

## MAKING PEACE WITH OUR FATHERS

Now, some of us suffered the crime of a happy childhood. We had a positive relationship with our father and/or mother. If so, today on Father's Day, I implore you to say a resounding prayer of gratitude for your good fortune. Then go forth and celebrate the presence or memory of your father or fathers with great rejoicing. And extend their loving legacy through every move you make in the world.

However, for countless women and men in our culture there remains a broken or an unresolved father-child bond. Some among us never received sufficient blessing from our fathers and, as one Jungian analyst wisely notes, if you weren't being blessed by your father, you were probably being wounded.

In my work with men over 35 years, I've developed a father-son continuum ranging from abuse to abandonment to aloofness to availability to affirmation to affection. The paradigm is equally applicable to women as men. In our father-child odysseys we find ourselves somewhere, at different times, on that continuum. Naturally, there are odd blends as well: fathers who are emotionally abusive yet periodically affectionate; fathers who are aloof in larger social gatherings but caring when alone with their children; fathers who abandoned their sons or daughters early on, then return later, ready to deliver long-overdue affirmation.

Powerful evenings, indeed weekends, can emerge from placing our singular father-child relationships on that continuum...when we were born, a child, a teenager, a young adult, and currently. It may be something worth your doing...through journaling or in workshops.

The sad truth stands that too many women and men remain on the injured side of the continuum. In a few cases the father-child bond is irredeemable, and the only recourse, suggested in various cultural stories, is symbolically “to kill your father”, to cut yourself off from Dad’s presence or memory. You haven’t been blessed thus far and never will be. So don’t wallow in the wound any further. Leave Dad behind and emotionally move on.

But, thankfully, most of us in the amphitheater today can make more peace with our fathers than we ever imagined, if we’re sufficiently brave and persistent. Our father-child bond is salvageable. It can be forgiven, healed, even regrown.

For I contend that our maturity as adult men and women hinges greatly, not entirely but greatly, upon bridging the chasms with our parents—in today’s case, with our fathers. The Hebrew scriptures rightly claim that only when we leave our fathers and mothers (and you can’t truly leave them until you’ve conducted your unfinished business), can we cleave to our chosen partners, can we forge mature adult ties.

So, my invitation today is for us to be courageous in facing our fathers afresh, in revisiting the pleasures and poverties of our father-child bond, to make a deeper, more enduring peace, be they step, adopted or biological fathers—again, I say, be they alive or dead. The play *I Never Sang for My Father* is accurate when it affirms that “...death ends a life but not a relationship which lives on in the heart of the survivor always struggling toward some resolution.”

Of course, this conciliation work isn’t easy; you and I know that, but there are two useful reminders taught me by our grandson, Trevor, around 10 p.m., after a Padre game when he was around 5 years old—reminders that keep us on purpose and make the

challenge a tad more doable. “Okay, Grandpa,” Trevor said in a sleepy yet crystal clear voice. “There are two really important things in life: first, keep your eye on the ball; and second, if you’re a little bit scared, it’s okay!”

My friends, Trevor’s young advice rings sound whether you’re playing baseball or making peace with your father: yes, you’ve gotta keep your eye on the ball, and if you’re a little bit scared, it’s okay!

So, let’s get to it. This morning, I’m going to share a few pastoral observations which have proven handy in my own odyssey in the quest to make greater peace with my father. Perhaps they’ll prove useful to you as well. There are clearly generational differences at work here, realizing that some current fathers are more actively engaged with their offspring than in my days of sonship and fatherhood. The fact is that our culture is more supportive of fathers being upclose and personal with their children. I only have to observe the tender, tough love of our younger San Dieguitan dads.

In any case, my hunch is that many adult women and men gathered today still have homework assignments to perform with your fathers. You need to write notes, speak new truths, make a visit...simply risk a healthier bond with your father, be he alive or not.

Here’s a first tip. If we children seek a sounder relationship with our fathers, then *we’ve* got to make the first moves.

Of course, there are exceptions. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, the warrior-king Odysseus returns and reveals himself to his teenager son Telemachus: “I’m the father whom your boyhood lacked and suffered pain for lack of. I am he.” The story continues with Telemachus weeping, as he flings his arms around his repentant, brave father. Would that

there were more fathers willing to retrace their steps, return to their children, ask forgiveness, heal festering wounds?

But let's be honest. Few fathers are as brave as Odysseus, taking the initiative in healing with their daughters and sons. However, it's also true that our fathers are often willing to come part way after we children have reached out.

The story goes that a king's son was at a distance of a hundred-day journey from his father. His friends said to him, "Return to your father." He said to them, "I can't. The way is too far." His father sent word to him and said: "My son, go as far as you're able, and I'll come the rest of the way to you."

I know that can happen. If we sons and daughters take the first steps, sincerely reach out, our fathers are often moved to do what they can, to go as far as they're able. Not always, but often. And even when they don't reciprocate, we children still feel better, more at peace with what we've dared to do.

The father-child relationship is a dance requiring effort and good will from both sides. Never forget that we sons and daughters have been abusive as well as affirming towards our fathers. We're connected in hurt; we must also be connected in restoration.

In Hebrew lore, Jacob transmitted personalized blessings to his sons from his death bed. It would have been beautiful and fitting, don't you think, if his eleven sons had responded in kind?

Second, I encourage us in our peace-making efforts with our fathers to recognize them not solely as wounders but wounded as well. As children we must remember that our fathers are partial beings, as are we all, trapped by conditioning and the

transgenerational web launched in father-child exchanges from the beginnings of time.

