Teen’s Arrest Produces Good Parenting

By: Betsy Hart *Daily Breeze* 4/28/09 B3

I hesitate to begin a story with, “This recently happened to a friend of mine…” But it did. It’s not me—yet. I just hope I would handle it the same way. “Karen,” and her husband, “Tom,” are great, loving, supportive parents of five young kids. Recently, Karen got a call from a police station telling her that her high-schooler had been arrested. She’d been picked up for shoplifting. Karen and her family live in an affluent community; their kids are well supervised; Karen is a full-time mom and their kids go to a great school.

This is no “at-risk” child in the world’s eyes.

But to Karen and Tom, every one of their kids is at risk, not just because of the world, but because of the folly that is bound up in the heart of a child, to paraphrase scripture.

Far from being today’s “My little Johnny would never do that!” parents, they know that their little Johnnys are capable of pretty much anything. All of ours are—we are, too. And these parents know that only if they grasp that can they get to their children’s hearts at all.

Well, as she always does, Karen went to bat for her child. But not in the way so many “Oh, my gosh, this could end my child’s chances of getting into Harvard” parents would. My friends are not primarily after Harvard; they are after the hearts of their kids.

That’s not what the police officers were expecting. They fully believed this child’s affluent parents would march in, like so many others in that community would have done, with a demand to get their child off the hook.

Instead, when Karen arrives (Tom was out of town), she not only cooperated fully with the police and agreed on the seriousness of the charges, she clearly appreciated the officers for the arrest.

The police were stunned.

But Karen and Tom think the arrest—combined with the penalties their child will face as a result—is one of the best things that could have happened to their teen. (In fact, the child admitted she’d shoplifted before.)

What a wake-up call. The arrest gave Karen a chance to talk to her child about the folly all of our hearts were capable of. It gave her an opportunity to continue her ongoing discussion with her teen about how everyone of us needs to be saved from the “sin which so easily entangles.”

And it gave this mom and dad an opening to affirm to their child that there is nothing—nothing—their child can do that can separate her from the love of her parents. That in the midst of what was in fact a real crime, not only were she and Tom not going to degrade her very humanity by “separating the (bad) behavior from the child,” as the parenting experts teach, but they were going to love her and walk with her in the midst of it.

These parents are willing to see their daughter as she really is at her worst (even if down the road that’s more than shoplifting), to call it what it is and to love her like crazy anyway as they encourage her to move forward to her best.

In contrast, what good does it do a child, in our self-esteem-obsessed culture, to tell her how “good” she is, even at the times when she knows she is not?

Rather than excuse and defend on the one hand—“Those other kids are a bad influence on little Suzie”—or condemning her on the other, Karen and Tom, with their response, produced a remorse and a softening in the child’s heart like they hadn’t seen in some time.

Karen and Tom know this is a process. But I think they have a great chance of success. Not because they are “perfect parents,” whatever that means. But because unlike so many parents I see today, their egos are not bound up in their children. Only their hearts are.