

When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much the old man had learned in seven years.

- Attributed to Mark Twain

I love doing these services. I think this is the third or fourth one I've done now. To be honest, there's always this sense of foreboding as the date approaches and I struggle with what I'm going to say and how I can possibly keep going for a whole fifteen minutes and, oh by the way, say something meaningful. But, it's the struggle itself that is the gem here because the process itself forces me to delve more deeply into the subject being discussed than I would otherwise. This subject is certainly no exception.

Lately, I've been examining what my place is within my family and what my true identity is as a father and husband and as a man. This exploration has led me to look more closely at men's relationships to their sons and fathers and the spiritual connection to the divine as modeled by father figures.

As I look out into the gathering here this morning I see a number of sons. Each one of you has a relationship with your father that is unique between you. And yet, I wager that there are many similarities we share as sons of our fathers.

Now, I should preface these words by ensuring the women gathered here that I am not intending to exclude you by focusing exclusively on the Y side of the chromosome pair. In fact, I'll bet that, before I'm done, many of you will have nodded your heads in knowing recognition of the dynamics involved between son and father. After all, many of you are mothers to sons, sisters to brothers, wives to husbands, and have been witness to the often-times awkward dance we men do with both our sons and fathers.

Now, the "alien" I refer to in my title refers to the alien we see in our fathers as we become aware of our own selves as boys and begin to look to our fathers to satisfy many needs. Too often, our relationship with the father is strained, complicated, and, well, alien. Conversely, as I'm coming to understand fathering, I'm beginning to see the

alien in my older children as they begin to pull away and assert their own personalities and become more independent.

In researching this topic, for which I have a personal stake, being both a father of two boys and a son of an aging father, I found it interesting that I was able to find quite a number of books in the bookstore focused on women's intimacy issues, but very few focused on men's intimacy. I suppose I shouldn't be surprised. Men seem to have a pattern that goes back to our earliest ancestry, referenced vividly even in the Bible, of having difficult, strained relationships with their fathers.

In his book "Brother-Spirit", Tom Owen-Towle draws from biblical reference to illustrate in great detail Adam's relationship with his father, how that relationship colors his attitudes of fathering to his sons, Cain and Abel, and how the two brothers' relationships are affected, disastrously, by their relationship with their paternity. Tom writes:

"The blockage we men experience in our own relationships with our fathers is worked out, usually in unsatisfactory and

often damaging fashion with our brothers. To put it another way, because we are unresolved in our vertical, authority relationships, our horizontal, peer encounters suffer a consequential price.

“Perry Garfinkel validates this claim in his own study of ‘Fathers and Sons: After His Image’:

‘The father is not all he appears at first to be. In fact, as most of the men in my research indicate, the men they wanted to love the most and be close to—their fathers—were the ones with whom they were least able to feel intimate. The ally is revealed as the rival.... The father-son relationship is a microcosm and a model of how men relate to each other.’

“Thus our primary hurt, gap, wound is with our fathers, which then gets replayed, often exacerbated, in the wounding of our peers. In sum, hurt men inevitably hurt others.”

I hadn’t really given much thought to the Genesis story as it relates to my relationship with my own father and to my sons until I had read

this book, but it does act a memorable, and familiar, reference to father's interactions with their sons. Sam Osherson refers to this idea in his book Finding Our Fathers when he states:

"...mothers become life-giving earth in the unconscious of men, fathers become wrathful, judgmental gods."

This theme of "wounding" comes up again and again in Sam's book in various contexts to enforce the point that we as adult men have many unresolved issues related to their relationships with their fathers. And, unfortunately, there are few venues for us men to openly discuss our feelings and work out our issues that cause us to be wounded.

My dad, who is now 81, and who I now have a very good relationship with I might add, was in many ways the typical father who had the following characteristics (see if any of this sounds familiar):

- Stern
- Aloof

- A man of few words
- Judgmental
- Someone who related to me on his terms, not mine
- Always right
- Had clear notions of how you treat girls: "You don't ever hit your sister". (Boy did my sister play that for all it was worth!)

Now, as I said, I'm doing ok with my dad these days, but it wasn't always so. My dad left my mom when I was 6, the details of which I'll spare you. Suffice it to say, that was the beginning of a long and complicated road toward reconciliation. We saw each other for a couple months over the summer, when Mom was grateful for my sister and me to be "out of her hair" for a while. While I will always remember those trips to Maryland to live with dad as great times, the adult in me reminds me that my dad was very often away from us even there and we were left to fend for ourselves.

I also clearly remember several occasions when dad would make commitments to come up to New York for my birthday or Christmas

and then not show, on one occasion calling just hours before my birthday party to tell me that he was sorry he wouldn't be able to make it.

To keep some perspective, it would be unfair of me to leave the painting of my dad's portrait there. We had and continue to have good times and I learned positive things from him. He taught me how to sail. He taught me manners and how to have respect for people. He taught me how to pick a hard-shell crab clean. He gave me my first real job in his office when I was 14 and taught me how to drive a stick-shift. All these things and a host of miscellaneous others I value.

So, I loved him, almost more for the negative experiences than the positive. You see, I loved him so much I looked at myself for reasons why he wasn't there for me and believed it was my fault. God how that must have made my mom's blood boil, because she saw. She saw how his inadequacies were being projected onto her son. All she could do was try to pick up the pieces.

