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POSTS ON PARENTHOOD

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A collection of raw musings

about being a dad

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Excerpt

> By Brad Huebert

Excerpts are optional hand-crafted summaries of y

My prized Sturpees

My son Noah is turning 13 in a month or so. A colossal turning point. A coming of age. A rite of passage. And high time for parents like me to shift gears in our parenting strategies.

I think that the early parenting years are about investments in our children's development. The teenage years, I suspect (as I face the prospect myself and reflect on my sixteen years working with teenagers) will be defined by calculated risks.

From 0-12 we slowly but surely build the canoe, carving out the frame, stretching the skin, sealing the holes; inaugurating the teenage years is like pushing the canoe out from the dock for the very first time. The water isn't deep—yet—but every stroke takes our “baby” into darker water made choppy by the winds and tides we cannot control from the workshop on shore.

When you sit in front of a final exam, staring at the stark pages that will define your grade, it's too late to study. It's time to act, to get the ink flowing and see what you're made of. And by the time your kids hit pubescence, you better be ready to do some serious letting go, because it's too late to instill the stuff of childhood. The canoe had better be sea-worthy, because it just left the dock. This is a scary time for parents, for me. But exhilarating, too.

For Noah's first twelve years, we imposed a healthy pattern of giving, saving, and spending: Every dollar he got was broken into tithe (10%), savings (10%), and spending (80%). The other day, I changed the pattern. I cut him loose on the tithe thing. All I can say is, I felt God guiding me into it.

I told Noah that until he turned 18, he would still have to save 10% of what he earned. Long term savings, non negotiable, he'll thank me later. But as of

his 13th birthday, I explained, he no longer had to tithe a single cent should he so choose.

I told you, parenting an adolescent is about calculated risk.

What I also did was sit him down for what I felt was an inspiring Bible study on generosity, riches, money, and sharing. I explained that I was no longer going to require him to do something that ought to be coming from his heart, but challenged him to consider what kind of person he was going to be. The New Testament doesn't command us to tithe, but it does command us to be generous (1 Tim 6). And then I let him be.

The very next day, all on his own, he decided to buy a \$5 pack of hockey cards for his little brother (this has never happened before, honest!) and to treat us all to slurpees to drink during supper. He basically spent all he had left on us. On being generous.

I don't know if he'll keep it up. I think he will. I think he's grasping that God has given us everything for a reason, that it all belongs to Jesus, and that we must always be willing to share, to give and give some more, even if it hurts.

Man, that slurpee was sweet.

Remember your training, young one

I read a book a few years ago that really made me think about parenting in a new way. Can't remember the title (sorry) but I do remember the one thought that made my jaw drop. So here it is:

No amount of parenting discipline can compensate for a lack of training.

In other words, it's not fair to discipline our kids for things they haven't been adequately trained to do. If they aren't trained, their failure is really ours, not theirs.

If they're trained, if they know better and have learned the skills necessary to turn a "know better" into a "do better," discipline kicks in. No counting to three, no "the next time you hit your sister, I'll" anything. Just consistent, firm, loving discipline. And discipline isn't so much punishment as allowing consequences to run their course, to press the reset button so that our kids can remember their training.

"You know better," we're so quick to tsk-tsk, hands on our hips—but I think we often presume too much, too soon. This week I got so frustrated with Noah, our oldest. He's been studying for year-end exams—or rather, blithering his teary-eyed way through exam prep, refusing, apparently, to study.

Until I realized he didn't know how. Honestly. No one had ever shown him (let's all throw out a cheer for the modern school-system), so he honestly didn't know where to start. A few nights of coaching in basic study principles and strategies from yours truly and he was actually excited to face down those exams. NOW he knows better. And not a moment before.

This is what God's been teaching me lately. I'm a better dad for it, and just in time for Father's Day.

Listening for my family

When God calls the meeting, you drop everything and listen.

It's what I call the divine encounter approach to "devotions," which is based on the fact that the Lord really is our shepherd, and that he will lead us better than we can lead ourselves—especially when it comes

to our spiritual development and devotion. If you initiate your own devotional plan, it will often feel flat or empty because God's agenda for us is getting buried by a devotional plan written for millions of people. But you're not millions of people. You're you.

When God calls the meeting, he sets the agenda. And it's never boring, never aimless, because God called the meeting. It's a guaranteed divine encounter. Read my book to explore this more deeply.

Anyway, last night after tucking the kids into bed I sensed God calling a meeting—beckoning me, inviting me to spend some time listening to his heart for my family. Not to pray for my family, I should point out. Not giving God my requests. God wanted to speak to me. Pulling out my journal, I found a fresh page and wrote, “Lord, what do you want to reveal? Say? Show me?” And then God began putting thoughts into my head—ideas, words, phrases, pictures—which I recorded in my journal.

And family member by family member, he gave me insight into their lives and how I should be loving them in this season of life. This May, to be specific.

How do I know it wasn't just my own thoughts and wishful thinking? Well, first off because the messages critiqued my parenting and stung a little. Not exactly what I'm dying to hear. Secondly, they had a ring of truth to them. All the vague, disconnected hunches I've been too busy to connect the dots on suddenly became clear and directive. Third, it was specific enough to do something about. Satan tends to be so vague with his criticism that you can't possibly fix it.

Today is day one of the new plan. So far, so good. No, I'm not going to share the specifics. Suffice it to say that I've been dropping the ball as a dad and while painful, the messages were gracious because they gave me another shot at nailing this daddy thing. More or less.

Jesus and Joel and mommy and stuff

It was Friday, 4:55pm. My kids were all home from school, Shauna was relaxing, and I was sneaking from kid to kid asking them if they were ready for mother's day. The younger two, Glory and Joel, had lovingly constructed mother's day crafts at school. Joel went fishing through his backpack so he could show me his mommy treasures... and realized he'd forgotten them at school.

To recap: It's Friday, and Sunday was comin.' Not Easter Sunday, Mother's day. And his stuff was still perched with a smile in his cubby, waiting for him to pick them up a day late, on Monday. Nuts.

His shoulders slumped, and a heavy tear dragged its way down his cheek at the thought.

I've said this before, but every day we're faced with a series of decisions, strings of crossroads linked in a providential chain. Follow the links, find God's best. My first crossroad was whether to go see if the school was still open, which it never is. But I had to try. That's what dads do, right? So as we're driving, I'm praying—because I wasn't exactly optimistic. Best case scenario, he knows I did my best for him, that I think he's worth the effort. But I prayed out loud. With a fatherly ache lacing the words.

There's one car left in the staff lot. Probably a custodian. The front doors are locked. It's dark inside. Second crossroads. Do I give up? No. We walk by a series of windows. Dark, dark, and dark. Next door is also locked. As it should be. I pray again. Next crossroads. "Please God." Now we're three quarters around the school.

