

Chapel Talk
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Last Saturday, I sat in the cold stands of Palmer Stadium, watching Princeton's football team thrash Yale 28-7. I feel the same way toward Yale's athletic department as I do toward Tower Hill's: my metabolism rises, my competitive yearnings becoming almost fanatical; each play takes on an aura of Biblical proportions. I especially loved taking out my white handkerchief and waving it across the stadium to those defeated Eli supporters, rubbing in our victory with almost satanic glee. And this craving to obliterate Yale has only increased since my undergraduate days in the late 70's; all that has changed is that I now attend these yearly rituals sober.

During a momentary lull in Princeton's assault, I had two small revelations. One was that my father, seated next to me, a minister of selfless service for over 35 years, a man who never excelled in sports other than hiking up a mountain or paddling quietly on a New Hampshire lake, a man who never reads the sports pages, a man who naps on Sunday afternoons instead of watching pro football: this gentle, non-competitive father of mine actually relished in this Princeton victory more than I did. "Come on, Tiger!" "Make that block!" "Don't fumble here!" "Get that man!" "Let's put 'em away!" With a coach's intensity he watched every play; he knew the players, holding the program open to the team rooster to look up replacements--and it struck me that for as long as I've known him, he's always attended Princeton football games, not for the social camaraderie they foster, but for the thirst of victory. In my father, I saw myself.

My second insight was that despite my near hysterical hatred of Yale, I confess it wasn't always so. Even with baby pictures of me in a Princeton sweatshirt, or a letter from a great uncle three days after I was born casually reminding me that I of course would go to Princeton, there was a time in my youth when I, confused, distraught, misguided, when I, down childish, untutored and carnal paths--yes, I lost sight of what was good and gave myself over to the sins of the flesh: alas, dear friends, there was a

time when I cheered for Yale. I'm not sure how my father lived with me during this dark passage through grade school; perhaps Christopher will soon root for the Phillies over the Mets, and the sins of the father will come home to roost. Yale's football squad during the 60's boasted my first athletic hero, Calvin Hill, later star running back for the Cowboys and Redskins, now father of Duke basketball star, Grant Hill. Calvin Hill barreled over everything in sight. After his last game against Princeton, I raced down to the field just to stand next to him. On the battered turf of the Yale Bowl, a little boy stood in the shadow of greatness, touching that muddied jersey as if it was a holy relic. Princeton had nothing to compare with Calvin Hill -- until my mother became a trustee there, and I quickly realized that my love for Yale's football team wouldn't matter to their admissions office, while a mother on the board of trustees might be a valid reason to see the light, and it couldn't hurt my Princeton application. Perhaps with some suspicion, my family welcomed me back after this mysterious conversion.

As I watched Princeton march to victory last Saturday' remembering my wayward youth, it occurred to me that I probably sold my soul to Yale as a form of early adolescent rebellion. In second grade' my best friend's father had been captain of Yale's 1940 football team, which made him cooler than my father. Cheering for Yale made me different: I could make a stand, be a rebel with a cause, define myself uniquely. Children have forever fought against their heritage: parents are the first foil children have -- a child asserts her identity and independence by doing what she, not her parents, wants to do. Whether it is crawling high on a sofa, riding a bike further away from mom's watchful eye, wearing clothes or styling hair, wanting to study literature because parents are doctors or lawyers or money managers: so much of what we do is a conscious or subconscious statement against our parents. And we do it most of our lives, because while we may grow up, we will always be so-and-so's child.

Additionally, because our world revolves around our parents from the earliest moments of consciousness, any disillusionment of that parent example can have frightening consequences. Marital separation, divorce, death, lack of affection, lack of

attention, alcoholism, loss of a job--children have a brutal time seeing their parents, seeing their perhaps unfair ideal of parenthood, fail, miss the mark.

Furthermore, as children of any age, we have trouble seeing our parents as anything but parents, as if they were immaculately conceived and born as 40 year olds. They never experienced adolescence, struggled academically, broke up with a boyfriend, had trouble fitting in, had a teacher who made learning impossible, had parents who couldn't understand their friends or music. Part of this blindness is because of how naturally self-absorbed the average adolescent is: he or she is the only one who ever experienced this trauma. The paradox is that our parents are still working out their tension with their parents, even with the ghosts and memories of those parents. Andy Techet wrote an essay in English for me last year about his relationship with his father, how when Andy started to make his own choices, his dad let him. This moment was important to Andy not because he asserted his independence, but because it began a new stage in his relationship with his father, one where they could almost be partners. Andy's insight was that his dad was a person, a friend, not a distant adult or adversary.

I know how hard it is for parents to let go, to stop nurturing, defining, controlling, keeping safe their child's world. Parents love and hate the maturation process -- they rejoice in the growth and triumphs and learning, but I also think we fear letting our children fight their own battles, make their own choices, not because we want to control you, but because we want you to be happy and safe. Cutting the umbilical cord never really takes place in most parents' minds. Thus do people who love each other battle against each other, especially during the high school years. Perhaps this is why sex is so difficult to talk about, because sexual activity signals the recognition of the child as an adult, of the child as possible parent, as an equal to the parent. Most adults over the last twenty to thirty years have struggled with this critical topic because they fear how young, and how younger, children are when they ask for that acceptance.

