

Healing father wounds and father hunger

Prof Wentzel Coetzer of North-West University was the keynote speaker at the SAAP Conference in March 2016. Following is a summary of the third part of his presentation at the conference

Children with absent fathers grow up with enormous emotional, physical and spiritual challenges. These situations have high demands and without the necessary support systems the results are usually very negative. Chiles (2013:126) explains something of that effect in the following words: "And the results of a child being raised without his father's involvement can be just as devastating as a plane with one wing." Bradshaw (1996:144) draws attention to clinical studies indicating that where a father is absent, children often find it difficult "...learning to delay gratification." In context of poverty and shortage the children will try to find anything they can lay their hands on. Such children are also, according to Bradshaw (1996:144), vulnerable for feelings of inferiority and shame. According to Eldredge (2001:197) most men have experienced something of a "father wound" in the process of growing up. Diamond (2007:161) describes the "father wound" as "...an internalized, unresolved conflict between father and son." Levant (1996:263) went so far as to suggest that "father wounds" can be so severe of nature that it can be described as "normative developmental trauma". Miller (2012:197) describes "father hunger" as supplementary to "father wounds": "Though the father wound may include a sense of absence of one's father, it may also indicate a deeper psychic injury: Frankly, it can be likened to a physical wound that is in need of healing... the father hunger construct provides additional evidence regarding the potentially detrimental effects of having a physically or emotionally unavailable father." Buske (2007) accentuates basically the same point of view with his use of the phrase "father need": "Fathers are indeed needed and necessary. Fathers aren't optional. Only fathers can father and only he can bring his uniqueness into the child's life and well-being." Eldredge (2001:62) argues that a boy learns from his father and also other men whom he really is and what his masculinity really implies: A boy learns who he is and what he's got from a man, or the company of men. He cannot learn it any other place. He cannot learn it from other boys, and he cannot learn it from the world of women. For numerous mothers it is thus a critical phase when the father starts to replace her as the focus point in this boy's life. Sometimes a father walks out on his family and then such a mother places pressure on a son to fill the vacuum his father has left behind. Such a situation can actually develop into "emotional incest" with intense emotional damage for the son. The son has internal battles for which his mother has no answer. "Femininity can never bestow masculinity. My mother would often call me 'sweetheart', but my father called me 'tiger'. Which direction do you think a boy would want to head?" (Eldredge, 2001:64).

A. Spiritual and emotional fathering

Dr Ken Canfield of the Theological Faculty of the Fuller University in Pasadena, California works with street children with fathers in prison. Following is material from a 2013 conference.

There is no perfect father.

Every person has a story - there is no perfect father, but we strive to move one step forward. Ask your son: "If there is anything in the past that I have done up to the present to keep you from fulfilling your Godly calling and to fully live out your talents/ gifts, then I want to ask you today: forgive me!" The fact that you as father will be willing to be humble and admmissive in this way, will also be a conclusive component of your own healing process. Breaking the barriers between you and your father will open the way for God's stream of blessings on the relationship between you and your children.

Positive emotional fatherhood

Children with positive emotional fatherhood enjoy the following in their relationship with their fathers: □

- A sense of closeness.
- Warmth, by touching your child, or the coldness and numbness of fatherhood can take over.
- Attachment – on a very deep level there is a bond that could already have been established during pregnancy and enhanced thereafter. Fathers who are exceptionally attached to their children:
 - Demonstrate patience and tolerance and little irritability o
 - Express pleasure through interaction with their children and show feelings of satisfaction and competence
 - Have feelings of love and pride with reference to their children
 - Joy - a fresh emotion that needs to be expressed regularly. Fathers who have experienced lots of inner security in their relationship with their own fathers usually are more extrovert and adjustable, they experience more positive marriages and interaction between work and family.

Negative emotional fatherhood

In contrast, adult men that experienced an emotional vacuum as children of uninvolved or absent fathers, might suffer from the following:

- Emotional turmoil □
- Loss of security □
- Sexually acting out behaviour
- Destructive behaviour □
- Memory loss and “higher measures of shame”
- More vulnerable for fear, lack of security and anxiety
- Bigger probability of leaving school early
- Big inclination to crime □
- More inclined to substance abuse
- Battling with gender identity
- More susceptible to group pressure.

The joy factor

Dr Wilder, a brain specialist and friend of Dr Ken Canfield, accentuates the power of joy very much. He is quoted by Dr Canfield regarding the following aspects: □

- The joy factor enlarges the front right hand side of the brain with reference to capacity and functioning – therefore is it so important that joy will be a permanent component of your interaction with your children.
- □ It feeds and endows the emotional system – in this way investments are deposited into the child’s emotional system from which can be drawn especially in times of crisis in the future.
- □ It strengthens the child’s faith.

