

“Please Come Flying”
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The most celebrated parable in the Bible is about parenting. It concerns a man and his two sons. The younger son asks for his inheritance early. This was not that unusual among the Jews of Palestine. Living conditions were precarious there. The younger generation often emigrated to find something better, using their share of the family wealth.

The father says yes, and the son goes off to a distant country, where he promptly squanders his inheritance in “dissolute living.” A famine comes. He is reduced to swineherding, and still he’s nearly starving. Recalling how the hired hands on his father’s farm always ate well, he heads home.

He rehearses what he will say: “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.” As he approaches, his father sees him in the distance, and runs to him and kisses him. The son starts into his prepared speech, but the father immediately turns to a servant and says “bring out the finest robe and rings and sandals, and put them on him. Slaughter the fatted calf. We will have a celebration, for this son of mine was dead and is alive again.”

As the celebration picks up steam, the older brother comes in from a hard day in the fields, and asks, “what’s all this?” A servant tells him, and he’s so enraged he won’t enter the house. The father comes out and pleads with him to join in. The older son says, “I have been working like a slave for you, and I have never disobeyed your command; yet you have never given me even a young goat so that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours comes back, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you kill the fatted calf for him!” The father replies, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to celebrate and rejoice, because this brother of yours was dead and has come to life.”

To the Jewish audience, the story is shocking. It’s okay for the younger son to ask for his inheritance while his father is still alive; but under Jewish law and custom, he must hold the bequest in trust, to care for the parents in their old age. In squandering it, the prodigal son has treated his living father as dead. The disgrace he has brought upon himself and his family is severe.

The father sees him approaching in the distance and goes running to him. Running. The Jewish patriarch was a figure of immense gravity. The very idea of him running would have been ludicrous. But the father runs anyway. The physical distance between them represents the spiritual distance the son must travel to reach true repentance, but the father already sees the possibility of it in the very act of returning home. He is a mirror of divine love. As the Christian theologian Dorothy Sayers has written, “Like the Father of the Prodigal Son, God can see repentance coming a great way off and is there to meet it.”

The father isn't about to squander this blessed moment on fretting over whether his son will think he is "condoning" the wrongdoing; or over what the neighbors might say, or what kind of patriarchal fury the community expects. The doors of his heart have been flung open by the joy of recovering a child from the spiritual death of cutting himself off from family, community, and God.

The joy is still in full tide when the father turns to deal with the older brother, who acts like an employee filing a grievance. He has lived by the stingy accountancy of a closed heart. To him, the fatted calf is not part of a communal celebration, but rather, something that gets posted on his despicable younger brother's side of the ledger.

And yet, the father commences pleading in a most unpatriarchal way. No time to waste on rebukes. He is determined not to let his older son miss out on the joy.

Now fast forward nearly two millennia. Another parenting parable is unfolding in the home of my seminary professor, Douglas Adams, age 11 at the time. Doug has little league practice that day. For some reason, his coach has a gold pocket watch with him. He puts it on top of a fencepost, and, somehow, it finds its way into Doug's pocket. Once home, he is quickly found out. His father and paternal grandfather take him into . . . the living room.

"Doug, I don't know whether you're going to be able to recover from this," his father begins. "This is serious, really serious," the father intones, summoning every ounce of his gravitas. Shaking his head and turning to his own father for added authority, he says, "Tell him, Dad, tell Doug how serious this is." The grandfather scratches his chin and said, "Well, Doug, your father's right -- this is serious." Pausing for a moment, he continues "of course, it's not as serious as the time your father stole the Johnsons' boat and ran it into the dock across the lake. Or the time he and his classmates jammed the lock on the door to the ladies' room so the seventh grade teacher couldn't get out for nearly an hour. But yes, it's serious."

Needless to say, at this point the court martial pretty much loses its sizzle. There will still be shame, apology, and atonement, of course. But Doug is spared the damage of having his father pronounce judgment on his eleven-year-old soul for having done something irredeemable or awfully close to it.

How long would this child have carried that judgment?

These are stories about love, the essence of which is seeing others for the truth they are, with nothing added and nothing left out, and letting others see you in the same way. This means seeing the whole person, including both the flaws and the spark of the divine, even when that spark is quite dim. And it means letting your own flaws be seen, even by your children.

The father of the prodigal son has this attitude. We don't know what he was like before, but he probably had something to do with the unloving attitudes of his sons. As an old friend of mine says of children's behavior, "they don't lick it up off the grass." But nearly losing his son changes him.

