

Living Up to Your Parents' Expectations

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All of us—whether eight years old, or eighty—are weighed down by our parents' expectations. Like Simba.

Simba is the name of the cute lion prince in *The Lion King*. For the older folks here, who have not seen it, the *Lion King's* plot is a bit like Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. A good wise king (Mufasa) is killed by his evil brother (Scar). The good young son (Simba) doesn't know what to do. In Simba's case, feeling guilty, he runs away. But since this is a Disney film, it has a happier ending than *Hamlet*.

Today I want to focus on just one image from this movie, but first we'll watch the scene in which it occurs. It happens before Mufasa is murdered. Prince Simba and his friend Nala have visited the Elephant Graveyard. Their parents had said this graveyard was strictly off limits. While there, Hyenas attack the two little lions. Just when it looks like it's all over for Simba and Nala, King Mufasa shows up and saves them. Still, Simba has disobeyed his father. So his father is angry. Watch.

Movie Scene

<http://tinyurl.com/j3wczmj>

There is a lot more to the movie. We'll leave that for next week and the week after. Today, I want to focus on just one image taken from the scene we just watched—little Simba's tiny paw in the huge pawprint of his father, King Mufasa. See that?



Will Simba ever be able to fill his father's—or mother's—shoes? Will he ever measure up to their expectations?

Living with our parents' expectations, whether our parents are dead and in the stars, or alive and just a phone call or text message away, can be very tough. What our parents want and tell us to do and hope for—what our parents want from us weighs on us, all the time. Will we ever measure up?

Still, sometimes those expectations are good. For example, I remember one time when my family—five kids—and another family—four more kids—were camping together in Nova Scotia. I was the biggest kid. I was sixteen and had a driver's license. I felt like the big man on campus. Anyway, one day, as I was driving, I let an eight-year-old girl from the other family sit

on my lap and steer the car while I worked the pedals. We immediately crashed into a ditch and I smashed up the car's whole front end.

Then, like an idiot, I told the girl not to tell her parents what really happened. I told her to say nothing about how she was behind the wheel. But, like George Washington, that little girl could not tell a lie, and that night she told her parents everything. I was caught.

I'll never forget talking to my dad about it the next morning. He didn't say much, but he did look at me in that same stern, sad way that The Lion King looked at Simba. His eyes went right to my heart and tore it apart. Like Simba, I felt very, very small. I felt very, very bad. Not only did I lie, but I put a whole car full of kids in danger. Worse, I let my parents down. My shame overwhelmed me.

Still, in that case, my parents' expectations for me were right on. I should not have lied.

But sometimes what parents expect of us can be way more complicated. Let me tell you another true story. My father was an immigrant who couldn't afford college. So, after he married, he went to night school. He earned a business certificate. Later he taught high school.

But my dad really wanted to be a minister. So into his thirties and forties he took courses at York University and summer courses at a seminary. Eventually a few churches asked him to preach. He turned out to be good at it. Finally, even though he never graduated, one church asked him to be their full-time minister, just a few years before he died. Against great odds, my dad achieved his life-long dream.

But my dad's dream wasn't just his personal dream. You see, he dreamed that I would become a minister too. He never said so, or only rarely, but I knew it deep in my bones. He wanted me to be a regular minister with a proper education, a minister who wasn't held back by English as a second language. And I did what my dad wanted. I sensed his expectations, they weighed heavily on me, and I tried to meet them. His expectations were huge paw prints in the sand that I couldn't miss, even though he never expressed them in so many words.

Now, I don't really regret becoming a minister. I've enjoyed my career. Looking back, though, I also see that other careers might have been even better for me—working on ancient human bones, for example, as a paleoanthropologist. Or, maybe, University teaching. Or, maybe owning a nice little cigar shop. But it is complicated. The thing is, I loved my dad. He was good and kind and fair. I wanted to please him for those reasons, to make him happy, and so even though I wasn't aware of it, I let my dad's unspoken expectations, which were deeply felt by me, lead me into the pulpit. I became a minister.

All of us, whether we are eight or eighty, live with those kind of mighty paw prints in the sand. And it's okay, it's unavoidable, it's human. The thing is, ultimately, all of us have to make our own decisions about what really matters in life. We all have to decide what we will do when we grow up, what kind of person we'll be, what matters most to us—maybe neighbours, maybe

money, maybe fame. All of us have to make our own important decisions about what really matters in life. But at the same time, our parents, as well as our teachers or friends, will have their own expectations for us. They may tell us what they want to do, or just hint at it. So what will you decide? How will you decide? How will you weigh your parents' expectations when it comes to your own dreams?

This is important. If you are young, get to know your hopes and dreams. Take time to really consider what you love to do, and what you are good at. Try stuff. Imagine stuff. Consider your parents', or your teachers', or your friends' advice carefully, but, in the end, make up your own mind. Don't fall into something just because it is expected. Remember, the be-all and end-all of life is not merely pleasing your parents as much as you can, or earning as much money as possible. No, as Frederick Buechner once put it, "the place God calls you to is where your deepest gladness and the world's deepest hunger meet."

If you are older, like me, you will eventually realize that some of the most important decisions you made in your life were decisions made because of expectations placed on you that you might never have been aware of. You tried to fill paw prints that didn't fit, and you didn't even realize it. You did as you were expected, but now you feel sad, or diminished, or angry. What can I say?

It is unlikely that your parents meant to do this to you. But even if they did, out of ignorance or stubbornness or because they thought they knew what was best for you, try to forgive them. And now, no matter what age your kids are, to the degree you are able, don't make their meeting your expectations in all things the price your kids have to pay for your love and acceptance.

When it comes to putting too many expectations on our kids, whether they are career expectations, or visiting expectations, marriage expectations, or even financial expectations, remember what the Apostle Paul says. *Love does not insist on its own way.* Sure, that's a tough standard, but it is the right standard.

For Christians, there are two other things worth keeping in mind. First, living as a follower of Jesus involves divine expectations. Our scripture reading suggested that we should try to obey our parents and we should be gentle with our kids—not provoke them to anger. More generally, as followers of Jesus we are challenged to love your neighbour, seek justice, and embrace mercy. Jesus is our model, but the shoes of the fisherman are the very most difficult to fill. Following Jesus can easily make us all feel inadequate, sad, confused, or angry with ourselves or the church. There are many ways in which the demands of following Jesus feel a lot like the demands and expectations parents put on us.

But the second thing to remember is that if we decide to follow in Jesus' way, failure, while not encouraged, is always forgiven. How and why is a great cosmic mystery. Still, at the heart of the church is the belief that when we do fail, the divine encourages us not only to admit it, but to try again, joyfully rather than with crippling regrets.

In conclusion, Simba had a hard time living up to King Mufasa's expectations. We all demand too much of our kids, and we all fail to live up to our parents' expectations. We have to make the best of it. But the bottom line is that it isn't our parent's paw prints that are most important. Once again, to quote Frederick Buechner, "the place God calls you to is where your deepest gladness and the world's deepest hunger meet."