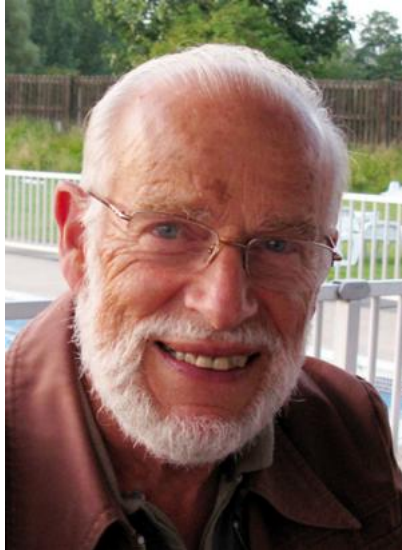


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Growing up without a Dad

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They say we all have a duty to forgive our parents; no parent has ever been perfect!

I was 75 before I finally forgave my absent father. I don't recommend leaving it that long. The resentment builds up and takes its toll. But I didn't realise that until I was 45, on a social work course. At coffee one morning a younger chap casually remarked, "You've got a lot of anger in you." "What me?" I exclaimed, "mild-mannered me?" I couldn't believe it.

It's taken me a long time to get straightened out. I was conceived in Paris, born in New York, and brought up in Britain. My mother was an actress, who was an unexpected addition to her family seven years after the rest of her siblings. When she got pregnant her mother wouldn't have her back in the house, so instead of returning to London she took a cargo boat across the Atlantic "to give me US citizenship," she told me later. I never knew who my father was.

But from day one she couldn't look after me, and I went to a nursery run on "feed every four hours and don't pick them up in between 'cos it spoils them" lines. So, no bonding, no contact, no love. Six months later Mum took me disconsolately back to Britain and found a foster mother.

Mrs P ran a small nursery and was wonderful with tiny babies. She'd wanted half a dozen of her own, but had married a homosexual, who gave her only one. My mother's diary records that she took me there as a wan, white little scrap and a fortnight later found a bonny, brown baby, enjoying the September sun in Surrey. Trouble was that when babies grew into toddlers with wills of their own, Mrs P wasn't so keen on them any more.

I don't really know how long I stayed there. My first five years are a blur. Mum tried caring for me for a while on a farm, but she was depressed. I went back to Mrs P at about age three; she'd moved to Dorking. Her son Derek was five years older; one day he was reading his comic and I snatched it and put it on the fire! Not a good way to endear myself to him.

Then I went to a children's home in Folkestone from the age of four. In the park I fell into the pond. We had cold orange 'soup' for tea. My room-mate, 6, found two rail tickets and we ran away, but didn't get far. But there was nice Mrs Heath who sat me on her lap as we looked out over the golf course. At five my mother had to find me a school; I suppose Folkestone was too far to visit from London where she was living, so she took me back to Mrs P, who was then in a small flat above a wool shop in North Cheam.

When the door opened I saw Derek on the stairs, I got the distinct impression he was not best pleased at the prospect. After all, a five-year gap is too much at that age. I was a pain, not a playmate. But my 25 shillings a week meant they could move to a new bungalow on the edge of Stoneleigh, with my infants' school just down the road.

My mother visited once a fortnight when she was not abroad. I think she was a bit in awe of Mrs P. I got a scholarship to the County School in 1940; I was ten and old enough to travel up to London for a weekend a month with my mother and the owner of an advertising agency in Bedford Square with whom she was now sharing her life, which I enjoyed. But at home, that is in the Pearce household, rows got increasingly bitter, and I was frequently told to 'pack

my case and clear out'. Finally my mother's friend paid for a term at Dartington School in Devon, but when Mrs P got the letter she said to me, 'If you want to go off with your mother's foreign friends, after all I've sacrificed for you, don't think you can come back here again.' A strange turnaround, but I felt I had to stay. She told me to write and cut all ties with my mother. The worst decision of my life; I lost the schooling I might have had, I lost my mother, my future step-father, and the business he wanted to leave to me.

