Opinion
Spirituality



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by Christian Mocek

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To crawl back into bed after I shower and get ready for work is a rare treat. But when I'm able, I do, seduced by the chance to revel deeply in the sweet cuddles of my son.

Even though rare, this special occasion always happens the same way. In a high, scratchy voice, my son softly whispers, "Hi, Daddy," a phrase that in my eyes illuminates the dark stillness of our room.

"Good morning, baby," I habitually whisper back, taking his waking body into my arms and gently placing him on my chest.

When my son was born, I didn't know one thing about babies. His was the first diaper I ever changed. Often, I would turn to my wife and ask if I was doing it right. "Does his diaper look normal to you?" "Is this how you wash his hair?" "Can I hold him like this?"

She was patient with me. "Yes," she'd respond with a smile, "you can hold him like that."

Two years later, I don't ask nearly as many questions. He learns from me now — not from afar capable of discerning my right and wrong moves, but up close, at my hip, or on my chest when I carry him around.

He echoes what I say, does what I do, and wants to be in the middle of the action whether I am cooking, cleaning or fixing something around the house.

There is a certain responsibility that comes with that and maybe it was #MeToo and the subsequent firing of many prominent men, or maybe it was watching my wife as she took all of that in, but I've become keenly aware of the kinds of things my son could learn from me — both good and bad. He will, to my dismay, grow up one day, and the first man who will teach him how to be a man is me.

That's an incredibly frightening thing for someone who didn't know how to change diapers two years ago. But the #MeToo movement has caused change across institutions and it seems only right that it also touches the home.

What *does* it mean to be a father who raises a son in the age of #MeToo? What can a father do to ensure his son doesn't end up the perpetrator in a #MeToo story?

The answer to this question is personal for each father. But I do think there are universal things parents can teach, especially fathers to sons, about consent, responsibility and honoring the dignity of the other. In a culture where growing boys are bombarded with salacious advertising and easily accessible lewd material, and where dehumanizing banter is written off as locker room talk, the only choice is for fathers — and other male role models — to teach their sons to navigate these arenas with vulnerability, virtue and courage.

The #MeToo movement is also a wake-up call to fathers, telling them that side comments about a woman's body and laughter at crude jokes among men don't exist in a vacuum. Our sons are next to us, listening to us and ultimately being socialized by our reaction to what appears innocent but we know is not.

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For me personally, the answer to the question of how does one raise a son in the age of #MeToo first starts with an examination of my own ideas of manhood. Or more specifically, asking in which ways I see machismo as courage, manipulation as kindness, and power as leadership. There is no doubt that there are some in positions of influence who mistake those to the detriment of the institutions they serve and the people in their care.

It also requires an honest assessment of choices I've made in the past that could have hurt those around me. It necessitates an acknowledgment of wrongdoing and effort to change the pattern of behavior that led to it.

Like most, if not all, of the women I know, my wife has her own #MeToo story. When she shared it with me, I was appalled and upset. However, I quickly realized that I've heard those stories told from a male perspective and seldom did I feel the way I felt then.

In truth, I wish I could hold my son on my chest forever in the early hours of the morning. There I can protect him from things that threaten to destroy his innocence. I know I can't, so the next best thing is to equip him with tools that will help him navigate whatever comes. The hard part is ensuring the tools I give him come from both a place of strength and from an acknowledgement of my brokenness.

St. Francis de Sales, the gentleman saint, says, "Nothing is so strong as gentleness and nothing is so gentle as true strength." He knew that manhood, at its core, is a great paradox. That in humility is courage, in compassion is strength, and in service is leadership. With God's help, may we raise men who live this paradox well, who don't separate virtue from desire, and who seek God in their brokenness.

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