

Column: contemplation on being a parent with a disability

Julie made a little poem for her dad's Father's day. In doing so she made her dad happy but also made him think. Dad Peter shares his contemplation with ENIL. Read below ...

One of the nice extras of working at home for a day, is that I can have lunch with my wife and children. At 12 o'clock my wife picks up the children at their school. A little while later they arrive elated and somewhat noisy at home. Then they rush to the table already set to have sandwiches and tea. Usually I still have a few minutes to finish my e-mail or to close the documents on my computer before the girls start calling me: "Come at the table, Daddy", or "Come to eat!".

But this particular time, the scenario was somewhat different. A little bit more noisy than usually the girls ran inside. Elise had been working in her kindergarten class with paper-mâché to produce me a Father's day present! Full of enthusiasm she walked to me and gave me her little artwork. A small bust of pulp which resembled an Eastern Island statue, but for Elise it was a portrait of her dad. While I was thanking my youngest daughter extensively for the Father's day present, I saw my other daughter Julie quickly grabbing her markers and crayons.

She, being nine already, hadn't been working with paper-mâché in class, she had to learn mathematics and correct spelling. However she didn't want to do less than her little sister. So she rapidly fabricated a gift for my Father's day to. On the spot she invented a poem about her Daddy.

Voor mijn allerliefste Papa

For my sweetest Daddy (the rhyme got lost in translating)

Mijn Papa die is cool

My Daddy he is cool

Hij zit in een rolstoel

He sits in a wheelchair

Want hij is zo lief

Because he is so sweet

Een echte hartedief

He really stole my heart

Ik moet nog iets vertellen

I still have to tell you some things

Over zeven frikandellen

About seven onion rings

For Julie especially the final rhyme, about the seven onion rings, was the hilarious highlight. Me on the other hand was struck by something else. I suppose Fathers have a soft spot anyway for poems straight from the heart from their own princesses. But seeing that in the mind of my own daughter, sitting a wheelchair is perfectly compatible with being cool and sweet, was in one or another way very heartwarming for me.

I'm probably the last person on earth to state that disabled people cannot be good or appropriate parents. I surely experience daily how I fulfill my role as a parent in every aspect. Around me I see people with all kinds of disabilities, also mental impairments, who are very successful in raising their children, in providing them with love and everything they need. Still, as a parent, disabled or not, you very sensitive and vulnerable about everything concerning your children and about being able to provide them with all what they might need.

Sometimes thoughts go thru my mind like: "Doesn't my daughter miss a Daddy who can roll thru the grass with her, or who learns her to ride a bike?". Once in a while I'm afraid that one day I'll make my daughters sad because their father can't waltz with them on their wedding party, or because I can't learn them how to drive a car. Luckily it's not so difficult to put all this in right perspective. My daughters roll thru the grass often enough and the oldest already rides a bike perfectly. The wedding party and the learning how to drive a car will work out fine in time as well.

In fact my disability is nothing more than a factor, let's say an attribute or even a quality, my family lives with. For my daughters, in their childlike innocence it's just what it is. I'm simply their Daddy, for now still their hero, and a wheelchair really doesn't change a thing about that. They know really well that for a repair on their bike they don't have to address me but their grandfather or uncle. On the other hand they are really having a blast when they're 'allowed' to operate my car elevator or my persons lift, or when we get priority over the queue in amusement parks. When they're a little older I'm sure they will get nasty or painful remarks about their handicapped Dad. It might even be that in their puberty they will say hurtful things themselves. But we'll deal with that then.

In the end all that disappears into nothing compared with the joy of parenthood, the wonderful scent of your own newborn, the immeasurable pride with the first step or word, the overwhelming feeling to finally have found the meaning of life.

There's a lot to be said about the image or perception of disabled people. I can tell out of my own experience that the image of a disabled parent is still very uncommon in Belgium in the year 2011. Like everyone else I once in a while go to a market or a fair. Usually my daughter sits on my lap then, that's simply easier than pushing a pram when you're in a wheelchair. For sure this brings out one or another reaction from perfectly strangers. Some of them look at us, or stare at us, with a look filled with fear, disbelief and horror. You see them think: "oh, that poor child has a handicapped daddy, that cannot be real?". Then I look, filled with pride, straight in the eyes and I would like to scream at them that she really is my daughter and that she is happy with her daddy in a wheelchair too. Others react completely different, and give us a big smile, hold up their thumb, or even tap me on my shoulder. That's a lot more positive of course, but also a confirmation that parenthood and disability isn't an obvious combination in our society. So there's a lot of work to be done when it comes to image and perception.

Peter Lambregts,

Father, husband, U2-fan and oh yes...also a person with a disability