

I am here, my son.

These were words that I never expected to say. Honestly, I was expecting another girl. The idea of fathering a son, of raising a boy to be a man in our world filled me with a considerable degree of apprehension and trepidation. The idea of being a father to a son intimidated me just enough to be unsettling. And so the prospect of one day reciting these very words took on a new and daunting significance.

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The anxiety in fathering a son is captured for me in these five short words. It is not the very real worry of 'being here for' my children - working to provide a safe and secure physical home and loving family. These are significant challenges, but they were not why these words bothered me so. It has to do with me, a man, parenting a son and the questions I confront: What does it mean to truly be a 'man' - and not a man in the manner that our society teaches us about manhood, but a man who can transcend those limitations? Am I 'man' enough to teach my son how to be a 'man'? Will I be able to sincerely 'be' with my, 'be; in a way so that he knows how to love and really 'be' with those he will come to love in his life? Will I be able to recite these words, live these words with integrity and understanding?

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The emotions of these words hovered in the recesses my consciousness until future Hall of Fame pitcher Roger Clemens brought them front and center. Roger Clemens is surely a man's man. Clemens, 43, currently pitches for the Houston Astros. Not only has he made millions of dollars doing something he loves, he is simply one of the greatest pitchers in baseball history. He has a reputation as a tough minded competitor, an incredible physical specimen and someone who is a great teammate to younger pitchers learning his ethic and craft. So, what he chose to do on the evening of September 13th, seems to fit his image and reputation for strength and toughness. The newspaper headlines from the following day from across the country tell the story:

- With Tears and Pride, Clemens Wins After Mother Dies
- Clemens Pitches in Late Mother's Honor
- Clemens Wins for his Late Mother
- Clemens Wins Despite Big Loss

- Mother Dies, but Clemens Starts

On that same morning of September 13th Clemens mother, Bess, succumbed to a fight with emphysema and died. Clemens, divined that with his team in a playoff race, his mother would want him to pitch that night. The pundits and prose that followed this story regaled us of Clemens' courage, his embodiment of his mother's steely will and his ability to be there for his teammates in the midst of their epic struggle for a place in the playoffs. Clemens effort was summed up by one of his bosses, the team's General Manager, Tim Purpura, "It's heroic. He understands the meaning of duty. His mother taught him about duty."

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As the sports pages lauded Roger Clemens for his choice, for his masculinity, I only heard these five words resounding in head. Why was there no outrage that Roger Clemens left his sisters, brothers, children, nieces and nephews hours after their mother and grandmother died to ... go to *work*? What did someone teach this son about being 'here' and being a 'man'? On that day of all days, shouldn't a father, a 'man' turn to his own sons, his siblings and his entire family and say, I am here, my family ... instead of turning to his teammates, his co-workers and saying, Let's go to work, that is what my mom would have wanted me to do.

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In the end, I cannot fault Roger Clemens for his choice - he did what he thought best, what it seemed his mother taught him to do. Roger Clemens did, well what our society expects a 'man' to do - to be strong, be tough and to put those emotional things aside for later. These five words intimidate me so, because to really say them, embody them and live them ... means a man acting in a manner that we do not obligate, cultivate or celebrate.

These words and their implications touch us all, for the manner in which we in our 21st century American village raise our men affects all of us in this room. Whether you are a man or not, men affect your lives and you affect the lives of men. The men in this room this morning ... you understand the dynamic of which I speak as you consider your relationship with your own fathers, partners, brothers and sons and the way you engage the people you love. As we all carefully contemplate the men we know - whether they are our fathers, sons, brothers, friends or even our selves -- we know some aspect of the pigeon hole

our society asks our men to squeeze into. We also know that there are dear consequences for how well these men fit or fail to fit into that distinctive space.

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As much as the sports figure Roger Clemens seemed to personify my anxieties embodied in these increasingly significant words in my life, another sports figure gracefully entered the discussion - his name, Joe Ehrmann. It was one of my brothers, who 'introduced' me to this ex-pro football player, turned minister and high school football coach by telling me about a book I HAD to read, called Season of Life. The book chronicled the season of a high school football team in Maryland and their two coaches - Coaches Joe Ehrmann and Biff Poggi. The book isn't really about football, though -- it is about fathers and sons, it is about being a man ... for me it was about those five words weighing heavily on my heart.

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Joe's first lessons in masculinity, albeit extreme, capture the dilemma our society faces in raising boys to be men and for these men to know and love their partners, friends, children and themselves.

