Do You Have a Child Causing You Pain?

Steven Darter

As a small child, I would toddle along with my dad each Sunday as he did work in the yard. I was his little helper, pulling weeds, using my toy shovel to move dirt, picking up twigs. Whatever was asked of me, I proudly did. My dad loved having me there as his helper, and I equally loved being there and working—if you could call it that—beside him. It was a wonderful feeling.

I don't recall the day that being his little helper turned to "Do I have to?" It became work I didn't want to do but had to do. The loving aura that had existed was replaced by the darkness of my resentment. He asked, I complained. He insisted, I capitulated.

I always did the work that was required of me, whether it was mowing the lawn, sweeping up grass clippings, pulling weeds, raking leaves or removing them from drains, cleaning windows with Windex, or helping him hang storm windows in the late fall and removing them in the spring. He always said, "Good job." I mostly mumbled and grunted, displaying displeasure and annoyance with the entire obligation and arrangement through words and body language. I would depart as soon as I completed my assigned chores.

The relationship went from not being able to get enough of Dad to not wanting to spend time with him. Tension became unbearable and yelling frequent. He yelled at me for things I did or didn't do and for trouble I continually got myself into. I stole things I should not have, like candy from a store, money from a girl's purse, and emblems I pried loose from cars. I caused damage, like setting a fire in a wooded lot and throwing rocks through newly installed windows of homes that were being built. School was a disaster, with each report card producing mostly Ds and Fs. Many nights, my mother would say exasperatedly, "Wait until your father gets home!"

As I moved further into my high school years, there was gambling, occasional vandalism, and broken curfews, and in college there were drugs. But what got to Dad the most was my arguing. He had strong opinions and would seemingly not listen to the thoughts of others, particularly mine. He would go on rants, leaving little room for people to say anything, but I would often fight my way in and wage verbal warfare. Sometimes I baited him with a question like "Is China a country?" And when he said yes, I would argue the other side, in such a way that an inferno of anger and frustration grew within him. We got to the point where if he said "black," I would say "white," and if he said "big," I would say "small." It was so bad that when I got married, my wife, Diane, pointed out that I would often begin sentences with the words "You're wrong." When my father and I weren't arguing, I was doing my best to ignore him. A day didn't go by without my tormenting him in some way.

There were moments, though, with my dad, during those tumultuous years, that would break through the barrier, melt the ice, bring the smiles, and release the tension. Moments that were glorious, like when he said, “Steve, grab the gloves.” I would run into the house, get his baseball glove and mine, and we would toss the ball—a simple game of playing catch. He was proud of how I could field anything he threw my way, and I was proud to receive his approval. Other such moments were when my oldest brother, Jay, who was married with children, came over for a visit and Dad would say, “Steve, get the cards.” We would play three-handed pinochle, complete with teasing and trash talking. Then there were larger family dinners and afterward my dad telling stories, mostly about growing up on the Lower East Side of New York. I never argued with him during those moments and could listen to his storytelling for hours, even though he told the same stories over and over. This I never grew tired of.

My dad died when I was fifty-three years of age, but one of the best decisions I made, or realizations I came to, came in my twenties. I realized that I could spend my life focusing on the anger, resentments, frustrations, disappointments, and the strain in our relationship, or I could instead choose to focus on the things that brought a smile to my face and joy to my heart—the good thoughts and positive memories rather than the bad ones. When I did this, I regained that loving feeling, and our relationship was reborn and much stronger.

I learned to avoid certain topics. And when he went on a rant, I just listened. I didn’t take the bait, didn’t fall into old habits. I waited the storm out. I wanted the positive, not the negative, and adjusting myself was a small price to pay.

For more than twenty-five years, we spoke at least once a week—father and son. I telephoned, and if I forgot, he’d call me, asking if all was OK. His pride in me was infectious and his approval intoxicating. I had no greater supporter. Few things could beat the feeling I had when I saw my dad’s pride in me.

My father never stopped loving and believing in me. He never stopped wanting us to spend time together, even when our relationship was at its worst, even after saying things to each other that caused great pain. As I evolved into adulthood, I wondered why that was so, given how much grief I caused him.

It was easier to see him walking away and wiping his hands free of the mess of a son that I was. But he resisted any temptation he may have had to walk away. In doing so, he taught me a lesson, one that has been battle-tested.

He demonstrated an enduring value: If you have a troubled child—a lost soul—you don’t walk away; you do what you can, instinctively, lovingly—as he did—to try and correct things, to try and right the course. And this, I have learned, is not easy.

Life has taught me that when you are not successful in finding a way to save your child, it is like being in a free fall, grasping at anything that will slow the descent and stop the downward spiral. How quickly things can spin out of control. How quickly, you ask, did it get to this point?

Life has taught me that when your child takes a self-destructive path, despite your efforts, it is like watching a scene from a movie and seeing something horrendous about to happen, but you feel helpless to stop it. You want to reach through the glass and correct the situation, stop the production, stop the self-destruction.

Life has taught me that when your child needs saving, you just keep plugging away until success arrives. You presume success even though it may not come. You never stop loving and believing in your child, never stop believing that positive change is around the corner.

That is the job of a parent and being a father, as taught to me by my father.

And when a child is saved and his life turns around, there is no greater celebration or feeling. But when he remains trapped and you can't free him, can't extricate him from the mire, mush, and morass, there is an unrelenting weight that never ceases bearing down.

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