

## Showing Up

By Michael Milburn

A year ago, when my son Dev was twenty-three, he took me aside to apologize for his role in a painful incident we had shared the night before his high school graduation. I had driven from my home in Connecticut to Syracuse, New York, where Dev lived with his mother. Shortly after my arrival, he headed off to a series of graduation parties. At midnight, annoyed by his absence when I had traveled so far see him, I called and angrily ordered him home, hanging up before he could respond. The blow-up tainted the following day's ceremony and both our memories of it. And while I appreciated his apology, I knew I was wrong to have begrudged him a last night with his friends before they dispersed for the summer. What made the fight even more regrettable was that Dev's graduation marked the end of the bi-weekly visits to Syracuse I had begun over a decade before.

Dev's mother and I had separated when he was six, and I spent the next year living two miles from them in Syracuse, sharing custody, attending teacher conferences, pediatrician appointments, and soccer games. Though Dev divided his time equally between his mother's house and my apartment, the schedule was hectic and often confusing for him, and I felt myself in a kind of limbo. His mother and I still saw each other at every drop-off and pick-up, and traveled in overlapping social circles. We both taught at Syracuse University, and neither of us was likely to find a comparable job elsewhere in that city, which would have created much needed distance in our daily lives. Looking ahead, I couldn't see myself carving out a life independent of my failed marriage.

Midway through that year I began dating a woman who lived in Connecticut. In the spring I applied for and was offered a teaching job in New Haven. I understood how significant this decision was in terms of Dev, that I would be giving up the daily contact that for me defined

parenthood. But remaining in Syracuse had begun to feel like trying to get around on a broken leg: excruciating and ultimately foolish. I was confident of my ability to overcome the new distance; if all it took to maintain my relationship with Dev was getting in a car on Friday, driving five hours, and then repeating the trip on Sunday, I could manage that. Looking back on the years that I made those drives, I realize that they were fueled by sheer willpower.

Shortly before my move, I had lunch with a friend who asked me to reconsider. She worried that this would turn out to be my first step in abandoning Dev. She was ten years younger, unmarried, and seemed to see me as a typical divorced father who starts a new life with a new woman and ends up a stranger to his child. That was the first of many times I have wanted to tell someone that he or she could not possibly imagine my situation. Even today, when parents commiserate with me about how rarely they see their over-scheduled kids, I know there is no comparison between our predicaments. Missing one's son because he shuts himself in his bedroom or only comes home to eat and sleep is not the same as living apart from him during his childhood.

Still, I saw my friend's point, and if I hadn't been so flush with willpower I might have worried about my resilience. I never even bothered to calculate how far into the future the commutes would last—eleven years from the summer I moved until Dev's high school graduation. Maybe I assumed that he would rebel against his mother and want to come live with me, or that I would eventually move closer to Syracuse. Or maybe I was just caught up in the promise of getting away and starting fresh. Many times in the years since I have marveled at my optimism.

I still believe that my friend's concern was based on a superficial understanding of my predicament, but wonder how I would advise a father contemplating such a move today. First, I would acknowledge that there is no more momentous decision than to withdraw from one's child's daily life, and that geographical separation does not necessarily create

emotional distance from an ex-spouse—when a small child is involved, the contact is still constant and complicated. At the same time, if one’s best chance to rebuild one’s life lies elsewhere, it’s hard to fault that decision. In the years since my departure I have not progressed beyond seeing my choice as between selflessness and self-preservation, doing what was good for Dev versus what was good for me. The case for the move benefiting both of us has never gained unequivocal support in my mind.

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While in Syracuse I stayed in the house Dev shared with his mother, who relocated to a friend’s guest room. As the years passed, he slept later and later in the mornings. Noon came and went as I watched our time together dwindle until it added up to less than my hours on the road. But waking him early on a week-end would have made him resent my visits, and I was glad for the chance to do schoolwork. I never got used to leaving on Friday afternoon and returning home Sunday night with no time to grade papers or prepare for the week’s classes. I was so intent on making the most of our time together that we always had some joint activity planned. Apart from his morning sleep-ins, I can’t remember us ever acting independently of each other—him upstairs listening to music, me correcting tests in the kitchen—the way most families do most of the time.

One of our favorite activities was lacrosse catch. Though Dev played this sport throughout his youth and I coached my school’s team for several years, our catches weren’t so much occasions for practice as excuses to talk. We occupied ourselves for hours in a nearby park as the rhythm of the ball flying back and forth eased us into conversational intimacy. I learned about his schoolwork and friends, and caught him up

on my middle school students' interests and idiosyncrasies. Often right before a visit's end, one of us would propose a quick last catch with the understanding that a last talk was the real reason for the invitation.

