

Healing a Man's Father Wound



It is a peculiarly twentieth-century story, and is almost too awful to tell," writes Frederick Buechner, "about a boy of twelve or thirteen who, in a fit of crazy anger and depression, got hold of a gun somewhere and fired it at his father, who died not right away but soon afterward.

"When the authorities asked the boy why he had done it, he said that it was because he could not stand his father, because his father demanded too much of him, because he hated his father. And then later on, after he had been placed in a house of detention, a guard was walking down the corridor late one night when he heard sounds from the boy's room, and he stopped to listen. The words he heard the boy sobbing out in the dark were, 'I want my father, I want my father.'"¹

"How incredibly sad," we say, but how many of us have killed or turned away from the only source that can meet the deepest longing of our heart? "Not me," I say, but every time I look for love in any wrong place, I do that.

For example, I looked for love in the things I did, like making beautiful things including a dream home. Then I majored in words and wrote books and poems. I learned to move a crowd to tears, make them laugh hilariously and inspire them to reach for noble goals. I got lots of approval but none of these things ever made me feel loved.

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Perhaps most delusive of all is how I looked to the opposite sex to try to make me feel loved and to affirm my masculinity. It started with my mother because, being my primary caretaker, she was all I had to look to when I was a child. Next I fell madly in love with my second grade school teacher, looking for love from her. That didn't work either.

Unfortunately, no mother or any other woman can ever make a boy or a man love himself as a man. An attractive woman might make him feel terrific for a time but she still can't make him feel loved or that he is a man no matter how attractive she might be. A man may even be intoxicated with passion

when he meets a beautiful woman and may want to marry her. If he does, he may be in for a rude awakening. Not because of her but because of him. When his passion subsides he'll be faced with the pain and reality of his own loneliness and emptiness.

And then to avoid facing his pain, he'll look to another performance, climb another mountain, or seek another beautiful woman. . .and another. . .to prove to himself that he is a man. Or he'll deaden the pain through alcohol, drugs or addictive behaviors and eventually ruin his health, get cancer, die of a heart attack, never get close to the ones he loves, or ruin those relationships. That is, he'll keep acting out until he faces why he looks in the wrong places for the love he never received as a child.

Ask a hundred men how many felt close to and affirmed by their father and you will see about three or four hands raised. Herein lies the secret of so much of our relational and emotional distress and the answer to our recovery. The father wound that injured our masculine soul is because we never felt loved by our fathers. And that wound desperately needs to be healed.

Only a father (or a surrogate or substitute father) can affirm a man's masculinity and make him feel that he's a man. Neither fame nor fortune nor all the women in the world can ever do this for him. Only a father's love can.

But what if our father was absent, as was mine? He was physically present but not emotionally. He was uninvolved in my life, which I perceived as rejection, and then I in turn rejected him. I "killed" my father too. Not literally, of course, but as far as I was concerned he was dead to me. In doing this I shot myself in the heart. And everywhere I've went for years I searched for the love I never found from my father.

So where's the answer?

First, I need to acknowledge the fact that I had or have a father wound and need healing. As long as I deny this I can never be healed.

Second, I need to get in touch with my pain, express my deep anger and sob out my well of buried grief over the loss of the father's love I never had. Counseling with a male counselor, participating in a psychodrama (role play) group, prayer for inner healing, and having a couple of soul brothers with whom I can share openly and honestly has helped bring much healing.

Third, I need to continue to build healthy relationships with healthy men. No woman could ever affirm my masculinity or teach me to love myself as a man. Only men can meet my unmet father need.

As long as a man depends on a woman to make him feel good about himself, he is still emotionally tied to his mother's apron strings. All a woman can ever do is confirm what a man already feels about himself. That is, if he rejects himself as a man, he will likely be attracted to a rejecting woman. Or if he loves and accepts himself as a man, he will be attracted to a loving and accepting woman who will confirm what he feels about himself.

Fourth, to be affirmed by men—who become father substitutes—I need to find men I can trust and let them know me as I truly am—warts and all. Every one of us has a dark side. I need to take the risk and share my dark side to these men I trust—men who will know me fully and accept me as I am. It is through their love and acceptance that I learn to love and accept myself. But as long as I keep my dark side hidden, I will never feel fully loved. I can only be loved—and healed—to the degree that I am known. This may be scary but there is no other way.

Fifth, because I am a spiritual being, the bottom line to feeling fully loved is to feel God the Father's love at the very core of my being. Herein lies the deepest healing of the masculine soul. Thus I need to come to God through his Son, Jesus Christ, confess all my dark side to him, ask for his forgiveness, and accept him as Lord of my life.

I then can learn to feel closer to God and experience his love as I get closer to healthy, accepting men and feel their love. As God said, "If we love each other, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us."²

NOTE: I need to realize that so many women also have a deep father wound. Only when we men are healed are we able to appropriately affirm women so they, too, can be healed of their father wound.

1. Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*, P.65.

2. 1 John 4:12.

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