

A BETTER DAY for FATHERS

Evelyn Cole

The Women's Movement was the defining social force of the last 40 years. Like all social change, it has a backlash, seen now in patriarchal religious fundamentalism-Christian, Muslim and Hebrew-and estranged fathers. The re-evaluation of fatherhood is the next radical social agenda. Australia seems to be leading it. Here is a story from the Sydney Morning Herald:

"Barry loved his children but he is the first to admit he did not know them. He worked 13 hours a day, six days a week, and on the seventh he worked around the house.

"He was a perfectionist driven to volcanic fury by ordinary signs of household disorder. When he did see his son and daughter, they were afraid of him. And so was his wife. 'I was not physically violent,' Barry said, 'but I was aggressive. The place was never good enough.' Barry's anger and obsessiveness drove his family away. After he wrenched the phone from the wall and threw it across the room, his partner of seven years took off. 'His temper was getting worse,' she said. 'The kids couldn't breathe.

"Barry joined the legion of angry, bitter, and sorrowful fathers estranged from their children, caught up in Family Court and the object of apprehended violence orders. 'The formula that had worked for his own father had failed him. 'I was a workaholic,' Barry said. "It was my duty to be the provider. At the time I thought I was great. Knowing what I know now, I can see I was not a good father."

Throughout Australia increasing numbers of men are enrolling in courses that did not exist five years ago to help them be better fathers. The "Angry Dads" movement has achieved prominence and political power as separated fathers railed against the family court. Quieter and more profound changes have occurred in fathers' attitudes toward their role.

Social services have grown to help separated fathers surmount their bitterness. Because there are so many men who do not seek help and continue to stew in bitterness, Australia's Child Support Agency decided to take help to where the men are, in their work places. Their program covers three areas: taking better care of oneself, building a business like relationship with the other parent, and learning how to be a good dad.

In England a man dressed as Batman climbed the royal palace in London. He said he had to dramatize the need for justice for fathers in child custody disputes. Around the world and across the Internet fathers are raising their voices. Better that than their fists. Women need to continue to fight the glass ceiling, to fight for equal wages, to get elected to congress, to become president, to influence men away from wars and the continual buildup to wars, but, for the sake of the children, they should back off in child custody disputes. Many divorced fathers give up. According to the National Fatherhood Initiative, about 40 percent of children who do not live with their fathers, have not seen them at all in the last year.

The father may feel that his ex-wife has prejudiced his children against him. Or he may be so bitter about perceived injustices he alienates his children. Although he tries to hide it, bitterness seeps through his pores. His children, then, don't want to see him.

Father's Day

Father's Day, that once a year tribute to Dad, is fraught with confusion. Many offspring pay no more than lip service to it through phone calls or commercial cards.

Because 70% of U.S. prisoners grew up without a father and because poets use few words to get to the heart of things, they encourage brief written communication to all fathers whether or not they lived with you, whether or not they are still living. Therefore, poets in San Luis Obispo, California added Write-to-Your-Father's Day to the calendar of U.S. National Holidays.

"Okay," you might ask, "What do I write to my Dad? 'I love you' would be a lie and the truth would just hurt him."

One poet answers, "Simply write and ask your father what he does or did that is Most enjoyable, Most scary, Most exciting and Most satisfying. Don't expect an answer. If you don't know where he is, write his answer as you imagine it. Repeat the question each year, adding to it briefly when you desire. There will be results. Risk them."

30

2000 words

HOW AND WHY FATHERS FAIL by Evelyn Cole

"Your father did what?" the man across from me asked?

"He and his legal buddies tried to pass a law over-riding a superior court judgment."

"Which one?"

"The one that barred mothers from taking their children to places a long distance away from their fathers," I answered. "They had to back down, of course, but it's no surprise that they tried."

"I think it's a surprise. Why would men like your father want to undermine the rights of fathers?"

"Here's why. Family laws come from unconscious, gender-related motivation. The number of laws favoring mothers in child custody disputes were written and passed predominantly by men who sanctify motherhood. "

"Wow. I never heard a legislator admit to that."

"They wouldn't because they aren't aware of their unconscious feelings. Laws favoring equality for women in the workplace are passed by men, reluctantly, and under great pressure. In this case they are not touching on motherhood.

"Gender-related issues run deep in human minds," I continued. "It's not half bad in the U.S.. Think how it is in some countries. I believe that most of it is unconscious.

Lots of fathers grew up without fathers of their own. As a result, they have no unconscious clues to guide them in day to day interactions with growing, changing children. Some fathers react with raging voices and punishment to regain a semblance of control. Others withdraw into silence and distance.

"Girls who grow up with mothers train their children as they were trained unless they make a conscious decision to do exactly the opposite. Even then their mothers' words slip off their tongues unwonted. When my teen-aged daughters started swearing at each other in a grocery store parking lot I yelled at them, 'Stop that! You sound like a couple of fish wives.'

"Their mouths dropped open. 'What's a fish wife?' one of them asked.