And the door... OPENS. What? But surely the second set, the inner doors... OPEN TOO. We walk into the Grand Hall, and find the custodian. She looks surprised.

“How’d you get in?”

“The door was unlocked.”

“WHAT? REALLY?” They’re ALWAYS locked, apparently. I smile inside, then explain my heartbroken son’s predicament. She’s friendly, though not totally convinced. Even so, she leads us to Joel’s classroom... Which is also open. With the light on. And the last teacher left in the building? HIS teacher. She knows exactly what he’s looking for. Joel snags his mother’s day gifts, and our hearts are beaming.

Thanks, Jesus. Joel is moved by his God’s tender miracle. NICE!

Filled

I was praying the other day, asking God to fill me with His Spirit for a message I was preaching. On a dime, these words jumped into my mind, so clear that I wrote them down:

“It will be everything or nothing. You will be Spirit-filled or not. Period.”

It took me aback, initially. What? All or nothing? Is that even possible? But that’s not what he meant. He meant that he’s not interested in anointing my sermons but leaving my parenting to my own devices. He won’t fill me for public ministry and ignore my prayers, my vacuuming, my driving, my free time, my conversations with the barista at Starbucks or the punk kid at the Superstore.

He wants my whole life to be touched, graced, empowered, anointed, filled. All of it. Or nothing. Imagine that! Spirit-filled driving through traffic! Spirit-filled household chores! Anointed discipline for my kids! Spirit-filled reactions to meetings! To math! To migraines!

To breakfast! To blogging! To bedtime! Lions and tigers and bears, oh my!

Yup. So to nail this message home, I've been doing a lot of praying: "Fill me, Lord. Fill me with Your Spirit." Twenty times a day. Forty. Maybe a hundred. Not compulsively, not out of a legalistic expectation. Excitedly.

And you know what? My perspective on almost everything is changing. My joy level is rising. My angst level is dropping. My ability to minister unselfishly to others, even when I'm tired and they don't deserve it and they're "just" my family is increasing. His voice seems clearer. His presence more palpable. His touch more noticeable. Why should this be surprising? But this is absolutely crazy.

Anointed, even.

Learn 'em good

God woke me up at 5:30am this morning. To chat. To tell me that something I've been working on for church is wrong.

For one thing, he's been showing me that the church doesn't train people for the Christian life. We train for children's ministry, ushering, and worship ministry, but not for life. Not for parenting, marriage, prayer, Christian character. Oh, we inform people well enough (teaching). We motivate people decently at times (vision). But Discipleship with a capital D is about teaching people to obey what Jesus has commanded (Matthew 28:18-20). The words here literally mean: Teach: more than instruction (one way) but actually helping people learn. The goal isn't dispensing information, but transforming a life.

Obey: Keep, observe, fulfill — like a prophecy.
Commanded: Commissioned, charged... with a definite goal, result, and purpose in mind.

As I said before, the church doesn't really do that. At all. Cause you can't do this in a class. Or with a book. It can only be done 'on the job,' with color commentary. Real-time coaching, like Jesus did.

For example, by far the best way to train parents is not to get them into a parenting class. It's to sign them up for being participants on "Supernanny." She gets right in there, observes them real time, corrects them real time, follows through, says what needs to be said.

Church parents walk away with more paper in another binder and no one there to help them apply it. The cool thing is, we CAN do this with our own children. Learn 'em real good so that they can live the life God intended. By the power of the Spirit, we MUST do this. Wow, do I have some thinking and praying to do.

Shifting gears

Parenting is serious business. For one thing, while your children are learning to listen to the Holy Spirit themselves, you've got to cover for them. They're just kids, after all.

Noah is 11, our pre-pubescent, almost pubescent dude-and-a-half big brother to Joel and Glory. We love him so much. He's not adolescence (I made that up) much yet, but his body, mind, and soul is definitely shifting gears. And grinding pretty loud at times.

The other day he told us about a friend who has a secret copy of a video game where you can chase down a woman and have sex with her. You don't see anything, the lights go out, but the sexual innuendo is deafening. His parents don't know he has it, and he's

already psyched about getting the next version, where the lights DO NOT go out, if you know what I mean.

Noah is disgusted with the whole thing, praise God.

Two weeks ago I blogged about a sense of alarm for him, that something was wrong and that I had prayed to avert an evil event. Putting this together with that, now I know what it was. And then there was yesterday. He was going to another friend's house for a birthday party sleepover, we were eating supper just before he took off, and I suddenly had a warning bell clanging in my spirit. I excused him from the table and we had a quick heart-to-heart.

I warned him that Satan was going to sexually tempt him at the party, that he had now entered a time of his life when friends might experiment with things that could damage his soul if he embraced them too and that I sensed it was coming that night. He seemed to understand and was grateful, though not quite grasping the magnitude of what I'd shared with him.

This morning I picked him up from the sleepover and one of the first things he said was, "You were right, Dad." Apparently they'd playing Rock Band and you can design your own characters. Well, his friends customized a girl character with narrow bands of cloth where her clothes should have been so they could watch her bobbing and you know what to the music. He left the room when it happened, praise God. I'm so proud of him! And thankful to God once again, who pre-tripped the booby-traps of the enemy (pun intended) so we could avoid them.

I can't be everywhere Noah is. But I can pray, I can listen, and this is so important — I CAN TELL HIM WHAT I'M HEARING. I pray that he realizes he can hear God for himself. That's the next step.

Anointed prayers

Last night when tucking time rolled around, I was ready to count some serious Z's.

My kids were tired too, so I was fully expecting the usual auto-pilot prayer time: "God, thank you for my day. Thank you for our family, and supper. And video games. Amen." Much of the time their prayers are so rote-based that we wouldn't actually have to pray, we could just press play on an .mp3 version, a pre-recorded monotonous mumble we could all nod our sleepy heads to. "Yeah, *that*. Amen." And drift off to sleep.

So imagine my surprise when, after their cherubic nephew's first birthday party earlier, Noah begins our prayer time with something like, "God, thank you for David and his first birthday. I pray that you will draw his heart to yours every day of his life and that one day he will come to realize that you are Lord." And then Glory continues, not copying, with something like, "And Lord, please help him to grow up to love and trust you and grow up to serve you." And then Joel, our eight year old, caps it off with something like, "Help him to accept you every single day in small ways, so that when he grows up, he'll really know you."

Awakened to Christ's presence, my usual prayer changed too: "Wow, Jesus, thank you for settling on my children right now and breathing your heart for David into them. Thank you for giving them the words to pray." It was so gentle, so beautiful. In some way invisible to my natural eyes and groggy soul, our Lord Jesus had crept into our little gathering and illuminated my children's hearts with insight and passion far beyond their normal routines. I'm not sure they even knew it. But I did. And Jesus illuminated my heart too. Through them.

Those little gifts are more than rays of eternal sunshine, they are joy come home.