On a few early trips, I brought along a tent and cooking gear, and we camped in a lakeside park outside the city. After arriving at the site, we gathered wood for a campfire, then cooked dinner and talked in the tent until we fell asleep. Looking back on those scenes of father-son togetherness, I wish I had made more of an effort to continue them. But camping left me drained; picking up Dev on Friday after five hours on the road, driving another hour to the lake, rushing to get the tent set up before dark, and reversing the procedure on Sunday morning took some pleasure out of the activity.

The bulk of our week-ends was spent simply walking around. I'm not sure if this was because I felt comfortable with this relatively solitary activity or because we both enjoyed it. Often I couldn't think of anything else to do as a guest in town. After Dev woke we would head to the massive Carousel Mall, eat lunch in the food court and spend the afternoon window shopping. For me, this became the epitome of quality time; we were alone and able to converse casually, yet the mall was active and varied enough that we could watch each other interpreting the world as we commented on people, merchandise and fashion styles. It lacked the glamour of camping, but we revealed ourselves as much at these times as if we had been sharing secrets in sleeping bags under the stars.

When I brought my dog along to Syracuse, we would take her out for nighttime tours of Dev's neighborhood. The darkness and late hour loosened our tongues, giving rise to some of our most uninhibited conversations. It was on these walks that I truly learned how to talk with my son, testing out subjects with tentative questions, trying to be non-judgmental in my answers. I didn't always succeed—once during his junior year in high school when he was struggling socially I must have

been too dogmatic in my advice. When we returned to the house, Dev stalked off to the kitchen muttering, “You are so not like my mom.” I should have welcomed his passion—at least he was listening to me—and the difference he perceived between his parents, but instead I cursed myself for having ruined that chance at closeness.

Invariably, our week-ends were punctuated by watching movies, either in the mall cinema or on TV in the evening. This ritual survives today, as at some point in our visits we always end up in front of a screen, absorbed and content. Talking about movies—ones that we have seen together or separately, or that one of us has seen but the other hasn’t, or that neither has seen but both want to—is central to our relationship. No matter how stiltedly and monosyllabically our phone calls begin with me trying to pry Dev’s news out of him, when they come around to movies the talk turns copious and passionate. This topic serves me as a kind of secret weapon—whenever our conversation lags, I need only mention a movie to kick-start it again.

Even if we sometimes use movie talk as a substitute for personal talk, and movie watching as a way to avoid talking at all, we’re not just killing time—I love movies, both as art and entertainment, and Dev is a film school graduate who has made several short films. We’re as united in our interest as my sister and her daughters who used to lie around on week-ends engrossed in novels. Our discussions get technical and argumentative, as we debate how shots were executed or why a director chose a certain location or soundtrack song. When Dev predicts whether I would or wouldn’t like certain movies, I know he has absorbed my aesthetic standards. And when his predictions contain a hint of exasperation, I know he has learned to challenge those standards as well.

What I liked most about those conversations was that they required my presence. Usually when people compliment me on my parenting it’s for the reliability of my visits or for being a good role model

from afar. But I don't want just to serve as a remote symbol of fatherhood, I want to participate in my son's life and be good enough company that he wants that too. No matter how effective one is as an example, any relationship that can be accomplished in periodic visits and leave one feeling heartbreakingly distant from one's child is not the parenting success that observers claim it to be.

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I was always eager to get away from Syracuse on Sundays, mindful of the drive and the schoolwork that awaited me at home. Also, the prospect of leaving Dev darkened the whole day; our goodbyes weren't teary or protracted, but filled me with melancholy. My exhaustion on arriving in town, impatience to depart, and constant awareness of how little time we had suggest that I didn't enjoy those week-ends. This had nothing to do with Dev—the soul to soul connecting that we did, throwing the lacrosse ball or watching movies, was all that communication between a father and son should be. Rather, the brevity of my visits and the reminders of my divorce that greeted me as I turned off the Syracuse exit made me associate my time there less with paternal fulfillment than with defeat.

I often think back on those trips and wonder if anything could have made them easier. Money was one factor: it would have been less depressing for me and more novel for Dev if we had stayed in a hotel instead of his mother's house. I would have arrived with more energy if I had flown to Syracuse and rented a car. Though these luxuries might have made me better company, I doubt they would have improved things in any significant sense. Our situation, like that of any non-custodial parent and child, was destined to breed frustration and feelings of inadequacy. It just plain sucked.

