



Grow Big and Tall and Straight and Strong

When I was a child and my father would tuck me in at night, I loved saying my prayers with him. It was a special time of quiet, just us two. I would go through the ritual with all the “God blesses,” and then I would straighten my body for what I now realize was my father’s special blessing of me. He would slowly run his two large and beautiful open hands over me on top of the covers from head to toe saying, “Grow big and tall and straight and strong,” I would point my toes to be as long as possible. I see now that in doing this he was not only praying for me, but also daily giving me of his strength and righteousness. He was telling me that his strong hands would protect me and help me grow. It was what I now understand was his own sacramental rite for me. The outward and visible sign, proclaimed both tactilely and verbally, of an inward and spiritual gift of grace and power.

He concretized this gift in almost every interaction we had, whether in taking me fishing, teaching me how to paint a room or to saw a board, or taking me to hear Martin Luther King when I was much older. There was one other moment that was particularly symbolic for me, however. He used to take me to a playground not far from our house.

There was a set of telephone pole stumps there ranging from about six inches to about three feet high. The goal was to walk from one log to the next at increasing heights. Well, of course I was fine on the short ones, but scared on the tall ones. I remember that as I got to the tall ones my father held out his index finger to me. I balanced myself with the tip of my index finger on his; then I could do all, or almost all, of the logs. His strength steadied me for a task for which I was too small.

I do not think he realized it, but his careful fathering and his prayer for me echoed Scripture. There is a section of Psalm 144 that petitions God’s blessing for financial security and civic harmony on family and community. The first petition of the list reads like my father’s nightly blessing: “May our sons in their youth be like plants

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full-grown, our daughters like corner pillars cut for the structure of a palace.” My father put it more directly. “Grow big and tall and straight and strong.”

These prayer blessings are for children’s maturity—their spiritual, social, mental, and moral strength and courage. The psalmist is placing a tall order here. He asks that young men and women be mature in their youth, full-grown plants, straight and strong enough to hold up a palace. I would like to offer a short reverie on these two similes to stimulate our thinking about our own prayers and blessings for ourselves and the young in our care.

This psalm verse is written in biblical parallelism. That half of the verse is written for boys and the other half for girls should not be taken literally. Biblical parallelism is meant to amplify, not to distinguish, difference. Children, boys and girls, are likened to mature plants and pillars of a large building. The two similes are both images that symbolize the traits and skills needed for healthy and upstanding maturity on which not only their own welfare, but that of the community, the whole palace, depends.

Full-grown plants can withstand bad weather. You may have heard that last summer we had a bad drought in the Northeast. We lost many plants and trees. Those that survived were older plants that had deep roots and thick trunks. Our family had just moved into a new house, and friends had given us a little mountain laurel. I could not save it. Only full-grown plants can withstand drought, hold themselves erect in the wind, and have enough branches and roots so that if damage occurs in one limb or part of the trunk another will suffice to make up for the damage until that limb scars over or heals.

Corner pillars, of course, hold up the building. They must be very dependable and carefully made to do their job. If the pillars give way, the whole structure collapses and anyone inside will be crushed. Along these lines it is interesting that the Talmud records that in Bethar near Jerusalem it was customary to plant a cedar tree when a male baby was born and a pine tree when a female baby was born. These were cut and used as the poles for the canopy at the child’s marriage ceremony. Whether this custom grew from this verse I do not know, but it clearly symbolizes the trajectory of growth in strength and maturity in the transformation from childhood to adulthood pointed to by the psalmist. Imagine having a tree planted in your backyard that grows as you grow. As a child you watch and water your tree, you prune it, you measure your growth against its growth. You look forward to your wedding day when, accompanied by your tree, you will take your place as an adult member of the community with all the responsibilities that your own parents have had for you.

The psalmist clearly understood the importance of child rearing and the blessing that children can be. At the same time, he expects a lot from his children—sons and daughters who will shoulder responsibility for the economic and social welfare of the family and the community.

Suppose we were to imagine a conversation with the father who thus prays for his children. What are the character traits, virtues, and strengths he thinks they need as mature adults? Well, he might say, following the horticultural simile, a mature plant is able to take care of itself, or as we might say today, to have its act together. One needs to be sufficiently disciplined and focused to use money and possessions responsibly, to take care of one's body, and to control one's emotions. This requires self-control and self-mastery.

The architectural image is even more challenging. Here maturity is not only for one's own well-being but also for that of others. Pillars need to be placed properly and to be able to bear weight. Only people who have their own inner and outer lives together have the maturity to be responsible for others. Pillars have to be cut, carved, smoothed, and painted. To grow to maturity, children must be able to accept guidance and correction in humility and to admit mistakes when they make them. They need to be able to learn positive and constructive patterns of behavior from positive role models and to turn negative role models to good account.