Where I belong

My kids pretty much tackled me the moment I stuck my head out of the customs door at the airport last night. Glory was draped all over my left side, kissing my neck and popping my ribs with joy. Joel took out my left flank, jumping up and down with just enough gusto to make it ridiculous for me to walk. Noah ambled in third, reaching past the other two to pat the only exposed part of my back he could find. I dragged them all thirty feet before sticking my neck out like a giraffe to kiss Shauna. I held it just long enough to make all three of them uncomfortable.

Aaaahhhh. I'm home.

The land of cooler—and cleaner—air. The kind of place where cities haven't stuck out their urban elbows and bled into other cities to form megalopolises yet. Where missing an unforgiving turnoff doesn't consign you to hellish miles of extra driving. Where a cute, two storey, poorly constructed home awaits me, smiling with a homemade "welcome home daddy" banner front and centre. A place where Glory takes me by the hand and shows me all the cool hand-me-downs she inherited from a taller friend while I was gone.

Where Joel informs me that we will be reconstructing his A-Wing Rebel Fighter from the 1,234,564 pieces of errant lego carpeting his room. Where Noah proudly cracks open his wallet to show me he's finally saved enough money to buy the video camera that will eventually forge his epic path to James-Cameron-itude.

Where all three kids inhale the iconically fresh and greasy Randy's Donuts I bought just before turning in my rental car yesterday. Where I can finally tuck my kids into bed, leaving them with a quiet sense that all is now right in the world. Where a cozy bed of my own, sunken in all the right places, hosts a plump, fresh pillow

that knows my name. Where the love of my life waits for an evening of cuddling under the covers watching a valentine episode of *Cake Boss* while whispering, “I’m so glad you’re home” over and over again. Where I fall into a sweet sleep pulled toward the body I’ve been missing the past week while I’ve been adventuring, fellowshiping, and learning up and down the Sunny State of California.

Where I now sit the morning after in a tacky brown robe staring blankly out the kitchen window at our pathetic little tree while my feet enjoy the coolness of floor tile that won’t warm up at all today.

Where I belong.

A beautiful bedtime

Bedtime was rich tonight.

Usually it’s brief—a hair touse, a peck on the cheek—and always including an I love you and religiously bracketed by a weary, halfhearted prayer. Tonight, God was tugging at my heart. A pang, an alert, a please. Slow down, he seemed to say. This is what I want you to do with the rest of your evening. So I gave in.

I lay down next to Glory, and we chatted it up, discussing the all-too-frequent-for-my-liking approaches by pubescent boys in her school. Determined to arm her with witty, polite, and yet off-putting one liners, soon we were laughing so hard that she couldn’t stop giggling to save her life. I prayed, sort of... and then I learned something. “It’s your turn” (to pray), I said, encouraging to put aside her laughter. “I am praying,” she replied. Huh. Apparently she was laughing TO God. Offering even that up to him. So cool, isn’t it?

After getting up from her bed (and giving up on verbal prayer with giggle girl), my thoughts returned to Joel. Ahh, Joel. He'd done and said some things earlier that evening that hurt me deeply. I'd forgiven him, but the moments still stung like the welt swelling in reply to the crack of a cruelly snapped whip. I'd already tucked him in quickly, with the customary peck and prayer.

Finding me in the kitchen a few minutes later, Noah asked me if I wanted to play some video games, or maybe watch some TV. Something in my heart held back. That pang, that alert sounded again. An ache, a need for prayer. I told Noah as much, promising to find him later, before his lights out. I was about to recline in my easy chair when I opened my heart to the Spirit's guidance. The image of me climbing into bed beside Joel and wrapping my arm around him. The thought that his heart was torn by what had happened, that it was up for grabs, that I need to be careful with him, or I'll lose him.

I climbed the stairs, then up into his bunk bed, and he welcomed me. He apologized again, and then I told him that I'd already forgiven him. That I would always forgive him. No matter what. That we're buddies forever. And then I knew I needed to stay there with him in the dark, by his side, arm around him, until he fell asleep. I needed to prove my love, not just say it. And so I did. Instead of his nightly routine, an hour long, restless fiddling with fatigue, he was out cold in ten or fifteen minutes. I slid out of bed content, remembering my promise to Noah.

I found Noah in bed, almost ready for light's out. I climbed in next to him, clicking off his lizard's terrarium lighting before settling in at his side. It was his turn for chatter. We laughed, we listened, we loved just talking to each other. I prayed that our friendship would last for our lifetimes, however that works out.

And now I'm blogging about it all, because it was more than precious. And because maybe God has something for you in the story.

Stupid angels

I have brainless children.

It's minus 27 today, the kind of cold that bites you, sucks your exposed skin like a vampire, and leaves you undead. Got the picture?

So I thought I'd be superdad this morning by getting up at 6:30am to warm up the car so I could drive Noah and Glory to the bus stop and let them sit in the car until the bus arrived. Which I was happy to do. Sort of. I mean, it's really cold.

So imagine my surprise when I glanced back at my lovely angel of a daughter and discovered that she hadn't worn any mittens. Who knew God had daft angels? Grunting and muttering some early morning vitrol that began with "You have GOT to be kidding me..." I wrenched the car back toward the house to retrieve Glory's mittens. Silly kitten.

And I keep muttering... about how now I'm going to have to take a big chunk of my morning, which is supposed to be a weekly date with their mother, to drive them to school because they're going to miss their bus.

"Do YOU have any mittens?" I asked Noah, half expecting the same answer.

"Yep."

Except his definition of "mitten" apparently includes mini-mitts—those miniscule, paper thin cotton stretchy nearly useless things you can buy for a dollar a pair.

"Uh, no," I muttered again as we pulled back up to the driveway. "Get a real pair."

Noah is a pre-teen with a growing thirst for being a pain in the butt and arguing about it, but even he embraced wisdom in this moment and jumped out of the car to get a real pair of mitts.

Luckily, we still caught the bus. But I drove home, still muttering. Kicked off my boots, muttering.

Found Shauna downstairs, and relayed the whole story. Beginning with the line, "Well, our brilliant children..."

...Are no dumber than I am at times as a child of God. And my heavenly father does a whole lot more than drive me back to the bus stop when I screw up. Best thing is, he doesn't mutter.

I've been trying to teach my kids that they can't control other people's choices, words, and actions. All they can control are their own responses.

Time to take my own advice.

Oh, the doorbell just rang. It was my kids, back at the door... because they're too cold. Huh. Really. The bus hasn't showed up yet. Guess I'll be driving them to school after all.

Good thing I had this little chat with God, so my attitude is actually pointing North now.

Later.

A Sunday from hell?

Our family is having quite the day today.

It was kickoff Sunday, one of the "bigger" sundays of the year.

It was also my first time back in the pulpit since I injured by throat more than a month ago. I wasn't sure if I could handle it, so it was a little nerve-wracking.

