

2007 UJUMEN Sermon Award Winner!

Restarting Fatherhood, My Up-Down Solution by Frank Mundo

Reading

From Forgiving your Father for Fathers Day, By Mark Brandenburg:

The memory of my father stays with me like a shadow.

It's a shadow filled with a complex array of gratitude, sadness, disappointment, and awe. It is the same for all men, for there's no escaping these memories. They are deeply imbedded in us, and they impact us every day of our lives.

And whether you're trying to live up to your father's expectations, prove him wrong, or rid your memory of him, the shadow of your father will remain. Each effort demands its' own cost. And each effort will keep the shadow close to you.

When you have children, the memories of your father grow stronger. The wounds that haven't healed are poised to be inflicted on them. We all carry wounds from our father. We all feel the pain of not "measuring up" in some way. But whatever your wounds, it's important to remember this: What is not healed in you will show up in your children. It will show up no matter how hard you fight against it, and no matter how hard you try "not to be your father." It will show up, and transcend all your efforts to prevent it.

What's left to us is a simple choice. Would we like to live with these wounds, and transfer them to our sons and daughters, or would we like to explore them, and find a way to heal them? To be an effective father is to understand the power of the memories you make with your child each day. These memories can be touched by the wounds from your childhood, or they can be touched by forgiveness and love. And while the path to forgiveness can be difficult, it's worth every ounce of effort you give it. And most importantly, it is a gift to your children, and the generations that follow them. (1)

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Let me start with a short piece written by Ken Druck, author of *The Secrets Men Keep*:

“When my Uncle Nathan was 70, he visited his father’s grave tucked away in a corner of a cemetery in the Bronx. He stood there facing the headstone, the November wind ruffling his silver hair. Suddenly, his body started shaking. Tears streaked his face. “Dad, you never even put your arms around me,” he sobbed, spilling out a secret grief that he had carried around with him all these years. “You never touched me. You never hugged me. Where were you when I needed you?”

It may surprise us to know that the most powerful common denominator influencing men’s lives today is the relationship we had with our fathers. The events and circumstances may have taken place years, even decades, ago. They may appear irrelevant to our lives in the present. But if we look beyond the surface, we will discover, as my Uncle Nathan did, that Dad is still very much with us today. Much of our behavior and many of our attitudes toward living can be traced to our fathers. Whether our dad was physically or psychologically absent, whether he died when we were young or is still alive at a ripe old age, whether we consider him a good father or a poor one, our fathers are in us. Every man hears the silent voice of his father inside his own head.

One of the most important clues to discovering who we really are lies in knowing who we were in relation to our fathers. One of the best-kept secrets for many men is the extent to which they allow themselves to be tied to their fathers, dead or alive.

..... our stories uncover a deep yearning for Father’s love and acceptance.

And some, like my Uncle Nathan, will journey to their own graves with that secret longing unsatisfied...”(2)

How do we mend ourselves with our fathers... and mend our sons and daughters with ourselves?

What about my father?

My father was a physicist. During WWII he was swept off a Radar Mast of an American Destroyer in mid Atlantic and was lucky enough to be plucked out of the sea by a sailor tied by a lifeline to a following British Destroyer. Later my father participated in the war by getting American planes filled with bombs into the air and then bailing out so they could flown by radio control to Germany to blow up submarines in their bunkers. Joe Kennedy was in my father’s group. He didn’t make it out of his plane. There is my awe.

During my younger years my father designed guidance systems for Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles. In his work he was rarely home. But he provided for us, we had what we needed but rarely saw him.... with his travels, working late at night and on weekends. We never wanted for anything... in a material sense. There is my gratitude.

He was never there at any significant event in my life that I can remember... he was somewhat like the Lone Ranger... always riding in and out of town. Like many men of his generation... *“he wanted to raise us but [it seemed] he didn’t want to know us.”* There is my sadness and my disappointment.

I never understood my father’s work. I was never introduced to it. I feared it. Would I be lost at sea... or disappear from my family when I became a man, and began to work?

I recall the cold shock of horror I received... like nothing I had ever felt before... when, as a child I saw the movie, Moby Dick. You will recall from that story... that Captain Ahab had a fury and an obsession with catching the White Whale... Moby Dick... the whale that had bitten off one of his legs. He pursued the whale relentlessly across several oceans and finally, when he did come upon the whale at last he jumped into a whaleboat and harpooned the whale. As the harpoon rope raced out he got caught in the rope and was pulled over the side. The next scene – and the one that struck horror in my heart... was the shot of Captain Ahab’s body, lashed to the side of the whale as it surfaced and then sank under the waves.. Ahab’s lifeless arm swinging back and forth. A “symbolic” last farewell....

For years I had thought that the horror I experienced in that movie – and it was truly visceral - was based on an unconscious recognition of the consequences of uncontrolled anger. However, in preparing this sermon I have come to an entirely different awareness. Ahab was very likely my father ... and his predicament ... one that lay in wait for me were I to become passionately committed to work.

What was it that I expected to get from my father that I didn’t get? Was it hugs? Was it his presence at my games and plays or recognition of me as a person? Edward Frost puts this question felt by so many men... better than I.....

