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Father's Day Reflections

By Kenneth A. Sprang

The greatest gift we can give our children is unconditional acceptance . . .-simply because they are.

This Father's Day, I invite you to close your eyes and recall the messages that you heard from your father while growing up (and may still hear today). If you are a father yourself, consider what messages you are giving your children. Hear any similarities?

One of the most persistent issues that we hear from our clients, is their struggle to meet their father's expectations. No matter what these adult children do, it is never enough quantitatively or qualitatively for Dad. Countless men and women in our society pursue education, careers, life paths, and even marriages, because of their fathers' expectations.

I think of a former student of mine whose real love was the theater. Yet she went to law school—battling anxiety and depression along the way—to meet her father's expectations. We continuously see adults in our practice who are exhausting themselves physically and emotionally trying to “measure up” to Dad's expectations, in an unceasing quest to win his approval and love.

I know that struggle well. My parents were divorced when I was three. As time passed my father became less and less involved in my life. As a child, I spent years trying to earn his love, to make him proud of me, to win his attention. I even made some career decisions out of my quest to please or win approval from my father.

Sadly, when my son was born, I quickly formed expectations for him, too. I wanted him to be the perfect kid. However, he had other ideas, and as he entered into adolescence, it became clear that he marched to a different drummer. Our once seemingly tranquil, loving relationship evolved into a war of wills.

Finally, a wise therapist taught me that I had to accept my son as he was, and not as I might want him to be. It was one of the most important lessons of my life.

Clearly I had expectations of both of my children. I wanted them to have the educational, economic, and other advantages and opportunities that I did not have. Trouble was that I was determining what those advantages and opportunities were and not consulting my children.

The change did not occur overnight, and I wonder even now if either of my children ever subconsciously wonders whether they measure up. I hope not, for I truly treasure them just as they are. It is hard, however, to credibly change messages that a child heard for years early in life.

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I do try to verbalize from time to time that my only wish for them is their happiness and pursuit of their visions and dreams, whatever and wherever they are. The world is their stage, and I am privileged to sit in the audience and be their cheerleader.

In my work with the Mankind Project, an international men's organization which seeks to help men address life issues unique to men, it is the rare man who does not identify some emotional issues with his father, whether a gay man seeking acceptance, a man seeking to pursue an alternative career, one working to overcome the legacy of abuse—which imparts the ultimate message that one does not measure up—or a host of other issues. If any of these themes resonate for you or men you know, consider the following:

- Stop trying to please your father or win his affection. You can't. Whatever the issues are, they are his, not yours, and no matter how hard you work or how much you achieve, it will always fall short.
- If you are a father, listen to your children, whether they are young children or adults, and help them find and build their own dreams, their own lives, their own identities. Sure you want what is best for them, but ultimately only they can discover what that "best" is. The greatest gift we can give our children is unconditional acceptance just as they are--simply because they are.

In our experience, when clients learn to stop seeking to please Dad and learn to craft their own lives, they experience tremendous energy and growth. A lifelong burden is finally lifted. When children feel listened to and valued "as is" by their parents, the relationships between parents and children improve dramatically.

Often we need outside help making such fundamental life changes. I invite you to get the support you need. The rewards are well worth the effort. Happy Father's Day,

Ken and Carol Sprang, direct the Bethesda-Chevy Chase Counseling Center and SinglesToSoulmates in Bethesda, offering Imago therapy, counseling and coaching services for individuals, couples, and families, executive coaching, and family business and related consulting. ken@singlestosoulmates.com. (301) 907-3377.

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