I stayed there until I was called up at 18 to the RAF. But what about my foster father? Only the other day I spoke to Derek and said I'd suddenly realised that in all that time I'd never had a conversation with his Pa. 'Don't worry, John,' he said, 'Neither did I.' He was a strange, lonely man, disparaged by his wife. At mealtimes, it wasn't long before a nag from her would have him leave the table and go to his shed in the garden. I'd take his pudding out to him later. Or I'd be sent outside with my meal, too, to eat it off the top of the dustbin. Better still, I'd be sent to my room—that was a relief from the tension at the table.

So there was absolutely no fathering from him. He was a skilled precision engineer; he once promised to make his son a signal box. He started when Derek was six; he was 12 before it was finished, but he never got his hands on it because it went off to win 2nd prize in the Model Engineering Exhibition at Central Hall, London.

The realisation of the lack of a father only gradually dawned. As a kid you just get on with things, don't realise what you're missing. Looking back, I can see how much I lacked. No one to show me how to do things, or champion me, or come to school events (very few during the war). I never felt believed in. And now, when I see fathers being nice to their sons, I still tend to choke up. The pain of that huge, aching loss still hangs around, despite my best efforts to dispel it.

But a minor miracle occurred three years ago. I was in Switzerland at an IofC conference in Caux. Lunching one day with a couple of women from Colombia, they told of their work with street kids. I began to choke up, we got talking, and they offered to pray for me. I resisted for a week, but finally they took me to the Roman Catholic chapel, and sat me in front of the Cross. I seemed to see a black tunnel, at the end of which I could make out someone approaching. I drew back; I didn't want to see him, my father. Then it seemed that Jesus spoke from the Cross: 'My son, if I could die for you, surely you can forgive him?'

I did—and it was a most wonderful moment. I felt a freedom I hadn't had for so long; a burden of resentment melted away. Later I heard the astonishing estimate that of all babies born in the world, 60 to 65 per cent are either unplanned or unwanted. I realised I was just one of about four billion in the same boat! So I felt new confidence that God wanted me, and actually loved me (though that was always hard to really believe). But I do feel a compassion for and a desire to reach youngsters who've been through what I have.

And two years later I was again in Caux, taking part in a course run by a Taiwanese family therapist on relationships and 'healing the wounded child'. The climax was writing to our parents (alive or dead) and then writing the imagined reply. Uncanny. Twenty minutes to say what's never been said, and then to get a 'reply'. I wrote to my mother, and to my foster mother (but that's another story). This is what I wrote to the man I thought of as my Dad:

Dear Father,

-whoever you are – I'd love to know all about you. Where you lived, what you did, your name – your parents and brothers and sisters – your looks, likes, dislikes, hopes, fears – the lot. What nationality, colour (white, I presume), race or creed?

So many questions. I don't condemn you for your one-night stand, or whatever it was, but it's left me feeling hollow and empty and without a guide in life. I would love to have had your help and encouragement – especially from the start; someone to show me the ropes. Someone to take an interest in my schoolwork, help with my homework, come to Sports Day, etc.

Do you ever think of me? Did you know I even existed? Did you ever love my mother? She badly needed love; she had none from her mother, only her father (thank God).

I miss you badly – I imagine you could have been a great role model, someone to look up to, admire. Or am I just kidding myself, just fantasising? Well, I guess you'd understand, and I wish you all peace – wherever you are.

Your son.

And now the reply:

My son,

What a privilege and a delight to hear from you. I never thought this might happen. An amazing gift – a lovely gesture on your part. You've made me very happy – though I understand, of course, your detestation of my fickle act of impregnating your mother – with no thought for your future.

I am truly sorry, and only wish I could repair the past. But I want you to know that I admire and respect your approach to me in these most unusual circumstances. And for your precious act of forgiveness in that church two years ago.

*Respectfully yours,
Father*

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