James Braly: Oliver’s Pink Bicycle

Program Transcript

NARRATOR: My father is a decorated bomber pilot, World War II, Korean War, shot down, parachuted to safety, along with everybody else in his crew. And one time I asked him, dad, what was going on in the cockpit on the way down?

And he said all the men were belly aching and crying and screaming, Captain Brawley, I don't want to die, I don't want to die. And I said, I can understand that dad. What were you doing? And he said solving the problem.

Crying doesn't solve a god damn thing. My dad's a man's man. Not a lot of room for weakness or frailty, not a lot of understanding for differences.

And one time I asked him to come see me in my high school band. I was going through my English glam rocker phase. And I had Farah hair and a shiny red jacket cinched at the waist and open to the navel, to frame my sunken English rocker chest.

And at the end of the gig, he walked over. And I said dad, what did you think? And he said, you don't have a shirt on boy.

So after 25 years of therapy and a week or two of inpatient crisis intervention, I decided I was going to be a very different kind of father, the kind of father who accepted the differences in his kids. And now I'm a dad. And I have two boys, Owen, who's eight months old, and Oliver, who's 3 and 1/2, my first born.

And Oliver's favorite color is pink. It's not my favorite color. But I'm OK with that because I'm a father who accepts differences in his son.

And it started with the pink crayons and moved on to the pink open-toed sandals. Went on to my wife's fingernail polish, which I was OK with and I actually started to think it was kind of cute. And I was even OK with the pink barrette, which Oliver kept in his pink purse, when he wasn't wearing it.

And then one day last summer, shortly before he turned three, he came to me and said daddy, for my birthday, I want a pink bike. And even for me, this was a little too much pink. So I said well, maybe, thinking maybe not, to give myself a little time to mull it over.

And the more I thought about it, the more I realized that the real issue wasn't that pink is for girls or that Oliver shouldn't have a pink bike, but that he should have a red bike, just like I had had. And so I spent the next three months trying to make him come around to my point of view with a technique that I had learned from my mother, to make my thought seem like his.
And so in the case of Oliver, that meant wandering around the park and noticing the shiny red objects and remarking what a wonderful colored bike that would make, especially the fire engines. To which Oliver would respond I want to fire engine and a pink bike. And after three months, I finally accepted that I had failed at converting Oliver. And that, in fact, he was a different human being than I was. And that I was going to buy him a pink bike which, is not easy.

You can get a Barbie 2000 in pink. And you can get Hello Kitty in pink, and Little Miss Pudding, and Jazz, and the Charmer, all in pink. But you can't get a pink bike without some looking. It took me 20 visits to virtually every bike shop in Manhattan, between Canal and 125th Street, until I found what I was looking for, two wheels, one color, no decals, in pink.

And on the morning Oliver turned three, it was sitting in the playroom downstairs, where we were going to be celebrating his birthday. And his friends came over and filled the room. It was decorated in pink, pink streamers and purple streamers hanging from the chandelier, and a birthday cake with pink candles, and Oliver's pink bike.

And after a couple of his friends had arrived, parked right next to it, Jeremy's bike, the Mountain Cub, which was dark boy blue, with paw prints all across it. And this was the moment of truth. I could accept Oliver's differences. But I didn't know whether the world could.

And Jeremy parked his bike. And looked at Oliver's pink bike, and looked back at his, and back at Oliver's. And he looked to his mom and he started crying, mom, I want a pink bike, just like Oliver has.

And part of me had this malevolent glee, sticking it to the tough boy with a pink knife. But another part of me, thought you know what Jeremy, so do I. Why does Oliver get a pink bike? We should get one too.

And at that point, I realized the gift that he had given me. It was his birthday. But he had shown me the beauty and the power really of being yourself and letting other people be themselves. And it's not an easy lesson to learn. Currently, I'm mulling over Oliver's request for a pink dress, which if I have the nerve to go to the contractor once again and ask him to change the paint color, will soon be hanging up in Oliver's new pink closet.

Thank you.

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