

Coming and Going: One Dad's Thoughts before their Daughter goes to College

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“Dad, I need to use the restroom, I'll be right back.” She glided gracefully from the table, more young woman than girl now. She and Dad were on what seemed like an endless college search. The schools were morphing together now, in a somewhat maddening concoction of dorm rooms, highway signs and educational hype.

Dad scratches his salt and pepper head, the foliage more salty by the day. He indulges himself by closing his eyes for a moment, not quite a power nap, but just resting the peepers for a moment. He is snapped back to reality by an angelic voice, several octaves above the restaurant drone. “Daddy, I need to go to the bathroom!” Down the aisle bounded an effervescent package of pink with blond curls. She cut the corner with lightening speed, a giggle with every step, looking over her shoulder for the Dad in hot pursuit. In a flash she was gone. Hauntingly, the soon-to-be college student reappears, filling in the path where the little blond spitfire just was.

The dad blinks, for this scene played out in a matter of seconds. “What you looking at, she asks?” “The future, and ... the past,” he sighs.

It was of course just the other day that we carried our precious package home from the hospital, forever changing the course of two lives, which was thought to be so hectic already. Oh what they did not know! The “other day”, 18 years ago, is emblazoned on the parental hard drive. It acts as the starting line for an amazing journey.

Commencing with the love of two, it quickly blossomed to that of three. The blessing of a mother devoted to the love and development of this gift from God, provided the inspirational foundation. The bond was inseparably galvanized, each rewarding each other with a smile, a hug, a reinforcing glance. Comfort and security reigned within an atmosphere of loving chaos.

So began the educational path of the first born prize. The parents, reasonably bright and informed (or so they thought), treated the child more like a grown person than an infant. They spoke with less baby diatribe and more conversational inflection. She became as much a buddy as a dependent. How did they survive without her and what the heck did they do before she arrived?

While days at times were long and some of the nights were seemingly endless, they found their collective stride. There was plenty of pacing to sleep, lots of early morning ESPN, and more than the occasional rendition of The Star Spangled Banner being sung as a functional lullaby. The fear that she would nod out at future sporting events and school assemblies was an unfounded parental concern.

What the parents found was that the family of three learned from each other. Before there was back and forth discussion, there was unspoken communication. The prize found a way to get her message across, whether it was expectorating strained peaches in the faces of her loving parents or furrowing her brow if something displeased her. The enlightened parents would notice over time that the very same facial expression would carry through childhood and beyond.

Lessons learned were both formal and informal. The prize received all of what was available in terms of developmental programs. Swimming lessons before she could chew solid food, countless and precious Mom and me activities and pre, pre K schooling which seemed to start in a pre natal environment. She was on a schedule, she was, being serviced with the diligence of a BMW's owner's manual.

Soon thereafter, the prize realized that while she was the center of the family's universe, there was some competition for her parent's undying devotion. Her sister arrived! While she was well prepped for this beautiful family addition, nonetheless things they were a changing. The same bond established with her was now being formed with her sister. The parental units were sometimes surprised (see frustrated) that the patented child rearing techniques skillfully honed with Number1, did not always have the same results with little sis.

The parents had to be retrained. This one did not want to be rocked and please, no incoherent ballads at bed time, you are ruining my sleep.

The arrival of baby coincided with the prize's emergence into society. With nothing less then ceremony and pomp, off she went. To her somewhat surprise, she discovered that there were legions of first borns out there, each equally "schooled" and pampered from day one out of the womb. How can this be? Who are these pretenders to the throne, she wondered?

Hence, the parents were back at it, explaining that getting along was an important part of growing up. They taught the virtues of sharing and compromise, skills that would over time become an integral part of the personality of this young woman.

It was probably around this time that the parents formally introduced the rope and rewards program. This was not your normal frequent flyer program. As the name implies, various measures of justice and privileges were dished out based on performance and adherence to the regulations of the homestead. All in all, the program worked for the most part.

Also, an emphasis on praising hard work and effort was stressed. The hallmark was the motto "bring us your best, and we will be happy". Sometimes there was some interpretive discussion on what was truly "best", but when everyone was truthful to ones' self, the results were outstanding.

"Oh, it can't get any crazier can it?" The parents were consumed in a sea of sporting events, dance recitals, girl scouting and much more. Juggling multiple team schedules, homework, while attempting to maintain a semblance of family structure tested the organizational skills to the max. Somehow it all got done, utilizing much of the 24 hours allotted in a given day. Throw in a puppy for good measure and the circus hit the road.

A funny thing happened along the way. Makeup, mood swings and boyfriends showed up. At certain times, those precious, sweet girls resembled more the evil offspring of Satan, then that of loving parents. Dad, being the calm, unflappable type, handled these developments with his usual effortless style. The gentlemen suitors were welcomed warmly, but subjected to an admissions exam, which gauged their overall interests. Most passed, as there was an advance expectation provided, with a listing of acceptable and unacceptable criteria. This was just a natural progression down the

path of adolescent maturation. Well, maybe a subtle speed bump or two down the winding path is more like it. They get through this as well, at times testing the limits of the rope and reward theorem.

Another, phenomena occurred over time. The prize became the teacher. The loving pupil was her sister. The younger child absorbed the love of her sister like the proverbial sponge. Blazing the trail was a rite of the first born, and she was clearly up to the task.

All of this was wrapped in a cloak of laughter and tears, devotion to God and precious family moments. While they may have seemed to be mutually exclusive events, they were in fact a path to the development of the personality and soul of the brood. It all began with mother's first embrace and was nurtured through years of love. There was plenty of trial and error. What was learned was that we are all inherently good, made in His image and likeness, though imperfect. It is this imperfection that allows us to grow as people, both in character and spirituality. It is our individual roadmap, one that we must inevitably go out and follow. Throughout the exploration, you always know where home base is. It is that place of comfort, light on at the porch, dinner at the kitchen table.

The parents were still learning- and growing. For better or for worse, the bulk of the training was now done. Oh sure, it really never ends, because heck, that is what parents do for a living.

"Hey Dad, where are we going next?" The Dad looks up, that damn blinking thing is happening in both eyes now. He pushes through it and stares back into the eyes of the young woman and smiles. "Raleigh, I think, babe, we should be there in a couple of hours." She smiles back and collects her things. The journey continues.