

Though Toys R Us filed for bankruptcy, as one who grew up in the 80's I'll never forget the jingle on the commercials during Saturday Morning Cartoons: "I don't want to grow up because if I did, I wouldn't be a Toys R Us Kid." And indeed, while the store was fun and its companion, Children's Palace, seemed like an amazing place when I was 8, eventually I did have to grow up. And that's true for all of us.

The problem is that age does not necessarily guarantee maturity.

Just ask Juli Slattery. She's a clinical psychologist, author and speaker, and does a lot with couples.

In an article she wrote recently, which could certainly apply to people of either sex, she asks the question: "Are you married to a man child?" The article is entitled: "My husband won't grow up." In it, she shares her observations and lessons she's learned through her vocation of marriage.

In her words:

He may be over six feet tall and intimidating to a stranger, but he still behaves like he's 15. He spends hours a day playing the PS4, can't make a decision, and throws a temper tantrum when he doesn't get his way. Does this describe your husband? If so, you're not alone.

It seems to be more common than not that a young wife finds herself married to a man who resembles an adolescent. There are a lot of reasons why this is a growing trend, so perhaps we will save that analysis for another day and another article. Regardless of how you got there, the question is: What do you do when your husband won't grow up?

For many women, this represents a pivotal crisis in marriage. The right response will lay the groundwork for healthy intimacy while the wrong response can propel the relationship into a tailspin.

Addressing this problem in your marriage begins by acknowledging that your husband isn't the only one who needs to grow up. Yes, you can point to a hundred ways you may be more responsible and mature than he is. While your frustration may be justified, it also probably points to your own immaturity. I know because I've been there.

When my husband and I got married, I appeared on the surface to be more mature than he was. I was goal-oriented, knew what I wanted from life, and had been a Christian far longer than my husband. As much as I loved Mike's laid-back approach to life when we were dating, I fumed about it once we were married. In my internal dialogue, I complained about always having to be the serious one, the responsible one. I remember one incident that represented the early years of our marriage.

Mike and I lived in a two-story townhouse. We agreed we would clean the house together on Saturdays—he would clean the upstairs and I would clean the downstairs. Along came Saturday. After breakfast, I grabbed the cleaning supplies and tackled my part of the house. Mike turned on the TV. Long after I had finished my part of the house, Mike decided to go for a run . . . then lunch . . . then a nap. As the hours wore on, I seethed with anger. By about 9 p.m., I self-righteously grabbed the cleaning supplies and began working on the upstairs. I'm sure I sighed loudly and slammed cupboards, letting my new husband know what a martyr he had married. I was so mad at my husband that I slept on the couch that night. I really lost it when Mike

came downstairs the next morning, chuckling at me sprawled on the couch. “Well, I got a good night’s sleep!” he informed me.

In the following days and weeks, Mike and I hashed out this ongoing issue so perfectly displayed by the cleaning episode. I learned my husband wasn’t the only one who needed to grow up—I could be controlling and manipulative in my high standards, sparking my husband to respond with passive-aggressive stubbornness.

Truth be told, we all have a bratty, selfish, sinful kid inside of us. We may be more sophisticated in how we demand our way, but sin is ugly no matter how it is expressed. I’m not suggesting you shouldn’t be upset if your husband refuses to get a job or take responsibility. What I am saying is that a self-righteous approach is doomed to make the problem worse.

You are the one person who ultimately can invite your husband into the challenges of authentic relationship and adult life.

Yes, it’s the age-old “take the log out of your own eye.” You married a man who still has some “boy” in him. And he married a woman who can still be

very much a little “girl.” I just turned 45. No matter what the wrinkles around my eyes tell you, I still have pockets of immaturity and selfishness that remind me of my need for grace—God’s and my husband’s. “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6).

Why does watching ESPN for hours on end appeal to a man? What in the world does he get from playing video games? Why can’t you get him to engage with you in real life, real relationships, and real work?

Dr. Slattery says she may be overgeneralizing here, but she believes the bottom line is fear. Do you know your husband fears failure?

She says she remembers a story my dad once told me. He was 12 years old and had just moved to Brooklyn, Ohio. Although money was tight, his parents sacrificed to buy him a baseball glove so he could play in the neighborhood baseball league and make some friends. He soon found himself playing in the outfield for the city championship. His mom and dad came to the game to cheer his team on under the lights of a city stadium. Her dad’s team was ahead by one run in the ninth inning—all they had to do was close it out. My dad will never forget the humiliation of dropping a

routine fly ball, giving the other team the winning run. His parents didn't hug him or say a word. He was left alone with his failure.

Dr Juli says she believes every man has a 12-year-old boy within him that fears what her dad experienced. Self-doubt and fear of failure taunt the average young man, even as visions of being a "hero" bring hope.

Video games and fantasy football offer "safe" ways to be a victorious hero. The virtual world offers risk-free adventure and achievement. The problem is the virtual world isn't reality. The accomplishments are an illusion. In the real world, she says, your husband can still be rejected, humiliated, and exposed as a failure. His virtual success does nothing to equip him in relationships, work, and leadership. To make matters worse, many young men do not have fathers or mentors to teach them and model manhood.

Dr. Daniel Levinson wrote a classic book in 1986 called *Seasons of a Man's Life*. His conclusion was that every man needs three things to be fulfilled in life: a dream, a wife who believes in him, and a mentor to show him the way. Dr. Levinson's conclusions are still true of men today.

(Though I'd respectfully disagree on the wife part).

Even more than the fear of “dropping the ball,” she says, your husband fears failing you.

Writing to a woman who wrote her, she says, my friend I know you may be frustrated by your husband’s lack of maturity at times, but it is key for you to understand that you are one of the most important factors in whether or not he grows up. You are the one person who ultimately can invite your husband into the challenges of authentic relationship and adult life. Even more than the fear of “dropping the ball,” your husband fears failing you.

