

# Five Parenting “Do’s”

Parenting is difficult, yet sometimes we make it much more difficult than it needs to be. I am not trying to minimize complex and challenging situations. I am blessed to have three very well-adjusted and compliant children. I realize that not everyone shares my experience. Yet the point still stands: we complicate and overthink things sometimes. [There are a handful of common sense things parents should not do](#), as there are some things parents should strive to do. Here are five things I have noticed in my time parenting that have produced good results. Hopefully this will be a help to other parents out there. Some of these things, maybe all, will not be brand new to you, but sometimes a reminder is just as important.

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## **1. Love them sacrificially.**

As stated above, some of these “do’s” will seem obvious, but it’s in the little details that we lose sight of the big picture. All good parents love their children. All good parents sacrifice for their children. Not all good parents do those things as consistently as they probably should. I don’t. Sometimes we have to be willing to sacrifice our time, our wants, our needs to enable our children to live their fullest life. That doesn’t mean we cater to them and their every whim though. (More on that a little later.) It does mean that at times, to show our children how much we love them, we give up our television time to play a game with them. It means that we go to school plays to support them, we attend their sporting events, we find odd jobs to help pay for their mission trip. The list goes on and on. Good parents do those things. Our children need to see self-sacrificial love played out in front of them at home. It will leave life-long marks on them.

## **2. Instill a proper sense of self-worth.**

This is the flip side to point one. We do our children no favors if we teach them, whether by words or by actions, that they are the most important people in the world. In this day and age, self-esteem is a big deal, and parents are encouraged and told to make their kids feel like the most special and unique little treasures in the whole wide world. Parents fill their days inventing new ways to make little Johnny happy. Ways to keep Janie fulfilled and content. We do that by taking them to every event, every party, every activity. We do that by giving them everything they could ever want or need. We do that by refusing to accept their failures and using them as teachable moments and instead we find someone else to blame for the times they come up short.

This is all garbage.

Our children should feel loved, always. Our children should feel protected, always. Our children should know their true worth, always. Their true worth comes from their Creator and the fact that they were fearfully and wonderfully made in His image. They are special, but not because the world revolves around them. They are special because the person the world does revolve around loves them and made them to be His unique image bearers on the earth.

## **3. Say no.**

This is not new or novel or original, but that doesn't make it any less important. Children want what they want and they want it right then. Sometimes, many times, giving them that thing they want is not in their best interest. Be an adult and learn how to say no. Now, some parenting experts advise against using negative words like "no", instead opting for positive ways to redirect. I'm no parenting expert but in their life, once they leave your home, your children will be told no on an almost daily basis. It's part of life. Training them for 18 plus years without ever saying no is a massive disservice to

their formation. It's okay to be the "bad guy" sometimes. You are their parent, not their friend.

#### **4. Prepare them for failure.**

Your child will not be great at everything. There will be areas of life where they struggle. It might be academic, or athletic, or even social. Don't shield them from their failures. Don't minimize them, hide them, or blame others. Let them own their shortcomings. Not in a mean or critical way, but in a way that lets them know that they are not perfect and there are just some things they cannot do. The Disney philosophy that teaches us that anyone can do anything as long as they believe is incomprehensibly stupid and borderline evil. We can't all be NBA players. We can't all be professional musicians. Teach your children to work hard, as hard as they can, but to understand that some things will be out of their reach. Some things are beyond their skill. And that is totally okay. It does not make them less than. It does not mean they are worthless. Help them find those things they are good at. Direct their energy towards areas where they are skilled. Challenge them to dream big. But let them fail. Let them learn that life is not always "fair." Don't handicap them with built in excuses about how the world is against them when things don't go their way.

#### **5. Say you're sorry.**

This one is probably the most difficult of all. We mess up. We mess up at our jobs. We mess up at home. We mess up as parents. We need to model repentance with our children. When we screw up with our kids, tell them. Ask their forgiveness. Say you are sorry. This teaches them that we will never get to a point in our lives where we are above mistakes and failings, but it will also teach them that there is forgiveness and restoration if repentance is sought. Our children need to see our broken hearts. They need to see our acknowledgement of sin and failures. They need to have faith that we hold ourselves to the same standards we are holding them. If you have not

done this before, it will be very difficult the first few times. Do it enough and it will feel completely natural. God will bless a home that is transparent and accountable.

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Hopefully these five things are already a part of your parenting life. If not, I hope something in here will help you in your journey. Please share your comments and ideas below. I love to interact with other parents and learn ways to better myself as a father.

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## Love at First Sight

I originally wrote this about seven years ago. I meant it then and I mean it now. Usually, we try to not to publish content that is personal but without broader application. After looking over what I wrote years ago, I am struggling to find any lessons for a broader audience. This one is specifically intimate. Still, I hope people can find something in here to appreciate, apply, or discover.

**“Why do I fall in love with every woman I see who shows me the least bit of attention?”**

Joel Barrish, Jim Carrey’s character in the complicated and amazing film, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, asks himself that very question sitting across the diner from Clementine, the colorful and delightfully free-spirited Kate Winslet. The very idea that you could fall in love like that is silly though, right? It is based on nothing but fleeting glimpses and unrealistic views of romance and love. It does not factor in compatibility, personality, or anything else of a more objective nature. He sees a woman that smiles back at him and he is smitten. Hard. I think many viewers simply wrote

Joel and the rest of the film off after that. That's too bad, because they missed a great movie. I didn't write off Joel or the film. In fact, that line, heard very early in the film, hooked me. It intrigued me. To explain why this line had this effect on me will probably reveal more about myself than I really care to, but it is unavoidable.

