The No-Fear Option

Just wait 'til your father gets home!

by Mark Montgomery

“You just wait ‘til your father gets home!”

All the moms in my neighborhood recognized the power of that phrase, and most used it pretty regularly. It was the Cold War, after all, and nuclear deterrent was the bedrock of diplomacy, at the White House in Washington, and at any house in the suburbs. No matter how caring and supportive our fathers were, it was just expected that we would be afraid of them. And every kid in the neighborhood was.

It seems that no matter how loving a home you were raised in, there’s always something you vow to do differently as a parent. My daughter, for example, swears that when her children sit down to a home-cooked meal, it will not have to be in someone else’s home. What I wanted to be different about my children’s upbringing was their attitude toward their father: I did not want them to be afraid of me.

Looking back, I see that there was something I had overlooked. If I raised children who were not afraid of me, I would have children who were…well, not afraid of me. (That was so obvious, how could I have missed it?) It would turn out that my children’s lack of fear would prove extremely inconvenient.

By the time my first child arrived, I was a professor who was married to a professor. My wife and I – mainly my wife, actually – read lots of books on parenting and discipline. We decided to raise our children by explaining things, to govern rationally, to assure our children that household rules, however tedious, were based on solid theory supported by an extensive body of empirical literature. We’d happily show them the footnotes if they were interested.

We now realize, too late, that over-reliance on rational argument invited our children to respond in kind. This had unhappy consequences. For example, late some evening I might find my son standing in the bathroom playing his Game Boy, and ask why he was not brushing his teeth, as instructed. He would say that he was brushing his teeth – he was in the bathroom, wasn’t he? I would point out, in the language of formal logic, that standing in the bathroom was a necessary condition for getting your teeth brushed, but not a sufficient one. He would reply that brushing would be completed as soon as he got past the Wizard on Level 4, which might already have happened had he not been distracted by this inane, academic conversation with me. So whose fault was it, really, that his teeth weren’t brushed yet? Oh fear, where is thy sting?

Compared to the home I grew up in, in our house-without-fear there is much less certainty about what will happen, and when. Something as simple as establishing a bedtime, for example, is as complicated as measuring the Federal budget deficit. There is an Official Bedtime, an Estimated Bedtime, a quarterly updated Bedtime Projection, a Gramm-Rudman Compromise Bedtime, until we reach finally, an actual bedtime.

To be fair to my three children, even fear is relative, and must be assessed in the context of the times.
Maybe they don’t see it as a house without fear. Maybe they see it as a house of terror, a house of oppression, a house where, figuratively speaking, an innocent child can be awakened in the night by the sound of jackboots outside her bedroom door. Suddenly, the door bursts open and men in dark uniforms flood into the room. One holds up a piece of parchment and, in a stentorian voice, reads its contents to the terrified child:

“By order of the Supreme Secret Council of Parents, your right to text messaging is hereby suspended.”