The Luke Evangelist makes a great deal about joy - with reference for instance to the birth of John, the angels said to John’s father, Zachariah, in Luke 1:14: “He will be a source of happiness and joy for you, and many will be happy about his birth...” Further, the joy factor

in Luke is emphasized, for instance when a lost sheep has been found (Luke 15:7), also lost coins (15:10) and a lost son (15:23). Therefore, as far as our children are concerned, we must not let opportunities pass to speak joy, for example with the birth of a child, the first day of school, first day in high school, matric farewell, first national certificate, etc. We must also never neglect giving full recognition when they perhaps had made mistakes and then could rectify it again. Children who have found joy and closeness to their fathers are more successful in education, finding a stable job and making life decisions.

Fathering and closeness

What influence does the closeness that you had with your father, have on you as an adult? Find out by responding to the following statements:

- I knew how my father felt about me.
- My father supported my interests.
- It was easy to become close to my father
- I enjoy remembering how my father treated me. I sustain regular contact with my father.
- I know how my father still feels about me.
- I experience peace with reference to my father.

Mostly positive response indicates a near and close relationship with your father. Men that had had a close relationship with their fathers are less inclined to unhealthy extra-marital sexual behaviour, pornography, sexual fantasising, masturbation, etc. A close bond, warmth and joy related to a strong fatherly relationship thus helps to develop sexual self-control (sexual addiction is such a problem today among men!) A further positive result is that men's marital satisfaction factor is significantly higher. An important conclusion is that we as men are already creating the atmosphere in the homes of our children and grandchildren!

Be the "daddy"

Research shows that 80% of all young people in USA prisons come from homes without a father. According to Canfield (2013) in Los Angeles 40% of prisoners or their family have already been in prison before. On the question: "What breaks this cycle?" Canfield's answer is from practical experience: "Only another father who arrives to do that which all fathers ought to do!" (2013) There is a revival in prisons all over the USA, due to an organisation that is focusing on taking children to prisons to meet more often with their fathers. Sister Susan is the driving force behind this bus project with the motto: "We must accumulate more buses so that children can get to their fathers." Canfield tells of one case of a tall black man, full of tattoos, who attended classes in prison around the theme of fathering. This man converted and loathed the day on which he would see his daughter on a prison visit – he did not have a father himself. The little daughter spotted her father and screamed through the glass window: "Daddy, daddy!" This big, tough man, whom everyone in prison feared, heard his daughter's voice and collapsed on the prison floor, weeping for a long time. The girl called him whom he really was: "Daddy!" - that made his heart melt.

Five elements of the process of fathering

Ken Canfield emphasizes the following five important elements:

► Honour and respect

Ken says that he himself has grown up in a broken home – his father was in full time military service. During his late twenties Ken radically converted and confronted his father with this option, when his father hit him to the ground with his fist. In later years the Holy Spirit reminded him of an incident when he was a rebellious teenager and said a humiliating thing to his father at the dining table, calling him “a stupid factory worker”. Ken apologised and asked his father’s forgiveness.

His father accepted the apology. Healing came when his son showed him respect, followed by mutual respect and interest.

► Encouragement

Children need encouragement from their fathers. They need his support, empathy, and recognition. For every fatherly word of criticism, he needs to speak seven positive words to maintain a healthy balance!

► Affirmation

“Fathers, do not always find fault with your children so that they become despondent.” (Col 3:21) Thus, rather focus on speaking blessings and be careful with behaviour that leads to depression and irritation (Gen 48:10; Eph 6:1-4; Col 3:21). This, amongst others, includes physical touching and the affirmation of the inner bond that already exist (or not). Self-control is also very important - fathers should model the control of emotions.

► Restraint

The focus is here on disciplining and directing (Hebr 12:5,6). Where children had grown up without such models there usually is chaos.

► Teaching

Teaching could take place through an e-mail or by your example or testimony – in the long term it will bear fruit.

Are you stuck in the prison your father built?

James Ryle says that he grew up in an orphanage as his father had spent a big part of his life in prison (2010:14). A rebellious James became involved with drugs and alcohol and spent several years in prison after a fatal car crash. He experienced a period of spiritual growth and went in full time ministry after his release. He developed a strong need to make contact with his father whom he had not seen in 20 years. In their first conversation he asked his father where he had been in prison: “I was in the Ferguson unit, close to Midway, just outside Huntsville,” James answered. His father’s facial expression froze and he stared at James in disbelief: “My goodness, my son, I have built that prison! They used prisoner labour when they built the Ferguson unit and I was the welder that welded the bars when that prison was built.” James Ryle then tells how he heard the voice of God in the front garden of his father’s house that night: “James, I have set you free from the prison your father built. Now I will use you to set others free from prison’s their fathers have built.” (Ryle, 2010:18) The symbolism of his prison experience in James’s testimony became a powerful message with a phenomenal impact on the lives of thousands of other men still trapped in emotional (or physical) prisons due to wounds caused by their fathers’ behaviour. As James puts it: “It is a staggering truth that the way we love our kids, will either build bars on their future prison cell or set them free into the adventure that God has designed for them.” (Ryle, 2010:126)