As Coach Joe tells it in Season of Life, "The earliest memory I have of my father was him taking me down in the basement. He'd put up his hands. I'd have to stand there, and as I'd have to learn how to throw these jabs and combinations. And I can remember trying to hit those just right. And then my father would start slapping me. He'd start slapping me to the point that tears would stream down my face. And then what my father did to me was that he shamed my sense of masculinity. Because what he told me was that men don't cry! Suck it up! Be tough! Don't be a girl! You gotta learn how to give a punch and take a punch in this world!" I think all I wanted my father to do was walk into my life, embrace me, look me in the eye and tell me that he loved me. But he gave me this message - that I wasn't quite man enough - because of the emotion and tears - I had this concept that whatever the stuff was that makes up men, somehow God had put all of this feminine emotion in me."

Joe captured for me the idea that I could not express myself. Men are not generally taught, do not consciously know and are unable to aptly teach how to say to anyone in their lives; I am here.

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These two coaches, Joe & Biff, harbored no illusions that their team goals were as simple as winning football games - demonstrating their strength, power or football acumen. Instead, Biff and Joe coached this team with different goals that were rooted in fundamentally different ideas about strength, power and masculinity.

Coach Joe explains, "All boys are given in our culture threefold criteria for what it means to be a man -- physical strength, sexual prowess and materialistic gains. I think those are a lie, and I think they lead to tremendous dysfunction both in marriages and relationships, and in the social problems of America ... Masculinity," he suggests "ought to be defined in terms of relationships, in terms of the capacity to love and be loved ... success comes in terms of relationships."

This team prepared for each game with a discussion of life strategies, rather than football ones. This team was expected not only to see weakness in the opponent's game and capitalize, but to see weakness in its classmates in the lunchroom and not capitalize, but empathize. This team began and ended its practice sessions by responding to the question from their coaches, "What is your job?" not with "To win", "To dominate" or "To inflict pain", but "To love one another." They began each practice screaming at the top of their lungs that their job is, "To love one another." Coach Joe and Biff strive to teach these boys to be friends, not linebackers; husbands, not safeties; fathers, not quarterbacks.

Coach Joe puts it in this way, "I think that there are three kinds of dads in this world. There are the dads that are totally absent ... no presence whatsoever. They're just gone. The second kind is a dad that has presence, he's in his kid's life, he's in the home or he shows up at school, but he doesn't deal with the most profound issues. They're the Dads that invest time and money, and they care, but when they die, it's kind of, 'Wow, I never really knew who my dad was.' And then the third kind is a strategic dad. He has a clear and compelling definition of masculinity and a code of conduct for

being a man. He understands the importance of whatever transcendent cause he has in his life. It's a strategic fatherhood ... a clear definition and understanding of what it means to be a man and how a man lives."

Now, my five words were becoming easier to grasp, hopefully easier to embody and embrace.

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I felt these five words fully transform from an obstacle to hinder my progress to an important mountain to scale, thanks to the story of two more men. It is the story we read just a short while ago - the story of Abraham and the binding of Isaac. Their story is one of two men seeking to wade through the contemporary messages of what it means to be a 'man' and somehow grasp the essential nature of masculinity. Abraham lives in a world in which 'men' sacrifice their children. Abraham even hears the voice that he recognizes as God, telling him to do it. Yet, it seems as our rabbis would teach us that even though this is what his world is telling him to do, some part of him is wrestling. He takes three days before he travels with Isaac to the site of the sacrifice, a sure sign, Rashi teaches us that this delay displays a Abraham's uncertainty. Abraham senses the dissonance between what his world is telling him, where it is pushing him ... and another way to be a father, be a man.

Isaac, too, senses this dissonance. Isaac sees the writing on the wall. He knows the expectations of his world, for he lives in it. He sees all the accoutrements of sacrifice, yet no sacrifice to offer. And perhaps in the purity and clarity of youthful vision, Isaac senses that these expectations, these paths of interaction are not truly the path of divinity. He cries out to Abraham in confusion seeking explanation and possibly an alternative course of action. Abraham responds by placing the wood ON Isaac. So, the text expresses in a subtle, yet powerful manner how the burden of this kind of masculinity is passed from generation to generation.

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Abraham and Isaac speak to me in a way that they have never spoken to me in previous years. They live and personify the same struggle in which I find myself - as I confront the questions of raising a 'man' and being a 'man' with the people I love. Abraham & Isaac overcome all of it, Abraham does not sacrifice Isaac -

somehow they do it. They did it in their story, how do I do it in my own? So, I look more closely, more urgently seeking the point in their story where the tide is turned. And there it is, in the very words that haunt and challenge me - is the hope, inspiration and divinity that I seek.

