

GUEST ESSAY

Understanding My Son, One Game of Catch At a Time

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By Jessica Shattuck

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I have never played on an athletic team. As a child, I was not fast or coordinated or interested in anything that involved chasing, catching or otherwise playing ball. My mother, who grew up in postwar Germany, associated youth sports with the Hitler Youth and the Nazi obsession with fostering the “prey instinct” through competition and strength. These concerns dovetailed conveniently with my anti-gym-class feelings.

But in the long, cold and gloomy spring of 2020, I found myself the mother of an 8-year-old son who wanted nothing more than to play ball. This was the heart of early Covid; there were no organized sports, no activities, no babysitting, no school. Will’s older sisters (both teenagers) wanted no part in this activity. My husband was game, but Will’s appetite for catch was voracious. So I donned his spare baseball glove and let him teach me how to catch and throw.

American film and literature are threaded through with stories of fathers and sons playing ball, from Donald Hall’s essays “Fathers Playing Catch With Sons” to a father appearing on the baseball diamond in “Field of Dreams,” transcending death

to participate in a game of catch with his son. I had always seen the game as a vaunted male tradition, laced with the pathos and psychodrama of inherited hopes and aspirations, the handing down of secret, implied codes of manhood.

But as I picked up a glove, the imagined maleness of the game offered me a certain freedom. I was not modeling what it means to be a man or re-enacting a ritual from my childhood. Will was not struggling to meet my expectations, even as I might be struggling to meet his. He was the teacher here. I got to appreciate his patience, his focus on detail, his encouragement.

We also weren't talking. I am a writer who loves putting things into words, but Will doesn't always love my questions or my boring mom-talk gambits. Here our closeness was measured in tosses, not words. Best of all, by the simple necessity of keeping the ball in the air, we were both fully present.

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Will was an excellent coach: He broke the actions of catching and throwing down into a series of discrete steps: Crook your elbow just so, put your weight into the throw, follow through after release. Over — a lot of — time (lack of experience did not, in my case, conceal natural talent) I learned to overcome the frustration of a streak of bad throws or misses, to try less hard, sometimes, in order to do better, to take a breath and reset.

We fell into a rhythm and played for hours on our dead-end street. It wasn't always fun: I became cranky when I repeatedly missed the ball. And on a cold day, it was hard to cheerily get off the sofa to go throw a ball outside.

Our game, miraculously, continued even after lockdowns were lifted. I still love the satisfying smack of the ball into the mitt, the almost magical feeling of stopping it midair. I like the thrill of reaching some number of consecutive passes, the singular

focus of our combined concentration. Most of all I love spending the time, outside, with my son.

Will is 12 now, and on a travel baseball team; I have nothing to offer by way of meaningful “practice.” We have reversed roles: Now I’m the one asking him to get up off the couch and play.

Parenthood is so full of letting go — not just of children turning into young adults and leaving home, but of so many little selves along the path to adulthood. The smiley, round-cheeked toddler becomes the shy 7-year-old; the thoughtful, shaggy-haired kindergartner becomes the clean-cut, Celtics-mad fifth grader. Sometimes the urge to hold on feels almost frantic. The only way to pin time down is to remember: *this moment, this boy, this place*. Ritual and repetition.

When we first started playing, we would begin a few feet apart and with every completed catch take a step back, expanding the distance between us. Now when we play, I’m all the way up by the neighbor’s pine tree, and Will is down by the mailbox. He is almost a foot taller than he was at the start. Even if it’s been a while, the muscle memory soon kicks in: Catch, draw your arm back, crook your elbow, let go.

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