

The Paternity Test

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SYMPOSIUM

O, sir, to wilful men,
The injuries that they themselves procure
Must be their schoolmasters.

—King Lear

In difficult moments, I imagine my revenge. It would start slowly and sporadically. I'd throw up on him when we were out in public, maybe at a restaurant with friends or at church. I'd go on a quick trip to the store with him just to buy milk or cheese for dinner. And, softly at first, I'd protest about the brand or color of what he was buying. Gradually my voice would rise as I became steadily more incoherent until saliva foamed around my mouth as I shouted about chips, the color blue, and my left shoelace. After the store, I would sneak around his house when he was not looking; I would begin by writing on the walls. Writing nothing in particular, just scribbles. Not high enough for him to just wipe away the markings from a standing position and not low enough for him to sit on the ground and clean, but at the spot on the wall that would make him bend. I'd then move to the kitchen; I'd place a CD in his toaster, and, as the plumes of black smoke would rise from the melting disc, I'd plant moist pieces of sugary cereal on the floor and carpet in hard-to-see places. And before sneaking away, I'd be sure to use the restroom without lifting the seat. I wake from my cruel fantasy knowing my scheme would never work. I know my victim would call me soon after discovering what I had done inside the house.

“Dad, what did you do that for?” my son would ask, his voice trembling with confused frustration. Then I would have to explain myself.

I promise these revenge fantasies are not about bitterness or an aspiration for a Hatfield and McCoy-type blood feud; they are really about mitigating my son's disappointment in me. I imagine that if I can show him how difficult fatherhood can be, he would forgive me more readily. The popular image of fatherhood would place me into one of two camps: I'm either the paragon of wisdom and wry humor or a deadbeat who neglects his children. If this conventional dichotomy of fatherhood had a TV channel, it would show family dramas like *The Waltons*, reality shows like *COPS*, and nothing in between. A dad is either a bumbling but lovable fool eating plain vanilla ice cream and dispensing aphorisms or a shirtless deadbeat who uses his kids to hide his stash. For me, the truth of my fatherhood is not in either extreme but in both of them. Homer Simpson's pathological mixture of love, well-meaning imbecility, and tender hedonism comes closest to the swinging of this paternal pendulum in my own life. In my better moments, I take my kids to church, have family home evening (even when my wife isn't there), and make dinner. In my weaker moments, covered in vomit at stake conference or trying to clean a feces-smear survivor of some intestinal Vesuvius, I admit to have muttered under my breath, "May your children do this." I don't think Rockwell painted these parts of the pendulum. My hope is that my children may see me as a good dad with weaker moments rather than a bad father with okay moments.

Ultimately my revenge fantasies are just an attempt to make my children feel sympathy in the absence of the loyalty I hoped my fathering would instill. Shakespeare best dramatized this ultimate test of paternal piety in his play *King Lear*. In a play about devotion, love, and natural affection, Shakespeare focuses on the instant when the children no longer need their father. This is the real paternity test. This test measures whether your children return to you when they have no need of you or anything you could give them besides your love. When Lear divides his kingdom among his daughters, he also divests himself of his children's need for him. Having banished one daughter in a foolish rage, he soon is evicted from his other daughters' castles. Following this familial coup d'état, the audience follows his grief and fury to a heath where Lear rages at his impotence. His fall from sovereign king to mere old man is the potential fall for all fathers.

My little children have already given me, as a young father, smaller quizzes to prepare me for my own Lear-like paternity test. My first practice exam began when my oldest son stood there with a block of wood in his hand and asked, "When should we start working on our Pinewood Derby car?" Some questions have less to do with an actual answer and more to do with the relationship between our past decisions and our current

circumstance. Questions like “Did you know how fast you were going?” or “Shall we check your prostate now?” aren’t posed to discover some new information; these types of questions merely implicate your role in the process. And so it was with my son’s question; I knew my time had come. I had set this chain of events in motion the minute I knew we were having a boy. I knew there would be a moment to come where he would ask me to complete something I knew I couldn’t. He stood in front of me, smiling in anticipation, with that small piece of wood, the oracle that through my attempts at woodworking would reveal the prophesy of my future paternal inadequacy.