### **I was hooked because I was Joel Barrish.**

Years ago, as a single man, I did not date much. In fact, I only "dated" three women. (I use quotation marks, because I can barely classify two of those as dating relationships – we went out a few times.) Clearly, my dating game was not on point. I was, and still am, shy. If I saw a girl and she showed me any attention at all I could picture us dating. In my mental version of things, I was charming, funny, handsome, and pretty irresistible so the odds were high she would say yes. In real life, I would not even get past pleasantries. I just didn't want to risk the rejection that might follow. I stayed safe and alone on the outside. All of that changed in the summer of 1996.

I was meeting a college friend for a Cardinals' baseball game and for some reason still unknown to me, he wanted to meet at the stadium hours before the game started. Summers in St. Louis can get pretty hot, and it was not a comfortable experience, but it did give me the opportunity to meet his friends, one of whom was a beautiful, friendly, Missouri girl who gently forced her way into my heart and mind. It was then that I had my Joel Barrish moment. I didn't fall in love with every woman I saw that showed me the least bit of attention, but I fell for her.

### **Hello, I love you. What is your name?**

Before you roll your eyes, let me clarify. I didn't love her in the fullest sense of the word. Love is not simply a romantic feeling, even though that is part of it. Love is a choice. It is a decision. But romance, attraction, chemistry,

beliefs, and a myriad of other things play into what “love” ultimately becomes in a relationship. So, while I didn’t fully love her, I was smitten. Hard. I would even say that I loved her based on the limited information I had. I knew then and there that I wanted to spend every waking moment in her presence. I knew I wanted to find out everything I could about her. I knew she was so beautiful that it actually made it hard to think when I was around her. That is not hyperbole. I was basically a mute around her that first day because she radiated a beauty I could barely handle. I knew she was intelligent and funny, and she had really great taste to be a Cardinals’ fan. I knew she was a Christian and she was thinking about coming to Welch College (FWBCC), my college, in the fall. More than once that summer I prayed that God would make that possible.

We parted ways after the game. I thought about her constantly. Unfortunately, I was not the best company that afternoon at the ballpark. I did not feel well and I was frustrated with having to get to the stadium so early. Needless to say, I don’t think my dream girl thought about me much.

Remember when I mentioned dating only three women? Well, I was dating one of them when I went to that baseball game. I had just started going out with a girl that worked at the same grocery store where I was employed that summer. She was nice. She really liked me. We were into the same bands and we shared many similar interests. There was only one problem: I could not stop thinking about the girl I met at the baseball game. Immediately after my second date with the grocery store girl, I got home and had one of those pitiful, sentimental daydreams about my future wife – the baseball fan. (That is totally normal, right?) I had spent one afternoon in the same ballpark as her, and that was all it took. She had captured my eyes, my mind, and my heart.

## A dream come true.

Shortly thereafter, I ended things with the grocery girl. I was returning to college in Tennessee and didn't think it would be wise to try to keep things going since my heart wasn't really into the relationship anyway. The day I arrived in Nashville is a blur. I remember very little about it and what I do remember is probably not that accurate, because what happened when we arrived at the college was like something out of a dream. My brother and I pulled in and there she was – my dream girl. She was on her way to the dorm. My heartbeat went into overdrive. Questions raced through my mind: Is she here as a student? Is she here to drop off friends? Does she even remember me? She saw us, stopped, waved, and said hi. She even remembered me! We talked for a few seconds, enough to find out that she was in fact enrolled as a student. *Praise the Maker!* We went our separate ways. She walked to her dorm room oblivious of what her presence had just done to that poor sap in the car. I, on the other hand, could not stop smiling. I promised myself right then and there that I was going to pursue her. In fact, I decided right then and there that, God willing, I would marry this girl. Ridiculous? Absolutely. Romantically hopeless? Certainly. Did I tell my friends and family about my newfound conviction? I am a hopeless romantic but I am not that crazy.

So, what was the end result of all of this? I finally asked her out and she said no. End of story.

Not really. I asked her out. We dated for a year. I truly fell in love with her.

Then she broke up with me. I was crushed. For one, it was a blow to my pride. Secondly, I truly loved her by that time. But most importantly, it rocked my world because I was absolutely convinced that we were going to spend the rest of our lives together. My early romantic dreams had solidified into complete certainty. I spent the next year in a haze. My

grades plummeted. My attitude soured. I became cynical and bitter. That is, until I realized that it was out of my hands. If I was supposed to marry this girl, things would eventually work out. As soon as I came to that conclusion I was a much happier person. I was finally able to understand the breakup and moved on. Slowly she moved back into my life. First as a friend. Then gradually, as something more.

### **A deeper view of love.**

Seventeen years ago, I married my dream girl. She has given me the best years of my life. She has blessed me with love and acceptance. She has modeled grace, forgiveness, and spiritual maturity. She has given me three wonderful boys. My life has been richly blessed by having her in it. It is everything I dreamed of and more. My “love at first sight” has become a love of a lifetime.

It is her birthday today. The day we celebrate her life beginning. She will not want any attention, as she prefers to stay behind the scenes as much as possible, so I will end this with a simple “happy birthday.”

I love you Amy.

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## **The Annual Super Awesome Film Festival: Making Wiser Movie Choices**

I've said this before, but it is worth repeating: I love movies. In some ways, I am probably a little too in love with movies. Many [jokes have been made](#) at my expense at my single-minded obsession with *The Lord of the Rings* Movies. I'm not



that compulsive with all movies, but I watch, think about, and discuss movies more than most people I know. It only seemed natural then, to share that love of movies with my kids.

