



*By Gordon Dalbey*

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## Father Hunger

Not long ago, I polled a conference of 350 fathers with this question: When you first became a father, did your own dad reach out to you—maybe with a phone call, a letter or a visit—to give you encouragement, support, or advice?

Only five hands went up.

Is it any wonder we men withdraw from our children?

On another occasion, I asked 150 men, “When you were growing up, did your father talk helpfully to you about your sexuality?”

Only two said Yes.

Is it any wonder men’s sexuality is confused and out of control?

In both instances, the men polled were not marginal in any sense. The majority had jobs, families, and shared values representative of the society at large.

In almost fifteen years of speaking at men’s events around the world, I’ve rarely seen those proportions change. The father-wound is an epidemic among us, snowballing down through the generations unto today, when its effects have become so destructive that we care not ignore it any longer.

Healthy civilizations have recognized the critical role of fathers since ancient times. In the last two verses of the ancient Hebrew scriptures, for example, God promises to “turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the hearts of the children to the fathers, or else I will come and smite the land with a curse” (Malachi 4:56).

To see that curse unleashed among us today, you don’t have to be religions—just honest.

A Catholic priest I know tells of a nun who worked in a men’s prison. One day, she said, a prisoner asked her to buy him a Mother’s Day card for his mother. She did, and the word traveled like wildfire around the prison. Deluged with requests, she called Hallmark Cards, who obliged with huge boxes of Mother’s Day cards as a donation. The warden arranged for each inmate to draw a number, and they lined up through the cell blocks to get their cards.

Weeks later, the nun was looking ahead on her calendar, and decided to call Hallmark again and ask for as many Father’s Day cards, in order to avoid another rush. As Father’s Day approached, the warden announced free cards were again available at the chapel. To the nun’s surprise, not a single prisoner ever asked her for a Father’s Day card.

The father-wound is most often a wound of absence—emotional as well as physical. As such, it's harder to recognize than others.

You can kill a living organism in two ways. With a plant, for example, you can cut it down, smash it, or beat it up. Or, you can just leave it alone and not water it. Live requires input. Abandonment kills.

In the souls of men, the weapon of destruction is shame. When Dad doesn't embrace, encourage, guide, and protect him, a boy grows up thinking, "Dad doesn't value me. I must not be worth much." He doesn't feel like a real man, confident that he belongs in the world, with both a destiny and the power at hand to fulfill it. He feels tremendous shame and anger at being abandoned in his deepest need.

Distrusting himself and other men, he's easily suckered into a counterfeit masculinity, from fast sex and alcohol to isolation and violence. Hence, prisons are bulging. Yet even the average, law-abiding man today hasn't had a father who said, "You're my son and I love you," or who helped him discover his unique talents and abilities. As a small boy in a large world of men, he's imprisoned by bars of shame from father-abandonment, unable to fulfill his destiny. He mis-focuses his muscles, intelligence and energies destructively instead of creatively.

One 32-year-old magazine editor, whose father had died two years earlier, put it this way: "I'm still waiting for my father to talk to me about sex and success, money and marriage, religion and raising kids. The shame of it is, I don't know a man my age who doesn't feel like he's navigating his life without a map." (Joe Kita, *Men's Health* 6/95)

A real man is a man who's real. He walks in the truth, even when it costs him his image of being in control. He doesn't want to hide his wound; he wants to heal it. He wants to face and overcome his inadequacies, so he can fulfill his calling as a husband, father, worker, and citizen. He's willing to confess, "I don't need a beer, my boss' approval, a sexual encounter, a gun, a race to hate, or a million dollars. I need a father!"

In fact, when Dad is absent, the boy looks to Mom to fill the gap-- ultimately, identifying more with the woman than the man. Later, he may grasp onto his wife. But no woman, no matter how present, loving, and helpful, can be a father.

Until a man faces this deadly wound, he'll never seek healing. To break the crippling generational cycle of shame and destruction, at least two steps are necessary.

First, a man must forgive his father for wounding him. Often this happens as the man dares to see the awful brokenness in his dad which fueled the wounding. A boy cries FROM his father's wound; dad hurts you, and you cry. But a real man cries FOR his father's wounds, feeling his dad's pain instead of stuffing it and acting out inappropriately.

Secondly, we men need to begin fathering ourselves through a community of support. The fatherless man today can begin to trust himself and reclaim his destiny as a man among men by getting together with other men and talking honestly about his brokenness and strengths. The shame flees when you discover you're not alone, that we're all in this together. The wolf loves the lone sheep.

However we choose to face it, we men are literally dying today for a father. But the good news is, you don't have to wait for a program. New life can begin with a simple handshake or phone call to say, "I need you, brother." Granted, it takes courage. It takes a real man.

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