

Perhaps the hardest thing in the life of a parent is dealing with the changes that life brings as their child ages. One moment, you are playing games and watching Sesame Street, and then not too long afterwards as a child ages, a parent realizes how their child is now becoming a woman or a man, and that they can't do everything for them anymore. But at the same time, a wise parent also realizes that there comes a time when they also have to let go, and let their child spread their wings, but also make mistakes, as they try find their way in life. And truth be told, this could also apply to other relationships like our friendships. We may see the right path to go and the right decisions to be made, but we can't force these on people - they have to learn. And whether it is our children, another family member or a friend who fails, hopefully on our part we are patient and also there for them to help them learn from the mistakes made.

Julie Garmon, a mom and writer, writes about how she had to learn this as her son aged. But with some wisdom from her husband, she also learned that with patience, things would have a way of working out, and that while her son might be changing, it didn't mean that the love she had given him was forgotten.

In her words, she recalls her son Thomas one summer, having just had an injury in football. He had a broken left leg propped on pillows.

His entire leg was wrapped in a soft cast, the bones near the ankle fractured during August football practice. Exactly what she had warned him about.

Glued to his hands was a video-game controller, the one he'd grabbed as soon as they came home from the doctor's office the day before. How long had he played that thing she thought. Well, at least he'd be hungry.

"How's the leg feeling this morning?" Julie asked. "I brought you a protein shake for breakfast—with a curly straw. Remember how you used to love those?"

"Uh-huh," he grunted, his fingers madly directing baseball players across the TV screen. "How 'bout a waffle too?" she said. "They have calcium in them."

Thomas didn't take his eyes off his TV, as if Julie weren't even in the room. "Thanks, Mom, but I'm not hungry. And I don't use curly straws anymore," he said.

"I just thought it'd cheer you up," Julie said. "It can't be fun having a broken leg. But you have to keep your appetite up if you want it to heal. I'm your mom. That's what moms do—take care of their kids."

Thomas shook his head, still not looking at her. "I'm fine, Mom. Really."

Julie walked up the stairs and looked back at Thomas. Even with a broken leg he didn't want her help. "Doesn't he even want me to be his mom anymore?" she wondered. It was a question that increasingly tormented her.

Okay, so Thomas was growing up, but “what had happened to my baby, the sweet boy I’d prayed so hard for” she ruminated.

Julie thought back to when he was little. They used to do everything together. He would hold her hand on nature walks, the paths slippery with moss. She made him shakes. She could picture him slurping one through a curly straw. Sitting at the table with his shake he shared secrets with her, like which Matchbox car was his favorite. He was crazy about his collection.

It all seemed to change the day he turned 15. It was like Julie contracted the plague. She was the last person he wanted to be around. He certainly stopped asking her advice. And look what happened! She’d told him (and his dad, Rick) football was dangerous. But he wanted to play. How, she thought, could I get him to understand he still needed me?

All day he never called her for anything. When she brought him supper he mumbled, “Thanks,” his eyes never leaving the TV. Julie stood waiting, thinking he might say more. But nothing came and she trudged upstairs to eat dinner with Rick. “What is wrong with that boy?” she cried.

“He’s a teenager,” Rick said. “Both of the girls went through it.”

“He’s pushing me away. Why? I don’t know how to be his mom anymore, but I need to be his mom. And he needs me!”

“Give him some space. That’s what he needs now,” Rick said. “He’s almost a man.” Julie frowned. Rick didn’t understand. He and Thomas got along great.

A couple of weeks later Thomas was back at school in a cast. It felt too soon. Julie talked him into letting her drive him to school, but he refused to let her carry his backpack to class.

He hopped on his good leg, slung the pack over his shoulder and grabbed his crutches. “I’m not a baby,” he said before hobbling toward the building. “But I’m still your mom,” Julie thought. Why won’t you let me help you?

With his friends, Thomas was different, animated, laughing easily. The most she could get out of him was a mumble, but he talked to them for hours about football and weight lifting. She noticed how the other boys respected his opinion.

“We used to talk like that,” Julie complained to Rick one February evening. “Now he never listens to me.”

“We have to let him make his own decisions,” he said. “He’s a smart kid. He’ll learn from his mistakes.”

“What if I let Thomas choose—and he chose to give me the cold shoulder the rest of our lives?” Julie thought to herself. She spent the rest of the evening depressed until, alone in the bedroom, she gave up and prayed. “God, please show me how to be the mom Thomas needs. Show me what to do. I’m totally lost here. I thought I knew how to be a good mom.”

Nothing changed until a few months later when they went to the doctor for a checkup. His cast removed, Thomas hurried down the hallway on his crutches. “He’s doing well,” the doctor said. “He can start using a cane—if he feels the need.”

“Are you sure he’s ready for that?” Julie asked, trying not to sound like she wanted Thomas to remain an invalid. She didn’t really want him to. But it dawned on her she needed Thomas more than he needed her...or needed to need her. As she puts it, “He was my baby and I was afraid to let go.”

