

What I Learned in the Men's Room

Guest post by Ted Olson.

"Daddy, listen!" A common plea from my son, Thomas. I'm often lost in thought or working on a post, or trying to dictate a command. Getting my full attention can be difficult. Listening, really listening, is not easy. Yet, deep listening makes all the difference in a relationship.

What does this have to do with a men's room? I'm getting there.

When Thomas was 6 we were out in the back yard. I was weed whacking and he was playing with his sister. They got into an argument so I called Thomas over. He wouldn't come. I called again; still nothing. I couldn't believe that he wouldn't take a few simple steps so I could have a quick conversation with him. I resorted to yelling – still nothing.

I was stunned. What the heck was his problem? I really yelled – still nothing. Finally I walked over to grab him. When he shrunk back in fear I realized I was missing something. He wasn't afraid of me. He was terrified of the weed whacker idling in my hand.

I wasn't listening to my son. I wasn't reading his body language or facial expressions. And I didn't listen to his protests. I simply cut him off and repeated my command. I grew up with this type of domination parenting. I don't recommend it.

I was reminded of the weed whacker incident today. Thomas and I were at the mall. During our travels we stopped to use the restroom. I saw the sign for the men's room and headed straight for it. Thomas pleaded "Daddy, look, let's go over here!" I didn't know where over there was, and I didn't care. I saw the sign and knew where to go. Thomas acquiesced.

On the way out, he showed me what he had been trying to tell me. "Family Restrooms." Yes – this mall had very cool Family Restrooms – they were big, private, and had kid-sized toilets and sinks, along with the regular ones. It was great. There was even a bench to lounge on. What could be better! Had I listened, I could have enjoyed said facilities.

But there was something more that I didn't know. Something much deeper. I assumed Thomas was interested in the Family Restroom because it had so many cool amenities. I was wrong, again. I found out what it was during our next stop a few hours later at a "regular" restroom. Thomas stopped dead in his tracks outside the door of the men's room. This time I read his body language and could see his angst. I walked over to where he was standing and leaned down. He whispered that he didn't like going into the men's room because lots of people think he's a girl.

Thomas wears his hair just like his sisters, and many of his friends – it's long and flowing. He's also gorgeous thanks to his mom – clear, dark Sicilian skin. When he was a baby my mother used to say, "he's so beautiful he could pass for a girl." And he can. That said, he doesn't like to do anything wrong. Perhaps it's his birth order or his mother's influence, but this kid sticks to the rules. He doesn't even like the look of impropriety – hence heading into a men's room, when he could be mistaken as a girl is a big deal for him.

Too often we assume we know. We assume that everyone is just like us – that they experience the world as we do. They don't. My son, who is my polar opposite, teaches me this daily. Taking the time to journey with others on their path makes all the difference – even if it's to the men's room.