

RUMBLINGS FROM CHIEF SILVER CLOUD

With help from an invisible hand

UNSEEN GUIDANCE

Today my family and I were busy putting away Christmas decorations. What a wonderful chore this has become. We've collected ornaments from everywhere we've been, events we've attended and special occasions we've celebrated. My son and daughter and my wife and I are all picking our sparkling keepsakes off of the dry tree. I hold my daughter and lift her up to remove ornaments hung high on the tree. My hands hold her steady as she plucks some of her favorite gems from the branches. My thoughts turn to all the times that I have held her, supported her, or reached out for her. Since the moment she was born, to this moment taking down Christmas, I have been her support.

One evening during snowy December, my daughter and I took our dog for a walk. We navigated the treacherous sidewalks packed with ice and snow. I was ready to catch her at the slightest misstep. I didn't hold her hand on that icy stroll, but I was at her side to support her, or to catch her if she began to fall. She must have known that I would catch her. She had to know from so many other times that my hands reached for her when life was unsteady. And now on this snowy walk, lit by all the twinkling lights of Christmas decorations strung on the houses of our neighborhood, my unseen guiding hands sustained our walk. My daughter knew, consciously or not, that she was safe to romp in the ice and snow because Dad was near.

Fathers with older kids tell me their invisible guiding hand is even more necessary and for things more complex than catching a falling child. Examples I've heard include: Attempting to pick up a teen from a school event, but quietly driving out of sight, and around the corner, when the teen to be chauffeured is seen joyfully ensconced in a good social group; An email, unknown to the child, sent to a teacher asking for motivational guidance and clues to academic performance; A quiet word to a potential after-school or summertime employer; Or a new set of freshly installed wiper blades, or a new set of jumpers cables thrown in the trunk of a college kid's car. And here is the biggie: paying college tuition. You would think a college son or daughter would drip with gratitude for this one. But that's not the point. Fathering is a mission. We serve up countless invisible favors and kindnesses, sometimes measured in mere degrees, small course corrections, but very necessary as our children slowly sail towards the destination of adulthood. Gratitude is just a bonus. Like divine intervention from the Great Spirit, we guide, direct and help the lives of the children we love so much.

Thinking about my own father, I'm still discovering how often he provided an invisible hand. I remember buying my first new car. As a young dude, just out of college, I needed no one's help. Although Dad directed me to a specific dealership, and to please him, I took his direction. But I negotiated the great purchase price and the great financing rate all on my own. As happy as I was with my styling new car, a little voice nagged me that this seamless auto purchase went way too smoothly. I dismissed the little voice. But I should have known, because years later, when Dad was in the market for some new wheels, I recalled buying my first new car.

"Well, Dad," I crowed, "I hope your car purchase goes as smoothly as the time I bought my first new car. But, you know, come to think of it, I've never had as good a deal as that first one." Dad laughed softly and looked towards the floor. Then it hit me!

“Dad? Did you have a hand in that purchase?” Dad reached towards me and gently touched my cheek. He winked and gave a confirming nod assuring me that he was the invisible guiding hand years ago in the purchase of my first new car. “It was my pleasure son,” Dad said quietly. Why didn’t he ever tell me? Then the light bulb flickered on in my head and I understood. Dad never mentioned his role in my first new car transaction because the joy of quietly helping our children is enough, in and of itself. Using the power of our invisible guiding hand, for the good of others, particularly our children, is its own reward.

Our Federation is full of good men like my father. I tried to explain this on New Year’s Eve to my wife and friends we were visiting. It was only 11:00 PM, I was already half asleep, and fighting the urge to simply doze off, when my good friend asked me, “So, hey! Tom. What’s it like to be Federation Chief?” My eyelids felt like two garage doors on their way down, but I managed a sleepy reply, “Invisible hands, lots of invisible hands.”

“Tom? Are you with me? Maybe it’s time to go home,” my buddy said as he quizzically peered at me wondering what the heck I was talking about. I woke up a bit and explained that an old guy named Adam Smith, from the 1700’s, the father of modern economics, wrote the book that all economists study. “An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations,” published in 1776. Yup! Adam Smith, the dusty old economist, was on my mind because he coined the phrase “the invisible hand.” I studied Smith in college and his words recently come back to me because the invisible hand is a great metaphor that applies perfectly to our Federation.

