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The Unexpected Rites of Fatherhood

Robert Sullivan | June 14, 2014

A dad reflects on the changes in his teenage children

Weddings and wakes, anniversaries and other annual reckonings—birthdays and such—these major events are always anticipated as impending rites of passage and are enjoyed as such (or not). Our 16-year-old, Caroline, just passed her driver's exam, so there you go.

One thing about rites of passage such as that: You usually see them coming. But in rarer instances, rites of passage sneak up on you, and might resonate in entirely unexpected ways. This happened recently—it happened to me, anyway—in St. Petersburg, Florida.

There's a swim meet there every spring at a terrific Olympic-sized facility. The facility's name escapes me, but the meet is the Boys and Girls Club Nationals. The meet organizers handle everything well.

For the kids who've been laboring in the humid pools of the North all winter—and certainly for their parents, who've been laboring more—the meet is a lovely dessert at the end of another long meal of a season. The meet is outdoors, it's sunny, it's frolicsome—it's suntanned.

We've taken Caroline and Jack, both 13, to this meet for many years in a row now. When its three-day duration coincides, on the near or far end, with spring-break-school-vacation, we all go down and tack a trip to Disney onto the near or far end. This year was "a Disney year," which delighted Mary Grace, our child who doesn't swim for the Marlins team. But that's neither here nor there, having nothing to do with the theme. Passages is the theme. I never thought of the meet in St. Pete as a place of passages. This year I realized it was nothing but.

Ever since we've been attending, the meet has been presided over at the poolside microphone by a terrific announcer—deejay quality—who surprised me back when with his sense of fun. He'll announce someone coming up super fast in lane six of the Bayside Pool or the Scoreboard Pool and deftly switch back to the kids taking the blocks in the other pool, and then ladle in the "specials" that night at the local eateries for folks attending the meet, and end with a bon mot. His was so unlike the noise of a winter meet, which is either non-existent, a beep, or surly. He's always been there, but I never thought of him as a way to mark the passages in our lives.

But now that I think of it, maybe he is part of a rite. The kids have grown to appreciate him and, in a measure of their growing sophistication, his subtle (and not-so) wit. They agree with their dad and mom about his expertise and ability to buoy the meet. We never



The Sullivan family at Disneyland

Courtesy of Bob Sullivan

used to talk about material like this with the children. In any event, I make it a point to catch this announcer on the deck every year and thank him for his service.

The little kids—10 and under—compete in the Bayside Pool. Eleven and up are in the Scoreboard Pool. At first, it was just me watching Caroline, Bayside. Luci would be back at home with Jack and Mary Grace. Then Jack joined Caroline on the team, but still I could hang at the Bayside Pool. When I drew a timing assignment, it was for that pool. Then Caroline moved up to the Scoreboard Pool, and I or my wife might draw an assignment in either pool, and we would be trying to watch our kid swim in the other pool and not screw up the clocking of The Anonymous Kid from Wherever And Why Do I Care whom we were supposed to be timing, or we would be running back and forth to see Caroline's heat and then Jack's, or vice versa.

"You're back to both pools," I said, deckside, to Mark McLaughlin's dad this year. He now has a daughter in the Bayside Pool again, his fourth kid to swim for the Marlins. "My life has finally stabilized," I added. Caroline and Jack are both in the Scoreboard Pool and will be forevermore—which means for Caroline one more year, and Jack four more. And Luci and I are birthing no more Marlins, I can assure you of that.

The Marlins are by far the largest team in this meet and annually do well. But they don't (I think and hope and pray) behave untowardly. The coaches encourage the kids to go down to Florida, and though they ask the boys to shave—Jack, age 13, bloodied himself mightily this year, and was proud to do so—the coaches don't hype this meet like they might another team. They seem to see dessert for what it is. And they've built in fun aspects, sprinkles on the ice cream. Caroline started as a Little Marlin, which meant on Saturday afternoon back at the hotel, she and a bunch of other young girls would be hosted during the break between the first and second set of heats, their host being a Big Marlin girl (13 or over). Pizza would be eaten, small gifts exchanged. Caroline was excited when she became a Big Marlin a few years ago. Next year is her last with the team. I used to throw the baseball between heats with Jack and his buddy Little Marlins. This year he became a Big Marlin. The kids now just ask for money and go to the Subways across the parking lot on their own, and the parents are in the health club or in the bar watching the ballgame. Passages.

On Sunday night at the end of the meet, the Marlins have a dinner at the hotel and each Senior-year swimmer gets to talk—a reminiscence of his or her years with the team, very often heartfelt, sometimes truly eloquent. For a decade or so, if your kid has been a longtime Marlin, you have joined the annual chorus of complaint in the wine line about how ungodly long the "speeches" are. Next year, Caroline is a senior. If she speaks for an hour or more, it's good with me. If Jack breaks her record three years further on, then good for him.

I haven't watched a race in the Bayside Pool in a couple of years. After next spring, I'll be down to one kid. I told Caroline recently, "I like St. Pete. It's a good town. But when you guys are done, I'm not sure your mom and I will ever come down here again."

She looked at me in a Don't-Get-Melancholy, Dad, way. Then I thought of Mary Grace. At least we'll always have Disney.