

Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear, not absence of fear

- Mark Twain

Two steps forward, one step back; two steps forward, one step back; two steps forward, one step back. That seems to be our world since the day our son, Ian was born. You struggle ahead two steps, then have something happen that drags you backward. Medical issues, school issues, social issues, whatever; it does not matter because the pattern is in place. Two steps forward, one step back.

The big thing about this never-ending process is that it seems to run two steps forward to only one step back. I guess that is progress. For those of you who don't know Ian, he is now 20 (From my perspective that is scary enough – what happened to the time?). He is deaf, and has choreoathetoid cerebral palsy. He was a preemie, and had to overcome a lot of issues. From his first day, two steps forward, one step back. That perseverance has taught him (and us) many things. He does not quit. He keeps plugging away. He is an Eagle Scout. He graduated high school with a standard diploma and is now in his 2nd year at the local community college in their computer science program. He wasn't supposed to walk, but ran track in high school. Two steps forward, one step back....

Oh, and he has had his driver's license for about 3 years now and, according to reports from friends and spies I have across town, is actually a pretty good driver. Here is where we come to my current two steps forward and one step back.

I am a reforming helicopter parent. I work hard at NOT hovering. I work hard at giving space and independence and freedom. Staying away from chocolate is easier for me that fighting the urge to hover. Right now my wife is ready to send me into a helicopter parent 12-step program. You see, while Ian is rolling ahead, I just had a 'one step back' week.

Ian was in a 'minor' car accident last week. Nothing major. No ambulances, no big disasters, but one of those fender-benders that you see all the time on the roads. He is fine. His 1991 Pontiac is having some bumper work done and a headlight replaced.

Dad, on the other hand, is on the verge of a full, irrational, structural collapse. You see, I have regressed about 6 to 8 months mentally in my comfort levels concerning his independence. This is my step back.

You see, tomorrow he will hit the road again – by himself – to college for his classes. And I am on the verge of an existential meltdown of global proportions with worry. I am fighting the dark side of overprotectedness. I keep waiting to see some guy in a black helmet and cape with James Earl Jones' voice in my dreams go "Mark, I am your father" and urging me to join him on the dark side.

My rational side keeps telling me that I know he is a good driver. It keeps telling me (truthfully) that the accident was one of those 'normal' things. It also keeps telling me that with all freedom and all independence, and all of life there is risk. This is part of it.

My irrational side has come up with two solutions. One is to lock Ian in his room (he has a shower and bath attached to his bedroom) and never let him out. Cut a hole in the door and slide his food through it to him. That way he will be safe forever. The other is to move the family to a small town I know of that has about 500 people living in it in Montana, where 2 cars at the town stoplight is a traffic jam, and live there away from many of the current threats to safety that exist in my sphere of the world. I can deal with wildlife out there – they don't drive cars.

Neither of these solutions is particularly rational, and neither of them does Ian any good or, in the long run, do any of us any good. My wife, being the calm, practical one, just looks at me and shakes her head when I bring these ideas up.

So what will I do? I guess tomorrow I will swallow my butterflies, watch the clock intently, wait for the text that tells me Ian has arrived at school safely, swallow back any sense of rising panic, and lose a little bit more of the few hairs I have left. I will do the rational thing, and the hard thing, and allow him his freedom and his independence. All I know is that it was so much easier when I was going through these kinds of things with my dad. I guess so much of it is what side of the prism you are looking through. Oh, how I wish that the easy thing and the right thing were one and the same. Isn't it odd how so often in life the right decision winds up being the hard decision?

So tomorrow, as Ian moves on with his life and his independence, I'll try and take back one of those steps, and start getting ready to take that second step back into the future. Two steps forward, one step back. Two steps forward, one step back. Two steps forward, one step back....