If there's self-pity in that statement, I don't intend it, though for a long time my thinking about Dev was steeped in self-pity. As my trips to Syracuse came to an end with his completion of high school, I became increasingly aware of my awkward fit into his life. During our decade of living apart I had grown accustomed to his ambivalence about my visits—he would mumble hello without taking his eyes off the TV when I arrived, only to run down the street calling my name when I drove away. As his social life intensified during his junior year, I felt more and more intrusive. He often left me for a few hours to see his friends. Several times I rushed to get on the road in time to join him for Friday supper, only to have him call me in my car to say he'd be out late and would see me the next day.

I couldn't blame him, a teenager forced to give up his week-end social life to plod around the mall or play catch in a park with his father. Occasionally he invited me to join him and his friends, but having a parent tag along on Saturday night hardly elevates one's social standing. At these times I'd fantasize about treating them all to dinner and charming them with my wit, but I lack the personality for this, and besides, I hardly knew these kids. On many Fridays I arrived in Syracuse to find Dev's mother's chatting with him and his friends in the living room. The atmosphere would turn formal when I walked in, as Dev felt compelled to introduce or re-introduce me around. Even if the group had welcomed my company, I wouldn't have felt comfortable sharing Dev for long—we had so little time together that I wanted him all to myself.

In 2004 Dev enrolled at Quinnipiac University in Connecticut, two miles from where I live. From my standpoint, it was a glorious turn of events. Near the end of his college visits I had suggested that he add Quinnipiac to his list of schools. As we toured the landscaped grounds and gleaming new buildings on a providentially beautiful spring day, it occurred to me that a reward for my long-distance commutes might be at hand. I could tell that Dev liked Quinnipiac's suburban campus (arriving

at rural Hampshire College he had made me turn around in the driveway after spotting a cow). That night, when he told me his decision, I had visions of recovering all the time we had lost in the past eleven years.

To my surprise, after Dev moved in at Quinnipiac my house never became his home away from the dorm. He never came over for comfort food and ended up spending the night, or showed up with a crew of friends to watch TV until I threw down sleeping bags or drove them giggling back to school. It was his first experience of living away from home (not my home, but home nonetheless), and he enjoyed the camaraderie of the dorm and the independence of carrying on out of a parent's sight. That is, he treated college the way most freshman treat it and the way I had treated it myself, as an opportunity to distance himself from his parents. If I wanted to protest that he and I didn't need any more distancing, and that our new proximity was too fitting an antidote to our separation to be neglected, that was my problem.

When I complained to a friend that I had seen more of Dev when he lived three hundred miles away, she suggested that I wouldn't have welcomed that kind of exposure, not so much Dev's presence as unannounced visits and groups of friends. Her implication was that Dev sensed my potential discomfort and kept his distance. There was some truth to that. I'm hardly a gregarious person, and am set in my domestic ways. But a lot of ungregarious, inflexible people have children and are forced to adapt, and do adapt out of love. I had never had that obligation or opportunity—my challenge was to show up, which I had adapted to well. How could I know how I would have fared as a daily parent if I never had the chance? Sometimes I wonder if I can even claim the experience of raising a child.

I once confessed to a therapist my envy of fathers with intact families. "Why can't you and Dev be a family?" he asked. We are in the literal sense, but I grew up thinking of a family as a group of people living together in a common home. My own family was rife with internal

divisions, but because my siblings and I were all raised in the same house with both parents present, we continue to define “family” and “home” interchangeably. I imagine that Dev thinks of himself and his mother this way. Naturally, he identifies me as his father, but since I moved out when he was six and left for Connecticut the following year, it’s understandable that he would place me in a different category from the parent he has lived with for most of his life.

After a year at Quinnipiac, Dev transferred to film school at NYU, from which he graduated in 2008. Throughout his time there, we visited back and forth occasionally, though I no longer made a point of showing up every other week-end; few college students see their parents that frequently. I felt myself caught between the roles of empty-nester and someone who has not quite completed a job assigned to him. I hope that during Dev’s years in Syracuse I instilled in him the values and self-esteem that a child expects from a parent, but also know how much more time he spent with other adults—his mother, his friends’ parents, his teachers. In the end, my strongest claim to influencing him is not the extent of our interaction, but the fact that I am his father.

Twenty-four now, with a full-time job and a girlfriend, Dev lives an hour and a half away from me in New York City. We talk on the phone every other week and I invariably say goodbye regretting that our conversation didn’t probe deeper. That’s why his apology for the graduation incident was so surprising to me and, I suspect, necessary to him; we had never spoken about that night. Of course, given our reserved natures, our communication might have been the same if we had seen each other daily throughout his childhood—I’m trying to stop seeing everything as a casualty of our separation. When we visit now it’s not just what we say that satisfies us but the chance to replenish ourselves with each other’s personality. I repeat a familiar joke, he rolls his eyes at a movie I have praised, and we look at each other as if to say, “It’s you. I’ve missed you.”

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