Up until this point, my son, Holden, still enjoyed watching my feats of strength, like hitting a Wiffle ball over the roof of the house or wrestling all four boys at the same time, but now, staring at the block of wood, he would surely see me as I am. And I could do nothing about it. So now I would begin the slow descent from the Mount Olympus of his childhood.

As I walk over to my neighbor’s house to use his saw, I try to hide my trepidation. My son excitedly walks beside me almost bouncing as we walk. His mouth moves as quickly as his feet: “Can we build a seat for my Stormtrooper? . . . Will they have awards for everyone? . . . I would feel fine with third place; I don’t have to win everything. . . . Wouldn’t a dragon design look cool?”

Before I can respond, I see images of the uneven bench that still rocks, the plastic car with wrench dents of rage, and my other failed attempts at engineering strewn across my memory like a junkyard for the criminally insane and mechanically challenged. I quietly think of ways to make a triangle sound dazzling. I can hear myself start in on the value of the triangle and how other fathers tend to overthink the design, when I just want to kneel down next to him, look him in the eye, and tell him what I’m thinking: “Son, if I can use this saw without losing a hand or somehow destroying the Richards’ house, I’m going to consider this a success.” But I can’t say it; I need his illusions about me. So I continue on about the strength of the triangle and about the secret hole I’m going to drill down the middle and stuff with screws, nails, and glue. Those other dads won’t even know.

When I start the saw up, I hesitate, hoping the muse of Pinewood Derbies and sons will inspire me. Nothing comes. I watch the saw make its irrevocable way through the wood. *Measure twice, cut once.* I see the shadow of the boy behind me on the wood as it splits apart. I can remember all the times I started some project and near the finish realized I had made an earlier mistake that made the end product I wanted impossible. The unforgiving nature of building or cutting with my hands vexes me. And I’m afraid raising sons may not be all that different from shaping

wood. *Measure twice, cut once.* But life doesn't always allow us the time to measure each thought or action, and, for some of us, having all day doesn't improve either our parenting or jigsawing skills. This is why I love the craft of writing. It's perfect for those who need to see and correct their mistakes before they move on. Cutting does not afford such forgiveness. My fear is that the pinewood car and the son I worked with would come out the same. My misstep here or my failure there would later blossom in the life of my son.

After trying to hide my inexperience with the saw, we painted an Incredible Hulk theme for the car with some green and white paint we had in the garage. We ran over to the church with the car still dripping green and white paint. At the doors of the church, I could already hear the deliberate din from inside the cultural hall. For a Mormon, this was like walking into the Roman Coliseum. In a church with a focus on consistent improvement, our gyms channel the reservoirs of our anxieties over whether we measure up to our ideals.

Peering into the cultural hall, I felt more like a Christian than a gladiator. The movement inside was like a hive: fretting parents at the weigh-in hurriedly grabbing graphite and hot glue guns, their boys awkwardly buzzing around with some kind of weird mixture of childish glee and an early form of testosterone. Holden and I went to the weigh-in, where the parents not making last-minute fixes were eyeing the other cars. I could feel the corners of their mouths moving up as they looked over our car.

Holden and I weighed our car and found it well underweight. Luckily I had had a flash of insight before we left the house. I had driven one nail into the back of the car and two into the sides, so I could use little round magnets as weights. I figured if the car didn't fit the weight requirement, I could use as many or as few of the magnets as I needed. So when we came in underweight, I was prepared to keep my son's hope in me. I placed three magnets on the back nail and two magnets on either side of the car. Our car weighed in perfectly. And, for a minute, I felt like we'd be okay.

The seriousness and focus of the first few minutes in the gym turned to anticipation as the Scout leaders started to set up the heats. Two race officiators positioned themselves on either side of the finish line, while another official kept track of the heats on a laptop. Our car joined the heat with engineer-fathers and dads who worked with their hands for a living. The engineer-dad's car was shaped like a space-aged shoe stretcher; another car looked identical to an actual Nascar race car with paint and fenders. We had a rolling piece of Brie.

Holden and I waited for our car number to be called. As I watched the first cars race down the track, my nervousness began to dissipate. I felt like

I had vaulted the pinewood hurdle. *Maybe I did okay. I can't use tools well, but I understand physics and weight distribution.* Holden could barely sit still, and he popped out of his seat when our number was called. Almost twitching with excitement, he placed our car on his selected track. We got a good position near the track to watch our race. Slowly I could feel my stomach tighten as the gatekeeper said, "Ready, set, go." The gate released, and our car shot out in front of the other cars. *I did it! I did it!* I thought. But right when the track flattened out after the steep decline, I saw the front left wheel begin to wobble. In an instant, we went from first to last.

