

Louder than Words

THE UNSPOKEN CODE OF FATHERS AND SONS



As a young man living in New Jersey in the early '80s, I became a Bruce Springsteen fan. The Boss's music was everywhere, and the local imagery of his songs was as familiar to me as a well-worn jacket: dusty beach roads, boardwalks full of shady characters, muscle cars, freeways, factories, loading docks, and backstreets. The rough, taciturn world he described was the one I lived in, filled with people working hard to get by, clinging to their hopes while letting their deepest longings remain unexpressed or even unacknowledged.

The Springsteen story that touched me the deepest, however, wasn't in a song, but in an introduction he delivered at a concert before he sang "The River," a haunting, dirgelike melody about how one generation's struggles can be handed down to the next. In his introduction, he described the

spiral of hostility and misunderstanding between himself and his father during his teenage years. After their arguments, his father often angrily muttered, "I can't wait till the army gets you." It was 1968, and many young men in the neighborhood were being drafted and sent to Vietnam. Some of these men, Springsteen remembered, never came back. The ones who did were never the same.

When he got his draft notice, Springsteen expected the worst. It looked like his father had gotten his wish. He hopped a bus and disappeared for three days. When he showed up back at the house, his father was waiting. "Where you been?" he asked.

"Got my draft papers. Went in for my physical."

"What happened?"

"They didn't take me."

"That's good," replied Springsteen's father, choking back his relief but saying nothing more.

That's good. Perhaps nowhere in the world of human relationships can so much be said in so few words than between fathers and sons. When I've felt closest to my own father, very little, if anything, was spoken between us. A few words have meant volumes, and the most important things have often been communicated in silence.

Recently, I've been thinking back to all the time we spent in the backyard, throwing a baseball back and forth. In my mind, it's usually early twilight and the smell of freshly cut grass wafts in the summer air as the familiar sound of leather gloves popping with each catch creates its own unhurried rhythm, almost like a heartbeat. Little is being said, save for an occasional "nice catch," "good try," or "way to go, Hot Shot." When I don my baseball glove, my name always changes from Scott to Hot Shot.

It's a simple memory—just a father and a son playing catch. So why do these times have such power for me now, 40 years later? As a boy, I saw these evenings as practice sessions, during which I was developing skills as a ball player. Now I see them as something else entirely. I know that it wasn't about baseball: it was about being with Dad. Somehow the ball stitched us together.

There must've been nights when Dad, after working hard all day, would've preferred to relax, rather than throw a baseball. There must've been times, especially as I was learning the basics, when he

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dreaded the thought of chasing after yet another ball thrown wildly over his head. There must've been days when he put important things on hold or overlooked his own aches and pains to put on his glove and get out in the yard with me.

I'm overwhelmed with gratitude when I think of those countless nights, the Saturday practices he drove me to, the games he sat through. And I think about all the trips to the department stores (before there was such a thing as a sporting-goods store), when he not only helped me pick out the perfect bat, but paid for it without mentioning the work it'd taken to earn that money.

I remember one trip in particular when we went looking for a new glove. My mind was quickly set on one that was just a bit too big for my hand. After rebuffing a few gentle nudges from Dad, who encouraged me to try on a few more before choosing, he suddenly decided he needed a new glove, too, one that was just a bit too small for his hand. When we switched gloves a few days later, there were no lectures, no "I told you so" moments. He really *seemed* to like my glove.

Unlike Springsteen's, my relationship with my father wasn't contentious, but we did have our misunderstandings. What father and son don't? How many times did the words he intended as guidance get interpreted as criticism? And how many times did my attempts to carve out personal space get interpreted as rejection? Throughout it all, however, as I grew from a boy to a teenager to a young man, we were unified by that baseball, throwing it no matter what. I realize now that the language through which our love was expressed was action-oriented—a simple gesture or word stood in for much larger meanings.

As I've gotten older, I've become better at deciphering the shorthand fathers often use with their sons, and

I feel increasingly connected to my dad. Like notes in a bottle, messages that went unnoticed, untranslated, or misunderstood for many years are now being fished out of the currents of time and delivered onto the shores of my awareness. I see now that he was always watching—like when I was 4 years old and wandered off at Seaside Heights on the Jersey shore, not far from Springsteen's Asbury Park. Finding myself suddenly surrounded by strangers at the packed beach, I started screaming. People were towering over me like menacing giants. When a woman in a blue swimsuit and sun hat approached me, I yelled for her to stay back, terrified she'd carry me back to her lair. Then out of the corner of my eye I saw Dad running toward me—not walking fast, not jogging, but running at top speed. Relief flooded in as I realized I was safe and had been in his sight all along.


Why are these memories inundating me now? Through what alchemy have these dusky summer nights and crowded beaches been summoned back, after all these years? Who knows? Maybe it's just getting older. Maybe there's some neurological program that makes us pause to take stock when we hit 50. Maybe it's the years I've spent as a hospice social worker, watching as messages get lost in translation and trying to help. Maybe it's just life.

My days of smacking balls down the third-base line and digging wild throws out of the dirt on first are over. Dad's hair is gray, and mine is fast becoming so. But I still have a dog-eared photograph of my first Little League team, with my teammates and me lined up in two rows in our green-and-white uniforms bearing the name of our sponsor, Murphy Tile Company. Behind us are four adults, one of whom is my dad. What strikes me is how young he and the other fathers look, all of them younger than I am now.

In those days, I expected all fathers to live forever, but the summer after 10th grade, my friend Kenny's father

died suddenly of a heart attack. The next day, Kenny and I were leaning against the gunmetal-gray hood of his dad's beat up Dodge, searching awkwardly for ways to fill the silence. I didn't want to be there, but it seemed important to show up, to let him know I cared. Before I left, we agreed to gather some of the guys in the neighborhood that Saturday and head down to one of the baseball diamonds to see if we could rustle up a game.

Later that day, I was out in the backyard throwing a baseball into the air and running it down, trying to calm my mind. At one point, Dad came out, pretending he needed something from the storage shed. I could tell he wanted to check on me but wasn't sure what to say. As we fumbled for words, I found myself crying on his shoulder as he hugged me. When I looked up, I saw the tears in his eyes. There was no conversation. When the moment was over, he went back to the shed, and we never spoke of it again. We didn't need to. In the mysterious lexicon of fathers and sons, it was one of those rare moments that needed no translation. I got the message. *I'm here. I care. No matter what savage curveballs life throws, we'll always be a team.*

In my mind, I can see the Boss wink and hear him say, "That's good." 

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