Sadly, this personal relationship with my own father is not unique. Indeed, several studies indicate that a significant percentage of fathers were either physically or psychologically absent from their families, being too interested in their careers, or simply uninterested in their sons' lives. One study, in particular, surveyed over 7,000 men and revealed, shockingly, that only 1 percent of those men had a good relationship with their fathers.

It's no wonder that we sons may focus more on our careers or men's activities such as sports or lodge-type organizations when you consider that this sense of loss of that adult male figure extends into our adult lives. We're constantly searching for that sense of acceptance from father authority figures and, in our jobs, we're given clear guidelines how to get that acceptance. Further, as I mentioned before, there are very few venues for men to gather and actively work out these issues. The office, lodge, or the golf course are poor substitutes.

So, how does a man learn to be a man? In Neil Chethik's book "VoiceMail", he busts a common myth regarding how men would

treat their spouses. Many of you have heard the adage from a mother to a soon-to-be-married daughter: "If you want to know how a man will treat you, look at his relationship with his mother." Well, it turns out that a man's relationship to his spouse is much more closely influenced by his relationship to his father. Now, think about this. It makes sense doesn't it? Sons notice how their fathers treat their mothers. They get a first-hand look at how to be a "family man". This can be a good model or, as we've discussed, a poor one. A son can look at the example of the father and choose to emulate that model or not. In my case, I chose not to, but that's a hard road to take because we now have no model to learn from.

It gets even more complicated for us guys who are children of the 50s and 60s. As sons, we were given very clear definitions of the father and mother role in the family: dad worked and mom stayed at home. By extension, dad was an absent member of the family but provided an image of the heroic slayer of dragons while mom filled the emotional void and provided the realistic, practical needs of the child. When the 1960s came along, the gender apple cart was turned over and men had new demands placed on them. The sons

that grew to manhood in the decades that followed were caught in a world of confusing messages about their role as mate and father.

To give an example, in one survey that Neil conducted for his

VoiceMale book he writes:

“ [the division of] household responsibilities ranked third on the list of topics most likely to cause marital discord (behind only money and balancing work and family).”

Third on the list. Let's examine this for a moment. This result suggests that men are struggling in adulthood to be the man that the family needs him to be with a very sketchy roadmap of how to function in that role. If the son as a child sees the father coming home from work and step right into the family dynamic with an attitude of “what can I do to help”, he will get a nurturing sense of the father as partner in the family. But, too often as surveys have shown, the father is more likely to remain in his own world, self-absorbed by his hard day at the office, expecting sympathy from his spouse and, in many cases, avoidance of his kids as he “winds down”. This leaves precious little time for him to connect with the family until the next morning

when the cycle starts up again. He's become the alien, not only to his son but to every member of the family.

This is a lesson that I learned the hard way and am still learning in the many facets of. It's taken me years of marriage to a woman who saw that this was the path I was moving down to realize that this was a dangerous cycle that was in danger of becoming the all-too-familiar reality. One of the many turning points I experienced on this journey back from the brink of familial isolation I distinctly remember was when I came home from another long day at the office. My first action when I got home was to plug my laptop in and start getting my email. After one too many days of this pattern of neglect, Elisabeth said to me: "You see those things over there?", pointing to toddler Karina and baby Adrian, "Those are your kids. You need to spend time to bond with them." That was a wake-up call.

Now I come to my own sons, Adrian and Pieter. I won't spend any significant time talking about my relationship with my 14 year old daughter, Karina here. Maybe that's a topic for another service. Suffice it to say that she's blossoming in so many of the ways that I

would want my daughter to grow and that it would be a great inaccuracy to suggest that I was the major factor in it. The truth is that's mostly the accomplishments of my wife Elisabeth and Karina herself. She's a great kid and continues to give me hope for her future. But, I digress.

I've found, especially in Adrian that I'm starting to see some of the same signs in our relationship that other fathers I've described had with their sons. We're starting to pull away from each other as the day to day interactions of physical and emotional intimacy become thinner, more tenuous in the ways I'm used to having, say, with Pieter. Pieter (who is 7) and I still play silly games and act silly together. I carry him around and pick him up regularly. I tuck him into bed on a frequent basis.

Adrian and I have a different relationship. We train together in Japanese Karate, I go to his baseball games, and send him off to his Boy Scout activities, and take interest in other aspects of his life. But it's different and becoming more different as the months and years roll on. He's establishing his own identity apart from me. In the two

camps he went to this summer, his goodbye to me was (with a smile mind you): "I don't know you." Perhaps this is natural in its best sense though. I can guide him and teach him by positive examples (most of the time anyway) of how to be a good husband and father by being there, simply being there and sharing when he needs me to share, and backing away in those ever increasing times when he wants to spread his wings and move on his own path under his own power.

There are aspects of his being that are becoming alien to me. Maybe that's the natural course of things. Maybe I have to just adopt the advice of Graham Nash: I just have to look at them, my children, sigh, and know they love me. But, I will also take the advice of Elisabeth when she says: don't stop hugging them. They need the physical intimacy from you and you need it too. Good advice.

I've shared with you some of my own story, backed up by the findings of others that fathers and sons have complicated relationships with wounds that fail to heal. In sharing, I hoped to explore greater questions: what is my connection with the divine?

What is my internal spark and how can my light burn brightly for the people I love? And, ultimately, who am I? The journey continues as it should.

In closing, I want to remind us that all of the men here are sons. All the women here know sons of fathers that may have had difficult, alien relationships with their dads. In our faith community, I believe there's a lot we can learn from each other as a community, and as a group of men in particular. I would welcome and encourage further conversations that will heal our wounds and lead us to a place of divine harmony.