

WHO ARE YOU
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“I don’t even know who you are.”

This was the answer I was given. The question was what was on my eighteen-year-old daughter’s mind. We were returning from a trip to my alma mater. I needed to visit an old mentor. She wanted to see if it was a university she might want to attend. So we went together.

Our itineraries were different. I would interview my old professor. She would roam the campus and check out the library. Then we would reunite. We never got that far. A true educator, my old friend let her know she would be welcome to join our meeting. So for two hours, she sat as unobtrusively as he would allow her to remain. She sat and listened to two educators discussing how cognitive capabilities are hindered by cultural and familial paradigms.

The return trip was mighty silent. Finally I pulled off the road, turned to her, and asked. I honestly worried that an older student at the library might have made a crude suggestion to my young, beautiful and sheltered daughter. No, it turned out I was the one who had shocked her. She had no idea who the academia who had taken her father’s place might really be.

How could I tell her? Dreams get put on hold when your children need to pursue their own. Play dates and children’s events fill adult schedules too. Changing diapers and reading Golden books leaves little time for expanding our own minds. That it takes years before the tasks of child-rearing are replaced by friendships in which ideas and dreams can flourish.

It seemed important to try.

It’s always been a trade-off. Love requires we give up our time, goals and lives to those we love. Love requires dreams and desires of others supersede our own. Ours can wait. So we proudly announce our coming parenthood and place our lives on hold. And hope the investment will pay off. That the ends of our lives will be less lonely, full of friends we shaped and formed. And who also desire our friendship..

That last one’s a bit tricky. God never commanded us to be friends with our children. Just to raise them in fear and admonition of the Lord. That means sometimes, maybe often, we also deny them their hopes and dreams. We intervene to save them from their plans. If we do our jobs, we risk their anger. And hope and pray this too shall pass, as time brings new perspective.

Love requires us to sometimes say ‘no’. Wisdom requires us to know how to let go gently, one layer of responsibility at a time. They are definitely going to leave us, one way or another. We either release them, hopefully with guidance. Or they tear themselves free, creating scars on two or three sets hearts in the process.

My children are all gone and married. And I’m not yet sure how well I planted. I believe I have two friends in my daughters. The jury is still out on my son. He hasn’t yet figured out he was never in competition with me. That my accomplishments never set his bars any higher, just my own.

I am currently sure of this. He is tired of having friends compare him to me. So in the past two years, I’ve tried to make the larger than life image all fathers become, a bit more human in scale. He has still begun a life completely different from mine. I wish him well. I will support and encourage him however I can. Mostly, I will wait anxiously for the day when our lives will again come together. It may never be as equals. I don’t believe God ever intended for that to happen. But at least, I hope, a basis has been established for friendship.

You see, friendship with our children requires us to eventually let them know. Who really are those people they call Mom and Dad? Do they know what we want from our lives? Do they know what wakes us up in the night in the cold clutches of fear? Have we ever let them hear our heartbeat?

We did at the beginning. They lay against our chests while we read to them from Golden books. Then the frantic flurry of growing up pulled us into separate worlds. Mostly theirs.

But before they leave us forever. When they are facing their own futures, but still leaning on us. Let’s pull them close. Let them see our fears and our tears. Let them hear, one more time, the heartbeat of the man or woman who gave them more shelter than mere arms. Let them see us as people.

So they never have to ask. "Who are you?"