I've watched movies or television shows with my boys since they were little. When they were young, we watched things they enjoyed and I had to sit patiently and long for the day when I could introduce them to the things I loved and enjoyed. I jumped the gun a few times though. I watched the *Star Wars* films with my middle son when he was too young to appreciate them. His older brother loved them, but it has taken him time to even tolerate them, all because he wasn't ready. Similarly, I thought my oldest son was ready for *The Lord of the Rings*, but I was proven wrong when he completely freaked out over Bilbo trying to take the ring away from Frodo in Rivendell. For those that have seen the film, you know the scene I am referencing. Kindly, old Bilbo, fueled by his desire for the ring of power, transforms into a snarling, angry creature. It is a shocking moment and it caught my son completely by surprise. He had nightmares about that scene for a very long time afterwards. I felt like a complete failure for not recognizing how that scene, or other scenes, could potentially horrify him. It was after that traumatic event, I decided that I needed to do better. I needed to be more thoughtful about what we watched and when we watched.

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It was around this time that one of my favorite film critics, Drew McWeeny, started writing a series called [Film Nerd 2.0](#). While I didn't always agree with what films he introduced to his boys, and I would have pretty strong reservations about endorsing the entirety of his approach, the specific, thought-out system he created appealed to me. I knew my version would look different, but he had inspired me to do this whole "watching movies with my kids" thing better.

## The Super Awesome Film Festival was born

Five years ago, I kicked off our very first *Annual Super Awesome Film Festival* ©. We held the festival over the summer, when the boys had later bed times and our schedules were not as busy. For that first Festival, I chose four movies to watch over one weekend. At that time, my youngest son was only four years old, so he would only watch one of the films. I chose a couple films that were new to the older boys, one favorite that they wanted to see again, and one that my youngest had not seen but would hopefully enjoy. We made a big deal out of the whole thing – we bought popcorn and movie theater style candy. We had drinks aplenty. The entire event was a huge success and has since become an annual tradition.

The film selection has grown and expanded with each year. The following year, I even made a simple poster for the Festival.



Click to  
enlarge

That year, my youngest was able to watch two of the films in the lineup – *Willow* and *Peter Pan*. He enjoyed both of them and proclaimed them the best movies he had ever seen. He has since adjusted his rankings a bit. The older two fell in love with *Remember the Titans* in a way that I did not expect. I figured they would like it, but their level of passion for that film took me by surprise.

Each year I have attempted to introduce new types of films to the boys, not just the action/adventure films they love so much. As they get older and able to handle more difficult and complex storytelling, I will challenge them with lesser known

gems or films way outside of their interests. Besides having a good time with my kids, I hope that the films we watch serve as a chance for discussion and inquiry. I still do my best to balance the festivals with plenty of fun and exciting stuff, but I don't want to limit our viewing to only one style of film.

This year we are finally watching the *Marvel Cinematic Universe* films with my youngest son, who turned eight a few weeks ago. Almost all of his friends at school have seen these films – some starting back when they were three or four years old. I chose to wait, convinced that he would enjoy them but not truly appreciate them as much as he could at that young age. Plus, all of the films, while very clean, have content that is just too much for someone that young. The older boys are watching the *Marvel* films with us, so I will also select a couple of films to watch with just them that will keep them on their toes and engage a different part of their mind and heart. While the Annual Film Festival has been the primary example of my adjusted approach to movie watching with my kids, I now work through a similar process any time we watch something.

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### **What we watch matters**

As a Christian, I believe that what we consume – physically, mentally, or otherwise – affects us. I believe that as a father, it is my responsibility to develop discernment and wisdom in my children. Right now, I am their guardian and their protector. For the most part I can control what enters their eyes and ears. There are various approaches that I have seen for how to do this.

There is the avoidance approach – shielding our children's eyes from anything and everything potentially dangerous. Building a wall around them so that the sin of the world

cannot stain them. The problem with this approach is that sin has already stained them, regardless how much I protect and shield them. And this approach does nothing to help them make good, and Godly, decisions as they age. Instead, it leaves them vulnerable and weak; unable to process and examine the sound and fury the world will throw at them once they are away from the defenses built by their parents.

Then there is the full embrace approach – letting our children watch anything and everything because it’s “just a movie.” This approach goes hand-in-hand with the idea that we turn our brains off when we watch television or movies, simply because we need a way to unwind and relax. This approach exposes our children to content, ideas, and worldviews they are unable to process or examine. They are fed dangerous philosophies about life, religion, faith, morality, and a host of other important things. It’s akin to putting your eight-year-old behind the wheel of a car with no training or practice.

Finally, we have the “examine everything” approach. This approach does not hide from the ugly or the sinful, but uses wisdom and common sense to determine what and when we watch. It puts the onus on the parents to actually think about what they allow their children to watch. Taking it further, we should be on the look out for more than just curse words or dirty jokes. There are plenty of films aimed squarely at families and children that contain no cursing, no sex, and no offensive jokes, but are entirely bankrupt in the philosophy and worldview they present. This approach forces us to do some hard work on the front and back end. We can’t just watch a movie that contains problematic material, and leave it hanging in their minds with no further exploration on our part. As parents, and more importantly, as Christian parents, we are called to do much better.

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## **Final thoughts – One size does not fit all**

I don't want this to seem like I am advocating for my way and only my way. I realize that every parent has a different perspective. That is one reason why I did not delve into checklists or comprehensive guides. What you do needs to work for you and your family. But—and I believe this as strongly as anything I have written—we have to take this seriously. Your approach might vary significantly from mine, but as long as you are approaching it with wisdom and thoughtfulness, I can't really criticize. The key is that you are thinking about these things. You are engaging with your children and what they are being exposed to. As parents, we have to stop being lazy and complacent about the things our children consume. There is too much power in the things they are seeing, reading, and hearing for us to give anything but our best.