I couldn't have just had the car splinter apart or burst into flames. I had to have a car that jumped out of the gate like a champ, only to lose badly. It was the ultimate engineering irony to make a car that could heighten the expectations of my son and then shatter them all in a matter of seconds. In any other circumstance, I wouldn't have cared; it wouldn't have made a difference to me. But in the periphery of my vision, I could see the stillness of my son's posture, which had been almost convulsing with excitement a few seconds earlier. He looked up at me with concern and with what I hope was not a suspicion of having been betrayed.

Looking over at him, I told him, "Okay, we started out great, but now we just need to fix our one problem, and we'll be fine."

He looked down, and I feared he sensed the hollowness of my words. We went over to the table and I tried to stabilize the wheel. The groove for the axle was so worn that it had trouble keeping the axle steady. Not sure what to do, I put the axle in the best spot I could and added some weight to that side of the car, hoping it would keep the wheel from wiggling. I could feel that old frustration I'd had with dozens of Christmas toys, dining room chairs, and car headlights. This, however, was different. Most of my failures hadn't spread beyond me. But here in this gym, I feared I had infected my son with my own illness. With the little cars zooming past in front of us, I lean over to Holden to ask how it was going.

"I'm really trying to be happy for my friends who are winning," he got out before his eyes betrayed his attempt at a straight face.

During our last race, as we watched our car waddle to the finish line, my son turned to me and said, "It feels like guilt."

At that moment I was tempted to talk about the track or the graphite or even how someone else had misapplied the rules, but I knew that what wobbled across the finished line was the product of my own hands. It was a reflection of what I could do and, I feared, a divination of the future. Somehow I imagined my son in an airport coming home off his mission or surrounded by people after his wedding in the temple with all these people moving to surround him and congratulate him, and I, in the middle,

trying to make my way toward him, wobbling like the car toward the finish line—last in a row of others competing to show their affection. Like Willie Mays in a Mets uniform, our little derby car was the mark of an aging idol.

If the Pinewood Derby is an indicator of my future performance on paternity tests, I fear one day they will find me, an Idaho Lear, in only strips of clothing, raging against the wind in a potato field. But I wonder if I've misread *King Lear* and the prediction of the pinewood. Lear's paternal fall teaches me less about what his wobbling wheel was than about what blinded him from being able to fix it. King Lear doesn't illustrate that I am forever frozen in my missteps or that children are mere objects to be rigidly shaped before they are beyond my control. It's not just what Lear did. It's what he didn't do with his children; it's what Lear couldn't see.

In the collaborative editorial relationship between parent and child, Lear refuses to revise until the very end, when his banished daughter returns to him with absolution. To *revise* means simply to "see again." It is an echo of Lear's loyal courtier, Kent, who, trying to keep Lear from his rash stupidity, exclaimed to the King, "See better Lear!" (*King Lear* 1.1.156). Kent acutely perceived what Lear and I couldn't discern. We do not engineer our children—we write them. We collaborate with our children on the drafts of their souls, and they, in turn, help us revise ours. Fatherhood is a proofreading, a shaping of ideas and a mentoring for dealing with introductions, conclusions, and transitions. Together through the effort, we become something better than what we were without each other.

As I write this, I envision a less vengeful future with my son. In his home, I am no longer counting or weighing old injuries inflicted or received. Instead, I observe him. I sift through the layers of his idiosyncrasies like some kind of fatherly geologist, reminiscing over those moments when I first saw them and contemplating how the layers of his personality then influence the man I see before me now. I see the receding hair where I once skillfully straightened cowlicks. I see the glint of my young boy's eyes in his laughter. I accept his kindness to me not as an entitlement to an aging sovereign, but as morsels of grace from the table of one at whose feet I once served imperfectly. Old flawed father, I sit reverently in his living room.

This essay by Eric d'Evegnée (who can be reached via email at devegnée@byui.edu) won second place in the *BYU Studies* 2010 personal essay contest.