

Prodigal Sons and Daughters

Written by By Tom Hartsock Gallup Sun Correspondent
Friday, 18 September 2015 08:16



It occurred to me this week while working on this column that the best reference for writing may well be the Bible. What other work has such a large volume of stories and parables as this ancient text? Whether you believe it or not – I do – the various books represent a very wide array of history, proverbs, and common sense themes. Sunday School last Sunday was a fine example, at least for me.

In the Book of Luke, Chapter 15, you can find three parables in 28 short verses, the first two contain only seven verses. The third parable, and the best known, is more detailed. In these parables, Jesus was talking about 'lost' things in a Biblical sense, with no mention of sports or extracurricular activity. But there is a correlation to our continuing topic of coaches, good and bad, if your mind is nimble enough.

Our topic continues with coaches and parents, who firmly believe their players or children should only follow the path they have had laid out for them and not be allowed to wander from this single road of opportunity. Like lost kids. OK, that may be a stretch, but keep that thought uppermost.

This philosophy reverts to earlier years in the history of humankind, where men raised sons in the same profession and wives trained daughters to be just like them. As the human race evolved from hunters/gatherers to metro-sophisticates, it has become a point of disagreement today among mentors and their students.

Coaches want players to concentrate on only one sport; parents want every child to get straight A's and finish college with a meaningful degree. The athletes are expected to use those talents to become professionals; the academic whizzes to shatter glass ceilings in their meteoric rise to the top.

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Sometimes the innate nature of the young becomes the deciding factor, though. In today's society we often call this factor 'burnout'. It is also known as 'oppositional defiance' in some cases, but the more simple 'prodigal' is seldom mentioned. Being lost is not something we ever want to admit. By any tag, these factors are aided and abetted by very normal and usual things discussed two issues ago: the wants and needs of each individual. These variables are as different as people are from each other.

A third term for these occurrences may be one of plain and simple maturation. As we each grow in age, some of our previous desires don't become as important as they were. If you haven't experienced this phenomenon, ask a six-year old what they want to be when they grow up and compare it to an annual check-up in the same vein. Speaking for myself, I discovered what I really wanted to do when I was almost 50.

Coaches and parents know these things, yet they can't seem to relate it to the ones they're in charge of, the most susceptible victims of their own selfish desires. Both insist, in too many cases, on making others do what they wish they could or would have done when they were younger. In my mind, that approach is wrong with only a few exceptions.

Practice or homework are two of those exceptions. Both are necessary but not always in the ways they are approached. They should both be presented in a more tactical way in most cases. Instead we have coaches, teachers and parents who demand physical or mental supremacy more as 'busy work.'

Athletes do need to stretch their physical limits and the same holds true of minds in the academic arena, but it should become more a work of repeated discipline than just trying to lift bigger weights, so to speak. Pushing an agenda that doesn't account for individual ability is pointless. Basketball coaches do not put the smallest player under the basket, or the slowest in the guard position. Nor do teachers read Shakespeare to a group of students that do not understand the English language! Or did I just insult 'common core'?

These are not the 'prodigal' children after all, only the poorly coached or taught. They may not know exactly what they want, but they usually know what they are capable of doing. It is up to the coach, teacher, or parents to help them do better in that regard.

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It's homecoming weekend this Friday at Miyamura. Next Friday it's Gallup High's turn and all the girls and boys will look even more beautiful and handsome.

I'll be there looking for you in the bleachers. Wash your face and comb your hair, and we'll talk!