

# Go Big in the Little Things

A few years ago (nearly eight to be specific) I wrote about cereal on my personal blog. At that time, my boys and I ate a lot of cereal. We still do – them more than me. You can read that story [here](#).

My middle son still eats cereal every day. He gets up in the morning, fixes a bowl of cereal, sits down on the couch, turns on the television ([WKRN – Channel 2 – in Nashville](#)), and gets caught up on the morning news, the weather, and the traffic. He is 13 and 75 all at the same time. He also eats a bowl of cereal most evenings as well, after we have finished supper. And occasionally, he gets a bowl for his afternoon snack. He eats a lot of cereal.

My oldest son eats just as much, if not more, simply because he just eats more in general than his younger brother. Between the two of them, plus whatever the rest of us in the family eat, we go through 6 or 7 boxes of cereal a week, give or take a box or two. And if you read the article I linked to above, you understand that is okay and part of the plan. My goal as a child was to have a pantry full of cereal boxes. Seinfeld levels of cereal boxes.



My dream has been realized for sure. I have passed along this dream to my children and I hope they pass it along to theirs in the future.

But this isn't about cereal – as awesome as it is. I don't think it would be in anyone's best interest for me to write another article about cereal. (We have a Top Ten Cereal List already published on REO. Read it [here](#).) No, cereal is not the point.

I am the one that handles grocery shopping for my family. My wife and I used to do it together but she doesn't enjoy it and I was willing to take on that responsibility. One of my great joys in life is to come home with the groceries and see my sons' reactions when they help unload all that food. Before they unpack anything else, they find the cereal. They are desperate to find out what cereal I brought home. Especially the middle one. I can make or break his day depending on my cereal selection. If I do well, he is bubbly and dancing and smiling. If I do poorly, he gets quiet and mopey. Because of this, though he is learning to not allow minor things like this to affect his emotions, I do my best to bring home at least a few kinds of cereal that I know he will enjoy. I do this because I love him and I enjoy seeing him happy. I realize it's a little thing, but I believe if we try hard in the little things, over time, they become building blocks for the big things.

My wife loves McDonald's Coke. She is a woman of virtually no vices, but she has a weakness for a cold Coca-Cola from McD's. (Their mix is the best around.) If I am on my game as a husband, I will remember to stop by a McDonald's on my way home and pick up a Coke for her. As with the cereal and my kids, this is not a big deal. In fact, it's such a tiny thing that it would be easy to overlook. But I think overlooking these little things is a good way to take things for granted, and trust me, I overlook these little things way too often. It's a learning experience for sure. But by doing the little

things, it helps me be aware of and attentive to the bigger things.

There are a million ways you can go big in the little things. I buy gum at the grocery store every so often because I know how much my youngest son loves it. My wife rubs my head when we are watching TV together because she knows it relaxes me. These little things take many forms. It could be anything really. The important part is that you are paying attention. And that "paying attention" is appreciated and will not go unnoticed. The big things will take way more time and energy and focus on your part but if you have been doing the little things, you've built the foundation for the big things already. You're ahead of the curve. None of this is to say that if you do the little things you will handle the big things well. I'm sure there are people who do all the little things but still mess up big time on the big things. (No pun intended.) Yet I am confident that if you don't do the little things well, you probably aren't knocking it out of the park on the big things either.

As silly as cereal, Coke, gum, and head rubs seem, if they are done out of love and genuine affection for others, then they are the least silly things you can do. In fact, overlooking them (and things like them) could be incredibly detrimental to your relationships. Do the little things. Get really good at them. It's worth it.

So what are the little things you do for your loved ones? What are the little things they do for you? We would love to read about it in the comment section below. We are here to learn as much as anything else.

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# Five Things Our Mothers Taught Us

Mothers. None of us would be here if they weren't around. Am I right or am I right? But our moms are so much more than just the person who brought us into the world. I don't know about you, but there is a universe of knowledge I gleaned from my mom. For this Mother's Day, the REO team wanted to honor our moms by relating five of the important lessons we learned from them.

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## Vickie Speer

When I was around 6 years old or so, I was at the supermarket with Mom, and we had finally made it to the checkout line. I asked her if I could get some Starburst candy, and she flat out said "No"...but I just couldn't take that for an answer. When she wasn't looking, I wedged the Starburst in between a few other items on the conveyor belt and hoped she wouldn't notice.

