

The Footsteps We Leave: Fathers & Sons



By Rick Johnson

Fathering is at the heart of masculinity. I don't mean just fathering a child--any adult male can do that. I mean actually raising one and being responsible for another human being's life. I think it completes a man and matures him in ways that he cannot attain without going through the self-sacrifice that fathering requires. Fathering may be the most significant role a man can perform in his life. But the responsibilities of being a father have evolved over time. For far too long men were taught that being a father was just putting bread on the table and a roof over their children's heads. But our children also need the emotional, nurturing "father food" that men provide.

My friend Jon tells a compelling story about his father. Jon's father was a typical man of his generation raised to believe that a father's only role was to provide financially and to protect his family. He did not show much emotion and certainly no affection toward his family, especially his son. His gruff demeanor was a wall he erected to protect himself from the muddy and confusing waters of relationships and its entangled emotions.

While away at college Jon heard a speaker talk about the need to demonstrate physical affection to those you love regardless of whether they reciprocate or not. Jon vowed the next time he went home he would kiss and hug his father. The first few times he did his father jerked away and was very uncomfortable—he never did seem to warm up to the physical affection his son forced upon him. However, Jon continued to demonstrate his love for his father.

One day Jon's trip home coincided with the visit of one of his father's childhood friends, a man who had raised three sons himself. As his father walked him out to his car to leave Jon embraced him in a hug and kissed him on the cheek. Jon got into his car and drove back to school. When his father went back into the house he found his friend with tears running down his

face. Inquiring what was wrong, his friend looked at him and replied, "I would give anything if just one of my sons would hug and kiss me."

I think many of us choose to not show our emotions or physical affection because it is safer. Emotions are powerful if not controlled. We are afraid of what will happen if we loosen our grip on these untamable and unpredictable facets of our personality. Do real men hug and kiss their kids? I believe so.

Perhaps the biggest bane on our culture is the emergence of fatherlessness. The destruction it has done to our children and families is directly responsible for literally every problem we face as a culture. It is especially devastating to males. It is a virus that is passed down from generation to generation, destroying men and women in each successive generation it infects.

I speak with men in prison who tell me that for as far back as anyone can remember there have never been any men in their family lineage; that there has never been a father in the home for generations. In fact many men in prison tell me their fathers are also in prison. One man told me he actually met his father for the first time when they brought him to the prison as his cell mate.

Millions of men of the past several generations have been and are being raised with the legacy of father abandonment in one form or another. They in turn fulfill their destiny by abandoning their families and the cycle continues until an intervention by another male or group of males helps these boys and men break the cycle.

Many men have been wounded by damaged fathers or by having had no positive male role model to learn under. We stagger and stumble through life searching for roles and behaviors that fit comfortably enough to survive, all the while yearning for we know not what.

I have spoken with numerous directors of homeless shelters and domestic abuse shelters and every one of them tells me that, upon reflection, fathers are at the root of all their clients' problems. One woman told me, "I've worked in this industry for 36 years. Now that I think about it, every single one of my clients had either no father or an abusive father." Think about that statement the next time you feel unappreciated in your role as a father.

My friend, Marvin Charles, director of D.A.D.S. ministry, once told me, "The AIDS virus does not actually kill anyone. The virus just lowers your bodily defenses so that other infections can invade the body, which is what actually causes death. Fatherlessness is like AIDS. Fatherlessness does not actually kill the family it just lowers the defenses so other issues can infect it, eventually destroying it."

We all yearn for the respect and approval of our fathers. We all crave the love and understanding of a father. Many men have told me that the most important aspect in their journey

from boyhood to manhood was when they finally felt they had earned the respect of their fathers. But children also need love and forgiveness modeled from their fathers.

Ernest Hemmingway, in his short story, "The Capital of the World", tells of a father and his teenage son who lived in Spain. Their relationship became strained and his son ran away from home. The father began a long journey in search of the lost and rebellious son, finally putting an ad in the Madrid newspaper as a last resort. His son's name was Paco, a very common name in Spain. The ads simply read: "Dear Paco, meet me in front of the Hotel Montana tomorrow at noon. All is forgiven, Papa."

As Hemmingway writes, the next day at noon in front of the hotel there were 800 sons named Paco who were all seeking the forgiveness of a loving father.³

As men we have the power to bless people's lives or to destroy them. That is a great level of power. But with great power comes great responsibility. Understand the power you have and learn to use it responsibly.

This article is excerpted from Rick's newest book due for release in January 2009, *The Power of a Man—Using Your Influence as a Man of Character*, by Revell Publishing. Rick is the founder of Better Dads, a fathering skills program designed to inspire and equip men to be more engaged in the lives of their children. He develops and delivers inspirational training workshops across the country for organizations including businesses, churches, civic groups, social service agencies, hospitals, prisons, and schools. To find out more about his organization go to www.betterdads.net.