"My words in the heat of the moment were not mine. They were my mother's. We all laughed at my attempt to answer the question."

My listener smiled. "Go on."

"Silent and absent fathers leave their sons no phrases or ideas to rebel against and then later repeat for their children. Worse, the sons have no foundation for their identity. They seek it instead on the street or on the battlefield.

"Also, fatherhood is really tough on stepfathers. They usually have two strikes against them: 1. Competition for the mother and 2. Confusion about their power in the relationship. If they don't recognize these strikes to begin with, they suffer the pain of helplessness. None of us likes to feel helpless and out of control. It enrages us. Children often arouse that feeling and get the brunt of the rage.

"In a highly competitive society like ours, fathers often find themselves competing with their growing sons. Sons, seeking their own identity and respect, reject their fathers even as they compete with them. They NEED fathers to push against. Absent or silent fathers do not provide the essential battering ram boys need to form their specific identities. According to the National Society for Fathering, the average age that sons most dislike their fathers is seventeen. This is both normal and healthy.

"Unfortunately, most fathers don't recognize the importance of this period of dislike. They battle with their sons or avoid them. Too often, love is the last feeling fathers and sons let themselves feel for each other, or express."

FAMOUS FATHERS

Stories abound about famous men and their sons. Kirk Douglas loved and competed with his two sons. Only one, Michael, competed with him enough to equal his success. The other died in middle age from alcohol-related disease. Michael turned out to be as famous and respected as his father. At middle and old age these two are free to love each other.

My father loved all three of his sons, but only two competed with him successfully. However, he wept with love when the son who did not compete came home from war. It was the only time I saw my father openly express his love for a son.

Our former president, George Bush, loved his sons, too. One competed the most and became president, too. But the competition continues beyond middle and old age. When George senior was president, George W. said in a 1989 interview, "I have to make a fairly big splash in the pool for people to recognize me. My pool has been expanded so much because of who my Dad is. The advantage is that everybody knows who I am. The disadvantage is that no matter how great my accomplishments may be, no one is going to give me credit for them." (Newsday, Long Island newspaper)

To compete with his father, George junior had to behave outrageously, be more decisive, more bullish than his father had been as president. George senior maintained the competition as evidenced by his presentation to Ted Kennedy of the 2003 George Bush award for Excellence in Public Service. The award announcement praised Kennedy as an "inspiration to all Americans." (10/18/03 Boston Globe)

Certainly Ted Kennedy's principles do not resemble those of George W. Bush. In similar subtle ways George senior shows his disapproval. This ongoing father-son competition is pretty well hidden, yet bits and pieces sneak out to the press often enough for us to know it's still active.

The unconscious mind never forgets. It just hides in about 90% of our brains. But it can be found! Recognition of the role of one's unconscious mind in raising children can ease the resolution of conflicts, rendering them unnecessary rather than unavoidable.

HOW WELL DO YOU KNOW YOUR FATHER? Take the following survey to see where you fall on the scale. Some poets in San Luis Obispo, California conducted this survey online and at the local Farmers' Market. When asked the question, "How well do you know your father on a scale of one to ten?" 100 randomly selected adults answered: With one standing for "Who?" and ten for "very well",

11 respondents chose 10
7 chose 9
15 chose 8
12 chose 7
3 chose 6
3 chose 5
17 chose 4
9 chose 3
13 chose 2
10 chose 1

The younger the respondent, the more likely he or she asked, "Which father?" One comment that came by email was similar to many. An adult son wrote, "Both my bio dad and step dad are gone from this earth. And I never really knew either one. They were men troubled all their lives and suffered John Wayne Syndrome."

Another: "What an interesting question. I neither knew my father nor my father-in-law despite years with them."

The National "Write-to-your-Father's Day" one week before Father's Day encourages an end to silent suffering, to John Wayne syndromes, to bitterness and loneliness.

Writing letters to fathers whether or not they are still alive, whether or not there's a known address, changes the writer for the better. And delivered letters change the fathers. The more you know your father, the better you know yourself.

30

Ten Best Things a Father Can Do:

- 1. Know himself to the core**
- 2. Recognize his hot buttons**
- 3. Recognize the source of his hot buttons**
- 4. Accept his hot buttons**
- 5. Feed himself-physically and emotionally**
- 6. Think**
- 7. Laugh with, not at**
- 8. Walk a wavering middle line with discipline**
- 9. Lead by example more than by words**

10. Understand his child's need to push against him at each stage of pending separation

WORSE TEN MISTAKES A FATHER CAN MAKE

- 1. Hit his children**
- 2. Yell, shout, rant and rave**
- 3. Apologize frequently**
- 4. Lecture his children**
- 5. Run away, physically or emotionally**
- 6. Tease his children**
- 7. Demand respect**
- 8. Lie to his children in any way**
- 9. Lie to himself**
- 10. Berate himself**

Evelyn Cole, MA, MFA
The Whole-mind Writer