My devious plans were foiled, but not before the cashier had already scanned the candy into the register. My mom held her up from her scanning, and the cashier asked if she should take it off and shelve it. For some reason, mom left it on the bill and bought it. And then, she didn't let me have the candy. Oh man, it was so much worse knowing for weeks that the candy was in our possession, sitting alone up in the cupboard. The poor, lonely candy. The poor, deprived child.

I probably learned my lesson: No means no. At the very least, I haven't forgotten it. Still, once enough time had passed, I

snatched the candy out of the cupboard and asked Mom if I could have some, and she just hurriedly unwrapped it and let me eat it. I think she forgot about its significance. I ate it with the weight of shame upon me. How could something so sweet be simultaneously so bittersweet? Cast your pejorative gaze upon my childhood shenanigans and learn, O reader. A Starburst eaten with a clear conscience is worth 500 eaten in shame. (D.A. Speer)

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## **Betty Lou Plunkett**

When we were kids Mom told us that “Here at The Rock, we have two basic rules. The first rule is: obey all rules. Secondly: Do not write on the walls, as it takes a lot of work to erase writing off of the walls.” Just kidding. That’s Barney Fife. Though she kept decided discipline and order, Mom was definitely not a Barney Mom, constantly spouting off rules, regulations, and long rants of “wisdom.” Mom was not one to dole out a lot of such talk and sage quotable diatribes. Her wisdom was largely displayed through how she lived. Most of what I learned from her I learned by watching her live life and interact with those around her. And I learned so much. One of the ways she most impacted me was via her enduring innate joyfulness and contentment in all situations no matter how dark. Mom had been through a lot of heavy moments in her life: Months in the hospital as a child after accidentally drinking a glass of lye soap; months worth of hours spent in the hospital with me for various reasons; raising four kids; years of serving as a home missionary, foreign mission, and teacher; and finally lymphatic cancer. Yet, for as long as I knew her (since 1973) she always maintained her contented spirit. This is not to say she never got sad or anything like that. Yet even in sadness, there was always that feeling of joy radiating from her. No matter how dark situations got, she had a way of making it feel like matters weren’t that bad. This

was even true with her final battle with cancer. Like Paul the Apostle, she had learned the secret of being content even in the darkest moment. That secret was their hope in Jesus. Her contentment and joy came to a head just minutes before she died. During those moments she expressed an almost rapturous joy in Jesus, and we who were present could almost see heaven itself. (Ben Plunkett)

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## **Yvonne Cannon**

I remember once my senior year in high school my best friends Wade and John came over one afternoon on a school day – I don't recall why – but they ended up staying for dinner even though we hadn't planned for them to do so. My mother cooked extra without even a second thought. Then, again without really planning it, they slept over. On a school night.

The reasons these things happened is because my mother created a home environment where people felt welcomed to treat it like it was theirs. My living room was often packed with our friends on weekend nights when we were teenagers. Some of our friends didn't even knock when they came over. People of other races and ethnicities were welcomed into our home. My dad's hunting buddies, Super Bowl parties, Seinfeld finale parties, Bible College visitors, church prayer times...our house was (and still is) constantly being used to host people. Even though our house was well kept, even when my mother worked full time, we worried far less about stains on the carpet and spills in the kitchen than we did about making sure everyone in Turbeville, SC knew there was a place where all were welcome. My dad is a great man, but my mother was the main reason this was so.

So of the million things I have learned from her, most of them from observation and not words, hospitality rises to the top. It takes humility and sacrifice to open up your home to so

many people. It's supremely inconvenient. I wish I could say I appreciated it back then, but I do now. It's one of the most Jesus-like things about my mother's life. And one I hope to emulate here in Chicago. (Gowdy Cannon)

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## **Judy Lytle**

There is nothing more empowering than hearing the words "you are good at..." It may even be more important for a parent to affirm the things their children do well than to correct their short-comings. As a teen, I more or less floated through life. I am not particularly athletic, musical, or creative. I was fairly shy and just starting to take an interest in academics. Some people can do well just about anything they attempt. Well, I had (have) very few skills. I just was. When I was in high school, my mother told me that I would make a good history teacher or perhaps a good chef. Studying history and cooking were two things I did well and loved doing. That conversation with my mother established the trajectory of my life. This morning I got up early to pray with 30 of my students before taking their AP United States History exam. I also baked them homemade cinnamon rolls. It has been 20 years since my mother said, "You are good at..." but I am living out the empowerment from that conversation nearly every day. (David Lytle)

