



We're All in the Same Boat

By Clark Powell

As the father of an eight year old boy, I understand and embrace the many roles I am expected to play. For example, at the dinner table I am expected to be the-eater-of-all-things good. However much it actually pains me, I will stab at the broccoli on my plate and chew it with exaggerated appreciation – throwing in a few facial contortions and “Mmmm!”s every third bite or so. While my wife will argue to the contrary, I think I play the role of good-eater pretty well.

But the role I really love is that of the coach. Whether it's teaching my son the graceful art of a pitcher's wind-up in baseball, or demonstrating the proper grip while throwing a football, in his eyes I am the authority. Never mind that I was a marginal player at best in every sport I ever played, in *his* eyes, I am an inspiration. I love that.

Recently, however, I found myself in a role that actually taught me something. We were at a fair and my son asked if we could ride one of those enormous boats that swings side-to-side. I don't know if you've seen them, but they are terrifying – at least to me. Two dozen people or so climb in the boat, half facing one way, the other half facing them. Then the boat begins to swing like a pendulum. It starts slowly, but soon you pick up speed and go higher and higher. After thirty seconds or so, we were flying. One moment the ship shoved us backwards so far that looking forward meant looking straight down. Then suddenly the boat swung the other way – leaving our screams and our stomachs high above us.

It was during one of these agonizing free falls that I opened my eyes long enough to notice my son looking at me. Great. Now I have to play the role of the brave father who isn't afraid of anything. So, dutifully, I smiled and mumbled through tightly clenched teeth: “Isn't this great?! Woo!” However forced and painful my reassurance, he bought it. I could see his face relax. Then he smiled back and yelled “Yeah! Awesome!”

After the ride we laughed and high-fived all the way to the cotton candy booth. While standing in line he asked me a brilliantly poignant question: “Dad? Were you scared?”

A lot of thoughts suddenly raced through my head. Immediately I wanted to say to him “No! Of course not! I'm brave and tough and you should admire and emulate me!” After all, I reasoned with myself, he looks up to you. He idolizes you. Heck, he's convinced the Yankees are *still* crazy for not having you on their team! If you admit that you were scared your reputation will forever be tarnished in his eyes.

With that in mind I knelt down beside him so I could be at eye level, put my hand on his shoulder and said: “I was scared to death!” He smiled uncontrollably, and through a boyish giggle he said “Really!? You were scared, too?!” “You bet I was” I said, “thanks for helping me get through that!”

It was then that I realized that, far from being tarnished, my reputation with my son had been bolstered. In addition to being a coach and a counselor and the eater-of-all-things good, my most important role in his life is to be human. That means allowing him to see me afraid and weak and vulnerable – and to see how I react. He needs to know that when he feels those things, he's not alone and his fear doesn't have to control him. He needs to know that no matter how big or little, we are all – quite literally in this case – in the same boat.

It was just a two minute ride at a weekend fair but hopefully the lessons we both learned that night will make us closer for the rest of our lives. We sat and ate our cotton candy and reveled in our bravery a little while longer. When he had finished, my son looked at me and grinned with a mouth that was stained bright blue. “Let's do it again!” he said.