man of integrity who, away from his children, so lives his life that he would not be embarrassed were his child with him at that moment.

Yield the Experience to God

When fathers act intentionally, with the purpose of influencing and inspiring children, a counter-intuitive thing happens. God instructs the father. Years ago, a middle son was playing AAU basketball and things were not going well. His coach kept calling him by the wrong name. His playing time decreased with every scrimmage. He was losing confidence. Early in the season, the team traveled to High Point, North Carolina, for a week-end tournament. I found myself staying in a flea bag hotel, away from my family, watching other parents' kids play most of the time. Between games, I drove to High Point College seeking solace in the chapel there. I began praying for my son.

My tri-part petition was that he would not be hurt by the experience; that his participation on this team would draw him closer to God; and that I would yield the experience to God. Fast-forward three months and the prayer is forgotten. There are 15 seconds left in the national semi-final game and the team is down two points. Unexpectedly, the coach inserts my son into the game and calls a play for him. He comes off a pick in the deep corner and shoots a 3-pointer. Swish!

I don't actually remember leaving my seat on the top row of the bleachers but I found myself hugging my son on the court. In the parking lot after the game, the music is playing and the African-American teammates and their families are dancing. My son joins in but I wisely resist. It suddenly hits me - my prayer. My son had not given up, but rather spent the summer shooting hundreds of shots every day. The athletic adversity prompted him to seek God in prayer. Now when he remembers that (often painful) season, he remembers only the final shot. When I got off my knees in that chapel, I knew I had surrendered my son's experience to God and experienced His peace. In His amazing generosity, He blessed us with a father/son moment to match all others.

People often accuse me of reducing all of life to a sports analogy. But this vignette sums fatherhood up for me: a father's pain watching a child deal with adversity; a realization that the father's influence, effective as it might be, only goes so far; a growing acceptance of one's impotence to eliminate the adversity, transforming gradually into a recognition that the tribulation is meant for growth; a realization that the son will have to find his own way, and in the process encounter Christ; and finally, the father realizes, late, that all along, his Father has been teaching him. And the lesson has been love.

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