My mom is the hardest worker I know. If there is a job to do, she does it. If there is a meal to make, a person to visit, a floor to tile, a room to paint, a class to teach... You get the point. Unfortunately, I did not inherit that impressive work ethic from my mother. In my defense, no one in the history of the world has a work ethic like my mother, but it would have been nice to get even 50% of the inner drive she possesses. Also in my defense, I do work very hard if it is for something

I love. But my mom works hard period. Full stop. Love or no love, she jumps into every task as if it is the most important thing in the world. And while I don't have that same character trait, I do have the best example anyone could ask for to push me, nudge me, and even unintentionally shame me a little into working harder on things that I don't love that much. (Phill Lytle)

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## On Brotherhood, Inside Jokes and Built-In Best Friends For Life

**Michael:** *What comes before anything? What have we always said is the most important thing?*

**George Michael:** *Breakfast.*

**Michael:** *Family.*

**George Michael:** *Family, right. I thought you meant of the things you eat.*

Last Saturday night, as the clock struck 11:00 PM in Chicago, meaning it was midnight in South Carolina, I posted seemingly random lyrics of a 1990s Blackhawk song called "Postmarked Birmingham" to my brother Jeremy's Facebook wall. The following morning, I texted him different lyrics from the same song. He was not confused by any of this, because it is sort of a tradition between us. The reason it wasn't random is that the song, which is about a man who gets a letter from a woman who left him and he has no idea why she's writing from



Alabama, mentions the date April 22. So every year on that date, we share a childhood memory, a song we bonded over. And also of the CD that I desecrated by listening to before giving it to him as a Christmas gift. Which he will never let me live down.

I love inside jokes. I realize they are annoying if you're on the outside so I try to keep them to a minimum in public. And while I share them with all sorts of people in my life, there is no doubt that the deepest versions I have are the ones that I share with those who were there every step of the way from the time I was old enough to have memories until the day I departed for college in Nashville: my four siblings.

Quite often when my brothers Jeremy, Ashley and I are texting, if two of us disagree about something, the third one will reply, "I'm with you fellas". Because we have laughed together at *O Brother Where Art Thou?* several times together. (Sometimes there doesn't have to be a disagreement and it just gets worked in the conversation anyway.) Similar are the phrases "Seven Bushes" and "No more questions" from *My Cousin Vinny*. And I'm pretty sure when each of us turned 33 years old, one of the other two was there to text, "Today...he is...33 years old!" from *Three Amigos*.

It's not all TV and movies either. When we were very young, I once chased Jeremy through the house, angry at him. When we got to our bedroom he fell down so hard the whole house shook. He was completely still for a few seconds and I was terrified he was seriously hurt. Then he finally peeked at me and piped up, "I shook the whole house!" And I can still text him those words today and we laugh about it. On another occasion, Ashley and I were playing basketball with some friends and an older guy we knew, who was clearly out of shape, stepped on the court and said, "Let's see if I can still get rim." He clearly couldn't and probably never could, which made the scene quite unintentionally funny. And so this quote has come up during basketball many times. And then there was the time in the 80s

we were eating at our family's favorite seafood buffet and another group got seated just after us. And one of the men boisterously and half-jokingly complained to the hostess, "We're six miles from the buffet!" Except he said "buffet" the way it looks phonetically. That comes up every time we eat seafood even now.

My brother Tracy is ten years older than me and was in college by the time I was in third grade but we still share these moments. Over 20 years ago at the beach were staying in an oceanfront house. And an older lady was out sunbathing just in front, really close to us. As we stood there on the second-floor porch, Tracy dared me \$5 to hit her with a tennis ball. I obviously declined. But later when the ball really did fall from the porch and I had to go down to get it, I threw it back up to Tracy and it hit the ledge of the porch, ricocheted back towards the ground and hit the woman, who for some reason got really mad about it. Tracy gave me the \$5 and we still laugh about it in 2018.

