

Chapel Talk
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During one of the home football games this fall, I was standing underneath the food tent buying a snack when my son Joshua hobbled over. He'd been suffering from tendonitis in his ankles, and his dream of playing soccer ended after the first game. The only good that came from this season without soccer was he got to wear his Jeff Specoli Vans sneakers all day long.

As we huddled against the cold that rainy Saturday afternoon, Joshua told me his ankles ached because he'd been made to run the lines as a ball boy during the JV game that afternoon. I sensed some parental anger enter my voice as I asked him if he'd told his coaches how sore his ankles were. Yet Josh merely shrugged his shoulders, mumbling something I couldn't really hear. So I pursued, my parental frustration mounting, and said, "Well, why don't you let me talk to your coaches? I'll tell them that you –" but before I could finish, before I could solve the problem for him, Josh turned and limped away from me. He literally turned his back on me; he shut off my voice; he denied me my role as the heroic parent to the rescue.

I stood there, alone, stunned. Rage fermented inside me. I was livid that he'd rudely walked away from me; I was furious about his ankles; I was mad I couldn't do anything. I debated whether to charge after him, grab him by the shoulder, yank him around, and yell, "Listen, fella, don't you ever turn your back on me! I'm your father! I'm trying to fix this problem! Don't you appreciate all that I'm doing for you? I brought you into this world, and I can take you out of it!"

But you see, I'd committed the classic parent mistake. I'd tried to solve Josh's problem for him. My fault, despite my well-intentioned love for him, was that I didn't listen to Joshua: even in his silence he was telling me, "Dad, let *me* do this." If I had let

my huffing ego and blustering anger reign, I would have denied him the chance to discover his voice, gain control over his world, and begin to own his life.

At our best moments, parents desire to love you, keep you safe, and see you happy. We don't want you in pain – you can't imagine how excruciating it is for us to watch you struggle or suffer, whether that anguish is physical or emotional. So to protect you we “mother-bear” into your lives to assuage our feelings of inadequacy, just as we did when you were two, three or four years old. But as you get older, parents, and at a boarding school it's also teachers, have to step back, keep our mouths shut, and trust the process of you growing up to handle the situation on your own.

I read a novel over Thanksgiving called *The History of Love*, and in it a character thinks: “Perhaps that is what it means to be a [parent] – to teach your child to live without you.” For me, every fiber in my being wants to keep my children safe and happy. I also know that they need to be independent adults, people who can care for themselves. The dilemma parents face with their children is how do we love and protect and care without imposing or suffocating or controlling. How do we teach you to live without us? How do we teach you to learn without us?

Because we want the best for you, we parents and teachers keep interfering. Yet you'd think since we had once been children that we'd know what parental sins we shouldn't commit. At some point each child swears, “I will never do this to *my* kids” – and then sure enough, 30 years later there's that epiphany when you realize you're sounding like your mother, acting like your father, doing unto your children what your parents did unto you. You see, parenting and loving is a risk; it's a leap into a dark unknown – despite shelves of books on how to parent. We want you to be happy, and we certainly don't want you living with us for your whole life; but we are scared for your future, fearful especially as you start to test the boundaries of adulthood.

Here is the genesis of the obnoxious little league parent, who over-coaches his child, who berates the coach when his son or daughter doesn't play enough, who forgets

that the sport is a game, who lets his goals overwhelm his child's, who takes out all his parental hopes and worries on the coach, who physically attacks the coach, who in a few recent cases actually kills the coach. We invest so much in your lives – so much love, care, fear, time; so many sleepless nights when you were sick; so many hours in the car getting you to school or camp or friends' homes or to music lessons or games; even so much money poured into your existence, that we think your life and achievements and failures are a reflection of us, your parents. We believe that we, the artists, are judged on you, our creation. We forget that now we have to co-create, and then we have to give the creating over to you, letting you become the artist of your own life. However, what's difficult for us as parents, even as teachers, as my mother, at age 77, continues to remind me, at age 49, is that the umbilical cord is never fully cut.

The moments when our lives intersect are the most challenging to distinguish for parent and child. In E.B. White's essay, "Once More to the Lake," he chronicles returning to his family's summer camp in Maine, now as the father, taking his son with him. At one point he becomes confused: he can't figure out if he is his father, or his son, or himself. It's natural for parents to remember our experiences of growing up as we watch our children go through these stages: but we must avoid the Jay Gatsby temptation to repeat the past, to re-live or re-do these moments through our children.

When I was a young boy, my parents signed me up for swimming lessons. We went to a small, outdoor pool, maybe 20 yards long; the pool wasn't heated, so in the crisp New Hampshire air, it felt like swimming in frigid ocean water. Our swimming instructor was Mr. Switzer, an ex-Marine who'd lost the muscles to smile from years of standing in cold water teaching four and five year olds how to swim. His method was pretty simple: as we stood shivering by the edge of the pool, he grabbed us by our trembling arms, tossed us in the water, and barked, "Now swim!" If you didn't swim, you sank. I can still feel the chilled water, and I can still hear his gravelly voice, even as my head was underwater, imploring me to "Pull! Pull! Pull!" my arm in the breaststroke. My only other memory is the sight of my mother, happily knitting wool sweaters and

socks by the side of the pool, seemingly oblivious to my near-death experience happening ten feet away.

