

The Burden of Eldest Child

Each family has a child who is eldest. For *only children* it is part and parcel with being “the child.” In large families it is handed down as a mantle from the child above that is leaving home to the next who is still resident. As I awoke this morning these very words were coursing through my mind. With this mantle comes a certain set of responsibility and accountability with which the kid may or may not be comfortable, yet come it does.

It introduces a period of time wherein the transition from child to peer should logically take place. In some cases it introduces a period of time where the burden for the Parent /child relationship’s success or failure becomes the child’s responsibility. This is not the counsel you will hear anywhere else, but I believe it to be so.

I feel that the eldest child makes all of the decisions whether their final years at home are good or bad. For some this new work or this new test comes easily. For many the child in them will not back away and allow them to be clear-headed and step up to the plate to do their job. I have spoken to disgruntled, and upset seniors and juniors by the score whose home life is getting worse and whose happiness is limited because of a misunderstanding of this new dynamic.

Adults in your life are not likely to change. This is the first truth in this transition period that you must be willing to accept. You still can and will change. In fact although in your pride you may feel that you *are who you will be*, if this is true you will be scoffed at by your peers in college for being a “high-schooler” with adolescent ideas, and you will a joke in the workplace for being a virtual social infant. No, you are all about change for the next five to ten years. This will sweep through your life again and again as your social, academic, familial and professional landscape shifts at alarming pace. Yet you are wired for change. And like most all people your age it will seem neither difficult nor troubling to experience.

Some of these changes like the shift from “one of the pack” to eldest are partly reflexive and partly intentional on the part of the mantle bearer. If you are progressively more unhappy because you are being treated “like a child” you must recognize that your role as “child” is inviolate and sacred in the house. It is not a shame or even necessarily accurate that you are a kid still. If it is so by the time you are ready to move out you will change a dozen times. During each of these changes your “role” as child is an honored role. Your parents may or may not be aware that you are years to months away from an entirely different role. (Logically of course they do, but often times it is my experience that they have so little experience with you as a peer and so much experience with you as the kid that they don’t even see that this time is coming to an

end.) Regardless, it is incumbent on you to make the final months and years of your experience at home a success.

I have heard many students tell me “Mom doesn’t even let me do _____,” fill in the blank. Almost all kids in this transition period have a gripe. Is it true, what they are worried about? Probably so. Will Mom or Dad change? Probably not. Should they? Not even a reasonable question. It is not your job to decide if they should be someone else. Deal with reality, you are who you are, and where you are, and when you are. The truth is something that only dolt offspring realize late: you owe these dull uninspired adults that you call your parents your entire life. Every single minute of it is owed to them, every single joy from the first bike ride to your first sneaked cigarette out in the backyard is owed to the co-authors of your biology: your parents. Many a nitwit writes this off with the words “yeah, well OK but that was then and this is now.” Children only feel that way because they are children. Truth is this was an investment of their entire life. For many it is the only investment that they really care about in their entire life. Your successes and failures and decisions do not affect you alone and only the stupid think that this is so. *(Yes, you will go off and find your own way and make your own choices, etc... You will always possess an awareness of your family’s opinions, but decisions will still be largely yours to make. In the future your family will serve only as a backdrop for further choice, not as the main catalyst and certainly not as dictator. But that is still the future.)* It is critical that the exiting years are driven by the kid realizing several facts:

- Parents will probably not change.
- Changing them is not your job.
- Although you feel you often have more insight than they have, this makes you neither right nor boss.
- Peace and happiness at home is more often than not dictated by your actions and attitude.

Eldest children may feel that they should have their boundaries expanded. The concept is so common it is almost not worth visiting. This discussion will be had dozens of times. It is up to the child to recognize that a discussion becomes a disagreement only when they will not defer to the parents to whom deferring used to be their reflex. Now they realize that they no longer tend towards deference to their parents. A reasonable trend and new instinct. Of course you feel this way. Who wouldn’t? Who didn’t? This is a scenario that is dictated by your biology, not your brain. Lion cubs, gazelle and a thousand episodes of daytime television outline this dynamic. It is cliché at best. If you fall for it you are an idiot. We are more than instinct followers. We are thinking and, more importantly, loving individuals who must consider the big picture. That picture is that you will be in your home for months or years to come, ONLY. You live with people for whom you know you have lost objectivity. But inside you know that you love these people, that you owe them a debt you will never repay, and you do not want these closing months to be a miserable existence with them—for your sake or theirs.

Eldest children feel their ideas are not respected. So? This is typical. It is not the fault of your parents that they do not always see your point.

- Sometimes you are very right and they are very wrong.
- Sometimes you are more right than they are, but it's a close call.
- Sometimes you have felt right only to agree later that they were.
- Sometimes you knew you were wrong and just wanted to fight to be ugly.
- Most times neither is right or wrong, although it does not feel that way, and you just have different opinions.

It is up to you to stop disagreement from becoming the defining communication in the house. Right or wrong you want respect and you will get it. Later. You must settle for love now and know that the honor you want you already possess. You are just the most important thing in your parents lives even if you don't hear it all of the time. If you did you would hate that too. It is not that they don't say that enough. After all you're a bright kid you know that they love you...

“Yeah, yeah, that's not the problem... It's that they don't _____,” fill in the blank. “I want more respect in this way or that way”.

Well whining will not make it so. Fighting will not make it so. You already are honored. Your parents would die for you in a second. In half a second. They would give you their lung or their heart and you know it. If this is not enough then what kind of person are you?

You do not write the script for the entire family, but for yourself. It is your part of that script that dictates or mitigates conflict. You do not chart the extent of your own boundaries or how you are treated. Your response to these lines and your treatment can become the ongoing wound that will not heal because you will not leave it alone. Although not the rule maker, you are, nonetheless, the keeper of the peace in your home. You are now called upon to carry a large burden as mantle bearer and to think of the greater good in the home. Only idiot children think that life is about getting their own way. Life is about much more than being in charge of the remote. You have a very, very short time left at home. The MOST remembered and maybe the most memorable months of this part of your life are about to transpire. It is up to you to make these good. You must find ways of placating your parents and siblings. You must think less of *you now* and more of *you in the long run* and see how you can help and how you can serve others. We all have all seen the exceptions to this: kids who were spoiled and ungrateful and rebellious in the face of great sacrifice by their parents. WE have all seen this because we have all been this. At six years old it is not a shame. They are not self-aware. At nine it is a lesson to be learned. As the mantle of eldest is put upon your shoulders it is time to put away childish things. You have been given much and much is now required.

Teens can be deceptive. They can do this and never be caught. We have all seen this as well. They can live lives that are an insult and a joke to what their parents intended. We have all seen this at one time or another. Our worth as people is not what we do in front of a church or the class or people we want to impress. Our measure is taken by how we behave when we can do what we will, how we respond when we could lie, when tempted to think of ourselves of whom do we think? It is up to you to write your character on the board that your parents have provided. You have a short time remaining where you are and you have responsibilities that far outweigh your desire to win arguments, get your own way and think of yourself first. Make these last months good ones. Step up to the plate and think about how you can make life at home better. Like them or not your family will be around for the rest of your life and you have the responsibility of making this a great time in your family's life.