It was also Noah's big football game at

McMahon Stadium, a little thrill they give the peewee kids mid season so they can say they've played where the pros play.

It was also Kidz Church launch Sunday. Shauna leads that ministry so she was up to her eyeballs in prep, planning, teachers, and curriculum this morning. So five minutes before the morning service started, Shauna found me in the foyer and said, "Got a message. Noah is on his way to Children's Hospital. I'm going to meet them there." I gave her a hug, stepped back, and stood there, stunned. How was I supposed to preach knowing my son was injured, but without any idea how badly? And yet I knew I was supposed to follow through, to preach my heart out.

I laid my heart out for God in a fresh way, then stepped up and preached. Not preached my heart out, I'd already given it to God. But talking about a mixed bag of emotions.

Right after the service I snagged my younger two and drove to Children's Hospital. We found Noah and Shauna in a waiting room and after one look, I knew his leg was broken. Shauna gave me his football gear, which I proceeded to take back to the car.

But the car wasn't in the spot I'd left it in. It had rolled down the hill in the parkade and crunched the back of another vehicle. In my haste I'd forgotten to yank the parking brake. An officer was there, taking pictures and taking notes.

Did I mention that I didn't have my vehicle registration with me?

Or that when it came time for the x-ray, I was the one to lift his leg while the tech lady slid the film under it? That I, to love him, had to cause him star-spangled pain in the process? Not pretty.

It's been one of those days. A Sunday from hell? No. Not from Hell. I'm clinging to the goodness of God in this, accepting my brokenness as a necessary condition and embracing what God has for us in this difficult time.

Jesus is gently teaching, graciously offering his peace and presence. Oh, I love him.

And this wonderful, battered, bruised, and broken son who cried out during the x-rays, "Why is this happening to me?"

I had to be honest.

"I don't know, son. But I love you."

"I just want this to be over. I just want to go home," he sobbed.

I squeezed his hand tight, offering an iron grip that held him with my left hand on one plane, and the hand of Jesus with my right. But it won't be over today, or tomorrow, although he is home now, reclined in the living room. He's got a long haul ahead of him, unless Jesus does a miracle or five.

Oh, it hurts me to watch my son in pain. But life is hard. And the only way to make our way through it well is to hold Jesus' hand. I resolve that if nothing else, we're going to learn that lesson through our valley.

A Monday from God

So many people have responded with kind words and prayers for my son and our family on Facebook, through email, my blog, and Twitter that I sensed that I needed to follow up on what's what in the Huebert house of havoc.

Watching Noah writhe through pulsating shards of electric pain yesterday wrecked me. Listening to him ask, "Why?" for perhaps the first time in his life as the inherent unfairness and ambiguity of a fallen world crashed in on him wasn't any easier. It's relatively easy to admit that I can't take away his physical pain; it's harder to be honest about the emotional pain he's going

through, to admit that there are no easy answers for the “WHY?” question. For the first time in his life, he’s had to face the darkness of a ruined world head on, and it would be cruel of me in the long run to pretend the 19 arrows that have pierced him are duller than they really are.

I told him yesterday that God did have a purpose for all of this, not just for us, or me, but for HIM. I also said that you didn’t usually have the luxury of knowing what that purpose was as you’re trudging through a valley. It usually comes in hindsight.

Well... sometimes it also comes in hindsight. Because the outpouring of compassion, kindness, concern, prayer, cupcakes, and visits on Noah’s life during the past twenty four hours has been incredible to say the least. I pointed out that he must be pretty special guy.

“I think I know why God allowed this to happen,” Noah finally said last night (albeit through a Codeine high). “I got to see how much people love me.”

Think about that for a minute: How many twelve year old kids get to experience this kind of lavish affection and care under normal circumstances? Crisis has an uncanny ability to wring water from stone, or even wring full-on appreciation from pubescent, self-centred boys who only seem to get along half the time (Noah is one of them; I’m just saying).

Here I was thinking about what lousy timing this was: A debilitating injury right at a pivotal time of life when he needs to be active and engaged. Testing his ability. Learning his strength.

“Actually,” God seems to be saying, “the most important thing Noah needs at this moment in time is to know he’s special, that he’s loved, that he’s part of a community who admires and cares for him.”

Who knew that a spiral fracture could be the elegant wrapping adorning such a sacred gift?

I wonder if God winks?

Bullies

I almost forgot to tell you a story about my son's inner city mission trip. Before he left I blogged about the struggles of his soul, being crotch casted and all.

The emotional suckiness of his injury finally crashed in on him and he broke down crying, releasing a torrent of dark words in the process. Words that went something like,

“I'm totally useless. I can't do anything.”

Well guess what? There was an honest to goodness bully on the mission trip (from another church) who was doing his best to ruin a dodge ball game my son was trying to participate in. The ball only came his way from time to time, and then he could only hop a little bit to avoid it.

At one point the other kid approached Noah and sneered something like, “Why are you even playing? You're totally useless. You can't do anything.” I'm serious. It was almost a carbon copy of what had tumbled out of Noah's tears the day before.

Meaning, Satan had been whispering those pernicious thoughts to Noah. Meaning, Satan picked that nasty kid to give voice to those very same lies in hopes



of convincing Noah to believe them. He does that often, you know.

The difference was, Noah and I had talked in between. Prayed. Cleared the air. So how did Noah respond to the daggers? I was so proud of him:

“No I’m not.”

“Sure you are. You’re totally useless. If you play I’m just going to hurt you.”

“Try it.” I can almost feel his chest swelling with godly strength at this point. And then... the bully backed down, drooling out his pubescent verbal sludge, and slunk away.

Interesting, huh? I think that was Noah’s defining moment for the weekend. No, our struggle is not against flesh and blood. I’m not saying that. But flesh and blood people are often the devil’s errand boys (and girls) and we would do well to watch not only our own words, but theirs.

Storm

Playing, pretending, shouting, laughing.
Threatening, darkening, advancing, foiling.
Stopping, listening, looking, murmuring.
Spitting, spattering, plunking, dumping.
Squealing, scampering, retreating, shutting.
Booming, flashing, rumbling, striking.
Watching, ooh-ing, ah-ing, pointing.
Pounding, surging, gurgling, smothering.
Groaning, whispering, frowning, brooding.
Soaking, seeping, puddling, mucking.
Waiting, wishing, wanting, humph-ing.
Rising, running, flowing, flooding.
Wowing, wondering, checking, worrying.
Ebbing, ceasing, clearing, inviting.
Asking, begging, thanking, bounding.
Shining, warming, welcoming, pooling.
Smiling, giggling, splashing, playing.
Soaking, spreading, soiling, staining.
Shivering, dripping, changing, bathing.
Receding, draining, refreshing, blessing.
Snacking, cuddling, praying, sleeping.

A balloon for mama

In his delightful book, *Windows of the Soul*, Ken Gire says that God often opens windows for us—framing a moment in such a way that we must pause at the window. As we stop and listen there, we receive something eternal, a gift from God's heart to ours. He gave a window to our family yesterday, on Mother's Day.

