

“Family Matters”

Sometimes it seems like parenting is a long goodbye. This strange little creature arrives into your life, and before you know it or have a chance to get acquainted, separation begins. The umbilical cord is cut. Kindergarten and the first day of school arrive. Your child heads off for sleep away camp, and so it goes.

Last month, we delivered our daughter Holly to the dorm where she'll be spending her first year of college. You wouldn't have thought the event would be so emotional, for her mother or me. Both our kids have been out-of-the-home for awhile. But somehow we'd missed that ritual of piling into the auditorium with five hundred other nervous families and listening to the Dean remind the incoming class that this was a momentous threshold, an irrevocable parting on the passage to adulthood. The speech was boilerplate, no doubt, but by the middle, Dori was dabbing the corners of her eyes and I was a little misty, too. Other parents were crying, too, some because they realized their job as mommies and daddies was over, other because they realized their role paying the tuition bills was just getting underway. One phase of life was coming to an end, and another beginning.

Seriously, parenting is all about letting go ... making yourself obsolete. Good childrearing means preparing sons and daughters to make their own decisions, define their own identities, and perhaps most difficult of all, learn from their own mistakes. In my head, I know all this. But in practice, it's hard to do. My own tendency is to grasp at life and hold on.

I've had personal experience holding on lately, in fact ever since my mother died. Last summer, I inherited portion of her estate. Not just money from the sale of her house, but also a fair amount of the contents. Two armchairs upholstered in white that show every smudge and speck of dirt. A chest of drawers my father built. An oriental rug. and quite a bit more. All of the pieces looked fabulous in her home, but of course don't really match our own décor. And I read an article in the *New York Times* this summer that made me realize I'm not alone in this quandary. It was titled, "The Tyranny of the Heirloom," and told about increasing numbers of baby-boomers like me surrounded by furniture they don't really like but have to hold onto because it belonged to their parents. All across America, apparently, there are mirrored Victorian vanities and massive mahogany sideboards that people detest but can't toss out because they came from Great Aunt Edna.

Hardest of all, for me, was a carton full of photographs, hundreds of them, along with other assorted papers, many with pictures of relatives I couldn't identify and had never even met. The cardboard box sat in my basement for months as I procrastinated and postponed deciding what to do with all the memorabilia. It seemed wrong somehow to throw those photos away. A psychologist from the Manhattan Behavior Institute quoted in the *Times* article said that there's a primal anxiety about disappointing our parents. And what could be more guilt-inducing than putting your mother's high school diploma in the trash? But after selecting a few things I wanted to keep, I finally screwed up my

courage and put the rest of the box out by the curb. After all, no one wanted this stuff. And I think my mother would have understood that.

She didn't want me to inherit a lot of unwanted junk, after all. What she wanted to impart and pass on to my brother and I were qualities of character, family stories, traditions and values. I didn't just get my red hair from her. I also got a love of poetry and a taste for black-eyed peas with pepper sauce. I learned showmanship and, like her, found I had a flair for public speaking. One of the newspaper clippings she saved in that box in the basement showed a young Kowalski attending the 1972 Democratic State Caucus in Oklahoma City as an eighteen year old supporting George McGovern, so I guess she helped me form my political views as well. Among other yellowing documents in the box, I found an old Mother's Day card I'd written a few years back, expressing the gratitude I felt for the upbringing I'd received. On the card were a few lines of doggerel I'd written, titled "X and Y," referring to the famous sex chromosomes:

I thank you for the DNA

That made me who I am today,

Especially for the genetic part

That made me handsome, brave and smart!

From you, the twinkle in my eye—

But from my Dad I got the "y."

Of course, I did come from a good gene pool, but also from a good family. And yet there is at least one popular theory which holds that good parents and good families don't really matter much. *Challenging the Nurture Assumption*, a book by Judith Harris, became a best seller on the premise that youngsters don't acquire their character from their moms or dads. Rather, it's peers that influence kids the most. Harris pointed out, for example, that children of immigrants tend to drop the accents of the language spoken in their home. Instead, they learn the lingo of their chums. Of course, Harris neglected to mention that most immigrant parents strongly encourage their children to acquire proper English. That fact didn't fit the theory. But when Harris' book made the cover of Newsweek, it became part of the popular mainstream. Suddenly, spending "quality time" with your kids didn't seem so important for parents any more. Struggling to balance jobs with your kids became a whole lot easier, since moms and dads don't matter anyway. While parents provide a genetic template (and make sure the babies get their vaccinations) the theory said, they don't really contribute much more.