So, develop your own traditions. Hold your own film festival. Do a movie marathon. Do what works for you. I'll be over at the Lytle house holding the Fifth Annual Super Awesome Film Festival. We'll be eating popcorn and candy, watching Iron Man and Atticus Finch, and spending some time examining everything carefully and holding on to what is good.

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## **I said “I Love You” Before the First Date (And Other Fun Facts About My Marriage)**

*As of May 30th, my wife Kayla and I have been married for two whole years! Look at the big brains on us! In lieu of a sappy*

*Facebook post, I decided to share 24 of the most interesting facts about our marriage, one for each month we've been married...*

In March 2014 Kayla was living in Nashville. I was living in Chicago. On March 25th, I asked her out, telling her I was coming to Nashville for Spring Break anyway (I wasn't). Our first date was to be April 13th. In the meantime, we talked every day through texting, phone and Facetime. By the time April 13th rolled around I knew she was the one I wanted to marry. Before the date I met her on campus and we sat on a swing and I told her that I loved her. I'm sure people thought (and think) that this was crazy. But she didn't run away and she married me anyway.

While we dated and were engaged she lived in Tennessee and I in Chicago. She is from Sesser, IL and I am from Tookeydoo, South Carolina. There was a stretch of five weekends where we were together but in five different places. At one point during that stretch we walked into a Target and I thought, "I have no idea what city I am in right now."

Kayla and I were long distance from March 25, 2014 until May 7, 2015. In that time we traveled 40,000 miles to see each other via car, plane and train.

Within the span of 15 months in 2014 to 2015, Kayla finished getting licensed to teach in Tennessee, started dating me, performed several shows as Maria in a production of *The Sound of Music*, ran a half-marathon, graduated college in Nashville, got a teaching job in Hendersonville, moved to Hendersonville,

started her first teaching job, got engaged to me, planned a wedding, applied and took new tests to be licensed to teach in Illinois, resigned her job in Hendersonville, got married in Sesser, moved to my small apartment in Chicago, joined a new church, moved into a bigger apartment with me in Chicago, got a teaching job in Chicago and started that job.

I am 14 years older than Kayla. I am one of the youngest grandchildren on either side of my family. She is one of the oldest. As a result I have a first cousin that is 54 and she has a first cousin that is 8.

We got engaged on Saturday night, November 1, 2014. That night USC played Tennessee in football. Two of my brothers were at the game and could not hear me when I called to tell them I was engaged because the stadium is so loud. The Gamecocks blew a 14 point lead in the last few minutes and lost. (Not that I associate that game with my engagement or anything.)

After 3 years of being together my wife knows all the random phrases I will say out loud and she often will say them before me when she knows I am about to say them. For example, if someone mentions chicken wings, she knows I will say, "TOMMY LIKEY, TOMMY WANT WINGY" from the movie *Tommyboy*.

During our wedding and reception there were several subtle references to *Seinfeld* and *Harry Potter*. We did not want to distract from the reverence of the ceremony by making them overt but true fans knew them when they saw or heard them.

Kayla and I do not celebrate Valentine's Day but instead celebrate several of our anniversaries that are significant to us (the day we got engaged, first date, etc.). Included is March 6th because it was a date before we got together where I asked her a personal question over Facebook PM and her answer was so transparent and spiritually deep I said, "I have to ask her out." Only took me 19 days to do it.

In two years I probably have done the majority of the cooking but she has absolutely done the majority of the bug killing.

For her first birthday after we got together I gave my wife a Belle tiara and recreated the scene in *The Big Bang Theory* where Sheldon gives Amy a tiara to make up for being selfish.

I was so old when I got married that a man in my church, who had prayed for years for it to happen, gave Kayla a hug the first time he met her. I've never seen him hug anyone else in 15 years of knowing him.

During our first year of being married I was taking Kayla to school and a man with mental health problems jumped in our car when we stopped at a stop sign. He wanted me to take him somewhere but I could not understand him. I kept telling him to get out and that I'd call for help but he would not so he rode the rest of the way with us to school and then got out.

My favorite random moment from early in our marriage was on Good Friday in 2016 when we were at her parents' house. I was



upstairs doing something unimportant and I could hear her downstairs playing the guitar and singing Good Friday and Easter hymns in English and Spanish.

I've never beaten my wife at *Scene It Seinfeld*. But she refuses to give me a rematch of the rematch of the rematch.

If it weren't for Facebook, I am positive Kayla and I never would have gotten together. And in the words of Kramer, "That'll make you think."

I have always hated wearing jeans but my wife wanted me to wear them so she bought me some to go out on nice dates. So I would wear jeans on the nice dates and then come home and put on some comfortable khaki pants.

After a few months of marriage I put on 40 pounds and the jeans didn't fit any more. We didn't buy any new ones.

I laugh boisterously and fall on the floor quite often but the only time I've seen my wife do it was during an episode of *Parks and Rec* where Christ Pratt as Andy Dwyer ad libs a line when Leslie is sick: "Leslie, I typed your symptoms into the thing up here, and it says you could have 'network connectivity problems'."

Marriage teaches you how self-centered you are for sure. If we are home and my wife says something from another room and I can't hear her, I get mad at her as if it is her fault. If I

say something from another room and she doesn't hear me, I get mad at her as if it is her fault.

Probably the silliest fight we have had was recently when going to church and I asked if she wanted me to drop her off at the door or not, since it was a little cool outside. She said, "It's up to you," which means, "It doesn't matter". But I got mad and told her it was her decision and that I refused to decide it. But I really said that mumbling under my breath. And she asked me to speak up and so I said it very sarcastically. We both entered the church quite mad. Thankfully my wife is abnormally gracious and apologized quickly, even though it was my fault.

