

Lessons from a son on being a man

Dad's Corner

July – Parenting 2006

Somewhere around four or five years old, my son Gregory kicked a hole in a wicker chair in our bedroom. It was the first piece of furniture my wife Claudia and I had picked out for our new life together and it had a special meaning for both of us. When I saw the gaping hole my mind went straight to a picture of irresponsibility and flashed forward at the speed of light making a movie of my son growing up into some kind of reprobate who didn't respect other people's property. Parental obligation to discipline loomed like a flashing neon light justifying my rising anger.

I found him downstairs and confronted him. It seemed like I had the moral green light. He had done wrong. I am the dad. I have the power and the responsibility to teach him right from wrong. But at that moment it all amounted to "justification" for the anger in me over such a useless and needless destruction of a precious momento. (Needless to say dear reader, the sign of our love and the gift of the Creator standing before me in all the glorious wonder of his five-year old self somehow wasn't registering in the same way at the moment, as the chair. Odd.) I stood over the little guy and prepared to release the steam. He knew my facial expressions well and seeing my anger, stood calmly and without protest, with a slight smile of love on his face and a kind of peacefulness. It was a lamb to the slaughter sort of look that immediately broke my heart, and woke me up, stopping me in my tracks. Twenty years later, we smile about that chair (which still has a heart-shaped hole in it) that has become a symbol of cherished things that break along the

way to our becoming whole persons. Better broken things than breaking each other.

One day on a visit to Granddad's house when he was around eight years old I shamed him for being hesitant about putting a pizza in the oven and turning it on. What kind of man was he going to grow up to be if he shied away from learning a new task! He went to his room and closed the door, his body already contracted with shame. I felt bad immediately and knocked on his door to apologize. In our discussion, he said astounding words I will never forget. "Dad I want you to finish your dissertation, but when you're not around all the time it makes me feel like I'm not worth anything." He could already reflect on his sense of value and recognize that it depended immensely on his father's presence and yet he was willing to make a personal sacrifice in order for me to achieve something he knew meant a great deal to me.

These weren't the only times my son showed me what it is to be a man. How did he learn to be so articulate, so fully present, self-sacrificing, emotionally transparent and humble? Blessed are those men whose fathers enjoyed them when they were children, who listened deeply and thoughtfully to them and allowed them to express their pain and frustration without reprisal. All too often men are shamed for having feelings as children. They are rewarded for being "doers" only and not for being understanding, articulate and compassionate which is so essential later in marriage and parenting. Lack of male presence in a boy's life, or worse, authoritarian dismissal and over coercion, means feelings get sealed in a secret vault opened so infrequently the combination is gradually forgotten. They are buried so far underground that even if remembered it seems like too much effort to dig it up. Such men have much to learn from the boys we in turn attempt to raise. Hopefully, we are as good a listener to our children as we are preachers and

teachers.