Promise Keepers

James Ryle eventually became a well-known international speaker with an extra-ordinary passion for men and boys. He is also one of the founding members of the movement, Promise Keepers, who eventually also started branches in numerous countries. In a historic event on 4 October 1997, James delivered his personal testimony in front of 1,4 million men - the biggest gathering ever of men during peace time. God blessed this occasion in a very special way and an enormous spiritual chain reaction developed from it. James often asks: "Which prison are you in?", "What is your cell-block called?" - what do you name that particular thing that keeps you behind bars? Aspects like anger, covetousness, fear, sexual perversion and loneliness can all be examples contributing to the fact that people cannot truly be emotionally and spiritually free. In numerous cases it seemed from people's life stories, that such negative emotions and behaviour have its origin in broken and painful relationships with a father figure.

B. The healing process

Why should I think of my father at all? Especially since he abandoned me years ago and emotionally broke me down – why dig up the past now? The psychiatrist David Hart (as quoted by Stoop, 2014:189) says: "Many people fear that, if they face the unacceptable, they will become it. The exact reverse is true. If you do not face it, you become it. It will always be lived out in one way or another..." The Christian psychologist, Dr David Stoop, also refused "... to face the unacceptable". (Stoop, 2014) His father died when David was 22 years of age.

David put him on a pedestal and idealised him, ignoring the fact that he was actually an absent figure up to that point. Eventually the image of his idealised father was toppled and he was forced to deal with the reality of his inadequacy as a father. "The problem with trying to keep our fathers in the past, is that the unresolved past is never really in the past." (Stoop, 2014:190) David found his behaviour exactly the same as his father's, even though he tried not to be like that.

Eleven guidelines by dr David Stoop

► Identify the symptoms

In being a father Stoop says that examining the relationship with his own father holds many keys in the problems experienced in raising his own sons (2014:193). Furthermore, try to understand why the men in our lives to whom we looked up as "father figures" had spoken so much to us.

► Gather all the facts

Talk to your family about the different phases of your childhood, using pictures of your childhood years. If your father is still alive, discuss the early stages of your life and his own childhood experiences. Make notes about how you experienced your father and the symptoms in your life that could refer to his behaviour to you.

► Identify family myths and secrets

Myths are in general not the truth. Observe what happens when a member of a dysfunctional family succeeds in breaking away. Try to identify the hidden family secrets. Often the family "black sheep" received the stigma because he/she was not willing to play with according to the rules of family secrets and myths.

► Verbalise what had not been said before

Discuss your father issues with someone inside your family of origin. Start with the person you feel safest with and that can listen empathically. It is important to address that “which had never been spoken about before...”

▶ Rewrite the history

We cannot mourn a loss if we do not have clear insight about what we have lost. Rewriting the past helps us to define our losses, find clarity about that we could have had and eventually get a grip on the results of the absence of a father in our lives.

▶ Process the losses

Processing anger is an important facet of the grieving process. Making peace with your father is a matter of working our way through the grieving process that entails denial, anger, sadness/heartbreak and acceptance (Stoop, 2014:208).

▶ Wait

Wait until your strong impulses and need to act subside. The earlier the emotional wounding occurred, the longer the recovery will take.

▶ Forgive

The pain of the past may lead to the urge for revenge. Allow God to let justice be done and do not take it in your own hands - your part is just to forgive. “We know we are ready to forgive our father for the hurts of the past when we are able to be comfortable expecting little or nothing from him in the present and in the future.” (Stoop, 2014:222).

▶ Invite others to accompany you on your journey

Confrontation may follow forgiveness. Go to your father and tell him what you discovered about his role in your life. To first confront before we have forgiven will unavoidably make us vulnerable, experiencing disappointment and further pain. Invite your father and other family members to join you in your journey to healing and recovery. Facilitation may be necessary.

▶ Investigate new roles

By dealing with our father issues, we liberate ourselves to speed up our emotional growth process and become healthy adults. Having dealt with pain and anger, we will probably have passed other family members, including our father, in our emotional growth. Now we are ready to terminate the cycle of intergenerational sin and pain and have a healthy family ourselves.

▶ Redeem the past

You may look at the pain and wonder what purpose this process served. God eventually let new meaning flow out of everything that happens to us. Ask God to show you how He wants to recreate the pain of your past and use it to enhance the healing of others.

