Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

Being a parent is the perfect metaphor of “two steps forward, one step back.” It’s just the way things work in parenting. I thought about that as my youngest son wheeled out of the drive in his ’99 Subaru, loaded to the gills with his belongings to venture from the nest and into the great unknown. Parenting is uphill both ways. It’s not a race to the finish line. There is no finish line, and many days it’s a slow slog.

It’s like those moments when you get your kitchen so clean that you could be considered *obsessive compulsive*, and then you walk into a family room flooded with the chaos of matchbox cars, action figures, building blocks, and dinosaurs (some of them slathered with chocolate pudding cups). Two steps forward, one step back.

I don’t know how many times I’ve had to jump through all the hoops of getting the guys to bed, but now that we’re past that stage, I’ve realized that hoop jumping was my superpower. A certain number of pages must be read, teeth need to be brushed, prayers must be said, and covers need to be adjusted. And just at the right time, they’d crave water like a Labrador Retriever in the Sahara Desert. It seemed like my boys were never tired until they collapsed. Darlene and I said what all parents say from time to time: “It’s not about how tired you are, it’s about how tired you are making us.” After our last son, we relaxed as parents. We were so busy with the schedules of Upward Basketball, birthdays, carpools, parties, and science projects, we’d find him sprawled out on the family room floor with a half-eaten fruit roll-up in his little hand. Two steps forward, one step back.

We’ve missed a lot of adventures because we had kids. We’ve never been to those luxury resorts with crystal blue waters

and not a stroller in a hundred miles. But we've been to a few amusement parks and wrestled a wild, squirming five-year-old for thirty minutes to administer amoxicillin. We found these moments both traumatizing and, I must confess, somewhat exciting. Sometimes they get so dirty, the bathtub was out of the question. They were *backyard, spray-them-down-with-the-water-hose* dirty. We found parenting a rewarding rollercoaster ride of sound and fury, signifying a whole lot of stuff. Two steps forward, one step back.

I'm not a perfect parent, and we didn't raise perfect kids. Becoming a good father has been two steps forward and one step back. I said, "Maybe" when I was really thinking, *Yeah, that's not gonna happen.* For years I've stolen peanut butter cups from my sons on November 1st. I've made stuff up when the answers to their questions would require more wisdom and intelligence than I have at 5:30 in the morning. But now that they are gone, we still hear their voices echoing quietly through the house in our memories. They robbed our peace but stole our hearts. And that's for good. We treasure the days they return as adults for holidays and celebration. Our roles as parent have changed. We made progress even though it was two steps forward and one step back.