As his wife, you have the delicate role of protecting your husband’s vulnerabilities while also calling forth his strength. This sounds complicated, but it is accomplished day by day, moment by moment, in how you choose to think about him, pray for him, and respond to him.

The wonderful news is you aren’t the first woman to walk through the challenges of how to bring out the “man” in your man. I’ve seen it done by wise women, and I’m learning the art of doing so in my own marriage. I’ve learned when to step back, when to encourage, and when to confront.

Looking at her own marriage, Dr. Juli says she loves the man her husband is becoming. It makes her chuckle to think back on the frustrations and fights they had 20 years ago. She does not regret for a moment the hard work of seeking God's wisdom, laying down her pride, and building into this husband who seems to love me more every day.

I realize this is not a marriage therapy group, but when I came across her article, it struck a chord with me, because it gets at 3 very important truths that stand out in our Gospel. Namely that we do have to grow up. But we also have to help others grow up. And through this process which can entail pain, God through it all will be there.

In our Gospel, Jesus says "unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit. Whoever loves his life loses it...whoever serves me must follow me." That's not easy. It means we have to have a change. Our first reading gives us the blueprint: "I will place my law within them and write it upon their hearts; I will be their God, and they shall be my people." Our task it to develop our

conscience by acknowledging the reality of the fact that while all of us do much good, we are also capable of evil and failings. When we work at it, God's law becomes second nature. It helps us to overcome being fickle, angry, selfish. The suffering can be learning the hard truths about ourselves, and sacrificing wrongful pleasures, false gods, bad ways of living. Because whatever our age, we can't say "I've arrived." We have to say "we are a work in progress." Dr. Juli's article points out it wasn't the wife's job to "fix" her husband; rather both needed to mature. That's true for us too. So ask yourselves the hard questions. As I shared last week on pride, it's good to examine our consciences. And there are a number of great Catholic examinations of conscience out there. But some questions to consider include: Do you pray and strive to love God? Do you strive to trust the teachings of the Church and think about the things that challenge you? Do you go to Mass on Sundays and Holy Days (or challenge your parents to take you if you are too young to drive)? Do you on the one hand honor your parents and listen to them as you are growing up, but also for parents do you provide for your children, and also respect them as they age and try to set a good example to them? Do you harbor resentment towards others or spread gossip? Do you strive to see a person for their body and their soul, or give into sensualism? Do you use other people? Do you misuse

alcohol? Do you talk about others behind their back? Do you show fortitude and speak out when something is wrong? Do you bully others? Do you show contrition when you say something you shouldn't to a family member, and work on dealing with anger in a healthy way? Do you put God first and send that message to others, especially family? Remember, grace isn't cheap. It requires a response, and when we look at ourselves, we should not look at ourselves with shame or lament, but always with the attitude "I want to become a better person." The grain of wheat falling to the ground is the death to ourselves. Discipleship entails anguish. It's hard to grow up, but we aren't called to be Peter Pan, we are called to be a saint.

We also then have to emulate Christ and suffer with others. When we look at the cross, we are constantly reminded of how far Jesus went for us, and are also challenged to do that for one another. We need to journey with people, to challenge them, and to lead them to a better place spiritually. It takes time and commitment. Suffering with others means listening to them. It means challenging and saying difficult things. It means giving of your time. It means being patient and recognizing that change can come slowly. But just as because of what Jesus did for us makes heaven possible, when

we, like Jesus, do this for one another, we too can help them emerge a better person who has come to know God.

Lastly, like Juli's dad, we will drop the ball and sometimes blow the game.

We will let others down, and we will fail, because we are sinners. But through it all is God. Our first reading says it most beautifully: "for I will forgive their evildoing and remember their sin no more." That love doesn't eliminate sin, for we still make bad choices. But when we open ourselves up to it, and look long and hard at the reality of sin in our lives, we can begin to see that it can be overcome through an ongoing relationship with the God who is love.

So let's never fear turning to Him by being honest about who we are and seeing who we have the potential to become. Our Cross is covered, and it helps us to think a little bit about something we take for granted. On the one hand, we are loved and always will be despite our failures. But on the other, the Cross reminds us that we all have a job to do - to love others as Jesus has loved us.

I'd suggest there is nothing at all wrong with playing fantasy football, video games, going out with friends, golf, shopping, or whatever it is you may like

to do. Temperance is the virtue that guides these things. We can enjoy life. But the reality is, we do all have to grow up. As Saint Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13: "When I was a child, I used to talk like a child, and see things as a child does, and think like a child; but now that I have become an adult, I have finished with all childish ways. Now we see only reflections in a mirror, mere riddles, but then we shall be seeing face to face. Now I can know only imperfectly; but then I shall know just as fully as I am myself known." Paul becomes a man by dying to himself; by being the grain of wheat that falls; by suffering; by growing up. Let's use the last two weeks of Lent and also the rest of our lives to learn how to daily do that while helping others to do so too, because when we do we'll discover true happiness. Toys, both the kind we play with as kids and the things we enjoy as adults, give us an escape from reality for a bit and some joy. God though gives us true happiness, but finding it and obtaining it, the Cross reminds us, entails work, introspection, growth and suffering. Let's not be afraid though to grow up and let grace transform us from a sinner into a saint by responding to it, removing the dirt and dust on the mirror we look through darkly to help us see the person God knows we can become. God loves us so much - something we can forget. May our eyes, hearts, minds and souls be unveiled through His grace, and may we respond to that by becoming who

we all have the potential to become - a saint - by dying to ourselves, letting the love of God transform us through responding to it.