Your situation at St. Andrew's is heightened because in addition to your own parents -- parents from whom you are separated, creating an unnatural tension -you have

an additional forty parents thrust upon you. Just when you escaped from your own parents into the freedom of a residential boarding school populated mostly by your tempting and reassuring peer group, you get imprisoned by a nightmarish army of parents who tell you to make your bed, go to class, do your homework, eat politely, clean the table, run laps, learn lines, wear socks, get sleep, even to get off the phone with your real parents! A possibly unhealthy situation develops here because when you get into a little trouble, the first statement you say to me is, "do you have to tell my parents?" By separating you from your parents, the school almost fosters this division.

Yet I believe the benefit you gain here nurtures rather than weakens the bond between parent and child. St. Andrew's lets you see adults as people -- it's hard for any of the adults here to hide their humanity, their foibles, their moments of exhaustion, pain or joy. Team McDuff, the basketball game last night, shared meals, hiking trips, watching us struggle and interact with our own children, gasping at Mr. Gilheany dance: these and countless other moments allow you to see us as human, just as we see you as human. Additionally, you get to live with adults who truly love to be with people growing up, who want to talk with you about this journey. I heard Toni Morrison assert that it takes at least twenty adults to raise a child: parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents, teachers, neighbors, ministers all have a role to play. This is the way the extended family worked long ago, when families stayed together, living in one house or neighborhood. Perhaps intentionally, St. Andrew's mimics that society.

In fact, I became much closer to my parents once I went away to boarding school. They claim I grunted in conversation during 7th, 8th and 9th grade, but I remember wanting to be around them when I came back home during high school, probably because I had learned that adults cared about me, understood me, were human, were not out to get me.

All these platitudes paying homage to the great American family and its relevance to boarding school are fine, but there is still a risk here that challenges the bond of family, of parent and child. The defining moment of my life came when I violated that pact:

worst of all, I did it casually, I did it without seeing how destructive my actions were, how I severed and discarded the umbilical cord as if it was merely useless string.

One gray Sunday in the winter of my 9th grade year, with applications to boarding school in the mail, I waited at our front door for a ride to a yearbook meeting. The problem for me was since it was Sunday morning, and since my father was the minister, this meant attending church. (Ironically, I wasn't forced to go, and had only to ask, to communicate, to be excused.) Dad saw me at the door, and on his way to get his coat, mentioned that he'd be glad to walk up the hill with me to church, a half-mile stroll away. Characteristically, I grunted something, then dashed away as my ride luckily appeared at the curb.

The meeting went smoothly, and I was back home as everyone returned for lunch. No problem, no real issue to worry about: after all, I hadn't swiped booze from the cabinet, crashed the car, been caught cheating on a test. I remember, as we began to assemble in the kitchen, my younger brothers and sister on the periphery, that dad asked me why I hadn't waited for him. I was two or three steps up the staircase, he across the room about ten feet away, I mumbled something about wanting to get up to church early to see someone. Dad slowly, gently persisted--I still don't know at what point he knew I was lying--asking me what the hymns were, what the readings were, what happened in confirmation class. I kept muttering vague defenses that I'd been at church; yet I also remember that I didn't blink as we stared at each other. All I could think, as I lied myself deeper into trouble, was how amazing it was that I could look at him for so long without having to blink. What was really happening to me was that my body, like Pinocchio's nose, was rising up against me, warning me about the obscenity of my actions.

Later that afternoon, after a second discussion where I again maintained my absurd story, I finally admitted to dad that I'd lied. His response was to pull me out of school the next day and take me hiking--we must have walked 15 miles in the hills of northern Connecticut. Mountain hiking was a strange form of punishment for lying, but my dad knew what he believed in, feared what he saw developing, so he suspended me

into the family, into a situation where I had to be in the family. Those trails allowed us to journey together, to share and to listen, to speak and be heard. He forced me to talk, to articulate who I was beyond those grunts. I don't remember much of what he said except that he told me families can't exist with individuals: families are people who live and love together; you can't deny your family.

Ultimately, dad taught me, as I later read in a poem by William Carlos Williams, that "The business of love" (and it is also the purpose of families, of parents and children) "is/cruelty which,/ by our wills,/ we transform/ to live together." Our relationship with our parents is complex, fragile, filled with tension, yet also dependent on both of us to help the other. When you become parents, you will be surprised at how difficult it is to be a good parent, but you may also, as I have, discover a whole new relationship with your parents as you rediscover your own youth in your children. A week from now almost all of you will be home with your parents: after you sleep for the first twenty-four hours, I urge you to spend time with your parents, talk to them, catch up with them, find out how their lives are going, share some of your questions and doubts and joys, understand them, work through the inevitable conflicts, battles, misunderstandings. In the end, I hope you can nurture and sustain the paradox of your own individuality and your bond with them. Such a recognition, such a commitment to struggles and sometimes painful resolutions, will allow us to celebrate and be dedicated to parenthood and families, which, as Robert Frost said, is "The tribute of the current to the source."