



By Gordon Dalbey

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Crocodile Hunting with Dad: Your Father's Story Is Your Story

The Thanksgiving turkey had begun to settle after our extended-family dinner, and amid the chatter of dishes and lively conversation, the women rose from the table to gather in the kitchen. As the half-dozen men drifted outside to the patio, I picked up my pre-schooler son and joined them under a star-speckled desert sky.

There, my brother-in-law host was telling about a bullsnake that often visited the patio for shade on hot afternoons. Drawing closer to hear, I felt my son tighten his grasp on my neck and saw his eyes widen--as when I told him my own story of crocodile hunting years ago in Nigeria as a Peace Corps Volunteer. Among all my stories, that was his favorite and most often requested, relished each time as if it were the first.

Soon, the patio conversation turned to coyotes, and then javalinas, the fierce desert pig. Before long, the voices tapered off and the men fell silent, gazing out together into the vast darkness.

Savoring the moment, I shifted the boy on my hip and smiled, self-satisfied. The trip to visit my in-laws in Phoenix had been a spur-of-the-moment plan, and I congratulated myself on taking the leap.

Suddenly, a small but passionate voice burst forth from beside my chest, shattering the silence.

"One time, Daddy and me went crocodile hunting in Nigeria!"

"Wh-what...?" My jaw fell open as I turned to my son's face--brow furrowed intensely--just inches away.

Uncles, brothers-in-law and cousins looked up in surprise.

"It was very scary," the boy declared, eyes aflame and gesturing sharply with his fists as I stood there holding him. "But after the rainy time stopped, we jumped into the forest to the dry streams to catch him. We put a giant hook and some meat on the rope and the bamboo pole and saw his footprints in the sand and went to see if we got him."

Pausing, he shrugged his shoulders, raised his eyebrows matter-of-factly, and lifted empty hands. "But he took the meat and we didn't get the crocodile."

Puzzled and amused, the men looked at each other.

"Well," winked an uncle, "you and your daddy had quite a time hunting those crocodiles, didn't you!"

Beaming, the little boy nodded as the others turned to me and laughed good-naturedly.

Shaking my head in wonder, I offered a sheepish grin and hugged my son.

Later that night, I found myself sitting up in bed, strangely seized by the incident.

I'd left Nigeria twenty-five years before my son was born. Sure, I'd told him the crocodile-hunting story many times, with plenty of drama. The adventure had thrilled me as a young man, and I could understand why it would be exciting to him.

But how could he tell my twenty-five-year-old crocodile story to the men as if he'd been right there with me when it happened? Hadn't I taught my son not to lie?

I shook my head in frustration. And then it struck me: The boy was dead serious. His intensity was genuine and heartfelt. He wasn't lying.

In fact, I realized that my son was telling the truth--a deep truth, in fact, that we "modern" men--so unfathered and lost in the present--have forgotten: The father's story is the son's story.

What a man does is his son's history. As a father, your actions shape your son's heritage, the roots of his identity that undergird and supply his manhood--for better or worse.

Years ago, before becoming a dad myself, I used to say that a boy wants to bond with his father. But my son has taught me the greater truth: that in fact, a boy is bonded to his dad, in both flesh and spirit. The boy, that is, longs to affirm the father-bond that's already there, sculptured on his very face and rooted in his masculine soul.

That doesn't mean I'm my dad's clone, or my ancestors reincarnated. Rather, in order to grow into my destiny, I must root in my heritage. A tree without roots is a tree without fruits.

Granted, confessing the father within is hard for most men today, who often feel wounded and emotionally abandoned by Dad. But as one eighty-two-year-old great-grandfather declared at one of my men's retreats, "Whatever you don't forgive your father for, you'll do to your son."

To forget your father is therefore to forsake not only your past, but your future as well. That's why boys--and men--want so desperately to know Dad.

My father's father, who died when my dad was a teenager, was forced to leave third grade in the 1890's to work in the factories near Philadelphia. Later, as a man, he labored sixty hours a week, year after year, beside a blazing-hot furnace in a steel mill.

My father hung out on streetcorners in his teens. Through a series of marvelous events, he turned to work his way through college and become a Navy officer, faced World War II and afterward earned a graduate business degree.

This is not only who they were. It's who I am. Even as my son hunted crocodiles with me years before he was born, I sweat out the steel-mill furnace and World War II.

True, I have no callouses burned into my hands, and I never served in the military. But that's the point. Confessing the heritage I bear has positioned me--like my father--to give thanks humbly for what my forefathers have given me, to build upon it responsibly in my own time, and to give even more to my son.

My father's story is my story. Dad stands at the gateway to my history. As I engage his story in me, with all its pains and joys, disappointments and gifts, I am convicted in my destiny.

What's more, I realize now that in Jesus, Father God has declared, "My story is your story." His chosen people of the Bible are now my spiritual lineage; like a "wild olive branch (Rom. 11:24)," I have been grafted onto the original tree and can participate in God's promises to Israel.

To tell the story of what you and your Father God have done together is called evangelism.

And so, like Joshua, I say today, "Long ago, our ancestors lived on the other side of the Euphrates River and worshiped other gods. One of those ancestors was Terah, the father of Abraham, and Nahor. Then I took Abraham, our ancestor, from the land across the Euphrates and led him through the whole land of Canaan...." (Joshua 24:1ff,)