Speaking of mumbling, my wife's first trip to South Carolina gave her the chance to hear the Cannon men speak in our own personal garbled vernacular that only we can comprehend. My own mother can't make it out but we understand each other just fine. If you have ever heard Jeff Foxworthy talk about words in the South, you have an idea of what it sounds like: "How's ya mama an em?" "Aight." Sometimes when my dad and brother Jeremy have a conversation I'll translate for Kayla.

Occasionally, my wife will tell her story of fitness and health by posting a picture with comments to social media after an insane 30-40 minute workout. Sometimes, if you look carefully in the background, I'll be on the couch eating a whole frozen pizza from Aldi.

I really do love my wife very much and I cannot get over how much better marriage is than I even dreamed. I am sure it will

get harder (with kids, maybe?) but right now the great moments far surpass the frustrating ones.

HAPPY ANNIVERSARY, KAYLA!

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## [REO Pays Tribute: Marie Lytle](#)

On September 18, 2007 my mother, Marie Eula Buchanan Lytle was called home to Heaven at the age of 87. We had watched Alzheimer ravage her mind and body for eight years, and it was a sweet release to see her go.

Coming up on another Mother's Day, this tribute is in memory of her, and in her honor. I owe much of the man I am today to her influence, teaching, and prayers.

I saw her kneel at the altar of the Swannanoa Free Will Baptist Church in the fall of 1961 during a powerful revival meeting that swept our church, where she wept as she repented and rededicated her life to Christ. From that day forward, she was a changed woman. We were in church every time the door was opened, and we were not permitted to miss. She prayed, she talked about the Lord to us kids, she walked with God. I saw her more than once on her knees in her room praying for her family.

I remember in January 1967 when the first Super Bowl was being played. I begged to stay home and watch it that Sunday evening, but she was adamant in her refusal. Never mind that

it was the biggest game in history in the mind of a 16 year old boy. We were going to church. You didn't miss church for anything.

Much of Mother's life and special influence revolves around music. In my mind I can still see her standing at the kitchen sink and singing. You have to understand this; she was not a good singer. She never sang a special in church; didn't even sing in the choir. But her music and her heart, above all, touched the heart of God – and it touch me deeply.

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The first song I can distinctly remember Mother singing was "You Are My Sunshine," a very popular tune in the 1950s. The first Christian song I recall was the lovely "How Beautiful Heaven Must Be." I suppose that was around 1956 or 1957.

*We read of a place that's called Heaven  
It's made for the pure and the free  
These truths in God's word we are given  
How beautiful Heaven must be.*

*How beautiful Heaven must be  
Sweet home of the happy and free  
Fair haven of rest for the weary  
How beautiful Heaven must be*

Mother loved to sing "Is Not This The Land of Beulah?" Number 27 in the old Baptist Hymnal. She would sing it with strong emotion, especially the second verse. It might have been her testimony:

*I can see far down the mountain where I wandered weary years  
Often hindered on my journey by the ghosts of doubts and fears  
Broken vows and disappointments, thickly sprinkled on my way  
But the Spirit led unerring to the land I hold today.*

I have to believe that it was, at least in part, her love for

that song that birthed the same love in me; it has been a favorite my whole life, nearly 60 years now. In fact, I don't doubt for a moment that my love for music and song stems from my earliest recollections of how certain songs impacted her.

There was a time when I was about 10, and we had just moved to our new home in Swannanoa. I had been saved that summer in Vacation Bible School, and after we moved – probably around October or November, I crossed the little branch by our house, walked out to the woods, and sat down on a fallen tree. I started singing:

*He never said I'd have silver or gold  
Yet He has promised me riches untold  
He never suffered a life without care  
Yet He relieves every burden I bear.*

*Sin stained the cross with the blood of my Lord  
Yet He permitted it without a word  
Why, tell me why, He redeemed you and me?  
Love is why you and I are free.*

Life wasn't easy for Mother. She worked very hard at a local factory. My dad did not follow Christ for many years; for ten years he did not darken the door of a church, and was very bitter and angry. My parents argued frequently and there were attitudes and undercurrents in the home I never understood. Yet for the most part, we had a happy childhood.

Mother didn't drive, and so for several years until I got my driver's license, we were dependent on folks in our church for rides to church on Sundays and Wednesdays, revival meetings, and special activities. Several families, including a couple of Mom's best friends, were so good to come and pick us up, and there were four of us! Through the years, we rarely missed a service. Mother was determined that we be at God's house, hearing the Word preached and taught, and singing His praises. She loved the old hymns and she loved gospel music, and as a result, so did I.

My dad came to the Lord in 1971, and for the last decade of his life – he died in 1981 – he, too, was faithful to church.

By then, I had finished Bible College, gotten married, and began preparing for the mission field. Judy and I, along with baby Michael, said goodbye to my parents in Asheville, North Carolina as we boarded a plane to fly to Costa Rica to begin Spanish language school in August 1976. Standing there as the flight was announced, and seeing Mother's tears flow as she kept hugging Michael, Judy, and me is a powerful memory. Also powerful is the memory of my parents and sister coming to Panama to visit us, and our pride and joy in introducing them to the country that had become our home.

After my dad passed away in 1981, Mother lived for 26 more years. Church attendance, ministry (especially to nursery age kids), and caring for family remained her heartbeat. As her mind began to deteriorate in the late 1990s, followed by full-blown Alzheimer's in the early 2000s, life changed for her.

She always enjoyed music, though, up until the final couple of years. My brother would go see her in the nursing home every day, and took a CD of praise and worship music for her to hear. We gave her a Gaither Homecoming CD.

