

I Was the Only Man in My Daughter's Life

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My daughter never got to experience the love of a husband. She never knew what it was to love any other man but me. Catherine was killed in a tragic snowmobile accident January 23, 2000. She was fourteen. As parents often do in these cases I could punish myself with regrets, but, one thing I will never regret: I loved my daughter well. The unusual thing about it though, is that it was her idea.

When she was little we wrestled and hugged a lot. But as she began to mature I became hesitant about physical contact between a man and a teenager. She would have none of that. Somewhere Catherine had heard that a girl needed at least eight hugs a day from her dad and she declared her intention to get them. She was the kind of self-confident kid not to be dissuaded by her father's hesitancy. She practically accosted me from the time I came home from work until bedtime. She made me carry her on my arm like I do her mother, and even liked to hold my hand in public. How rare is that for a teenager? After awhile, I became comfortable with my daughter's affections and it was not uneasy to watch TV in the evening with her in my arms. My son Jesse would sometimes enthusiastically jump on top and a giggling dog-pile ensued (see picture). My wife was always encouraging and willing to put herself aside when Catherine wanted my attention. I found an outstanding source of love and adoration in my daughter. Suddenly it's gone, and I'd give everything I own to get it back. What a phenomenal loss.



During the days following her death many came to offer us comfort. I expressed my loss to numerous men and asked them how their relationship with their daughters were. I was disheartened to hear that many fathers (most unknowingly) suffer estranged intimacy from their daughters. They felt the same pious unease about physical contact and a lack of understanding about what is and is not appropriate contact between fathers and daughters as I had. They also had no idea what they were missing. So, I'm writing this letter hoping to reach as many dads as possible with this message: Get over it.

There is a lot of normal, moral, non-sexual physical contact and affections that can and should be shared between fathers and daughters. Maybe an over reactive self-concern to appear above reproach by Christian men in an immoral society has solicited and unwarranted restraint. Perhaps we have given in unwittingly to biblically conjectured but self-centered righteousness.

Please don't think that I am so naive to not have considered that there may be insurmountable extenuating circumstances in your case preventing a loving father/daughter relationship. There might be. But, short of death, you still have a chance to make sure that the trouble between you does not lie with you.

I have seen daughters resist unaccustomed affectionate advances by their dads if the estrangement has

been going on for several years. Like the man who worked day and night through all the growing years to give his family “the best the world has to offer”. He doesn’t have the years of a daddy/child foundation from which to begin. He must grow it afresh, and this can take years of persistence. The place to start, however, is with an in-depth soul-searching to see if repentance and apologies are in order for a deeply hidden self-centered motive. Was work easier and more gratifying than the stresses and chaos of family life?

It could be that she has done something hurtful to you for which you are withholding your love until an apology is received. “*While we were still sinners Christ died for us*” (Romans 5:8) Is there forgiveness required? You are the older and supposedly wiser one. Fathers can be very intimidating to children, young or old. Somebody must take the first step. It’s you.

I hope you are fortunate enough to have a wife like mine who gently encourages you (like rolling this letter up and whacking you over the head with it). Women are relationally gifted. You can believe what they tell you. What... divorced? Was it self-centered pride that did you in? Was it yours? You can go on stubbornly insisting that you don’t need these loving mushy relationships to exist quite well. You may have convinced yourself that it’s somebody else’s fault. But, you may be letting the devil trick you into giving up the best parts of life.

Self-centeredness is easy to do. Pride is easy to overlook in one’s self. It’s just plain human nature. Fallen human nature. I was helped tremendously by Dr. Larry Crabb’s books, Inside Out, and Men and Women, Enjoying the Difference. Maybe that’s a good place for you to start too.

Wherever you start, let me assure you, the benefits of loving others has a huge payoff for you. I can’t guarantee that it won’t end up with terrible grief and loss like I am experiencing. You really get attached to someone with whom you’ve invested years of relationship building. But, relationships last forever. You can take them to heaven with you. Plus, you might discover a gigantic source of love to help get you through the time you have to spend here on earth.

If you know you have a relationship with your daughter that needs patching, or this letter has stimulated a new awareness in you, I can’t recommend that you wait until tomorrow to begin.

I found this poem along with thirty others Catherine had written and stored in her computer a few months before she died entitled “When God Calls”:

When God says “Hello.”

I say “How are you?”

When God says, “Jump.”

I say, “How high?”

When God says, Go.”

I say, “Where?”

And when God says, “Come home.”

I say, Right away Sir.”

But, I will not go quietly.