We'd driven south of the city on an adventure and ended up at "Big Rock," a glacial boulder the size of an apartment block, shattered into halves and splinters. We spent a good part of the afternoon climbing, exploring, and conquering its many faces and fissures, and finally it was time to leave. On the path back to the van we crossed paths with a daddy and his daughter on the way toward Big Rock. They were holding hands and clutching an enormous balloon, the silver kind with big seams and a green and pink message emblazoned on the front: "Happy Mother's Day!"

"Aren't you glad you didn't get a tacky balloon?" I whispered to Shauna when the two had passed.



"What I'm afraid of," she replied, "Is that the mom is dead." I turned to watch them and snapped this picture. My heart told me she was right.

A moment later, Noah remembered that he and his brother had forgotten their sweaters on one end of the big rock. I volunteered to go back for the sweaters, curious about the balloon and hoping I'd discover more

about the mysterious daddy and daughter. I took Hero, our scrappy Cairn terrier, with me.

Circling the rock, I quickly found the sweaters and opted to meander around the side where daddy and daughter were. They'd found a quiet spot and were kneeling on a patch of old straw strewn over the ground to cover the spring mud. Not wanting to be overly snoop, I kept walking, hoping to overhear a clue—until Hero dug in his heels and dropped his tummy to the ground, refusing to go another step. It was weird. Until I realized God had orchestrated the moment. I was being invited deeper into the window.

"Is there anything you want to say?" Daddy asks quietly.

"That I love her," Daughter replies.

Wow. A sacred moment, so pure and painful. So Shauna was right. Hero got up, suddenly allowing me to walk him, so we left Daddy and Daughter to themselves. I glanced back a minute later, only to see the balloon traipsing its way into the vast sky. A gift to a mother on mother's day. A mother no longer with us. Reflective, I padded back to the van to rejoin my family and we enjoyed a snack together. Soon Daddy and Daughter returned to their own vehicle, walking past us very slowly, still hand in hand.

I wanted to say something, to fix something, to run over and crush them in a hug, but it was not my place. Later, as we drove off—the four of us and our mommy—I clasped Shauna's hand even more passionately, deeply thankful. Her eyes spoke the same words: "I'm glad I'm here. I love you." We smiled knowingly at each other, exchanging a kiss. But this won't leave my mind.

Lord, why have you graced me with this window? What would you like me to see?

The girl is so young, almost too young to understand. Will she remember her mother when she grows up? Will the balloon seal her memory in

daughter's heart? Do they know you, Jesus, or do they bear the ache of their loss all alone? Did the balloon soar into an empty sky, or was it like a prayer, a symbolic offering that floated its way into heaven, where her mommy is already at peace in your arms?

Jesus, what do you have in this window for my readers?

Glory-ous

I've got to tell ya, I'm having more memorable conversations with my kids this year than ever before. It all began yesterday while I was chipping a channel through the ice so a massive puddle could drain from our back yard into the alley.

Glory joined me outside, just kinda fiddling with the snow and ice while I worked. When I was done, I closed the gate from the outside so we had to walk down the alley and around the block to get back home. Glory took my hand in hers, which is about my favorite thing in the whole world. I love holding Shauna's hand, but Glory isn't always going to be nine and it's not always going to feel like that, and there may come a day when she doesn't want or need to hold my hand anymore. "Let's go to the swings," she said, rocking our hands back and forth.

So we raced each other to the playground a few hundred yards away. I let her win. We played on the swings for about a minute, but I got dizzy (something about the back and forth motion). And then it struck me:

She looked stunning in the waning daylight, frosted with gold and the glory that is her namesake. I ran to get my camera and took a bunch of great shots while she drank in the adoration and full attention from her daddy.

Twenty minutes later, she was stomping away in defiance as Shauna tried to discipline her for something. Five minutes after that, she found me lying on my bed and spilled out her heart:

"Daddy, I don't feel like God's princess anymore and I don't deserve to be in God's family. I've been feeling kind of guilty for a long time now but I was afraid to tell you about it."



Ah, golden words, those—so pure and real and ripe for a God-moment. So I invited Jesus into our time together. Glory confessed these things to Him, and I asked Jesus to lift the guilt and dirtiness from her. "How do you feel?" I asked. "Lighter and pure. Like God's princess," she replied. Amen!

I could have not taken her hand. I could have groaned at the thought of the swings and gone home. I could have stood there watching and not taken the pictures that made her feel special enough to come confide in me later. I could have told her I was too tired as I was lying on my bed. I could have tried to talk her out of her feelings instead of bringing her to Jesus.

And I could have taken the credit for it all, but I can't. Jesus, you ROCK!

Liar, liar

Satan is a liar. This you know. But did you know that his real victories are not outright fabrications? Not at all. His most outstanding trophies are all about misinterpretation.

And not even misinterpreting scripture, which, admittedly, can be catastrophic. No, I'm talking about his nauseatingly smooth proficiency at helping us misinterpret life in such a way that joy and potential is stolen, dreams are killed, and character is destroyed.

Take my son Noah, for instance. We had a moment today at the climbing wall. I just about short-circuited with frustration because he wasn't trying. He'd climb up a ways, then give up. And then deny it up and down. Which is weird, because when he was younger he used to excel at everything he tried. He hit the first ball I threw at him. Like, over my head. With a bat. He rode his bike without training wheels first try. He's a natural athlete, or at least he was, and his lack of effort and quitting attitude was killing me.

So it was mano-a-mano time. I calmed myself down and prayed and listened and finally, a break in the case: "You keep talking about how I was the best at everything when I was little. I can't be that little boy anymore. I'm always failing you because you want me to be that boy."

Oh. Nuts.

Downstairs we go, with tears flying. And spent an hour talking and praying. Asking Jesus for help, to find the root, the first time this lie took hold. Invited him into the pain. The lie. Which was that if he disappointed us, we'd give up on him and he'd lose us. WHOAH. But suddenly, release. The feeling of failure was gone as Jesus replaced the lie with truth. I also apologized, told him I love him, that the KIND of person he becomes is far more important than what he accomplishes. In fact, I

could care less about what he accomplishes, to be honest. And now he knows that.

So does his garbage can. There's nine pounds of snot and toilet paper in there. I told him to go take a shower, to imagine that little boy stigma being washed away, gurgling down the drain forever. He said he felt a great weight being lifted off his shoulders. Praise God!

But can you see how my good intentions got misinterpreted by the enemy and presented as a lie? Praise God for his grace in releasing us.

Gollum goes bye-bye

Gollum has been stalking my daughter at night. In her mind's eye, that is. And a few dreams. The silvery creeper had her terrified yesterday at bedtime. She was sobbing, almost shaking, when I slipped into bed with her. What do you do with a child who's afraid like that? Let me give you some advice.