The final two years of her life, Mother was totally unresponsive. She didn't know us, she couldn't speak, and her body was twisted and drawn up as she simply lay there on the nursing home bed. We had prayed many times that the Lord would take her home, yet we didn't know it was imminent on September 15, 2007, the last time we saw her. I was alone with her, speaking softly, and just watching her, when the idea occurred to me that I would sing to her.

Undoubtedly her favorite song, at least for the last 25 years of her life, was Squire Parson's classic "Sweet Beulah Land." Now I'm not a singer at all, and my best singing is done in the shower or in the car with no one else around. But I began to sing:

*I'm kind of homesick for a country  
To which I've never been before  
No sad goodbyes will there be spoken  
And time won't matter any more.*

*Beulah land, I'm longing for you  
And some sweet day on thee I'll stand  
There my home will be eternal  
Beulah land, sweet Beulah land*

Would you believe it? My mother, totally unresponsive for two years, lying in bed like a vegetable, began to respond to the song! While I couldn't understand the words she spoke – it was more like mumbling – it was evident it had touched her and that she was trying to sing along. That was a precious moment.

Two days later my brother called to say that she was gone.

Happy Mother's Day to my precious mother. Thank you for your godly influence.





# The Best Dad in the World's Blog

What a week! I'm not one to pat myself on the back or anything, but my parenting game was totally on point this week. Just knocked it out of the park time and time again. It's weeks like this that make me realize how amazing my parenting skills are and how important I am to the lives of my kids. Frankly, without me, I'm not sure there would be any hope for those little monsters!

I don't really want to take the time to write down every single thing that happened this week, though, it might be wise to do so in case others want to learn from my sterling example down the road. I'll limit myself to a few classic examples of what I call "Parenting Par Excellence."

On Monday, the boys and I were sitting down to watch a TV show while eating our supper. (We like to spend as much time as possible watching television together because it really helps us bond. It is much more productive and beneficial than talking, I know that much at least!) One of my boys, I'll save him the embarrassment by not naming him, was acting a little bratty. He didn't want to watch the same show as the rest of us. He even got a little smart-mouthed with me about it. I get it; there is a time and place for being a smart-aleck. Sometimes the situation calls for it. It's usually not cool to be a smart-aleck to your dad though, so I did what every great father before me has done: I unleashed a torrent of sarcasm and smart-aleckness that broke him down and put him in his place for good. He was all teary-eyed and distant the rest of the day, but that's actually a good thing because it shows that he learned his lesson. He was well and truly humbled.

Later in the week, on a spectacularly beautiful day, the boys kept begging me to go outside and play with them. They wanted

me to throw the football to them or something. I usually don't mind doing this with them as we usually have a pretty good time. There was one problem: I was in the middle of watching a movie on Netflix and I really didn't want to have to stop and try to pick it up later. My rule in these situations is pretty simple – kids need to learn that most of the time what they want to do is much less important than what their parents want to do. So much so as to render their wants, needs, and desires irrelevant. It's good for them to be told "no", even in situations when there really isn't a good reason for it. Granted, I had a really good reason this time (movie!), but the rule still applies. They were sad and disappointed but that is good for them in the long run. One of my main jobs as a parent is to teach them about life, and we all know that life is full of disappointments. So, I try to disappoint them as often as I possibly can. It is for their own good.

Well, that's about all I have time to write today. I could go on and on, but honestly, I would much rather get back to scrolling through Twitter and Facebook. A healthy social engagement is incredibly beneficial in these troubled times. I like to have my finger on the pulse of society. Plus, I need some "me" time today after having spent a week pouring my heart and soul into my kids.

Stay blessed!

#### **About the Best Dad in the World:**

*On December 1, 2016, Phillip Lytle was honored with the prestigious "Best Dad in the World" award by the preeminent parenting organization – the **Consortium Rewarding Amazing Parenting**. Each year, the winner receives a plaque, a not-so-modest financial prize, and a platform to share their mastery of parenting. This blog is that platform. We hope you enjoy the wisdom contained herein.*

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# REO Pays Tribute: Leeman Underwood

*Editor's Note: We believe it is good and right to honor the men and women who have inspired, encouraged, and challenged us throughout our lives. REO Pays Tribute will be our ongoing attempt to do just that. We hope that our meager words will honor those to whom honor is due.*

## **Leeman Underwood by Steve Lytle**

It was probably 1972, the year Judy and I married, when I met Leeman Underwood, but I had heard about him before then. His daughter Gail was his oldest child and she was Judy's cousin and best friend growing up. She was a senior at Free Will Baptist Bible College (Welch) when we were freshmen.

Leeman was born in Flat River (Park Hills), Missouri, but grew up in Fredericktown, Missouri, the son of Vester and Edith Underwood. He came to know Christ as a young man, and grew up in Copper Mines Free Will Baptist Church. Born in 1923, he joined the army and fought in World War II. His sister Lillian, two years younger, finished his 12th grade work in 1942 so that he could graduate from high school with his class.

When he returned from the war, Leeman married Laura Bayless, from Knob Lick, MO. They settled down in Fredericktown, where Leeman was employed in the lead mines and where they had four children: Gail, Greg, Sue, and Pam. He was ordained as a

deacon at the Copper Mines Church. He and Judy's mom frequently sang specials at church; he had a beautiful tenor voice, and she sang a strong alto.

When the mines began to close in the late 1950s, Leeman moved his family to East St. Louis, Illinois for a year and worked there. When he heard of jobs in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, he and Laura decided to move the family there, though it was a long way from southeast Missouri. They went to Oak Ridge in 1959, and began working at one of the nuclear energy plants in Oak Ridge, and worked there until his retirement. They moved into their house on Lancaster in 1965, and he has lived there ever since.

