

A Father's Dilemma: Staying vs. Fixing

"I was a broken child and dealt with things no child should have to go through. When many men would have run, he stayed. He stayed and led me through my own personal hell, and he never strayed." –Rachel

My 22-year-old daughter, Rachel, wrote those sentences this month as part of an essay for her college social sciences class. The essay started with the sentence: *"The leader I admire the most is my father."*

What father wouldn't want to hear that from his little girl?

I can assure you there were plenty of times over the years that I acted in ways that weren't admirable. As a Christ follower, I clung to the Bible verse that says, "Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all sins" (Prov. 10:12). I believed that I always was parenting my two girls, Rachel and Laura, out of love. I still think that's mostly true, but to pretend I didn't act out of selfishness at times would be just that: pretending.

So, starting from the premise that I did not always act admirably, I asked myself: *What did I do to deserve this kind of grace and love from my daughter?*

I stayed.

Staying is such a boring verb, isn't it? We want to be more than stayers. As dads to daughters, we want to be heroic, larger than life, wise beyond our years. Most of all, we want to be able to fix things in our girls' lives.

As men, fixing is so much more appealing than just about anything else, right? As far as being a handyman, I am lousy.

I can't fix anything around the house or on my car.

But I want to fix problems. I've wanted to fix my daughters, fix my wife, fix the neighbors (who most assuredly need fixing), and fix my waistline and my hairline. It's what we men do the best. (Not fixing things, but *wanting* to fix things.)

Here's the rub, though: I am unqualified, unequipped and not called on by God to fix these people or relationships. Never. I am called to stay in the arena of their lives, to be present, to be salt and light but not to fix. *And neither are you.*

Failing to fix the ones in our lives we nobly want to fix simply leaves us exasperated and anxious. And little by little, anxiety can kill us.

I've been talking to men more recently about their anxieties and about mine. I've always thought I was a uniquely anxious man with a uniquely anxious family that needed fixing. But I'm not. *And neither are you.*

Regardless, I tried to fix Rachel. I was pretty sure she needed some well-intentioned tinkering. She had a severe anxiety disorder, one that is much better now, but it probably will always be a thorn in her side.

In middle school she began having panic attacks. She became afraid to leave the house and afraid to be far away from me. I didn't select the role of being Rachel's emotional rock. My wife, Jane, didn't ask for the role of being her logistical rock, either, or being the fierce advocate for her in school.

These were the roles Rachel assigned to us.

I became obsessed with my role, to the point of being an "enabler." *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines enabler as:

"A person or thing that makes something possible." I guess you could say that being her emotional rock became my identity. My happiness and well-being were dependent on Rachel's happiness and well-being. What a horrible burden to cast upon her. What a ridiculous expectation.

Somewhere along the way, even though I knew better, I became convinced that God was calling me to become all things to Rachel. I was to be her rock, to find a way to cure/fix her, to not rest until she rested, and to carry the burden of knowing that if I failed, she'd wither on the vine and eventually slide into an inescapable shell.

I've never heard God speak audibly to me. I tend to look at people funny who say they've experienced that, though who am I to judge? But I did get a clear sense that in my spirit, God was lovingly whispering to me:

"Hey, my beloved knucklehead. What are you doing to yourself? I've got this. I called you to stay, not be her god. Stay. Stay in her life. Stay in the arena of battle, but only to hold her close, not to win the fight for her emotional well-being."

Or something like that. The Bible urges us to cast our burdens upon God and to rest in Him. I was not even close to doing either of those.

But I stayed, not only physically, but emotionally and spiritually, as well.

Men, staying was my calling. Yet I wanted a nobler calling. As it turns out, it was plenty noble.

For a dad as flawed as I was and still am, one prone to watching too much TV, who thinks he is funnier than he probably is, and who occasionally says the exact wrong thing at the exact worst time, *staying was enough to have my daughter call me her hero.*

I bet it might be for you and your daughter too.

William Sanders spent 20 years as a writer and editor at daily newspapers, the last 12 at the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. He readily admits to his flaws. His wife, Jane, and his two (almost) grown daughters, attest to that, but they love him well despite those flaws. William chooses Jesus over religion, grace over law, and the kind of love that covers a multitude of sins over the right to be right. William and his family live in Atlanta. His memoir, *Staying: A Multi-Generational Memoir of Rescue and Restoration*, is available on Amazon, or through his website .

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