The word “parent” comes from Latin words meaning “to bring forth.” Within each child is a whole person preparing to break into the world. We cannot treat the child as simply an empty vessel to fill with moral codes. But that person within cannot see himself yet, and without this seeing, he cannot emerge. Through his own seeing of them, the father in the biblical parable is laboring to awaken that self-seeing in his grown children -- blowing like a bellows to rekindle the spark of the divine in them, as it has been revived in him.

With the father of my seminary professor, it’s very different. The problem is not that Doug’s transgression is too large to leave room for his father’s love, but rather that it’s too small – too small to enable the father to realize that the spark of the divine in his son could not be extinguished by even the most serious transgression – and therefore, certainly not by pilfering a watch. The attitude called love requires more than he can find it in himself to give.

Instead, he is ruled by the opposite of love, which is not hate, but fear. He is panicked at what his son’s misbehavior might mean. Is his son a bad seed, a budding sociopath? Did he commit some irreversible parenting blunder – something from which he cannot “recover”? He knows kids don’t lick it up off the grass. He’s desperate to distance himself from his son’s bad deed, lest he seem to condone it. No amount of censoriousness could be too much.

He hasn’t revealed his own flaws to his son very much, and certainly won’t do so now. He fears sending a message that it’s okay for the son to do likewise. He can’t see the countervailing value in his son seeing that his father did get into trouble and was able to “recover.”

If the grandfather hadn’t spoken up, would Doug ever have gotten these glimpses of his father’s flawed humanity? The saving grace in this story is the parenting done by the village that it takes to bring out the whole person inside the child – the village represented by the grandfather.

Of course, in our present-day brave new world, there is still the invasive barrage of blaring cultural messages saying to children, do this or that, buy this or that, but don’t kid yourself that simply being a whole person will count for anything. A village committed to self-revelation and communal parenting can’t do anything about that.

Or can it? Do we older ones really think that our children are not interested in us, that we can’t compete with the buzz of mass media connectivity? There’s no on-off switch for shutting down the loudspeakers of mass culture, but can’t we call our children’s attention away from them? Then might the barrage eventually fade for lack of an audience? The power of humans to affect culture and history simply by where they choose to direct their attention is always underestimated.

I don’t think I ever heard my children actually admit that they cared what I thought or what I was doing, but I know they were paying attention. The only question was, could I be present to receive the astonishing gift of that attention. Sometimes I could . . . and sometimes I couldn’t.

I certainly paid attention to my parents. Of course, paying attention isn't the same as obeying. Right mom? I wanted to hear all about my mother's first job as a secretary at the local Firestone Tire dealership -- how she was doing her own work and most of her boss's work too, because he was too busy dealing tires to his friends on the side; how, when he got fired, they offered to make her the store manager – but, at her old secretarial salary, and with no secretary; . . . and how she walked out. Sayonara, Firestone. They scrambled to make amends, but her mind was made up.

I wanted to know what it was like for my father to work five jobs to put himself through college. I was interested in the guy who showed up for his first date with my mother in a sport coat he had outgrown, and what an impression it made on her that he wanted to dress up for her. It didn't bore me to hear about how he had a flask of whiskey in his hip pocket on that first date and immediately declared his undying love, causing my mother to roll her eyes.

To me, my children always seemed like adults in small bodies. I loved it when the adult within came out to play. Although I didn't do this with great consistency, my aim was for them always to have a standing invitation like the one Elizabeth Bishop sends in her poem called "Invitation to Miss Marianne Moore."

From Brooklyn, over the Brooklyn Bridge, on this fine morning,
please come flying.
In a cloud of fiery pale chemicals,
please come flying,
to the rapid rolling of thousands of small blue drums
descending out of the mackerel sky
over the glittering grandstand of harbor-water,
please come flying.
The flight is safe; the weather is all arranged.
The waves are running in verses this fine morning.
Please come flying.

Come with the pointed toe of each black shoe
trailing a sapphire highlight,
with a black capeful of butterfly wings and bon-mots,
with heaven knows how many angels all riding
on the broad black brim of your hat,
please come flying.

We can sit down and weep; we can go shopping,
or play at a game of constantly being wrong
with a priceless set of vocabularies,
or we can bravely deplore, but please
please come flying.

The world doesn't make invitations like this. Usually, it wants only the instrumental

parts of the whole person inside the child that are socially useful, with the rest kept neatly out of sight. All the more reason why we need to raise our voices in a chorus of “please come flying” – an engraved invitation to both parents and children to let themselves be seen. May we embrace the work of bringing forth the whole persons waiting within our children. And may we honor the profound truth that all children, in one way or another, are ours.

AMEN.