Talk to Jesus.

Here's what I did (I've done it many times on other issues, actually):

1. Tease the fear to the surface instead of pushing it away. This sounds counter-intuitive, but for God to deal with it you have to let it surface fully. So after she confessed her fear to me, I asked, "Are you afraid now?" She nodded, still crying. "Picture his face in your mind," I prodded. She resisted, then trusted me. Her body tensed up even more.

2. Find the root. "Why are you afraid of him?" I asked. "He might hurt me."
"What will happen if he hurts you?"

“He might eat me?”

“And then what?”

“Then I’ll die.”

Ahh, there we have it. See, I’m peeling away layers to find the real fear, the real issue. Once we’ve found the root, we invite Jesus into it. I ask her to picture Gollum again.

3. **Invite Jesus into it.** In my prayer, I repeat her fear to stir it up:

“Jesus, Glory is afraid of Gollum because he might attack her and eat her and then she’ll die.” Notice how I don’t say, “That’s not real. That’s silly. That could never happen.” Because that’s using logic on an emotional issue. Which doesn’t work. The next part of my prayer is simple: “Jesus, what do you want Glory to know about that? Would you please reveal your truth to her?” Then I wait. She calms, and tears turn into sniffles. Her body relaxes.

4. **Follow up.** I ask a simple question: “What’s going through your mind?”

“Jesus came and told me Gollum wasn’t real but even if he was real that he’d protect me and help me fight him. He’s holding out his hand.”

“Then take it,” I reply. She does. “How do you feel?” I ask.

“Peaceful,” she replies. I thank God, give her a kiss on the cheek, and walk out of her room. The fear is gone. If she’s heard from God, it always will be.

Dats muh boy

Yesterday morning, Shauna caught Noah in a lie.

Not a “lie-awake-in-fear, heinous-global-conspiracy-because-even-Kellogs-is-involved” kind of lie, but a lie. And he flat out denied it. Kept a stiff upper lip while she reminded him that lying was disrespect, the whole nine yards. You’ve heard the speech. He stomped off into the pre-dawn darkness, leaving my lovely flower pierced like only a mother can be pierced. She found herself wondering: Has anything we’ve tried to teach him sunk in?

I was sitting on the couch downstairs ten minutes later when I heard someone at the door. It’s Noah. “I want to apologize to mommy.” Uber dense dad that I am, I don’t clue in to the nobility of the moment. I’m incredulous. “You’re going to miss your bus!” He nods, discerning my dense displeasure. It was only when he turned to leave once again that I dialed in to what was going on. He knew he’d miss his bus. This was calculated. I ran downstairs to get Shauna.

When she arrived, he clamped on to her and burst into great, heaving sobs. “I’m sorry, mom. Sorry I lied. Sorry I treated you that way.” It was a Seventh Heaven classic, I’m tellin’ ya. After watching this epic display of tears, hugs, and character, I drove him to the bus stop—gladly choosing to be late for my own morning appointment because as his dad, I had to reward his decision. Later on, he told me what led him to do it.

I’ll paraphrase his words: “I walked toward my bus stop and when I got to the main street I stopped and thought, ‘Mom doesn’t deserve that. She doesn’t deserve the way I just treated her.’ And then I remembered, dad, how two weeks ago you said that Satan was going to be attacking our family to try and push us apart, and I thought, ‘This is it. I just let him do

it.' I started to cry, and all the way back home I told Satan off (not in swear words, dad), and I thought, I don't care if I miss my bus because mom is more important than that."

Sniff. Sniff. If that doesn't melt my heart as a dad, nothing will. It shows me that without being able to articulate it, his heart is softer than we think. God speaks to him. Things are sticking. And from time to time, at least, he acts on what we've passed on.

Daddy nights

Mondays are daddy nights. Mommy works one night a week, which gives me a chance to have the kids to myself and do fun stuff with them till bedtime. Last night I smacked off the light and hoisted myself up the ladder into Joel's bunk bed to tuck him in. I'm not going to over spiritualize the conversation we had; let me just say that it just about killed me: So funny, so cute, so painful. I'll also say he's seven, and very bright. I'll replay the conversation as best I remember.

"What should I be when I grow up, dad?"

"I dunno, Joel. Anything you want. Anything GOD wants."

Pause.

"I want to be a pastor and a free runner. I want to be just like you."

I smile, inside and out.

"Did you have to pay to be a pastor, dad?"

I laugh. "Well, I had to pay to go to school to learn how to be a pastor."

"School?"

"Yeah, buddy. College. University." Noah, his older brother, has been talking about college this year

(he just turned twelve). Joel seems to remember that. I can almost hear the gears in his brain churning, clicking. He pulls himself closer to me, emotion overwhelming him.

“I’m going to miss Noah when he moves away.”

“What?”

His mind keeps clicking. “And when Glory moves away.” He realizes he’ll be alone at home one day, being the youngest.

“Joel, you might get married before they do. You might be the first to move away.”

He’s quiet again. Mind flying. And clicking. He buries his face in my neck.

“Dad, the day before I leave, can we spend the WHOLE DAY together?”

“Yeah, buddy. Lord willing.” I hold him. He sobs. Maybe I could live with you, daddy.”

“For a long, long time, Joel. You bet.”

“Maybe I could buy a house next door to you.”

I chuckle. “That would be awesome. And there are lots of houses up for sale on our street.”

He’s quiet again. “What if they aren’t for sale then?”

“Oh, buddy, this is all so far away. Let’s just enjoy what we have now.”

He’s quiet again. But he’s got more questions.

“If I move away, then what will I keep my lizard in?”

“Oh, that aquarium is yours, buddy. You’ll take it along.”

“What about your lizards?”

“I’ll get another aquarium. It’s okay.”

He lets out a huge, solemn sigh, leaning over the bed to scan his room. “I guess I’ll take all this stuff along with me.”

I crush him in a hug. He cries again. Try as I might, he’s on this mental train, and I must respect it. I lie with him, holding him and stroking his hair. He

relaxes. Time for sleep.

“I love you, dad.”

“Love you too, buddy.”

Day of the year

Yesterday was like a delicious dream. Instead of loathing the ticking clock, I looked to Jesus all day and asked, “What next?” After my morning date with Shauna, I:

- Assembled a few hundred pieces of my son Noah’s megablocks castle.
- Built my son Joel a corner display shelf for all the action figures and spaceships in his room.
- Played some video games.
- Vacuumed the basement and main floor.
- Went for a hike with all three kids on a nearby ridge – gorgeous
- Stopped in to see Shauna at work (she works Monday nights).
- Played with Glory and Joel in his room, made an imaginext castle for him to play with.
- Made a short stop motion video with Noah.
- Read a chapter from Tabitha’s Travels, an advent book, with all three kids.
- Made the kids a snack.
- Danced spontaneously around the living room with Glory and Joel to Lincoln Brewster’s
- Tucked them in and had our prayer time.

