

Leaving Childhood

The day finally arrived when Mrs. Keokuk and I made the journey to the University of Illinois to deliver our first born child to college. Our son John (a.k.a Flying Fish of the Mighty Arapaho Guides) was now a college freshman. Thank goodness! Although we hated to see him go, it was clear he had to leave the nest. For his part he was cantankerous and edgy, part man and part boy, and now, as we unloaded his boxed up life at his college dorm, he was anxious and ready to be on his own.

My wife, Barb and I, and our second son Tom, helped John unpack. But all the while John kept asking, "Why are you still here?" So, we left his dorm room, grabbed a quick dinner and then, dropped him curbside at his dormitory. John promptly exited the van and said, "See 'ya." His mom nearly tackled him just to say good bye properly. After a rushed moment, we drove away with Tom complaining about helping to move his brother, and asking if he could he now have John's room at home. I told Tom to comfort his mom who was quietly crying. Although Barb wondered why she was in tears, because, she was sure, she said, that our home in La Grange would be more peaceful without the big kid. What a day of mixed emotions: a strange blend of sadness and celebration.

After one week of classes John realized that he needed his bicycle. My former little boy, now at college, needs his two wheeler. Barb and I received an email from John that simply read: "Fetch me my bike!" After an exchange of emails and phone calls with our newly emancipated son regarding how to communicate with courtesy, my wife and I took another Saturday, with our youngest child Katie, and headed south to U of I.

We deliver John his bike. He is surprisingly grateful. John hops on his bicycle and peddles down the driveway, into the street, and out of sight to park it behind the dorm. My mind swims deep into memory. I see John as a little five year old boy riding his brand new, red, two-wheel bike. It's his birthday, the bike was the present and John is wheeling through the house, making tight turns around the dining room table and off through the hall into the living room. He is free, speedy and self-propelled. In my mind's eye, I see John growing taller and older with every turn of the wheels, zooming through childhood, speeding through events, campouts, holidays, birthdays, and there is nothing I can do to stop it. Suddenly a man's voice breaks me from my thoughts. It's John. "Hey dad, thanks for bringing my bike. Now how about lunch? There's a good pancake place by the engineering quad. What do you say?"

So for lunch we eat breakfast, and John talks to us. He is truly happy to be at college. He belongs here with all the science labs, math courses, the names of which I can't understand, super computers, engineering classes and 35,000 kids all his age. I am delighted for him. This is what we hope and aim for as parents. This is why we steady our little child on his two wheeler, tuck them into bed at night, nag them to eat right, and make good choices. This is why we pick them up when they fall, why we set them on the right path, why we lecture and cajole, plead and discipline, and above all spend time with them, in the hope that we give them enough strength of character to hop on their big bike and speed headlong into their own lives.

Back on the interstate and we are heading north to La Grange. My dearest friend, my wife, is weepy again. We've made this trip two weeks in a row. And now our youngest, Katie, a mere eleven years old, is chatting from the back seat, planning out her life. Enchanted with U of I, Katie, is talking about going to college and what dorm she'll live in and what she'll study. Barb cries a little more.

The corn fields blur past us as the afternoon sun lengthens the shadows on the road. I am content and satisfied. I miss my little boy, but I have delivered him to the edge of adulthood. We did so much together when he was young. I am glad for that and have no regrets. Although, when I look back on John as a kid, I think I might have relaxed a little bit more. When he wanted to stay up too late on campouts, or tracked dirt in the house, or destroyed electronics to see how they worked, or broke his bedroom window when his make-shift sword flew the wrong direction, I probably should have given him a little more slack. These are really trivial matters in the face of an all too brief and fleeting childhood. What's the point to fret over that which is part and parcel of raising kids?

So . . . when you're on your next campout, and you're tired upon waking on Sunday morning, and you wonder just how much more fun you can take, and how many more years of this great fun you will have to endure, remember this: It all comes to a screeching halt. Mark my words. You will wonder where the time went. So, please, relax, go with the flow of childhood and enjoy being a dad with young kids.

Peace,
John C. Lorenzen, Federation Chief Keokuk