If we understand the corner-pillar simile to suggest that children be expected to take up public responsibilities, we see that mature youth also need social and interpersonal skills. They need to speak and listen to others with respect and to act with patience, dignity, and, we might add, compassion and fairness. They need the courage to stand up for what they believe to be right and yet see the merit in contrary points of view.

A full-grown plant will not be blown around by the wind. Rather, the wind and rain will annually carry off dead leaves. Spores and seeds will be carried off to start new plants in good soil. Good fruit will ripen, and beautiful flowers will bloom. Translating the simile away from horticulture for just a moment, I suggest that the image of the mature plant suggests good judgment, prudence, or caution.

Now at this point, I suspect that some are beginning to tire of my two similes. Adolescence, you say, is a time for carefree fun, for exploring life's options, and for experimenting with different personae and lifestyles. It is in the trying on and backing off, the adventure and the daring, the stretching oneself to the limit, the reaching for the moon, that the hope and thrill of these unburdened years takes its bloom. Adolescence is a time for making mistakes and for self-discovery, for setting out on one's own. Creating one's own identity, values, and beliefs shapes adulthood. Anyway, children have plenty of time for that dour responsibility and morality stuff later when they settle down, burdened with jobs and with car and insurance payments.

There seems to be a philosophical difference here between our Scriptures and our culture's thinking about adolescence. One book of the Bible is dedicated to the rearing of children: Proverbs. The whole book might be a good focus of study for the training of youth ministers, if for no other reason than to see how widely our own

ideas about adolescence differ from the biblical perspective.

Proverbs is made up of collections of apothegms, pithy maxims on the good life and how to achieve it. Perhaps I might add that by “the good life” we mean the upright life that is the only source of genuine happiness. The Christian tradition has always held that a life lived in God’s light is the only source and exercise of true happiness. The pursuit of righteousness and nobility and the avoidance of evil, violence, and disgrace are the core of the good life, according to this work attributed to King Solomon.

While Solomon is the putative author of Proverbs, the speaker is clearly a father instructing his son. In some passages the father, who often speaks of the teaching of both father and mother, appears to be the king. Yet in other passages the speaker appears to be God himself, who is the father of the youth being guided. Whether the father is a child’s earthly father or God, what comes through in Proverbs is the intimacy between father and child. The father has been around the block, has seen it all, and wants to protect the child from the suffering, the mistakes, and the humiliations that come from poor choices, bad habits, personal weakness, and sleazy companions. There are here lots of specific rules and guidelines, “Do not say to your neighbor, ‘Go away and come again, tomorrow, [then] I will give it’—when you have it with you. Do not plan evil against your neighbor who dwells trustingly beside you. Do not contend with a man for no reason, when he has done you no harm. Do not envy a man of violence and do not choose any of his ways.” (Proverbs 3:28-31)

Despite these “don’ts,” the tone of the book does not suggest simply a bare set of rules and regulations. Rather it suggests the application of some basic sensible principles. “Reverence for God is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction.” (Proverbs 1:7a) The whole first section of Proverbs stresses the theme of wisdom and understanding that leads to a prudent way of life for those who attend to God’s teaching. Wisdom is the one thing needful for a happy life. Wisdom is personified as a woman who goes seeking after the young in the mall, in the street, and at home.

The assumption is that wisdom and understanding, knowledge of how to live the good life and to resist the ruinous life, do not come naturally to the young. In chapter four, the father, speaking to his children, draws on his own experience with *his* father who urged him to accept his guidance. The father is trying to urge his children to examine themselves, their motivations, and their longings and desires that can so easily topple them. The moral guidance offered in Proverbs truly rings with the sound of parents seeing their children growing up in a confusing and morally dangerous world, with too many choices and a proclivity to follow the path of least resistance. In a sense the wisdom of Proverbs is summed up much later in I Peter: “Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some-

one to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith...." (1 Peter 5:8-9a)

Proverbs goes on, spelling out the need for discretion in speech and action, sexual self-control and devotion to one's wife, the value of moral discipline. Unfortunately, we do not hear the voice of the child to whom all this teaching is being imparted. How would such counsel be received? Would it be heard differently by boys and girls? I would not venture to guess whether children then were different from children now, but I suspect that it is not difficult for us to fill in for ourselves how we think that youngsters today would respond.

Yes, you may hear the child say, I understand what you are saying and trying to do for me mom and dad; really, I appreciate the thought, but it is impossible to teach me wisdom. Wisdom, understanding, insight come only with age and experience. No pain, no gain. You grown-ups must stand and watch while we do this ourselves. I need a wide berth to flex my muscles and figure myself out. We just need you to be there so we can bring our laundry home; and by the way, please stay by the telephone in case of an emergency. So we adults sigh and say, "What can we do?" and "Boys will be boys," and go back to our work.