But if that's so, it's just a coincidence that my grandfather was an artist, and my mother and father too, and that my brother teaches art. Three generations of artists—with no parental influence! Doesn't it make more sense to think that the interest in painting and visual art that I also share is a family lineage, passed on from generation to

generation, like the canvasses and prints I inherited from my mom and will pass on to my kids one day? Somewhere along the road, I learned to value fine art, just as I came to value hard work and personal responsibility. Those weren't things I picked up from playmates or in school or by watching TV. And there's really no gene that told me to prefer Picasso to Robert Kincaid. Those are attitudes I got them from my parents and grandparents. And your kids will inherit their sense of what's important from you, whether that's a love of literature or music or sports, or a sense of civic responsibility.

Educators tell us that in school, kids retain only about ten percent of what they hear. They learn more from what they see. And they gather up most of all from what they do. I think the same rule applies to parenting. What you tell your children is important. But what they see you doing, and how they experience your presence, day in and day out, is what really informs their minds. Parents who set high standards for themselves will have kids who follow suit. And if your youngsters observe you saying one thing but doing another, what message does that send? Kids are the world's best baloney detectors. They notice hypocrisy. And parents who really care about the well-being of their offspring will make sure their words match their deeds.

Of course, I'm not suggesting that mothers and fathers completely shape or control the destiny of their offspring. When I announced the topic of my talk for this morning, I got a number of anxious emails, reminding me that children sometimes mess up in ways that are beyond their parent's ability to remedy or mend. One mother called to tell me about her son who almost died from a drug overdose—and not because either of his parents use drugs. Just last month, I had to preside at a memorial service for a young woman run over by a train. Twenty-six years old, she coached soccer in high school and worked summers as a counselor at Girl Scout camp. The picture in the obit showed a photogenic blonde who somewhere along the way started making bad choices and hanging with a wild crowd. She was killed in a rail yard in New Hampshire, probably passed out on the tracks. That wasn't her parent's fault, anymore than the fault of the engineer on the locomotive. It was an accident. A tragedy. Morgan's parents can grieve their daughter's loss without needing to feel responsible for it or beat themselves up. What with the tyranny of heirlooms, I think we have enough unnecessary guilt in the world already.

Speaking of heirlooms, my colleague the Reverend Tom Owen-Toole writes, "It's staggering how much effort, both logistical and emotional, we expend sorting out the distribution of our earthly goods. Many of us agonize over the passing on of our material possessions before we die. Which of our children should get our shell or stamp collections? Who would enjoy the dresser, the piano, the china?"

Rationally, we parents know that once we give over our goods, it is up to our children to do with them as they choose, not as we dictate. Emotionally, it is difficult to relinquish cherished possessions when we aren't certain how they will be treated. Will our prized goods be treasured or ignored, appreciated or stored, enjoyed or sold?

The sadness," Tom says, "is that we spend an inordinate amount of energy and worry

over our legal wills and so little effort on our ethical ones. What our children need more than our goods are our goals, more than our perishables are our principles, more than our possessions our confessions and professions ... in order to move ahead meaningfully with their own lives when we are gone.”

What values and life lessons will you be passing on to your children and grandchildren? What will be your spiritual legacy? Just yesterday, Dori and I got back from visiting our daughter. It was parents’ weekend at Clark, about a five hour drive. When she first looked at colleges, Holly seemed intent on moving as far from home as possible. Reed and Santa Cruz were high on the list, along with Claremont, west coast schools all. She seemed to be striving to achieve the maximum distance from any associations with Burlington, her childhood and past, perhaps expressing an understandable and healthy urge to separate. Her mother and I tried to gently remind her that there were some excellent universities in the Northeast as well. As I said, I have a problem holding on. So I wasn’t disappointed with her final decision to attend school in Massachusetts. Yes, I realize she’s probably left us forever, except for holidays. And I understand that most of my parenting days are over. I’ve become redundant.

But if I’ve done my job well, she’ll have taken something lasting from these growing years of childhood and adolescence. She’ll have a solid foundation. She’s a heck of a Scrabble player, for one thing, just like her father and grandmother before her. That piece of the Kowalski character got passed on, and I’m sure that’s not all. However far she travels, or however far she strays, I’m confident that a part of her will always be close to home.