The father you have always wanted

There is a heavenly Father who cares about every broken person. It does not matter which type of earthly father you had or not. Your Heavenly Father sent His Son to enable you to eventually have the Father you always wanted. And on the cross of Golgotha the false father, the father of lies, was at last overcome and the way was paved for each broken son and daughter back to the house of the Heavenly Father. Everywhere we look around us we see Father Wounds. Many of us are wounded through the relationship, or the lack of it, with our earthly fathers. In the struggle with a distorted father image, we might also have a

negative image of God the Father. To find a vivid and clear image of Him, we will first have to get rid of all the broken “father filters” which most of us carried along into adulthood (McGlasson, 2013:50). These broken “father filters” are the result of all the negative experiences with our own fathers. After the emotional pain has healed and with a restored father image, we can look at the Heavenly Father as Jesus revealed Him to us. Philip said in John 14:8-9: “Lord, show us the Father ...” on which Jesus answered: “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father”. God the Father is the source of understanding of true fatherhood and in Jesus Christ we found an embodiment of Him.

A spiritual breakthrough at age 90!

In his book, *The father you've always wanted*, Ed McGlasson (2013:27) relates that after a lecture, one of the church elders at 90 years of age came to see him. With tear-filled eyes he told Ed that his own father had never told him that he loved him. He was also unable to say the words to his children and felt that he had little to offer them. When he prayed with this man, Ed experienced the love and blessings of a Heavenly Father that descended onto this elderly man, who said: “I am going home and for the first time I am going to tell my daughter, who is 68 years old, that I love her!” And he also did that – he told her all the things that he had so desired his own father would have told him. And it eventually led to his relationship with this daughter being transformed for ever. It is never too late for God!

The importance of a Father-God encounter

If I as a father do not have a meeting with God the Father on a regular basis, then I eventually transfer all my painful baggage to my children and grandchildren. Excuses such as “this generation of men did not share their emotions openly” may be true, but does little to heal the wounds of a son who is still waiting for the blessing of his father. Ed McGlasson (2013) tells how he as a young boy has humiliated his stepfather when he has stumbled over his words by saying: “That’s stupid!” His stepfather hit him in his stomach and told him angrily: “Son, never again dare to show me disrespect or otherwise the results will perhaps be much worse!” This was a humiliating and traumatic experience that stayed with him. Years later Ed’s son made a similar remark about something Ed had done: “Dad that was a stupid thing to do!” Without thinking, Ed said, he grabbed this boy and threw him onto his bed and shouted at him; “Don’t ever talk to me that way again!” He shivered because of the violence that suddenly exploded in his hands and in his words. This was the son he loved with his whole being, and he used a tone of voice that was cruel and murderous... In the heat of a moment you may also sometime see how the worst of your father streams through you involuntary in words or deeds towards those whom you actually love so dearly. Being deeply wounded ourselves, it is very difficult to give direction in a loving way without wounding the hearts of our children. We then become dream killers, in the same way that our own dreams had sometimes been destroyed in past in relationships - those losses and pain and humiliations that have never been handled. Is there a wonderful dream or hope that had died inside you due to a painful experience with your father? Are there possibly similar dreams that are dying inside our own children at present? Ed says that he was only able to really bless his family when he was willing to allow the revelation of the Father’s love to pierce through every part of his broken soul. “I was only able to bless my family when the Father I always wanted changed my story – He increased my capacity to love others the way He loved me” (McGlasson, 2013:156).

A cry for help from a 41-year-old woman

Ed also relates of an e-mail received from a 41 year old woman who read his book, *The difference a father makes*. After reading two or three sentences she was so emotionally overwhelmed that she could not read further. Her relationships had fallen apart, through which

the hurt of her father's abandonment just increased every time. She says the previous evening she had sat in her car for four hours crying and writing farewell letters to her family and friends. In the end she could not think of a suicide method that would be the least painful. "A gigantic unfulfilled longing to know a true father's love has caught me... My inside exhaustion of trying to keep going without being anyone's daughter, is my time bomb." Furthermore she tells that she saw Ed's daily devotion on her cell phone the next morning, while still in her car. That prevented her in the end to take her own life. She asked herself: "How does he know the Father so well??" And then she adds: "Ed, this may sound dramatic, but I want to know him more than I want to breathe!!"

God is our healing Father

God the Father knows our pain, our losses and our disappointments and He desires to heal our brokenness. The next step is to bring your pain and wounds to Him and to admit that you are still carrying wounds and scars, related to your own father or other father figures in your life. This can lead to one of the most redeeming moments of your life when you open yourself up totally for the experience of God the Father's love. The father of lies will in the meantime do anything to still keep you imprisoned in the prison your earthly father built for you. God, however, made a way for each wounded child to start over again. This all begins with a life-changing encounter with a new Father who says: "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jer 29:11). ■