Thomas came back into the room. “Feel this,” the doctor said, guiding her hand over where the bones had broken. Under the skin was a hard lump. “As the tissue grows back it makes the bone thicker, even stronger. The best thing to do is let nature take its course.”

Julie notes, “There was something curious about the way the doctor said: “let nature take it’s course”. Was he talking about Thomas’s leg or something else?” That night she flipped through the Bible.

The doctor’s words reminded her of a verse and she wasn’t going to sleep till she found it. She came to Ecclesiastes 3. “A right time to hold on and another to let go.” All those years she had spent holding Thomas’s hand she thought. Nourishing. Teaching. Protecting. She didn’t know any other way to be a mother.

A few days later she went to his bedroom armed with a single index card. She’d written in Magic Marker, “I’m so proud of you. I’m praying for you. I ♥ you. Mom.” That was all. She slipped the card under his pillow.

He never mentioned it. For all she knew he threw it away. It had been more for her benefit anyway, a way to tell him she loved him without getting in his way. Gradually, Julie started smiling more and stopped pushing so hard, stopped questioning his decisions. She bit her lip more.

One morning Julie watched Thomas in the kitchen getting ready to go to school. “I’m staying after school today. Weight lifting,” he said. He walked to his truck, tall and steady, without his cane. She wanted to tell him to take his cane, wanted to tell him he wasn’t ready for weight lifting yet. Instead though she said, “Thomas, I love you.” He looked over his shoulder at her. “Love you too, Mom.”

“What are you putting in those protein shakes?” her husband said. “You two seem like you’re connecting.” Julie smiled. How could she tell him what she’d learned—that sometimes the best way to hold on is not to hold on at all?

One Saturday morning in August, just before Thomas turned 18, Julie was putting away socks in his room. She came across a familiar card in the top drawer, tucked right beside his favorite childhood Matchbox car. She pulled it out.

There was the note she had written him. Julie traced the words with her finger. She went back upstairs. She heard laughter coming from the backyard. There were Thomas and Rick throwing a football. She couldn’t help but notice that Thomas was taller than his father.

Rick was right. Soon Julie reflected, they would have a new adult in their family. Yet in her heart, where all good things grow, he would always be her baby.

It’s something so many of us can relate to, especially those who are parents. But while a new parent might have everything planned that they want to do right and avoid, and have all these plans for their kids, what a wise parent realizes (and indeed any of us who want our relationships and friendships to grow) is that while you give people mercy and love and guidance, one also has to let go. And the father in our parable shows us how this is done.

Like Julie the father of the prodigal son loves his son deeply. How it must pain him to have his son come to him and say he wants to have his half of the estate and go off. But the father lets the younger son go, despite the fact that he knew the son would probably fail and suffer the consequences. But he doesn’t run after him. He lets him go. And when time goes by and he’s not home yet, he doesn’t go after him. He waits. And when he returns, there isn’t “I told you so.” The son suffered and returns on his own. The son expects to be a hired hand, but the father has other ideas. He gives him total forgiveness. In this parable, probably the most familiar in the Bible, there’s so much that guides us not just about parent-child relationships, but about all of our relationships with people as we try to help them along in life.

For one, we have to remind ourselves that each individual is unique. A child is not a clone of their parent. In fact, I was at a penance service recently as priests assist at a lot of parishes during Lent and Advent, and during the examination of conscience, one of the questions that people were invited to think about during the examine was “do I try to live my life and dreams through my child.” A newborn has no control; they rely on their parents for everything for the first part of their life. They are named, clothed and fed. But then that little child becomes their own unique individual with their own desires and interests, and a parent has to always balance what to do, what to be assertive in and what to let go. It changes as the years go by of course. I’d certainly counsel a parent to teach the faith to their child; to make Mass a priority even if a growing child didn’t want to go; to be willing to be the bad guy and say hey you have to do homework first before video games and we all have to do chores around the house, or to say sorry, you’re not

going to that party where there's alcohol. No parent can always be a best friend. But there are other things where a parent needs to respect the desires of a growing child. Take something as simple as a name. Remember last week, Moses asks God's name; God says I AM WHO AM sent you. Jews rarely speak the name though of God; its why we changed "Yahweh I know you are near" and don't use Yahweh anymore. A name gives you a lot of control over someone, but of course we can't control God. The point is maybe as a child ages they get a nickname or shorten a name or vice versa; William might like William or prefer Bill or Will or go back and forth. That's his decision as it's his name. A few more years go by and maybe Bill falls in love with football like Julie's son but his dad really loves the game of baseball which Bill has no interest in, but his dad says OK, if you really want to try this go for it. Or maybe he doesn't like sports at all but prefers board games. A few more years ago by and there's a college fund set up, but William, formerly Billy Will because his girlfriend really likes that name, discovers that he really has a talent for electrical work or rebuilding engines and has no interest in college but wants to go to a trade school. The point is that there's nothing wrong with a person choosing their name, their sports, their interests in life, their educational path as they age. It's about their individuality. It's a good thing. It's why friends compromise on where to go for dinner or what movie to see or where to vacation too. The two sons are very different in the Gospel, each has a lot of room for spiritual growth. But the father does not force himself on either one. A parents and all of our jobs as Christians is to evangelize; to teach the faith, to put people in the right direction, but also to respect their freedom of choice and let them discover their gifts and talents. A lot of that isn't even about moral decisions, but about just everyday decisions as a person tries to find out who they are and what they want to do.