My sister, Kim, is the only sister but we still have our inside jokes, too. Once, not long after she got married I was hanging out at her house. She needed some meat from her freezer, which was in a separate storage room off of the house. I went out to get it and there were wasps. Being terrified of them I reported back with no meat. Kim, who is also terrified of them, decided the situation called for desperate measures. We put on raincoats and hats and gloves—basically, we covered every part of our bodies—and armed ourselves with brooms and mops. And we successfully procured the meat. And Kim loves telling that story to this day.

Another time we were sharing a room at the National Free Will Baptist Convention with her husband Mark and their daughter Camille. Kim bought three 24-count bags of sugar donuts for the week. At the end of the week, they were all gone. Camille claimed to have eaten zero. Mark said he had about six. So

that meant between Kim and I, we ate approximately 66 sugar donuts in four days. We agreed to assume we both ate 33 so no one had to take the blame for eating the most. And to this day, we can't talk about sugar donuts without laughing.

All inside jokes are not funny, though. Some are extremely meaningful in a more serious way. A few years ago when I was home for Christmas, Jeremy introduced me to a song that was a "[Stopped Me In My Tracks](#)" song for him, as Phill wrote about for REO. He had me listen to it. And after hearing it, he and I made a vow that any time one of us hears "Colder Weather" by the Zac Brown Band, we will pray for the other one. We text each other that title every now and then to remind each other of our vow. Jeremy even eventually made the song his ring tone so he would pray for me often.

The picture from above is from the 2013 Outback Bowl when Jadaveon Clowney knocked the Michigan RB's helmet off on a spectacular play that has been viewed millions of times on Youtube. The Gamecocks won the game on a Steve Spurrier drawn up and dialed up bomb with 11 second left. But neither of those plays were what made the day truly special. It was getting to share those moments with my brothers and my dad. I don't remember it but after Clowney made the hit and forced the fumble, Ashley says that I said, "Who was that guy?!?" As if it was to say that it was so amazing I had to ask, even though I knew. Like responding to a superhero moment. It was a special time to relive over and over.

When I got married in 2015, Ashley gave one of the best men speeches and said our mother always told us when we were fighting as children that our siblings would be our best friends when we were adults. She was right. Boy, was she ever right. Because Kim, Tracy, Ashley and Jeremy absolutely know what I think of them. That no matter what happens, or how far from South Carolina I am, that, "I'm with you fellas". They

truly are my best friends for life.



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## 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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## 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.



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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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## **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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## **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.

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# A Beginner's Guide to Creating Your Own Christmas Movie Watch List

In my home, we love movies. (My wife is not as big of a film fan as the rest of us, but let's not get hung up on technicalities.) There are very few things in the world that I enjoy more than sitting down and watching a good film by myself, with friends, or with my family. In light of that, it should come as no surprise that Christmas movies get a lot of play around the house this time of year. Instead of just channel surfing and hoping to find a good Christmas movie to watch, I carefully select which movies we will watch each year, taking some input from my family. A few family favorites make the cut most years. There are a few films reserved for only the adults...that sounds weird but don't make it creepy. You know what I mean. And I do my best to introduce new Christmas films to the kids each year. A few suggestions when putting together your own list:

- Try to include one or two films that are part of your yearly tradition. I don't really care what movies you choose, just find a few that will be part of the rotation every year. Family traditions are important and movies you watch every year can play a role in those traditions.
- Look for new movies to introduce to your family, or to yourself. And they don't have to be "new" films. Perhaps it's an old film you have never seen. Perhaps it's



something you saw when you were a kid and remember very little about it. Perhaps it's a film that your kids are now old enough to appreciate. Stretch yourself a little.

- Include at least one film that contains the Gospel/Biblical reason for Christmas. I'm not one to overly spiritualize everything, but if you are going to celebrate the season, you sort of need to include the birth of Jesus in your revelry.
- Don't overthink it. Pick movies you enjoy. Don't worry if no one but your family likes a particular film. If it works for you and yours, that's all you really need.

With all of that as the backdrop, here are five of the films we will be watching this Christmas season. I'll include a brief explanation as to why each film made the cut and for those that need it, a super spiritual reason we watch.