All said, my day ROCKED! I didn’t feel the time ticking, I just enjoyed myself. Nothing felt rushed or forced. I was at rest, in sabbath, and it was marvelous!

Thank you, Jesus. Why haven't I lived like this more often? Just moving between what God lays on my heart?

Dating my daughter

Years before I had children, one of my mentors mentioned that he dated each of his daughters while they were growing up. I remember thinking, "Yeah, that's cool." So now I have a daughter, Glory, who's 8 and a half. And from time to time, we go out on dates.

Which jogs a memory for me. Glory is maybe four, and she's sitting on my lap, gazing into my eyes. She reaches out, taking one of my cheeks in each little hand. She tilts my head 30 degrees, and tilts her own the opposite direction to match. And then gives me a peck on the lips, straight on. She pulls back, smiling huge. "Now we are maweed, daddy." And I melt into a sentimental puddle. "That's fine with me, sweetie-pies. We're married until you're 16." (I actually said that. I actually meant it).

Last night I went on a date with my little princess. This is the first time she wanted to dress up for it. Shauna did her hair, she put on some jewelry, some lip gloss, and some bona fide princess charm. "She's dressed to the nines," Shauna warned me. "So make sure you tell her how beautiful she looks." Yeah, yeah.

Of course.

And then Glory is standing in front of me, eyes sparkling like diamonds. She's so tall, slender, lovely.

Breathtaking, actually, and so very grown up looking. She literally took my breath away, this little bundle all grown up that still wants to hold my hand (see photo). She coyly looks up at me, wanting my approval. I give it, I POUR it.

“So, you want to go?” she asks, playful, with a trace of blush and shyness. And I realize: This isn’t a play date like we used to have when she was little. This one is real. This one is practice. So I open doors for her, both in and out of the car. We hold hands. I speak my adoration and admiration. I buy her a bouquet of flowers. She melts.

“You’re treating me like I’m your wife,” she comments at one point. “No, I’m treating you like you’re my date, my treasure,” I reply. “And any guy that doesn’t treat you like this isn’t good enough for you.” She pauses, thinking hard, then nods. I pray that the message gets through.

Silence

My family is all in bed. Shauna is fading or faded beside me, Glory is breathing deeply on a mat on the floor, and Noah and Joel are wrestling with covers on the other Queen to my right. The air conditioner is working overtime. This is San Diego, a Day’s Inn.

We’ve careened along the Oregon Coast, pounded the Dunes, craned our necks at the Humboldt Redwoods. We’ve tasted Fisherman’s wharf and spied Alcatraz. We’ve hugged relatives, sucked back peaches like we’ve never had one before (I’m not sure what we get in Calgary... they’re called peaches, but now I’m sure they’re something else entirely). We’ve hugged Minnie Mouse, braved Indiana Jones, and took the Special Effects tour at Universal. We’ve had magical beach days, and even spent an evening with new friends that I miss already. And Shamu put on a whale of a show a few hours ago. We’ve done it all, I tell ya.

And now it's quiet. My kids are dreaming. Of what, I wonder? Of me snapping at them in the muggy heat at Sea World today? Of Dolphins dancing to music? Of Redwoods towering and creaking? Of the thrashing green waves at Laguna Beach? Of the long car rides, of their beach treasures, of the souvenirs they've accumulated? Of whudda-bumping roller coasters, cotton candy, pools, and pizza? Of picnics, tenting, rivers, and God's creation?

What have I put there, in those impressionable little minds? Cause that's the point, you see. Not the stuff, not the miles, not the coasters. The memories. The love, the time together. Cindy Morgan has a song with a line that says that the most valuable possessions we have are the memories we make along the way.

I'm a very rich man. But now it's time to press the "publish post" button, close my laptop, put it on the bedside table, and cuddle my wife. And dream my own dreams.

Mornings

I love mornings.

Not that I'm a morning person, per se, but something happens pretty much every morning that I wouldn't trade for the world.

When our youngest two wake up (Glory is 8, Joel is 6), they often bumble clumsily to our master bedroom, sludge-faced and slurry, wanting a cuddle. Their hair is mashed, their eyes are puffy, and they need seven minutes soaking up warmth beside mom and dad's faintly stirring bodies beneath the covers. Shauna is usually still comatose, but they don't care. She's really warm, after all.

“How’d y’ sleep?” I manage, whispering through my own dragon-breath.

“Good.” That’s the standard reply. I guess no matter how the night was it somehow becomes “good” once the cuddle is taken care of. Seven minutes later (give or take), they slide back out — places to be, things to do. If it’s Saturday, there are cartoons to watch. Those seven minutes are beautiful, yummy, precious, irreplaceable. For all of us. I get my gentle cuddle before they take off and don’t stop moving at bedtime twelve hours later. And they have sucked some kind of magical security substance from our befuddled forms by osmosis, like lying next to mom and dad together reinforces the family bond that is their universe and empowers them to face whatever the world hits them with that day.

They’ll outgrow this. A day will come when they won’t need this anymore — at least, not in this form. I pray that our love and guidance empowers them with the faith and self confidence they need to start their own family cuddle factories. Which is too bad, because in a few years I’ll lie in bed wondering where those moments went to. And I’ll probably cry. In the meantime, thanks for this, God.

Greatness

I spent today working on a video for our Father’s Day service.

Tom, our youth pastor, spent last Sunday interviewing the kids in our church about what they loved about their fathers. It was so much fun to work with all the short clips, assembling them into a meaningful whole. The quotes were wonderful; some were priceless.

Like, “My daddy is special because... because... when I... because at school I made an animal rock.”

Lately I've been reading Tim Kimmel's book, “Preparing your kids for true Greatness.” It's amazing so far. He contrasts the world's definition of success (high paying job, nice house, attractive family) with God's definition of true greatness (living to serve others and leave an eternal legacy). The one line that hit me the most was a comment on 9/11. He said that while the successful people ran down the stairs for their lives, the truly great people ran up the stairs to give their lives. He said we worship the successful, but during tragedies, we perish without the truly great.

Wow.

It made me think: That if I had raised a truly great kid who worked in the twin towers, I just may well have lost him or her that day because they would have been most concerned with helping others. They would have run up the stairs, not down. We discussed that scenario at Bible Study tonight: If you had to choose whether you'd raise a shallow, self-absorbed child who lived till they were 96 — or a selfless, truly great person who left a legacy but was dead by age 30, which would you choose?

I can't imagine losing a child. I can't. But a selfish, shallow child is a kind of loss too. I'd choose the 30 year old, hands down.

Bedtime wisdom

The other day I skimmed through a gangly list of every blog post I've ever written. Why? To find all the stuff I've penned about parenting. I kinda thought it might be worth pooling all the wisdom I've gleaned from the parental trenches. You know, to remind myself of

promises made, to remember lessons I thought I'd learned, to see if any patterns or persistent truths emerged over time.