I explained to my friends that I am surrounded and supported by invisible hands. The mantle of being the Federation Chief was not the heavy burden I had expected. The reason is because we have great dads! Our program’s backbone is the Nation Chiefs. I am supported by the brightest and the best. We have a dad set to task on everything: running Guides, running Princesses, running Trailblazers, counting money, publishing the newsletter, lots of dads running our campouts and events. But the credit continues to our dedicated Tribal Chiefs and right on through to each individual member of every tribe, who in one form or another, contribute to the whole. The invisible hands of hundreds of good men all pulling in the same direction make the Prairie Trail Federation successful. My friends were impressed. Not with me or my words, but with the fact of so many dedicated fathers.

There is another aspect to Adam Smith’s invisible hand theory. It’s the notion of an unintended power born of a common market; that when people as a group decide what they want, there is a resulting invisible force, a synergy, (the invisible hand), that both results from and then drives a common purpose. The strength of our Federation is the invisible hand, the synergy, which is found in our common purpose. Each and every one of us joined this organization for the same, sole, loving purpose of father and child companionship. There are no drive-bys, where a kid is simply dropped off for an event and the parent leaves. Each dad and his child are involved every step of the way. With each dad having a stake in our program’s success, we all benefit. No matter how we got into this Federation (by design, by wife, by neighbor, or by accident) our collective interest in our children creates this enormous driving energy that guides us in all that we do, aiming us constantly in a positive, singular direction.

This is why our program, because of its synergy, seemingly runs itself, chugging along with tremendous momentum. Even though we have a wonderful partnership with the Greater La Grange YMCA, it’s not the Y that sets out our agenda or rules and regulations to make Guides,

Princesses and Trailblazers function. We do that! If the YMCA did not exist, our program would continue with the same zeal and excitement currently fueled by the drive train of our invisible hands. In fact, even without the Indian theme our program would thrive. Although the Indian Theme is here to stay, that theme, and the ribbons, the trinkets, the vests, the patches, the games, the great camps and all those things that enrich and enliven our mission are simply the end result of the underlying invisible hand receiving power from of our single purpose: the companionship of father and child. Yes, we love the Y and the Indian theme, and our vests and patches and camps and games, but it's because we enjoy these things with the first of our greatest loves, the love for our children. Everything else is secondary.

We all know the road to the lake at Camp Tecumseh. Picture that road in your mind. See it on a Fall Campout strewn with yellow and orange leaves. Imagine a father and child walking down that road hand in hand, talking and laughing. That image is our program in its purest and most genuine form. It is that simple act of a father and child spending time together that creates the tremendous power and synergy of our Federation. From that relationship springs everything that we are and that we do.

I ask each and every one of you to do two things for me:

First: Participate! If you are registered, then participate. Participate in the life of your tribe, in campouts and in events of the Federation. We have all hitched our horses to the same wagon of father and child companionship. If you're on board, then join in the synergy. Be part of the power of the invisible hand.

Second: After you participate for a time, become further involved. Take an active office or role in your Tribe, or step up to be Tribal Chief, or rise to the greatness of Nation Chief. Be part of the invisible guiding hands that run this organization and make me and all of us, look great.

So return now to where I started this story. My family and I are removing Christmas ornaments from the tree, each and every one a treasured bit of family history. I lower my daughter to the floor, after holding her up to reach the branches above. As she and I carefully wrap the ornaments in tissue paper and place them gently into their storage box, I feel a profound gratitude for my life, my family and all the invisible hands that support me and so many others around me. I am thankful for this great Federation and for my chance to serve as your leader. I am nothing more than your current servant, doing my level best, at the helm of this tremendous organization. We are driven by a power larger than me, larger than all of us. Our power and synergy comes from our common commitment to love our children, our dedication to fathering and our shared mission to simply enjoy being with our children.

A Blessed New Year to You and to all the recipients of your invisible guiding hands,

Tom Estey, Federation Chief 2007-2008