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## Home Alone



Why we watch it: I realize there is nothing spiritual about the story of a young boy, who after getting left home alone by his family, defends his home from thieves. That's okay. Sometimes you can watch a film simply to have fun. If you have boys, this film is particularly fun to watch. My seven year old has fits of laughter when watching this film. The rest of us have fits of laughter watching him.

Super spiritual reason we watch: Not everything you watch has to have some righteous message. *Home Alone* is not without merits in that regard. The main child learns how important family is and he comes to realize that he has behaved rather selfishly towards them. Great lessons for any family member.

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## The Nativity Story

Why we watch it: I was underwhelmed with this movie the first time I saw it. I appreciated the understated nature of the film, but was disappointed with that style when it came to the big moments when grandeur and power seemed more appropriate. I have since come around to the film completely. The subtle quality of the film is refreshing in a world full of bombast and noise. The “big” moments still have power and grandeur; they are just grounded in something more earthy and tactile. While Keisha Castle-Hughes does fine work as Mary, the standout of the film is Oscar Isaac as Joseph. Never before have I fully recognized the role that Joseph undoubtedly played in the story. His decision to believe and obey the Lord by staying with Mary is something that I have always taken for granted. This film opened my eyes to his part of the story. Plus, the film frames the actual nativity in a beautiful and memorable way. The whole family enjoys this one.



Super spiritual reason we watch: Really? Do I really need to explain why we watch a film that depicts the birth of Jesus for Christmas?

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## National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation



Why we watch it: Before you lose your minds, I want to preface this by saying that we do not watch this one with the whole family. My two oldest boys will watch it with us this year. (My eldest watched it with us last year as well.) And, I skip a few scenes that add nothing to the story and are not

helpful to the minds of teenage boys. If you have seen the film, you know what scenes I am talking about. I realize that the film is a bit crude and rough around the edges. It's moments like these where I choose to discuss these things instead of hiding from them. I know not every parent sees it this way, and that is fine. Do what works for your family. For my kids, they are going to be exposed to coarse language and talk outside of my home, so pretending it doesn't exist won't do them any good. I would rather engage with them about it and show them a better way. While the Griswold family is a bit dysfunctional, particularly when you include the extended members, I think that is part of what makes this film so funny and enjoyable. We watch the film because it's funny and it reminds us of people in our extended family which makes it even funnier. Cousin Eddie alone makes it worth watching. If you are quietly judging me, jump down to the Super spiritual reason right now.

Super spiritual reason we watch: At the heart of the film is a man (Clark Griswold) who loves his family and wants to give them the best Christmas ever. That's actually something to celebrate.

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### **It's a Wonderful Life**

Why we watch it: This is one of my wife's favorite films of all time. We have yet to watch it with our kids. This is the year we finally take the plunge – at least with the two oldest boys. Our eldest son is 13 and our middle son is 12 so we hope they have the necessary attention span and maturity to handle an older film like this that approached pacing and style in a very different way than modern films. I truly hope they can look past the differences and see the heart of the



film.

Super spiritual reason we watch: Obviously, the spiritual stuff is hokey, but even so, it still has much to say about the importance and significance of every single human life. I'll cry at the end of the film as I always do.

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## Elf



Why we watch it: This one has become a family favorite and we watch it nearly every Christmas. It's great to have a modern film that is mostly clean and appropriate for all ages. Plus, Buddy the Elf is one of the great comedy characters ever invented. I am not a huge Will Ferrell fan, but he was perfect for this role, bringing an innocence and joy for life that makes the whole film a treat to watch.

Super spiritual reason we watch: Actually, this one has many reasons: Joy for life. Love of family. Seeing the best in other people. These are all practical lessons we should take to heart after watching *Elf*.

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Many other films have made appearances in our Christmas film rotation: *Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, *The Polar Express*, *Frosty the Snowman*, *A Christmas Story*, *The Santa Clause*, and many others.

There really is no wrong answer here, unless of course you watch *The Christmas Shoes*. Just talk to your kids, or if you have no kids, talk to your spouse, and if you are without a spouse, talk to yourself. Figure out what you want to watch,

why you want to watch it, and get started. You only have 23 more days until Christmas after all.

I would love to know if you do this sort of thing as well and what films you will be watching this year with your family or friends. Please tell us about it in the comment section below.