However, let's face it. Most parents aren't going to force their child to eat strawberry ice cream if they prefer chocolate, or mandate they go to particular college that the parent has chosen. But what do you do when you see your child making a bad decision morally? What do you do when your friend starts making bad moral decisions or no longer going to Mass? Jessica Lacy who writes for the New York Times, in writing for Psychology Today, says: *"By not allowing children to falter or experience disappointment, you render them helpless—the precise opposite of what most parents hope to achieve."* In her book, ***The Gift of Failure: How the Best Parents Learn to Let Go So Their Children Can Succeed*** she writes, *"today's overprotective, failure avoidant parenting style has undermined the competence, independence, and academic potential of an entire generation."* That could be quite true. And the prodigal son's father gets that. Obviously when you have a child, you aren't going to let an 13 year old get in a car and drive just so they'll learn a lesson. Nor will a parent say to a child who says "school is too hard this year, I don't like this subject, I'm just going to fail and play video games instead," a good parent would probably say in that situation no video games until you've finished your homework, but let's try and tackle it together. And a parent needs to lay down the law on a lot of things. But it can be so painful to see a child make a bad decision, or an adult child stop going to Mass. The well-meaning parent can want to fix everything. But you can't do that always. You can, and should, certainly give your opinion on why you feel so strongly about something, such as why living the faith matters so much, or if it seems they are really making a bad decision. But

there comes a time to let go. Letting go is not abandoning. It is realizing that we cannot do for others what they need to do for themselves. And it's a process. Letting go is respecting another enough to let him or her be free to make choices. Parents need to provide guidance, with increasing freedom and responsibilities as children get older.

For example, a parent can force a teen to go to Mass every Sunday, but the first chance they get to make their own decision, they will skip Mass if it is not a value for them. As with the prodigal son, it takes time for sons and daughters to appreciate the counsel and values of their parents. When we let go, we can still: 1) listen actively with empathy; 2) confront with love, not with shame, 3) encourage but not demand or try to manipulate a desired outcome, 4) set boundaries in our own home, and finally love persons without supporting all their choices. Again, letting go isn't just giving up - it still means being involved, talking things through, but ultimately not forcing an outcome.

Lastly, while we can't fix people instantly, we need to strive to be like the father and be there for them when they begin to see the light. The father in the Gospel story doesn't berate his son for his bad decision. He simply shows him love. Whether it's with a child or a friend, there may come a point where they realize that they messed up or let you down. Talk through what happened. Pray with them. Offer to be with them on their journey once they have found the right path to travel. Don't bring up the past as a way to win future arguments. Help them to become the person they are trying to become, namely a saint.

My parents have done so much for me over the years, and as I look back on all the years I've known them, I think two moments that taught me so much. The first was when I was about 6 or so and learning to ride a bike without training wheels. They took me to a trail and I remember having such a hard time keeping the bike straight and falling again and again. Finally though I got it right and stopped falling down. The point was they let me fall because they knew I'd find something better to enjoy than a bike with training wheels, namely a bike that could go faster and begin to keep up with them on their bikes. The second was when I was in high school. I remember my dad saying to me once that he didn't care what path I chose, so long as I was happy in my future profession and he'd support me. And indeed they have as with the help of the Holy Spirit I've tried to sort it all out.

Life is complicated. We as human beings, are screw ups. But God loves us any way, because he sees our potential. We fail Him, and we also fail one another. But we also come to see that free will, while we can misuse it, is such a great gift, because God doesn't just create a saint. Hopefully on our part we see with greater clarity how to do that and to return to the Father like the younger brother, but also as we try to help others to do the same remember that the process takes time. Falling off a bike wasn't much fun. But though that, I learned to ride just fine. And looking back on some of my decisions, there were many times I've fallen too. But through the grace of God and the wisdom of both Him and the people who have filled my life, I've learned so much and continue to learn more each day from both what goes right and what goes wrong. Inevitably, there will be more mistakes made because I am a human. But I truly believe

that from them can also come so much spiritual growth too. So lets believe in ourselves and seek out God's mercy always by not getting high on our horse but remembering we are sinners, and also remembering that sometimes when we and those we love fail, ultimately we can learn so much through the process about what it takes to become a saint.