

INTRODUCTION

The death of a man's father. It happens 1.5 million times a year in the United States alone. Yet few people are aware of its profound impact. When a father dies, we often see the sons performing their "manly" duties: arranging the funeral, delivering the eulogy, comforting fellow family members. Then we imagine these sons going back to their homes, back to their jobs, back, unchanged, to the lives they'd lived before.

It's rarely so. Sigmund Freud called the death of his father "the most poignant loss" of his life. Actor Sean Connery termed it "a shattering" blow. Norman Mailer likened it to "having a hole in your tooth. It's a pain that can never be filled." And more than fifty years after the loss of his father, Gen. Douglas MacArthur still carried the older man's photo wherever he went. "My whole world changed that night", he said of the loss. "Never have I been able to heal the wound in my heart".

Michael Jordan quit his basketball career after his dad died. H.L. Mencken launched his legendary newspaper career. Henry Ford dedicated himself to building an affordable automobile. And the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas, witnessing his father's losing bout with cancer, composed one of the most oft-quoted couplets of the past century: "Do not go gentle into that good night./ Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

As we will discover in the following pages, the loss of a father no matter, when or how it occurs, is rarely a small matter to a son. It severs his physical tie with the primary man in his life, and with the safety and security that man has represented. According to The FatherLoss Survey, which was commissioned for this book, nearly two out of three sons who have lost their fathers say that at the time of the death, it affected them more than any previous loss.

Like all rites of passage, the death of a father tests the strength and suppleness of the son, and his reaction may surprise both himself and others. In the worst of circumstances, the loss can propel a son toward despondency, and even self-destruction. In the best, it can inspire in the son a new appreciation for his life and loves, and move him with urgency to make the most of his remaining years.

My own interest in father-death began sixteen years ago with the most memorable words my father ever said to me. I was twenty-seven years old at the time, between journalism jobs, living just a few blocks from the small Miami Beach apartment my paternal grandfather had set up after his retirement. It was the first time in my life that Grandpa was close-by, and along with meals of

pot roast and potatoes, I soaked up the stories of his harrowing childhood in Eastern Europe, desperate emigration, and eclectic life that spanned the century.

Then one day I got a phone call from a doctor. "I'm sorry to tell you this," came the voice, "but your grandfather has had a heart attack, and he has expired."

The next day, my father flew to south Florida from his home in Michigan. I picked him up at the airport, and we drove in silence to the hospital to identify Grandpa's body, collect his watch and wallet, and make arrangements to ship the body north for burial at my grandmother's side.

Then my father turned the key to my grandfather's home, and we began sorting the material remnants of the old man's life. We discovered curled black-and-white photos from the early years, key-chains from more recent times, passbooks, matchbooks, coins, coupons and a pack of stale generic cigarettes. Working in different rooms, we'd occasionally exclaim to each other about a special find. Mostly we sorted in silence.

We kept at it until the glow of the afternoon sun had waned. Then my father and I collapsed in my grandfather's heavily pillowed living-room chairs, glasses of the old man's scotch in hand. We shared memories for awhile, then quiet. Finally, as the room faded into near-total darkness, I heard a guttural groan. At first, I was startled. Then I realized what was happening. I had never before heard my father cry.

I rose, and knelt by his side. After a couple of minutes, he spoke. "I am crying not only for my father, but for me," he said. "His death means I'll never hear the words I've always wanted to hear from him: that he was proud of me, proud of the family I'd raised and the life I've lived."

And then my father directed his voice toward me, and he uttered the words that continue to resound. "So that you never have to feel this way too," he said, "I want to tell you now how proud I am of you, of the choices you've made, of the life you've created."

Much of the pain that is inherent in father-son relationships dissolved for me in the calming resonance of that blessing. And in the months that followed, I felt stronger, more confident, especially as I re-started my career. At the same time, I had to marvel at the potency of the event that had brought my father, then a successful, 52-year-old university professor and psychotherapist, to such depth of grief, and spurred him to a proclamation of a kind he'd never made before.

I soon learned that my father's reaction was not unusual. As I reached my early thirties, my male friends began losing their fathers in increasing numbers. For many, it was a watershed event. Some cried for the first time in decades. Others feared for their own lives. One man decided to become a father for the first time. Another decided to change jobs.

Each man, it seemed to me, experienced a significant reordering of his inner landscape. As a 48-year-old minister friend told me: "When my father died, it was as if I had lived in a house my whole life, a house with a picture window looking out on a mountain range. Then one day, I looked out the window, and one of the mountains was gone."