Now this is the pleasant version of the story. I am sure you can fill in less-restrained versions of the interchanges between parents and children. Just as a ten-month-old cannot be toilet trained, a sixteen-year-old cannot be lectured on the merits of wisdom, insight, discretion, and prudence, and certainly not by parents. In addition, anyone else who tries to do it will be classed with parents and perhaps dismissed. Dial on. Preaching and moralizing are no way to form the young or to endear oneself to the young.

In the face of the decayed culture, many adults have retreated from trying to intervene in children's lives. It is easier to keep peace in the house that way. Power struggles are to be avoided at all costs, since they only drive children further away. It is easier to put a cookie in the baby's hand or to set the child in front of the television than to argue or to impose adult authority and discipline that will breed resentment and perhaps even provoke violence. This dynamic does not change from the two-year-old to the sixteen-year-old. Only the stakes get higher, as we see with young people who compile recipes for bombs and download pornography from the Internet or who stockpile weapons in their rooms or in other parts of the house where they think their parents will not find them. Some parents are exiled from their children's lives. Some are afraid of their children. Some don't really care.

Another reason for letting children be is that many adults cannot keep up with the computer technology that youngsters have grown up with. Parents and other adults are far behind in the knowledge and skills that are needed to make it in today's world. What do they really have to offer kids anyway? For some teens, adults are obstacles to be circumvented. Adults, for their part, are struggling to keep up at work

and at home. Life is stressful, complicated, and demanding. Tangling with teenagers only increases the aggravation. This not-very-comforting picture may be overdrawn in some cases, but it is accurate in others.

Additionally, in an age that values personal preference above all else, the idea of transmitting enduring moral values from one generation to the next may sound downright silly or perhaps even rude. The most we can hope for is to keep lines of communication with youngsters open enough so that when they hit a crisis they will have someone to turn to, even if it is not their parents, whose stature and authority often shrink dramatically during adolescence. That is one reason why your presence in children's lives is so important.

Yet beyond the issues of natural resistance and the loss of credibility that adults experience with teens, there is yet another reason why, despite the character education and moral education movement, we resist the moral education of children beyond exhorting them to resist sex and drugs at least until they are about seventeen. We are aware that many youngsters are troubled, but we see their problems in psychological, not moral, terms, and certainly not in theological terms.

While girls are becoming more frequently implicated in violent crime, violence and weapons offenses are much more common among boys. A recent Gen Y2K poll taken among teenagers was cited in the *New York Times Magazine* (8/22/99), although the report was not gender specific. Forty-one percent say there are people they want to get even with; forty-three percent say they sometimes are pushed too far and feel they will explode; fifty-eight percent of this explosive group agree they would use a gun "if they had to"; fifty-three percent of this group watch TV movies, compared with thirty-four percent of those who do not feel they would explode. That is, about one in five say they would use a gun when pushed too far. If this were gender-specific, the ratio of boys would surely be much higher.

That same issue focused on "the troubled life of boys"—how those who feel themselves to be picked on or outcast from the "in" peer group deal with their plight. Bodybuilding, bullying as a cultivated style, and the ultra-macho sports culture contribute to a male teenage culture of toughness and violence that is supported by video games and music.

Depression, once thought to be the province of women, is spreading to white boys, among whom suicide has risen dramatically over the past four decades. Again, I suspect that for many people, led by the media, these behaviors and personality styles are seen as psychological, not religious, problems. Even if they agree that the problems are psychological, not religious, people still differ as to the source of the problems. Some blame them on permissive environments while others blame them on controlling parents. Either option, however, drives another wedge between parents and children.

Why has a theologian come to speak with youth ministers, those brave souls who dare to cross the divide between the youth culture and the adult world? Why not a psychologist, a specialist in adolescent development, perhaps? I suggest that the dichotomy between a moral perspective and a psychological perspective on the youth culture is spurious. The issues are, I think, more complex than this simple judgmentalism would suggest. At best, the two sets of factors are deeply intertwined, if not one and the same. Dysfunctional behavior is a psychological *and* a religious issue.

Despite the temptation to let them grow themselves up, I think on some level we have a nagging awareness that the young still need something from adults, even if they do not always want it. They need *adults*, not simply pals to make them feel good about themselves on a bad day. They need adults as a sign that they have come from somewhere, that they have an identity and even a destiny in life. It is an identity that they do not make up. They need a sense of their own dignity that is not dependent upon how others treat them. They need to know they belong to something stronger than their peer group. Even if they cannot appreciate it now, children need adults who stand on firmer ground than they do.

The question is: How are we to give them the gifts that we have for them? I suggest that among the many things children need from adults is God. We, as members of the church, have already given them the most precious gift we have to offer: identity in God, by virtue of either baptizing them or consecrating them to God at a young age. My question is: Are we using these resources to best advantage in helping young people grow big and tall and straight and strong? ▼▲