אני כאן בן שלי.

The Torah teaches us that when Isaac first queries Abraham about his predicament, Isaac begins by calling out to Abraham, 'Father!' Abraham responds with two words, אני כאן בן שלי. I am here is the same thing Abraham says when first called upon by his God voice to fulfill this terrible mission. But here, in response to his son, Abraham not only responds with equal willingness, but by adding 'B'ni - My Son' I hear something crucial, something life changing. I hear Abraham swimming bravely through the powerful tide of his world and its expectations, to still connect, to be present with 'My son.' By using the language he uses for his own conversations with his God, he brings a transcendence and a sacredness to his relationship with his son. When Abraham declares to Isaac, אני כאן בן שלי - I see him in the midst of what the rest of the world is saying to him trying to be Coach Joe's strategic father - someone with a clear definition and understanding of what it means to be a man and how a man lives. Abraham says to Isaac: I am here for you, with you. I open myself to you, to share my self with you, perhaps in a way that I am not sure how to do, but willing and needing to try. And after that, after these words - the Torah makes sure to tell us that Abraham and Isaac continued, Yachdav - TOGETHER.

אני כאן בן שלי.

In the book, *Our Fathers' War*, historian Tom Matthews recounts how he and a few men in his generation fought on the emotional battlefield in the battle for the souls of men in our society. He recounts the moment that he first 'met' his father, who was returning home after the end of World War II.

He recounts that day, "From the roof, I have a commanding view of our weedy backyard. Suddenly the door to our subterranean apartment flies open and my father steps out, blinking in the bright August sun. My first impression is this: he is huge. My second impression is that he is a man without a stomach, quite different from my grandfather, whose web suspenders strain against his friendly girth when he hauls himself into his Chrysler. My father is flat and hard where

my grandfather is round and soft, and he is moving toward me at a very fast clip. Pulling up in front of the garage, he opens his arms.

"Jump!" my father orders me.

I hesitate, study the distance between us. It is transcontinental. The drop to the ground appears to be 1,500 feet. Bottom of the Grand Canyon. Certain death.

"Jump."

Not possible. No, no, no. no, no.

"I said jump." The voice is harder now. But then, for just an instant, he appears to soften.

"It's okay, Tommy," he says. "I'm your father."

Am I supposed to fly? Does he think I'm a bird? Recoiling, I freeze to the roof.

The tanned face flushes. Then the soldier wheels abruptly and storms across the yard, plunging into the basement. For the rest of my life I will hear the screen door's sharp bang and the last thing he said before he turned his back and walked away.

"No son of mine is a coward."

For Tom Matthews' life, this encounter set the tone for their relationship. As grown men and as part of research for this book, Matthews and his father returned to Europe to the places his father fought. After visiting sights of battles and places of comrades lost, they sat in an old café in a remote corner of France. Being there, seeing it all was too much for Matthew's father and after a life time of tension, dissonance and angst between the two of them - Matthew's father did something he had never done in front anyone else - he wept and lamented not the deaths of his comrades, but all the men he had killed. It was in that moment that Matthews decided to bridge that life long gap - ask questions that he had never dared to ask. Matthews decided to revisit that first meeting.

I asked my father, "Do you remember calling me a coward?"

Tears came to his eyes and he said, "How can I have done such a thing? How could I have said that to my own son? There was too much of the master sergeant in me."

"Well, did you think I was a coward?"

"No, heavens no?"

"What was it that you wanted of me?" I asked him.

He looked up and he said, "I wanted to be hugged." And all of a sudden nearly 60 years of total misunderstanding and distortion fell away.

When I look into the eyes of my son Tom Matthews and his father, Coaches Joe and Biff, Abraham and Isaac and even Roger Clemens remind me of the import for me to live and embody the words I yearn and need to say to him.

☐☐☐ I am here my son.

These words can melt away the barriers that all of us find within ourselves to being present and loving parents, children, siblings and friends. On this sacred morning as we assess who we have been and how we have been with those souls in our lives, it is essential that we see the clear path to becoming strategic fathers, mothers ... partners and friends. It is upon all of us to create lives, relationships, homes, communities and a society in which men and women are honored and celebrated, are safe and encourage to say with their mouths and their hearts, ☐☐☐ 'I am here, my wife.' 'I am here, my daughter.' 'I am here, my friend.' 'I am here, my self.'

☐☐☐ I am here my son.