Leeman, Laura, and the children attended the First Free Will Baptist Church in Oak Ridge, where he was elected as a deacon. They faithfully served there for over 50 years.

Leeman loved to travel. They frequently went back "home" to Missouri to visit his old home church, and his family and friends. He always enjoyed returning for his high school reunion. Some of his family went with him in 2016. He was one of two attending from the class of 1942. Even closer to home in Oak Ridge, he goes out on Saturdays with his daughter Sue for long drives to enjoy the beauty of the mountains. Cades Cove is still a favorite destination of his, to see the mountain vistas, and the wildlife there. On more than one occasion, Leeman and Laura would travel to be with Judy and me for special missions services, and were faithful to support and pray for our ministry through the years.

Leeman was an extraordinary ordinary man. Quiet, mild mannered, kind, he loved his Lord and his church. He loved his family; I don't know if I've seen anyone else who loved his kids and grandchildren any more than Leeman did. There were pictures of them all over the house, and it seemed like every time we went to visit, some of the grandkids were always there. They loved hanging out with Grandma and Grandpa.

Judy and I visited the Underwoods numerous times over the years. We stayed in their home frequently when traveling for International Missions to visit churches in Missouri, North Carolina, and Tennessee.

The oldest daughter, Gail, married a preacher and became a pastor's wife. She died of cancer in 1995 while just in her forties. We were in Panama and couldn't come back for the funeral. Shortly afterwards, we came home for our stateside assignment and went to see Leeman and Laura. I remember spending time with them, talking about Gail, and watching some of the early Gaither Homecoming Videos, hearing songs about Heaven and our hope in Christ. We shed quite a few tears on those occasions, but they were tears of hope and joy. Gail's death was very hard on Leeman and Laura, but God gave grace and life went on.

In recent years, time has brought many changes to Leeman and the Underwood family. We were privileged to attend their 50th wedding anniversary in 1996. Aunt Laura passed away in 2011. Leeman still lives in his own house, but his youngest daughter, Pam and her husband Butch, live with him, and provide care and companionship. He has chronic beryllium disease, caused by exposure to beryllium while working as a machinist in the Oak Ridge factory for so many years, and taking the small particles into his lungs. More recently, he began to experience kidney failure, and was actually on dialysis for eight months some years back, but miraculously was able to come off of this treatment for several years. Now it seems to have come back.

On his good days, he sits in the living room watching old westerns on TV and enjoying his company – family, friends, and people from his church.

It is a blessing, and an honor for me to pay tribute to Leeman Underwood. A true man of God, and one of the kindest, most hospitable men I have ever known.

I have said that Leeman was a good singer. Perhaps his best known song was "I Thirst," by Beverly Lowry. I only know he sang it from the heart, as a testimony, and he sang it well.

*One day I came to Him, I was so thirsty  
I asked for water, my throat was so dry  
He gave me water that I have never dreamed of  
But for this water, my Lord had to die*

*He said, "I thirst, " yet He made the rivers  
He said, "I thirst, " yet He made the sea  
"I thirst, " said the King of the Ages  
In His great thirst, He brought water to me  
Now there's a river that flows as clear as crystal  
It comes from God's throne above  
And like a river, it wells up inside me  
Bringing mercy, and life-giving love*

*He said, "I thirst, " yet He made the rivers  
He said, "I thirst, " yet He made the sea  
"I thirst," said the King of the Ages  
In His great thirst, He brought water to me.[1. I Thirst, by  
Bev Lowry, copyright 1993.]*



Leeman Underwood holding his great-granddaughter.

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## The Astonishing Tales of Middle Of The Night Guy

*"I never get enough sleep. I stay up late at night, because I'm Night Guy. Night Guy wants to stay up late. 'What about getting up after five hours sleep?' Oh, that's Morning Guy's problem. That's not my problem, I'm Night Guy. I stay up as late as I want. So you get up in the morning, the alarm [rings], you're exhausted, groggy... Oh, I hate that Night Guy! See, Night Guy always messes up Morning Guy. There's nothing*

*Morning Guy can do."*

(Jerry Seinfeld)

I really do want to love my wife. I struggle with selfishness as much as the next guy, but in my right mind I know that I need to serve her and put her first. I fail plenty, but most days I at least make an effort. I'll get her water when she's working out, go warm up the car when it's cold and rub her feet after a long day.

That's during the day. Basically, between 6 AM and midnight.

Something strange happens when we are in bed, though. Middle Of The Night Guy shows up.

Middle Of The Night Guy is not selfless. He does not serve. He doesn't think of others before himself. To be frank, Middle Of The Night Guy is a complete jerk.

Middle Of The Night Guy will throw elbows for bed space. Middle Of The Night Guy will take the covers without hesitation. One time Middle of the Night Guy repeatedly kicked his wife for invading his side of the bed. (Middle Of The Night Guy's wife wants the record to show it was a small bed.)

Rest Of The Day Guy, who is in control of the things I talked about in the first paragraph, knows Middle Of The Night Guy exists. But he can't do much about him. Sometimes, he will ask his wife if she remembers what Middle Of The Night Guy did the night before. She always does.

Rest Of The Day Guy rejoices when he and his wife travel and they get a king bed. He sometimes will jump on it and roll around and enjoy all the space. Because he knows Middle of the Night Guy will come calling.

Rest of the Day Guy and Middle Of The Night Guy both do not like being touched. Their wife loves it. So Rest Of The Day



Guy will sacrifice to make his wife happy. He will let her lean up against him while she works and hold her hand if she wants. Not Middle Of The Night Guy. If his wife tries to come cuddle at 3 AM, he will freak out, grimace, roll over until he is squeezed on the last 6 inches of space on the bed and make himself as thin as he can. The discomfort of this and risk of rolling off the bed are worth it to Middle Of The Night Guy. Touching is not an option. If his plan to not be touched is violated, the kicks and the shoves ensue. Don't touch Middle Of The Night Guy.

