



“JUST PUT YOUR HANDS TOGETHER AND JUMP!”

By Mike O’Neill

Another Father’s Day on the near horizon, and sitting at dinner a few days ago reminded me of all the lessons I’ve been given in just a few short years. One of the many important routines that prevail in our family, and contribute much to our often- times slender grasp on sanity, is having all of us around the table for dinner. We know this routine will seem nearly impossible at some point in the future, but for now, with the oldest of our six daughters not yet ten, my wife Ami can make it happen.

With the two oldest at either end of the long dinner table, and Ami and I in the middle flanked by the younger ones, the question of communication comes to mind. Not long ago from one end came the question, “Daddy, how do you die?”

What can I say? She’s nine, intuitive, and loves to toss the high hard ones at me when I least expect them. As I struggled to come up with a response appropriate to both the questioner and the others around the table, I was rescued by the eight year old at the other end. Without missing a bite or a beat she said, “That’s easy. You just put your hands together and jump.”

For just a heartbeat I reveled in the discovery of a Buddha, a truly enlightened soul with a grasp of the concept of the impermanence of things, right here at dinner with us. And she is only eight! Then it sank in. Quinn’s question had been about “dying.” Maggie’s pithy answer, carried over from their swim class, and had been about “diving.” At dinner, Ami and I do a lot of refereeing and time-keeping as six young voices all want to be heard simultaneously. I think it is one of those gifts that children invite Dad’s to accept and embrace – really listening, rather than just hearing.

I had the pleasure of reading *The Fatherstyle Advantage: Surefire Techniques Every Parent Can Use to Raise Confident and Caring Kids* some time ago. The authors, Kevin O’Shea and James Windell have a great book focusing on what fathers bring to the process of parenting. One of the lights that clicked on as I read it, was how much fathers, parents, are called upon to grow with our children. We are challenged to grow within ourselves-- from supervisors to leaders and mentors and, harder still, to have a good sense of the pace required for that growth.



Five or six years ago, Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner wrote *The Leadership Challenge*. Their book proposes that great leadership, and I think great parenting, encompasses five key practices. Let me briefly share them as they speak to me of being a dad:

- ✓ **Model the Way** – Watch how our kids watch us and copy us. We teach more by what we do than we will ever teach by what we say.
- ✓ **Inspire a Shared Vision** – Our kids can be inspired by the importance of having a vision and sharing it as a family. Be present to the moment, but inspire a positive vision of the future. Hold out exciting and ennobling possibilities.
- ✓ **Challenge the Process** – Dads can help kids take the initiative. We can help make challenge meaningful. We can hold up being innovative and creative as important and positive. We can encourage them to experiment and take risks even if the results are often messy.
- ✓ **Enable Others to Act** – We need to strengthen our kids, help them become self-leaders; help them develop confidence and competence. Dads are called upon to build collaboration with and between our kids. We can create a climate of trust, and build on interdependence while nurturing independence.
- ✓ **Encourage the Heart** – Dads can fill their children's buckets of self-esteem. There will be more than enough situations as our children grow that will conspire to drill holes in those buckets. We can help our kids set standards, recognize best efforts, appreciate good tries, and celebrate values and victories.

As Dads, I think we are called in the end to pull those five key practices together by *creating a spirit of community in our family*. We are called upon to be the tellers of our family story and to hand off the telling of it to our children. Ultimately, maybe we are simply called to be present to the promise of each moment, to keep life's paradigms flexible and open to change, and to hold onto our capacity to be astonished. After all, there's not so much different between dying and diving, or between "dad-ing" and diving.

Just put your hands together and jump.

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