

Some fathers may need forgiving children

Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Many adults I know have had unsatisfactory relations with their fathers. Including me.

“Unsatisfactory relations” cover everything from snippy to hostile, to mutual bafflement, to hand-wringing despair, to fist-throwing anger, to disengagement, to embittered silence, to chronic nit-picking, to frustrated remorse and, finally, to what a television advertisement refers to as “a wide spectrum of miscellaneous.”

Some fathers are, of course, heels. Absent. Irresponsible. Foul-tempered. Abusive. Hurtful. Mean. Or worse.

Stalin’s father, Besarion Jughashvili, became a violent, abusive alcoholic as a failed cobbler. He threatened to strangle his wife and kill his son, whom he abandoned. Stalin hated him.

Hitler’s father, Alois, a minor civil servant, was strict, short-tempered and overbearing with his family. He beat his son, often. Hitler hated him.

Mao’s father, Mao Yichang, was a hard-working, demanding man who insisted that his son fit into the role of a prospering peasant in traditional Chinese society. Mao noted in 1968 as his Cultural Revolution was persecuting “class enemies” right and left: “My father was bad. If he were alive today, he should be ‘jet-planed.’” [This torture position forces the victim to bend at the waist with his head down while his arms are forced straight up and backward.] Mao hated him.

Bad Dads beget bad sons, though rarely as bad as these boys. It’s also true that many Dads are not as bad as their kids perceive them to be.

Some Dads never wanted to have the children they fathered. Some couldn’t be bothered with those they had. Some, hammered by life, took it out on their kids. Some spent too much time working. Some couldn’t see beyond their own circumstances. Some were selfish and just didn’t want to do what was inconvenient.

There are a hundred reasons why fathers act badly, some of which are understandable, and a few might even drift over into being defensible. Some guys just aren’t cut out for it.

Some fathers don’t act badly, but their children come to see it this way. A gloppy emotional quagmire then entraps everyone, because the kids are reluctant to change their stories about why things are.

There are a thousand reasons why Dads screw up, which can be different from acting badly. Some screw ups are understandable. Some are avoidable. Some may be inevitable. And some just happen. No one wants screw ups, but everyone is forced to make do when they appear.

Some fathers are well-intentioned but mismatched with their kids. Many who grew up during the Great Depression and WW II did not fit with their Boomer children for whom, they thought with some justification, too much was too available too easily for too long.

The children I know who get along with their Dads best have the same values, religion, politics, opinions and lifestyles. Both generations are emotionally fortunate when kids want to be just like their Dads and succeed.

I assume these kids also think their Dads did a better job than the children who have parted company with theirs.

With kids who don't follow in their father's footsteps, divergence produces friction. Divergence implies rejection. Going a different way is a judgment rendered against the father by the child. It's hard to be family friendly when father and child each think the other is wrong.

Perhaps the saddest experience is that of the well-intentioned father who tries hard and still ends up estranged from children he both loves and likes. These kids find it hard to forgive, forget or stop stumbling over the details. It's always the child's burden to do the forgiving.

Time may not bring fathers and children onto the same page, but getting older does give kids a better idea of what kind of life sloop their Dad had to walk through.

I understand my father better, now that I've lived a few more years than he did. I find it easier to respect choices he made that I disdained at the time. I find his accomplishments remarkable. His shortcomings are in a different perspective. I hold him in balance these days, which I didn't do when I was younger.

Father's Day is a carved-out space to appreciate the things that Dads did right. The things they got wrong or sort of right are in the wings, not center stage.

Being a half-decent Dad is work. A lot can go wrong. It lasts a lifetime. It's not like shooting pool where you control your shots. This table rolls like the ocean, and the pockets can free themselves of their moorings at any time.

Father's Day calls to mind a wide spectrum of miscellaneous. It's easy to forget the stuff at the center.

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