

The Story of a “Privileged” Single Father Or the Zen of Parenting

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On quite a few occasions when I tried to express some of the challenges and difficulties of being a single father, I was silenced, or closed off by the categorical comment, “but Tat, you’re privileged.” The comment typically came from a woman friend or colleague, whose imagination of single parenting is dominated by the popularized image of the single mother, with low income and younger children. The fact that I am a father with a stable job and teenage kids has, according to these friends and colleague, completely disqualified me from any claim for support, or even a sympathetic ear. I am, therefore, extremely grateful to the organizer of this forum for giving me the privilege of sharing my experience with you tonight.

So what is it like to be a single father with teenage kids?

A single-father family is perhaps less marginalized or stigmatized than a single-mother family, but it also means that the “normal” expectations of a two-parent family are often applied, meaning the single father has to do it all. The most difficult years were when I was going through the trying years of obtaining tenure at the University of Toronto, where the publish or perish rule is rigorously enforced. One had to balance between the endless hours that one had to put in to survive, and the multiple demands of single parenting – driving the kids to and from classes and activities, making dinner, keeping up with what is happening in their lives, and spending enough time to respond to their emotional needs. And after all those duties, one could try to have a life.

Parenting teenage kids is, in my own experience, a spiritual pilgrimage. It is filled with challenges and exceptional rewards. Teenage (which we have all been through) is a period when one is struggling with difficult issues such as identity, peer relationships, self-image, sexuality, and a sense of purpose in life. The teenage life is full of tension and contradictions, many of which are played out in the parent-child relationship. The teenage child needs both attention and space, both structure and freedom, and your presence and help is both needed and resented. Finding the right moment is the eternal challenge. I am sharing three stories to illustrate my struggle.

Story 1. Can I go to a rave? When my daughter was fifteen, she asked to go to a rave. I knew it was an experience that many teenagers in her generation would grow up remembering. I shared my concerns with her, and she did her homework on the internet to address issues of safety,

drugs, and unwanted sex. She went and had a good time. The next morning she woke me up to take one of her friends home, and I found ten other teenagers sleeping in our family room. My daughter said to me, “Dad, you should be proud of yourself.” I asked why, and she said, “Your daughter is the only girl who went to the rave without lying to her parents.” I learn that tight control does not work as well as open communication.

Story 2. Teenage driver goes places. My seventeen-year-old son is going camping in Algonquin with six other teenage friends this summer. And of course he needs the car. Knowing that he cannot really take no as an answer and understanding how the car can be a “transitional object” in parent-child dynamics, I had to say yes. I preached the usual sermons on safe driving and drugs and not getting into trouble, being fully aware that the reception rate is unlikely to be higher than 40%. I also know the statistics of how risk increases with the number of teenage boys in the car. As a parent, I have to learn to take the risk and accept eventual responsibility without any real control over what happens on the road or during the camping. One has to embrace the uncertainty, the risks, and the lack of control, in order to offer enough space for growth.

Story 3. Dad does not spend weekends baking and cooking. When my daughter first started dating her current boyfriend, she spent a lot of weekend time at his place. That was fine with me, until one day when we were having a major argument over housework (all three members of my family tend to over-estimate his or her contribution), and she commented that that I had not spent enough time in the house, unlike her boyfriend’s mother who bakes and cooks for the family over the weekend. The fact that I had my tenure review to go through was not part of her formula. Her surrogate family serves as a reminder of the warm and cozy family that we are not, and I have to deal with the “incompleteness” of a single-parent family without feeling too defeated or demoralized. I resisted the temptation to compare our family with her boyfriends or to find something negative there. I tried to reframe the experience and derived some satisfaction from the fact that my daughter was having a taste of a warm family. It also increased my sensitivity to my son’s emotional needs. I have learned to be content with who I am, what I have, and what we are as a family, and remain thankful.

To conclude, I am borrowing the idea from one of the most inspiring lists of existential or spiritual insights I have ever read – the “Eschatological Laundry List” in Sheldon Kopp’s “If You Meet the Buddha on the Road, Kill Him.” My list is much shorter, though.

1. Fathering is difficult.
2. There are no golden rules.
3. You do not know.
4. There are always risks in life.
5. The perfect father does not live on this planet.
6. It is worth it, nonetheless