That image stuck with me. And in 1995, after launching a syndicated men's column, I started writing on the subject of father-death. The reaction to these columns was intense among men, most of whose letters to me had focused on the intellectual. Now, many wrote with emotion that quivered on the page, telling of the "void," the "hole," the "emptiness" that they'd felt after the death of their fathers. Some seemed stunned that a man they once viewed as invincible could be boxed, buried, or reduced to a feathery ash.

Many of these men expressed a hunger for more information on the subject, so I went looking. I found rich treatments on the theme of father-death, dating back to the 5th century B.C. That's when the Greek dramatist Sophocles penned his Oedipus stories, built around the tale of a man who murders his father and marries his mother. Some 2,000 years later, as his own father was nearing his end, William Shakespeare wrote his treatise on the subject of father-death. In Hamlet, a tempestuous young prince reacts with anger, despair, delirium, and ultimately, resolve, to the murder of his father, the king.

The theme of father-death also showed up in more contemporary venues, including at the movie theater. In "Field of Dreams," Kevin Costner's character yearns so desperately for his dead father that he carves a baseball diamond out of an Iowa cornfield in hopes of luring the old man's ghost. In "The Lion King," the youthful Simba struggles with enormous guilt as he's called upon to take over the realm his departed father left to him. And in "Star Wars," George Lucas sends his young male protagonist on a three-movie mission to locate and redeem Darth Vader, the dark father, before death overtakes him.

In my searching, I also found books on all manner of other losses: mother-loss, child-loss, spouse-loss, job-loss, pet-loss, even hair-loss. I found no similar writings, however, addressing the specific concerns of modern men facing or mourning the deaths of their fathers. Despite the huge numbers of men affected, and the growing interest in the father-son relationship, no psychologist, anthropologist, sociologist or journalist had written the book on how men react to the physical demise of this most influential man in their lives.

This book aims to fill the gap.

In the following pages, you will be led on a dramatic and ultimately hopeful journey that begins in the echo of those awesome words: "Your father is dead." Your primary guides will be 377

ordinary American men, men who lost their fathers sometime between early childhood and their 75th birthday.

I've had direct, in-depth conversations, with 71 of these men. In these conversations, begun in 1997, we focused on each man's relationship with his father before the death, and on his struggles and strategies in the aftermath. While this group of sons did not represent a scientific sample, care was taken to include men of different ages, races, religions, classes, educational levels, regions and sexual orientations.

In 1999, to bring greater definition to the original findings, I commissioned The FatherLoss Survey, a scientific, telephone survey of 306 American men, randomly selected from across the nation. My chief consultants on this part of the research were Dr. Robert Kastenbaum, a pioneering bereavement specialist at Arizona State University, and Dr. Ronald Langley, the skilled director of the University of Kentucky Survey Research Center. (For a more detailed description of the research, see Appendix.)

I chose to offer anonymity to each man in my research in the belief that he would be more candid if his identity was protected. I was not disappointed. In our conversations, I was gratified by the level of honesty and openness of the men, most of whom I'd never met before we sat to talk. Our culture seems to draw back from male emotion, especially grief, so I half-expected the men I spoke with to be guarded about any personal turmoil that followed the deaths of their fathers.

It did not happen. Rather, sitting with these men in their kitchens and living rooms, backyards and back porches, I found them eager to talk. They wanted to recall the good times with their fathers; they wanted to revisit the death. And as they did, some came thundering back to their grief. I sat with these mourning men, as I'd sat with my father more than a decade before. And just as my father's words, in his moment of loss, seemed to emerge from a deep and hallowed place, so too did the words and stories of these sons.

Listening to the men, I was also struck by the distinctive rhythm of male grief. In recent decades, psychologists and grief counselors have tended to consider crying and talking – **the traditionally female style of mourning** – as "the gold standard for grieving." (The preponderance of widows as subjects in grief studies may have influenced this.) As a result, well-meaning therapists, spouses, partners, and friends often try to steer a bereaved man toward some kind of intense emotional release. And for some men, it's effective. Their approach to mourning is eruptive, not unlike a volcano, tears flowing in the manner of hot lava, releasing the pressure beneath.

