

29. Discipline

Parallel fathers discipline their sons.

Some time around 353 BCE, there was a Roman consul Titus Manlius, famed in battle and the most upright and respected politician in Rome. He was also a stickler for discipline, possibly one of the founders of the military discipline and martial laws of modern times. Orders from above had to be obeyed no matter what. There was no leniency, the orders had to be obeyed to the letter.

So it was in one of the perennial battles Rome waged, this time with the Samnites against the Latins, Manlius and his co-consul Publius Decius were convinced that military discipline had become too lax and that it needed to be reasserted. Manlius therefore called his legions together and made a moving speech reminding them of the importance of discipline and that orders must be obeyed absolutely. And he restated his long held views on morality, pointing out his own virtue and total devotion to a moral life. He also recounted how important it was for Roman soldiers to work together as teams, immediately follow orders when formations had to be changed. Legions had to be deployed according to the battle conditions, such as the Phalanx, the tortoise and others. It was the brilliance of Roman discipline to deploy their formations quickly that made the Roman military the great fighting force it was. Their methods dominated the battlefields of Europe for centuries, certainly to the end of the 19th century, particularly by Napoleon.

After his moving speech, and cheers of “Manlius! Manlius!” by the legions, Manlius, sent them into battle. He was particularly proud on this day because his son, Sextus, was a Centurion, commander of eighty men. Eager to make a name for himself and to please his father, Sextus, instead of maintaining the formation he had been ordered to do, saw an opportunity to overcome several groups of Latin skirmishers, so led his men into battle, breaking formation. He and his men crushed the enemy and

returned to base victorious.

When the entire battle was over and Manlius had won yet another battle, he called the legions together.

“Fellow soldiers! You are bathed in glory today, having shown courage and devotion that has no equal. I am so humbled by your great bravery.”

The legions cheered, “Manlius! Manlius!”

Manlius raised his hand to indicate silence. The troops stirred a little as they calmed down. Then Manlius spoke in a stern and solemn voice.

“Sextus Manlius, my son. Step forward!”

Sextus stepped forward, beaming, proud of having led his men to victory.

Manlius spoke again. “Soldiers all! Witness this Centurion, who disobeyed my clear order to remain in formation until the order is given to do otherwise. He broke formation and led his century into battle, and although victorious, it clearly defied my order. The punishment in the military for disobeying an order is death.”

The legions stirred, but of course said nothing, not even a whisper.

Manlius continued. “It is therefore my moral duty, according to military law, to sentence you to be beheaded. This punishment to be carried out immediately!”

Sextus dropped to his knees, tears in his eyes, but also accepting his fate. He knew it was deserved. The camp Prefect stepped forward, raised his sword and delivered the blow.

*

Some time in the 20th century, Freddy lived in a modest house in a distant suburb of Geelong called Norlane. His dad worked at the local Ford Motor company. He had built their house and planted the garden and was very proud of it. Freddy, being just ten years old took it all for granted, of course. He often played in the front yard on the grass and mowed the lawn when his dad asked him to. His mum stayed inside most of the time, cooking and sewing, and knitting. One of the things that his dad was very proud of, though complained all the time about it, was the golden privet hedge that ran across the entire front of the

garden. It had become so high that Freddy could hardly see over it. He had to stand on tip toes to watch the cars go back and forth on the Melbourne Road.

On this day, having mowed the lawn, Freddy decided that he would do something special for his dad. He would trim the hedge to save him the bother. He went into the garage to retrieve the clippers, had a bit of practice opening and closing them. They didn't seem too hard to use, though his dad had told him on a number of occasions that they were too dangerous for him to use and that he was not to touch them. But his dad complained so much when he trimmed the hedge, Freddy he was sure he would be really surprised and happy when he came home and it was all done.

And so Freddy set to work. It took him much longer than he expected, and his arms got really tired. As well, he had to stand on a box to be able to reach the top. Clipping the sides, his dad had always said, was the easiest. It was the top that was hard, and now Freddy understood why. He sat down to rest for a while, and noticed his mum peaking at him through the front window. But she didn't come out, although she knew he shouldn't touch the clippers.

He had just finished the job and stepped back to admire his handiwork, when his dad arrived home in their old A model Ford. He pulled into the drive and hurried over to Freddy.

"Freddy," he said, "What have you done?"

"I thought I'd do the hedge to save you having to do it," said Freddy proudly.

"But look at the top of it," complained dad, "it's not straight. It has to be perfectly straight, not wobbly and all over the place. Besides, I told you never to touch the clippers."

His dad was angry. Not what Freddy had expected. And he was annoyed with himself that it had not occurred to him that the top of the hedge should be straight. Of course it should! But he had been too engrossed in cutting it, he took no notice of whether he was cutting straight or not.

"Gee, I'm sorry dad. I thought..."

"That's the trouble with you, you don't think. Think before you act! Aren't I always telling you that?"

Freddy knew he was too old to cry, but he was now on the brink of tears. “Gees dad,” was all he could think of to say.

His dad looked at him, and then looked at the lawn. “The lawn looks good. Here’s your pocket money. I ought not give it to you.”

“Thanks dad.” Freddy was puzzled and disappointed. He didn’t expect to be paid for the hedge. He did it to please his dad. It was the same for the lawn, really.

“But you disobeyed me,” said his dad with a frown. “I don’t know what mum has cooked for dinner, but you will not be getting any. It will be straight to bed for you.”

“But dad!”

“No buts.”

Moral: Discipline gained, empathy lost.