It seemed that everyone in our New Hampshire town passed through Mr. Switzer's pool. It was a summer rite of passage. It probably put two chest hairs on me as an early sign of maturity into manhood. Therefore it seemed both natural and significant, bonding even, to sign my son Christopher up for his first swimming lessons when he turned three. After all, if it was good enough for me, it was good enough for Christopher. My parents were so thrilled that they offered to pay the tuition. I felt as if all the generations were working together for the betterment of my eldest born son. All seemed good in the kingdom.

Christopher hated his first lesson on Monday afternoon. He howled in the pool, choking on water every time he submerged because his mouth was always open in cries of terror. A small wisp of a child, he shivered so much just standing in the water that he sent waves out from his convulsing body. And instead of sitting calmly by the pool reading, occasionally looking over with pride at my budding Olympic swimmer, I, the father, had to leave because I couldn't take Christopher's blood curdling pleas to rescue him: "Dad! Please! Dad! Please! I want to go home!" he cried out between strokes and shivers and dunkings. After his lesson, I bought Christopher an ice cream cone as a reward, and told him what a good swimmer he was, and that tomorrow would be much better. With tears racing down his red cheeks and blue wobbly lips, Christopher bellowed out in the small country store, "I'm not going back there!" People turned around and stared at me, trying to decide whether I'd committed a crime that afternoon.

But I was steadfast in my belief that Christopher could handle this challenge, that he could learn to swim the way I had, that he would get over his casual fear of the water, and that before long, he and I would joyfully be doing marathon swims together across the lake. Tuesday came quickly; every time Christopher anxiously asked about his lesson, I assured him it would be fine. I was surprised when he volunteered to take a nap an hour before his 3 p.m. lesson. Nor did I think twice when he wailed immediately upon

being awakened twenty minutes before the lesson. He cried furiously the whole way in our mini-van; frankly, I found myself rather impatient with his childish behavior. “Come on, Christopher, this will be fun,” I muttered, a tinge of annoyance in my voice.

When we got to the parking lot outside the pool, I unbuckled Christopher from his car seat. Instantly he leapt to the back of the car, behind the last seat, screaming that he didn’t want to go. Determined to win this battle, I ran around to open the back hatch; but Christopher darted into the middle seat just beyond my grasping arms. A few parents leading *their* obedient children to the pool gazed condescendingly at me as I struggled to control my fury and inability to get Christopher out. Now late for his lesson, I finally trapped Christopher at the back of the car, and started to pull him out, but he held on so tight to the headrest that as I pulled at his ankles, his body extended out of the car horizontally. He wouldn’t let go. He gripped the headrest as if it was his last lifeline to survival. Tears cascaded off his flushed cheeks. His screams were deafening – and it was at this moment that I finally, finally heard Christopher. He didn’t want to do this. He didn’t like it. Slowly I let him down, and told him we weren’t going to have his swim lesson. His response was to hug me, panting through tears and exasperated breathing and a major runny nose, “Thanks, dad.” How little I deserved his generosity.

As we drove home, I realized the colossal error of my parenting. I had tried to impose my world onto Christopher; I had tried to make him into my own image, a false, graven idol, which is as wrong in families as it is in the Bible. I missed all the signals he sent – the early nap, the screams, the tears, the desperate escape attempts, because I let my goals become the edict of his life. We as adults mess up when we forget that “It’s all about the kids.” We make life worse when we steal or deny your voice. That’s why when each of you toured the St. Andrew’s campus during your admissions visit, we separated you from your parents, so that you had your own voice, and didn’t cringe when your well-meaning parent launched into your great attributes or forced you to talk about some activity you liked. The irony is that, as your parents, we first knew of your existence by your scream in the delivery room, yet sometimes we forget to listen to that voice as you get older. Maybe adolescence is a second birth; maybe that’s why there can

be a lot of shouting between teenagers and parents as you try to establish your voice, your path, your existence. It's not that we don't want you to become adults: it's that we are scared of the journey, we love you and want you safe, and sometimes we convince ourselves we know you better than you know yourself.

Christopher, of course, had the last word on this experience, and his insight underscored how lost I was. About two months later, back at St. Andrew's, I watched him take a bath. He looked up from his toys in the water and said, "Hey dad, wanna see me *do* Mr. Switzer?" Puzzled, still feeling a pang of guilt, I said "sure." So Christopher collected his action figures from the soapy water, placing each on the rim of the tub. When there were about eight figures perched above the water, Christopher looked up at me with a slightly devilish smile. As he exclaimed gleefully, "OK, kids, swim!" he swung his arm and swatted the figures into the water, screaming gleefully at each one as he splashed them in his own swimming pool.

The way out of these shouting matches or isolated silences, is trust. We have to trust you; we have to trust that you can deal with these stages; you have to trust that we love you and that you can handle these moments. And that trust occurs when we talk and listen together, because that lets us, together, speak about hopes, fears, questions, dreams and doubts. Talking is self-asserting; hearing is understanding; questioning leads to discovery. Together, they engender trust. We can't prevent the conflicts between parents and children, teachers and students, but if we try harder to listen and talk, then maybe we can appreciate the love and hope that binds us. Recognize how hard it is for us to let you go, but don't let that stop you from insisting on your own voice. I promise you that in whatever role you have as adults, you too will be confronted with this challenge, as a parent, uncle, aunt, teacher, supervisor. But when we arrive at that miraculous moment of parenting, that moment even of child becoming adult, let us resolve to trust our capacity to talk and listen and understand. Then each of us can embrace the old saying, that "when we walk to the edge of all the light we have and take that step into the darkness of the unknown, we must believe that one of two things will happen – there will be something solid for us to stand on, or, we will be taught how to fly."