“What is it about fathers that has them brought so often and kept so late in the court of their children’s judgment? ... What is it about the task of fathering so many fumble with and finally put aside?(3)”

When I became a father I promised myself to be more involved with my children... and for a time, it worked. I raced to daycare. I took time off for birthday parties. I went to school events and games. I sat in bed with my youngest son and read him stories. We had a favorite book on dogs. All kinds of dogs. He could recognize and name them all.

I must tell you about one of those “moments” that a parent has, which will always bring a smile to my lips. We were in the park, and I was pushing my son along in his stroller. A middle-aged lady came along with a small dog on a leash. Seeing Frank Jr. she knelt down, scooped up her dog and presented it him. “See, she said, “...doggie”. My son gently patted the dog on the head, then looked the lady square in the eye and uttered a single word. “Chihuahua.”

My other son... I used to put him in a waste basket and fly him around the house – he holding on to the edge for dear life... and I... well making airplane noises while we buzzed by wing chairs and over ottomans. Cherished memories...

As my children grew older, I grew less and less able to be a part of their lives. Divorce was part of the equation. But an equally large part is that I never had had any experiences of son-to-father. I didn't really know how to relate. I didn't know how to be involved... and perhaps worse yet.... I didn't sense the loss of what I really didn't have before... from the son side of the equation. Indeed it wasn't until I arrived at being older that I was suddenly struck with the profound sense of loss of shared experiences ... experiences that never were and which will never be.

Thinking again about my father.... and what I had missed.... I recalled an Edward Frost sermon. I wrote to him for the text...

What did I expect from my father, I wonder? What was it I so desperately needed, after it was too late, after he could no longer give it? Robert Bly... said what boys and young men need from older men is blessing -- because too few are blessed by their fathers. Blessing is the bestowal of approval and encouragement. "Blessing," says Webster's Dictionary, "is a thing conducive to happiness and welfare." And without the blessing of the father all else, it seems, fails to be conducive to happiness or welfare.

For some of us, it seems, without the father's blessing, his approval and encouragement, nothing fully satisfies. Always there is the rising urge to take the small or large success and burst with it through memory's door shouting, "Hey, Dad, guess what?" And if he is not home, or occupied with his failings, or deep in his despair, his hopeless anger, his envy of his children, where, then, shall we go for blessing? (3).

I came to realize I had stumbled on the source of the profound sense of loss and sadness I had in my life. I wondered if other men felt it. I sought out their counsel, their wisdom and, finding many with similar backgrounds and stories, experienced their grief. Out of that I came to realize that fathering is an inter-generational thing. It doesn't get fixed so easily in a single generation. What is needed is what I came to call an "Up-Down Solution."

The "Up" part is fixing yourself and your relationship with your own father ...with forgiveness. Returning to thoughts of Mark Brandenburg, who wrote the words of our reading this morning....

Forgiveness can be a powerful and transforming experience. It is a way of giving up hope that the past can be changed. When you forgive your father, you accept the past as it was, and ready yourself to move forward. No matter how abusive or absent your father was, you accept what happened, and stop blaming your father for your current problems.

Forgiveness is not a one-time event. It happens emotionally when we feel the pain and sadness from letting go of a better past, and what we might have had. It happens when we stop blaming our fathers, and stop using anger to shield us from our sadness.

Forgiveness happens in our thoughts when we see our fathers for who they were, and not for whom we wanted them to be. It happens when we end the illusion of the selfless father, who looks after our needs first and foremost.

Forgiveness is complete when we allow it to unfold. It is a process, and it may take years. But as each layer of anger peels away, your opportunities expand. The energy that was devoted to anger and regret can now be devoted to things that matter: passion, truth, and love...[and being a better father]. (1)

The other part of forgiveness is to try to forgive yourself. To help with this I would offer you a poem written by David Ray. It's called "Thanks, Robert Frost."

**Do you have hope for the future?
Someone asked Robert Frost, toward the end.**

**Yes, and even for the past, he replied,
that it will turn out to have been all right for what it was.**

**Something we can accept,
mistakes made by the selves we had to be,
not able to be, perhaps, what we wished,
or what looking back half the time
it seems we could so easily have been, or ought...**

**The future, yes, and even for the past,
that it will become something we can bear.
And I too, and my children, so I hope...
will recall as not too heavy the tug of those albatrosses
I sadly placed upon their tender necks.**

**Hope for the past, yes, old Frost,
your words provide that courage
and it brings strange peace that itself passes into past,
easier to bear because you said it, rather casually,
as snow went on falling in Vermont years ago.**

The "Down" part of the solution is to bless your children. It could be as simple as a phone call this afternoon. Call your children and tell them how much their life has meant to you and that you are proud of them. Recognize and honor the choices they have made

if you can. If you can only acknowledge their choices, do that and speak to them of how their “being” has added to your life.

Speak to them of the time they were in the stroller and knocked some lady on her keister with their juvenile brilliance.

It is quite likely, when you’re pushing up daisies, they’ll remember your phone call. Maybe even make one of their own....

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- (1) Mark Brandenburg, Forgiving your Father for Fathers Day
- (2) Ken Druck, The Secrets Men Keep
- (3) Edward Frost, sermon: Life with Father