However, most men in my research seemed to mourn in more subtle ways. Only one in five sons in The FatherLoss Survey reported crying a lot in the month after their father's death. For many sons, their emotions moved more like tectonic plates, shifting deep below the surface, sending out tremors and shudders, perhaps the occasional tear. And the aftershocks often went on for many years. These men tended to release their grief only gradually, in small pieces, often thinking it through, and expressing it by moving their bodies and changing their world. They could frequently be found honoring their fathers: building with his tools, tending his garden, setting up a foundation to fight the disease that took his life. It was in the doing that these sons seemed best able to experience their emotions, and let their fathers go.

In the chapters ahead, I have allowed men to speak for themselves. (I have also let them define "father" as they wished; some chose to speak of their adoptive or step-fathers.) While names and some identifying characteristics have been altered to protect their identities, the stories related here are real. The quotes came directly from audio tapes or from notes made during our conversations.

It is in the rich details of these true stories, I believe, that a man going through the loss of his father can best find answers to his questions. What does it mean that I haven't cried? Why does my work suddenly seem valueless? Why doesn't my God comfort me now? How do I know when I'm "over" the loss?

Even for those of us not in the throes of a father-death, the stories hold lessons. Women reading these pages may see themselves; the "masculine" way of grieving is not unique to men. Women will also find ideas (most directly in Chapter Eight) for assisting their husbands, boyfriends, brothers, fathers, sons or other men through their loss.

As a man with a living father, I've learned much too. Peering behind the rough veil of so many father-son relationships, I have a far better sense of what my own 7-year-old son needs from me, now and throughout our lives together. I've also learned that my relationship with my own father, who is healthy at age sixty-nine, can continue to deepen even in these later years together.

I learned this last point by experiencing it. While some fathers might have felt threatened by a son writing a book on father-death, mine embraced the project from the outset. He helped finance the early research, shared insights about the death of his own father, and offered suggestions on the chapters as I wrote them. His is a powerful presence on these pages, as much for his sustained, supportive spirit as the substance he supplied.

The men who offered their stories would be pleased by this development. Again and again, they told me that helping men examine and resolve their relationships with their fathers – whether the older man was living or not – was a major reason for their speaking out. For many, sharing their stories was their way of reaching across the sands of silence that still separate American men.

Each son's reaction to the loss of his father is, of course, unique. It depends on a combination of factors: the quality of the father-son relationship, the son's experience with previous losses, his temperament, the suddenness of the father's death, and many others. There is one factor, however, that seems to stand out in shaping a son's reaction: the age of the son at the time of the death.

Thus, this book begins with **Part One: The Seasons of FatherLoss**, which focuses on men's reactions to a father-death, based on the phase of life in which the loss occurred. Part One contains four chapters, each corresponding to the different stage at which a son might lose his father: childhood (birth to age 17), young adulthood (18 to 32), middle adulthood (33 to 55), and the "young-old years" (56 to 75).

The emphasis in each of these chapters is on stories, detailed portraits of boys and men going through the loss of their fathers. I have supplemented these portraits with my own and others' research meant to shed light on how and why sons in each group tend to react the way they do.

One caution here: Necessarily, I have been arbitrary about when each stage begins and ends; I have also grouped together men who are as much as twenty-two years apart. Thus, readers may find that the chapter chronologically pertaining to them may carry only a part of their story; they may find other pieces in neighboring chapters.

Part Two: The Son Rises moves beyond age to focus on the ways in which sons, as a group, adapt to the loss of a father. As I've mentioned, the traditionally feminine style of grieving focused on expressing emotion is often viewed as the right way to mourn. And yet, on the cutting edge of grief research, scholars are finding that the masculine style emphasizing thinking, acting, and emotional control is no less effective. Drawing heavily from The FatherLoss Survey, and the voices of individual men, this section describes specific strategies for men as they prepare for, experience, and adapt to, a father's death.

In **Part Three: Lessons of FatherLoss**, I'll share what I've learned about being a father based on my experience researching and writing this book. I'll address the questions: What makes a good father to a son? How does the role of father change through the life-span? And what can a father do to help prepare his son for the father's death?

Finally, before each chapter, I have included short profiles of notable men through history, focusing on their reactions to the deaths of their fathers. The stories of these men suggest that

virtually no son can escape the confrontation with father-death, and that the event has the potential to shape not only a man's life, but the culture and world in which he lives.

Woody Allen once said, "I don't want to achieve immortality through my work; I want to achieve it through not dying." Alas, this is not yet the way of the universe. Until it is, we humans will continue to grapple with how best to cope with the loss of our loved ones. Along with the men whose stories appear in the pages to come, I offer this book as a helpful, hopeful companion in that struggle.

-- NJC