Rest Of The Day Guy hates that Middle Of The Night Guy is this way and he'd love to punch Middle Of The Night Guy in the face. But he better be careful; Middle of the Night Guy has more fighting experience.

The only way Rest Of The Day Guy has a chance is if he becomes Eating My Potbelly Cookie Guy. Then he will be ready to fight to the death.

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## **Five Responses to Common Pro-Choice Arguments**

From its inception, Rambling Ever On has advocated graceful discourse and nuanced conversation. We believe that discussions filled with attacks, oversimplifications, and emotional appeals do little to change minds or hearts.

With that said, there are some areas where there is little

room for nuance. While the overall conversation about abortion is complex and multifaceted, at its root, the moral implication is very simple: abortion is murder. We can dress it up in any number of ways, but there is no getting around the fact that aborting a baby ends a life.

The [March For Life](#) is taking place today in Washington D.C. as well as in cities all over the country. We stand with those that march. Here are Five Responses To Common Pro-Choice Arguments:

Argument Number One: “Women should be in charge of their own bodies.”

**Response: Abortion takes an innocent, defenseless life.**

Argument Number Two: “Anti-Abortion legislation doesn’t curb abortion, but encouraging safe sex does.”

**Response: Abortion takes an innocent, defenseless life.**

Argument Number Three: “Abortion keeps unwanted pregnancies from bringing children into a world of horrible circumstances. There are already not enough people adopting and too many children in foster care.”

**Response: Abortion takes an innocent, defenseless life.**

Argument Number Four: “There is a practical difference between a ‘fetus’ and a ‘baby’.”

**Response: Abortion takes an innocent, defenseless life.**

Argument Number Five: "Abortion is a safe, legal and often inexpensive procedure in the United States."

**Response: Abortion takes an innocent, defenseless life.**

Again, it is not our aim to be pedantic, condescending or simplistic. And we certainly do not wish to ungraciously hype abortion as an unforgivable sin. It's not. This is to communicate that we do not believe any of these arguments for abortion overrule the taking of an innocent defenseless life. We are followers of the Christian God. As far back as we have recorded writings, our God's followers have believed strongly that God created, formed and cares for people in the womb (Psalm 71:6, 139:13-18; Job 10:10, 31:15; Isaiah 49:6). So we, along with millions of others, feel obligated to speak out against the single greatest injustice of our society in this way (Proverbs 24:10-11).

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## [Titans Tuesday: The Joy of Sports](#)

I watch every Tennessee Titans' game with my boys. I have three boys, ages seven to thirteen, and they all love sports. They really love the Titans. My youngest will wear the same Titans' outfit every Sunday while watching the game. My middle son will wear a Titans' jersey and his Titans' gloves. My

oldest doesn't wear anything special but pays more attention to the game than any of them.

We watched the Titans take on the Kansas City Chiefs a few days ago, as most of you probably did. My oldest was only able to watch the first half with us because he had the opportunity to attend a college basketball game. I hate it that he missed the second half, because the football he got to see was not that enjoyable. The Titans were a mess in the first half. They made multiple mistakes on offense and defense. They allowed the Chiefs to dictate the terms of the engagement. But even with too many missed opportunities, mental errors, and bad plays on the field, the Titans were still only down 17-7 going into halftime.

Then it got good.

I've [written before about controlling my emotions and reactions while watching sports with my kids.](#) In the past, I did a bad job of modeling positive behavior when my teams would lose. I made a commitment that I would work on this and the results have been mostly good. And my kids are following right along since they no longer have to watch their dad make a fool of himself yelling at the television screen every few minutes. Don't get me wrong; I still get animated. I still cheer. I still yell at the TV from time to time. But I do my best to not allow the result of the game to affect the rest of my day.

With all that said, I had a pretty loud and intense inner dialogue going on throughout the second half. I knew how important this game was for the Titans' playoff chances. I knew they were capable of playing better than they played in the first half. So when things did not go as desired, my inner idiot did a lot of yelling and venting. On the outside, I remained calm and jovial. I smiled at my boys. I joked with them. I talked about how much better this Titans' team is than in previous seasons. But inside, I was fuming mad and

frustrated.

Fortunately, for my mental well-being, the Titans did start to play better. The defense made play after play in the second half, keeping the Chiefs scoreless for the final 30 minutes of the game. The offense didn't do a lot, but when it counted most – the fourth quarter – Marcus Mariota and company did exactly what they needed to do to win the game.

What a way to win the game though! When Ryan Succop lined up to kick the game winner, I knew Andy Reid was going to call a timeout. So, I didn't get nervous at all. I did swallow a little harder when he missed that kick by a good five yards though, but I figured it could help him make the kick that counted. I sat there with my two boys. We all moved the edge of the couch. I put my arm around both of them and said, "If he doesn't make this, this was still a really fun game to watch." They nodded in agreement. Right before the kick happened, my teenage international student/daughter strolled into the room. My boys yelled for her to come watch the kick with us. She happily complied. We were ready.

The snap...

The hold...

The kick...

**Good!**

The scene in my house after the kick was one of joyful insanity. We were all jumping, yelling, whooping, high fiving, and hugging. There were enough smiles in the room to last us the rest of the year.[1. We got to relive all the best moments when my oldest son got home from the basketball game. He had heard they won while at the game but didn't know the particulars. We were very happy to share them with him.]

This is why we watch sports. It's for these moments. Thank you, Tennessee Titans, for giving us a season to remember. No

matter what happens in the next two weeks, this season has been a joy to experience.