

The Family Puzzle... Putting the Pieces Together

Rites of Passage

For some time, my fourteen-year-old son Tyler had been acting more responsibly: doing his chores without having to be told, keeping his room organized, keeping his word. I knew he was making his transition into manhood.

Memories of other turning points flooded my mind. I remembered breathing in Tyler's scent as a baby, and then one day noticing that scent had shifted, changed – my baby had become a little boy. Then I recalled the day the training wheels came off his bicycle. Another time, I'd watched wistfully as he had thrown out all of his toys, only saving a stuffed gorilla that my mother had given him when she was alive, now another, bigger change was brewing. So, with tears welling up inside, I began to plan rite-of-passage day for my son.

Tyler's special day began with breakfast at a restaurant. It was just Tyler, his father, stepmother, stepfather and me – no other children. He seemed so happy being with us all together for the first time by himself.

After breakfast, we all went to a heavily wooded park outside of town. I gave him a special journal created just for the day. In the weeks before the ceremony, I had written numerous questions in the journal for him to think about and answer. Questions like: Who was his hero and why? When did he feel the deepest connection to God? What gift in his life had been his favorite and why? When did he feel the deepest connection to God? What gift in his life had been his favorite and why?

He had chosen several adults who were important in his life, and I had arranged for each of them to come and walk with him for about an hour over the course of the day. The adults were told that this was Tyler's time to "pick their brain," and they were asked to be as open and candid as they comfortably could.

His school principal, whom Tyler had invited to walk with him, shared his favorite prayer – the St. Francis prayer – with Tyler. This had special meaning for my son, as it is the same prayer my mother read every morning of her life. She and Tyler were very close, and later he told me it almost felt as if she were there reading it to him.

As the dusk began to settle, family and friends gathered for a ceremony on a dock by a lake. A brief rain had freshened the air, which held a fall chill. A tape of Indian flute music played as we sat around a dancing fire. During the ceremony, Tyler shared his intentions about his responsibility to the planet, guests publicly blessed him and we, his parents, made a verbal commitment that - from that moment on – we would hold him as a man in our hearts.

The guests had been instructed to bring non-monetary gifts to share with Tyler. He received a box of “What I Love About Tyler” notes filled out by the guests, and acorn of a mighty oak tree, handmade pouches and more. One man read a poem aloud that he had written about his father.

During the ceremony and the weeks following, numerous people came up to me and said, “I would be a different person today if my parents had given me the gift of a rite-of-passage ceremony.” Never in my wildest dreams as a mother could I have anticipated the feelings and sacredness that my son and I experienced that day.

Things are different in our house now; there is a deeper, richer feeling of respect for each other. Frequently, before I speak to Tyler, I ask myself, “How would I say this to a man?” And Tyler seems less self-absorbed and more sensitive to how others feel.

This was clearly demonstrated several months later, when our family was planning a fun outing. It was a cold rainy day, and everyone wanted to go to play games at the arcade – except for me. I had made some feeble attempts to recommend something different, but their enthusiasm won out. I did not have the energy to stick up for myself that day.

We were walking out the door when Tyler, now a head taller than I was, came over and put his arm around my shoulders and said, “I can see that you don’t really want to go to the arcade. Let’s sit down and decide on something we ALL want to do. ’Cause I’m not going anywhere unless you’re happy, too.”

I was so surprised, I burst into tears, but they were tears of happiness. It felt wonderful to be cared for and to know that my son would be a loving husband and father to his own family someday. Yes, Tyler had become a man – a good man.