

## Captain Hook

By John Blackwell, Ph.D.

When I was growing up, the Cincinnati Reds were hot. Johnny Bench was the catcher. Joe Morgan played second. Peter Rose played third. They were the team to beat, and they were fun to watch.

I also remember the manager, Sparky Anderson. He was known as Captain Hook. How did he come by that nickname? He was always changing pitchers—or so it seemed. Sparky Anderson had a strong bull pen. He had great relief pitchers, and he went to them—frequently. That’s how he earned his nickname: he frequently gave his pitchers the hook.

It worked well for Sparky Anderson. But Sparky was playing a game. I wouldn’t recommend his approach when it comes to relationships. I’ve noticed, for example, that students don’t thrive under *that* kind of pressure—the pressure that says, “If you make one mistake, you’re out of the game!” Imagine this scenario: as the coach puts a player into the game, the coach says, “If you blow it, you’re back on the bench.” Is that fair? Would that kind of pressure create the conditions in which a person can thrive? Would it work to say, “You’re not allowed a single mistake!” There may be people who can perform under that kind of pressure. When it comes to relationships—especially raising children—I’m not sure it’s a good strategy. The reason is simple: we’re human, and being human, we will all make mistakes at least some of the time.

Wouldn’t it be better to build confidence and to help others relax by saying, “I know you’ll do your best, and I’m behind you one hundred percent”? Nancy and I have discovered that when we trust our children, when we build their confidence, they not only respond; they thrive.

I am not trying to suggest that our loved ones will never blow it. Nor am I suggesting that we are always good. The doctrine of Original Sin has taken a beating in much of the church these days, but I think that its meaning is simple (and relevant): we can all be up to no good at least some of the time. We have to be savvy about the potential for wrongdoing. At the same time, we have to build each other’s confidence that we can do well. This involves a balance of support and accountability. People need a supportive environment in which they can more or less relax and do their level best.

Our loved ones need us to cheer them on: “I know you can do this! I know you’ll succeed!”

I will never forget the first time I served as an acolyte in church. I was in the fifth grade, and I was thrilled. Before I walked down the aisle to light the candles, an older acolyte told me to make sure that there was no more than a quarter inch of wick on the taper. Since he was older and experienced, I trusted that he knew what he was talking about. I didn’t realize that he was trying to sabotage me.

By the time I reached the altar, my light had gone out. So had the light of the girl who was lighting the candles with me. We had to return to the back of the church—with the entire congregation watching. If that wasn’t enough, the older kids, led by the boy who advised us to use a short wick, were sitting in the balcony, laughing their heads off. To add humiliation to embarrassment, on our second try the head usher walked down with us, to make sure that our light didn’t go out. He was trying to help, but I wanted to die (or at least find a church where I wasn’t known!).

In retrospect, this was no big deal. Others had a laugh at my expense. Welcome to the real world!

However, what if instead of sabotaging us, that young man had given us the coaching that we needed to succeed. And what if he had said, “I was a little nervous my first time, but I know you’ll do a good job.” And what if instead of laughing at us, he had said, “The same thing happened to me once. Hang in there. You’ll do better next time!”

Beware of playing the role of Captain Hook. Relating to our loved ones isn’t a game. It’s real life. What if instead of saying, “You better not blow it, or you’re out of here,” we were to say, “I hope you can relax, concentrate, and give it your best. And no matter what happens, I am behind you, cheering you on. I know you’ll do your best!”