It didn't take me long to find one:

God is busy at bedtime.

I know he never stops working, and I get that, but I'm telling you, stuff happens at bed time. I think God and my kids are in cahoots, cause right about the time when I'm starting to check out for the night, their walls come down and their hearts open up and they need me to engage in a big way. I think it must be safer to voice doubts in the dark, leaning there against my chest with the faint glow of the hall light soothing their souls.

Entry after entry, story after story, my bedtime blog posts add simple brush strokes to a grand masterpiece being painted by God in our family. Which is odd, because by and large... I can't believe I'm admitting this... most nights... often times...

I really loathe praying with my kids at bedtime. It's not prayer I dislike. It's not my children, and certainly not God. It's not a lack of love for any of the above. I think it must be the robotic way I go about it when I'm tired and really just want to get it done with so I can flake out and put my own day to bed. And the guilt when I realize I'm blowing an important moment again. Which is all too weird, because many of my favourite moments also come while tucking them in, and I'm not going to get to do this forever.

Praying with one child isn't all that bad. Two is a stretch. By the third, I'm repeating myself pathetically and wondering whether I'm actually praying or just going through the motions for the kids' benefit. I trust somebody else out there has felt the same way at some point?

Know what helps?

Cuddling together—all of us—on the couch before going upstairs. Praying together, praying for each other as we go. It's wonderful. Tonight I had Glory share

a passage from her devotions. I unpacked a truth nestled in the verses, we shared, we prayed, we snuggled, and off to bed they went. It was rich.

Thank you, Lord.

An 'aha' about empathy, parenting, and pulling your hair out

I had a parenting "aha" this summer.

You know the drill: Child A says something nasty to Child B. Child B retaliates. Stuff hits the fan. Someone gets hurt. Parent C intervenes.

Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

After awhile, it becomes obvious (brilliant father that I am) that Child A is the problem.

We sit down to debrief. A good idea. The debrief usually includes some form of, "And how would you feel if you were Joel and he said that to you?"

Sigh. "I'd be sad?"

"Yes. You'd be sad. Wonderful. So don't do it again."

"Okay, dad."

Okay, then.

Except I just led Child A down the wrong path. They were hurting child B, and what did I do? I focused on how Child A would feel, if...

Isn't the issue how child B felt? Not hypothetically, but actually? Isn't part of the problem the fact that Child A is only thinking of how they feel, instead of thinking about how child B is feeling? And haven't I just reinforced that bent by creating an exercise during

which child A is encouraged to continue seeing the world through their own eyes?

Hint: The answer to all the above is YES. A much better question: "How do you think Joel is feeling right now?"

"Sad?"

"Yes, but go deeper." Sad isn't good enough for kids their age. I pull, I peel, I prod, until I'm sure Child A has spent at least a few seconds in Child B's head.

Empathy doesn't come naturally to kids (or many adults). It takes practice. Better get started.

'Aha' number two: Imitation is not always flattery (or safe)

Imitation, they say, is the sincerest form of flattery. Except, I must interject, when you're wading through a conflict.

This morning during our family debrief (a weekly family sit down where we reflect on how our week's went, how we treated each other, how our family is doing, etc) my boys locked horns on the issue of video games.

One of the "rules" of the debrief is that all discussions remain sane and respectful, focused on a solution or on reconciliation, where needed. So my oldest Son Noah proceeded to address Joel, his younger brother, explaining in vivid detail why a certain conflict had erupted and what he found particularly annoying.

This was going quite well until Noah said something like,

"And then, you were like, "I wanna play this. I wanna play that," (doing a fairly decent imitation of Joel along the way).

Watching Joel's visceral reaction to this tirade, I learned something.

BING!

Joel was able to stomach constructive criticism, partly because he knew his turn to respond was coming. But the moment Noah imitated Joel to show him how he sounded, Joel bristled and shot back a defense of his own. In other words, the moment Noah imitated Joel, the issue shifted in Joel's mind from what he had done or not done to how accurate Noah's impersonation was.

"I did NOT say it like that."

"Yes, you did!"

"NO!"

Not helpful. Which illuminated an important principle and created a new family rule:

When you are trying to help someone understand how what they said and did affected you, don't imitate them, describe them. No impersonations, because impersonations are always caricatures, and unsolicited caricatures never make us feel good. They carry just enough truth to make our point, with just enough poison to hurt someone in the process.

Think about it: How do you react to unflattering imitations of yourself during a discussion or argument? My reaction is almost always, "That's unfair." And it probably is.

Much better for Noah to say, "Joel, when we play video games, sometimes you say such and such and it feels like you're getting upset when you're saying it, and the way you said it kinda hurt me." Totally objective compared to the "You sounded like this..."

Right?

I am more than a celery cop or chocolate patrol

It's 7:29am.

I'm reclining in our red easy chair, staring over the top of my Macbook Pro at my rustic brown "grandpa slippers." Shauna is still sucking Zs. She worked late last night, so I volunteered to get up with the kids to help them get ready for school.

When I say "kids" I feel I should explain. My youngest, Joel, is ten. Glory, the modern-day princess, is twelve (but looks fifteen). Noah? He's fourteen and stands just over six feet tall when his faux hawk is gelled into active duty.

All three of 'em dress themselves with reasonable success. They make their own breakfasts, and in theory at least, clean them up. They pack their own lunches, too. And brush their own teeth, wash their own faces, tie their own shoes, zip up their own flies.

And get out the door two minutes late. All by themselves. As they should.

So why am I getting up with them, exactly? I asked Shauna that question recently. I truly wanted to know.

Her answer? "To make sure they put veggies in their lunches."

Really? That can't be all. I press further.

"To make sure they don't put too many chocolate chips in their oatmeal."

Uh huh. That's it. I'm giving up half an hour of sleep I'll never get back for a few measly sticks of celery? To save eighty calories' worth of No Name chocolate chips per day? I tell you what, I can think of a hundred better uses of my time than that.

But this morning, I think I get it. The celery is a thinly veiled excuse. The chocolate patrol is a smoke

screen. The real reason I'm up, it turns out, is because I love them and won't get to see them all day. I can send them on their way with a hug, a prayer, maybe a few calories of wisdom.

They've all gone, now. Out the door, off into the world without me. For the day. Just a day. But another day, a day just like this one... will soon come, come without my permission, come to take them away for good. A day will come, too soon for my liking, when I would trade every ounce of sleep for another morning like this one. A morning pocked with clunking and stomping, bickering and spilling and chocolate cheating.

A morning will come when this nest is emptied of all but these glorious echoes and the cupboard will be full of chocolate chips with no one to steal them.

In the meantime I'll get up with my monkeys. I'll do my best to make sure the nest is warm when they leave, warm when they get back.

It's a cold, hard world out there, after all.
I'm up because they need me.

And because I need *them*.