

Fathers and Daughters

Some of us never know our children as well as we think we ought.

About two weeks ago [late January] my youngest daughter, Rosalind, asked me if I would go with her to her next appointment with the oncologist, which occurred this past Thursday [the first week of February. I thought the piece would be posted on the Tuesday of the following week]. It was a busy day for me but as I was actually free at the time of the appointment (barely), I was hardly in a position to refuse. But it was not something that I particularly wanted to do.

I was surprised by the request. Naturally, she had asked her mother first but she was unable to go. So, I became the second-option parent, as fathers often are. My children, both girls, have, as they have grown older, grown closer to their mother in many respects and this, I suppose, is to be expected. Maybe they were always closer to their mother than to me; after all, they shared more experiences with her. (Hair was and continues to be a great unifier.) I would be unaware of many things going on in their lives if my wife did not tell me about their conversations. My daughters seem to expect that she will. They don't mind that I know.

My oldest daughter, Linnet, lives in Houston and I talk to her infrequently. She talks to my wife and her sister nearly every day. When we speak these days, she does most of the talking. Perhaps it makes up for her childhood, when I did most of the talking— instructing, you might say. During the past year as Rosalind has been regularly seeing the oncologist, she never told me exactly what went on. I might ask and she would give a general answer: “Everything’s okay” or something like that. She seemed in good spirits for the most part. I thought she had resigned herself to feeling cured.

On the other hand, she would tell her mother a great deal, particularly about how she was feeling about these visits. I didn't mind this and, indeed, I could see it coming a long way off; even when they were children, they were more likely to confide in their mother than in me. I do not know if this is natural. My wife reminds me that, after all, had I been a widower, they would have come to me because they would have had no one else. Of this, I am not so sure. Perhaps they simply would have found another woman to talk to: one of their grandmothers, an aunt, a cousin, or even a girlfriend. But let me caution the reader: I do not mean in any way to give the impression that I am estranged from my children. I actually have a close relationship with them, and they sometimes come to me for advice but not nearly as often as they might go to their mother.

Another reason I was surprised by the request to accompany Rosalind to the oncologist was that she had, for the past year, gone by herself. She wanted to do this. She is twenty-four years old and this seemed like something she could handle on her own. I was surprised she wanted someone to go with her.

“She broke down the last time she went. That’s why she wants someone to go with her now,” my wife said.

“But why?” I asked. “The doctor said she was doing well. The cancer hasn’t returned, and there is a good chance it won’t.”

“But she keeps thinking that it will. She thought she was going to get bad news.”

Parenting is 10 percent common sense and 90 percent guilt. When Rosalind and I arrived at the Siteman Cancer Center for her checkup, I immediately felt bad that I had never offered to go with her before. Of course, my wife and I were there the first time when the extent of the cancer was diagnosed. Since the surgery had removed the entire cancer and the doctor felt that chemotherapy would not be helpful, she was only going to the oncologist to keep track of her condition, not to receive further treatment. Nonetheless, as I looked around the huge waiting room (I never knew so many people in St. Louis had cancer), I saw that nearly every patient was there with someone else. Although none of the patients looked sad, many did indeed look sick. I suppose anybody would be a bit unnerved being here alone. I have always found medical facilities to be unnerving, even when I was perfectly well.

Returning to Siteman intensified an earlier guilt: when Rosalind was first diagnosed with cancer and some of our friends and acquaintances thought she might die, my wife and I became, for a time, something like heroic figures, suffering parents with a stricken child. There was a certain perverse pleasure in this special regard that I found myself having to fight in order not to find myself taking an egoistic satisfaction in Rosalind’s illness as it showed me off to the world as a wonderful parent. To be reminded of some of my feelings of that earlier time made me flinch with self-loathing.

And, as is typical of parenting, a new guilt arose. The appointment took nearly two hours, much longer than I had counted on. I had hoped to take Rosalind to lunch, have a nice father–daughter time. But I was now in a hurry to get back to campus to make a meeting, retrieve material for a literary magazine that I publish that was facing its deadline, and work on other tasks that, while they weren’t important in the long run, were important to me at the moment. How much are you willing to put yourself out for your kids? How long must I be a parent? Those are real questions requiring something like an honest answer. Being a parent is not a form of sentimentality. I don’t even think it is duty, after a point. I think it is for me now just a bad habit I can’t kick.

“If I had known it was going to take this long—” I said, slightly irritated.

“I’m really sorry it took so long. I guess I should have told you. I guess you wouldn’t have come if you had known,” she said. “I shouldn’t have asked. I know you’re busy.”

Cornered by guilt and frustration, I was flummoxed. I was unsure what to say, so I chose to frame my words carefully.

“I would have arranged my day differently, if I had known how long it was going to take,” I said evenly. “I didn’t mind coming.”

“I really appreciate your coming,” she said, truly grateful. “I mean, I know you didn’t want to. So, I appreciate that you came anyway.”

“Next time I’ll plan it better. We’ll go to lunch.”

We left it at that. She didn’t hold a lot of hope in that promise but she seemed to know it was something that I needed to say, and she figured she would angle a lunch out of me under some pretext sooner or later. I wasn’t surprised when she told her mother later that she was really glad I came. I knew she would. Sometimes you know your kids better than you think.