

The Huffington Post



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Lost and Found: Don't Give Up on Dad

Posted February 11, 2009 | 03:34 PM (EST)

Lost and Found: Why Daughters are Redefining Fathers

As women storm the world of men, many are finding that part of the time-honored connection with the first man in her life has changed. In its place, however, is the opportunity to add new dimensions that were impossible in a time when father knew best. In researching a new book on a new generation of daughters and their fathers, I have interviewed dozens of accomplished women in their 20s and 30s. In this series, I share my observations.

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The stars would seem to align perfectly for a new kind of father-daughter relationship. Young women are educated, oriented and dedicated to making their way in a world of work -- territory that their fathers have patrolled for decades.

But for a surprising number of women in my study, this well of guidance and perspective can be fenced off by years of habit.

Fathers today are the sons and grandsons of men who fought a World War and shepherded their families through the ravages of a great depression. Their trials by fire hardened the mold of fathers that had been in place since the industrial revolution.

He was the sole provider who existed just outside the warm intimacies shared by mother and children. Just as his job was to toughen his sons for the world, his job was to position his daughter for a seamless handoff to a husband.

In a generation, everything changed for women. Many fathers changed with them. Some -- loving as they are -- remain in the emotionally land-locked realm of quiet protector.

Many of the women I interviewed found that breaking through centers on one of the sacred texts of human interaction: "relationships take work."

For Hannah,* a human relations manager for a Fortune 500 consumer products company, that work took on some added dimensions. Her father is what she calls "an amazingly high-functioning alcoholic" who runs a successful heavy equipment leasing business. He is quiet by nature, she said, bordering on introverted. Her mother is "pathologically insecure" and maintained perceived rightful place in the family hierarchy by driving wedges between family members; particularly father and daughter.

"It would be a pretty easy situation to walk away from," she said. "But I'm crazy about my dad. He's got some problems. But I always thought he was the one person in the world who would do absolutely anything for me. He started a business from nothing. There was a lot I wanted to know about him, and a lot I knew I could learn from him."

Her search for common ground did not include leasing heavy equipment -- "My life's work," she said, "was not going to include fork lifts and dump trucks." -- so she went the route that others daughters have: sports.

"We've always had that connection," she said. "We would watch ESPN together. I knew line-ups and statistics. His teams were my teams. We would sit there together and scream at the television."

It was a connection she worked hard to keep alive, and she gradually broadened it to other parts of her life -- particularly advice about work problems.

I came away from these interviews with advice for any woman who wants to cross generations and break through old stereotypes of father-daughter relationships. Work to understand his passions -- maybe it's sports, maybe it's gardening, maybe it's dogs, maybe it's cooking. Become a part of his life in a way that gives you the leverage to draw him into yours.

*The data I compiled and the patterns I've observed for this series are presented as collective experiences. I have honored promises of confidentiality by changing names and disguising identities.