Robert Bly makes this point when he writes sympathetically about his own father:

*I began to think of him not as someone who had deprived me of love and attention or companionship, but as someone who himself had been deprived...I've begun to see Dad more as a man caught in a complicated situation. It brings me closer to him.*

Our fathers, both in image and identity have suffered greatly over the years. Plus they're too often underappreciated and unduly lampooned.

And it's downright tough to be a father, especially a modern one. The duties have expanded while the rights have diminished. Today's father no longer teaches his children his craft, as he did in rural America. He no longer apprentices them to others. He no longer controls their education, nor does he even have the illusion of doing so. He has little if anything, to say about their partnerships.

On the other hand, he's expected to exhibit a wide range of fatherly responses. Dad's supposed to support his youngsters financially, as always; support them all the way through college and even graduate school, if possible; be firm with them but understanding; involve himself in their problems; care for them physically, discipline them effectively yet remain their pal, present an authoritative, masculine figure his girls will admire and his boys will emulate.

Frankly, I find most of the growing demands and expectations of fatherhood to be worthwhile ones. What bothers me is the low amount of esteem still accorded the father by our society.

I was reading an article in a recent *New Yorker* magazine that lampooned fathers as being "blocks of marble, highly polished, with veins and seams...placed squarely in

the path of their children. Fathers cannot be climbed over; neither can they be slithered past.” I find such an image both inaccurate and derogatory. I’m tired of hearing such sabotaging stereotypes of fathers; perhaps you are too.

Comic strips certainly have done their share to make Pop the butt of the joke. Whereas most of the unmarried comic-strip heroes are adventurers, swashbucklers and romantics, with virility oozing out of every pore, the married ones, with few exceptions, are good-natured buffoons. The typical male comic-strip character remains a Dagwood Bumstead type of guy, a well-meaning idiot who’s constantly outwitted by his children, his wife, and even his dog. Examples of down-with-daddy razzing are so numerous that it would take no more than a few minutes to document fully a charge of pictorial sadism, verbal castration, or symbolic patricide.

To be lampooned is tolerable, I guess, if you can take such satire to be in jest. But the ridiculing is too constant to be laughed off. And, furthermore, we know that behind jokes lies piercing social commentary. Like racial slurs and sexist humor, father put-downs camouflage attitudes of condescension and blatant prejudice.

Now, if such daddy-denigration in the comics doesn’t raise your hackles, take a look at the samples available in TV shows such as *Men Behaving Badly*, or even in our sophisticated, serious writings. The great anthropologist, Bronislaw Malinowski says: “What about the father? As far as his biological role is concerned, he might as well be treated as a drone. His task is to impregnate the female and then to disappear.” And Margaret Meade claimed “that fatherhood is a social invention learned somewhere at the dawn of history. The role of the father is a psychologically foreign one, artificially imposed by the culture for the survival of the race.”

Wait a minute, Margaret! I'm sorry, but a woman, despite her fundamental biological connection with a child, isn't automatically a mother, with all the subtleties that role entails. A woman learns from her current culture, absorbing and adapting its particular ways of motherliness.

Fathers and mothers, it seems to me, must both be essentially trained for their child-rearing functions. We *all* have to learn how to be firm and fair, kind and loving parents and how to want and care for a child.

Our fathers are not only undervalued culturally, but often simply underappreciated by their families. We simply don't thank them enough. And doing it just on Father's Day, while nice, well, just doesn't suffice.

Robert Hayden has a poignant poem on this very point:

*Sundays too my father got up early  
And put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,  
Then with cracked hands that ached  
From labor in the weekday weather made  
Banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.*

*I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.  
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,  
And slowly I would rise and dress,  
Fearing the chronic angers of that house,*

*Speaking indifferently to him,  
Who had driven out the cold  
And polished my good shoes as well.  
What did I know, what did I know  
Of love's austere and lonely offices?*

So, I urge you, sons and daughters, to go home this afternoon and call, write, visit or, if personal contact is impossible...in the silence of your heart offer a deep, soulful prayer of gratitude for your Dad's austere and lonely duties of love?

Third, our fathers are seldom either everything we wanted or nothing we ever needed, but land somewhere in-between. Most fathers are *something*: able to deliver some example, some meaning, some fun and some love to our lives as children. There exist no perfect fathers and no perfect children, but every child and every father can be good enough! As Alice Walker put it with respect to her own tormented and tormenting father: “Dad, I’ve grown to love you for what you might have been. And I love you no less for what you were.”

Here’s the truth: when we make peace with that compromised yet realistic vision of fatherhood, then we allow our real fathers to be themselves as we become ourselves, bonded without being enslaved to one another.

We children are startled when, upon reflection, we discover the good (not perfect) experiences in our adventures with Dad. Too many children become “addicted” to dysfunctional memories and visions of fathers, never unlocking the power of either anger or affection, just wallowing in self-pity. Or conversely, we’re stuck in romantic, half-truth notions of our Dads.

My breakthrough with my own father happened just following college. I wrote him a letter where I finally acknowledged my Dad’s lost dreams and driving urges, his torments and his genuine, although not easily demonstrated, affection for his wife and two sons. I listed the specific ways in which I appreciated him. I told him of my gratitude for what we had and yet might continue to have in the years ahead. He sent me a love-letter in return.

I'll never forget, upon my first returning home, I began to tell Dad how much his letter meant to me, and he tearfully and slowly lifted his hand to his coat pocket, and gently patted my letter nestled therein. Indeed, Dad carried my epistle, daily, in his suit pockets until the day he died.

His letter lies amid my prized memorabilia and is imbedded in my heart's memory.

It doesn't take much to restore or deepen a father-child bond, does it? So I invite you, no I urge you, to do this spiritual work, while you still have breath!

Tom Owen-Towle  
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