

P a r t O n e

THE SHAPE OF YOUR HEART

EXAMINING YOUR HEART

You may remember Hank Gathers, a big-time basketball star at Loyola University in the 90s. As a college forward, he was one of the nation's leading scorers and rebounders, and he had pro scouts watching him closely. Then, one March evening in the midst of a crucial game, he slam-dunked the ball, smiled, began to run up court, then collapsed on his back.

A little over an hour later, Gathers lay dead in the emergency room of a Los Angeles hospital. To all outward appearances, he was a man at the height of his athletic prowess. To those who had gathered at the hospital, a doctor gave a flat statement: "Much to everyone's chagrin, there was never any evidence of spontaneous heart activity that we could measure on a heart monitor."¹

Hank Gathers suffered from a congenital heart problem. A doctor had warned him of it earlier that year, but nearly everyone found it difficult to believe that such a gifted and physically fit athlete could be brought down so young. He continued to play, until, at the seeming height of his career, he collapsed and died.

A father, too, can suffer from a bad heart without ever knowing it. I'm not talking about the physical heart, but the emotional and spiritual heart that sustains a family. He may even move gracefully through several stages of fatherhood, a veritable model of parenting. "Did you see the way Phil disciplined his daughter?" Phil's neighbor asks a friend. "Firm, yet compassionate. And how about the tree house he built for his two little boys? It's a great design, and that guy sure is a craftsman with wood. And he makes the time and really enjoys coaching his Little League team, leading Cub Scouts, and teaching a children's Sunday school class. Where does he get his energy? He has such a heart for his kids. I wish I could be half the father that Phil is."

But then, suddenly, something happens. Maybe one of his sons turns into a teenager and rebels; Phil cannot handle the loss of control. Or his daughter is hurt in an accident, and he stubbornly clings to guilt. Maybe it is for no foreseeable reason at all. But, without warning, Phil stops playing as much with his children and disappears into a career. Over time, hugs and outings and spontaneous play are replaced by excuses, fatigue, and defeated resignation. Somewhere along the road, the heart of a father stopped beating.

If an emotional autopsy of Phil's heart could be performed, one might be able to discover the hidden cause. Chances are, Phil's fathering heart was damaged early on in his life, as a child or teen.

The primary influence on the condition of a father's heart is a man's father. In other words, the first step to becoming an effective father is to come to terms with your past by resolving your feelings, attributes, and actions as a son. As the disintegration of fathering continues, dangerous trends worsen. Fathers, damaged by their fathers, pass on the broken baton to their sons. And so on. Unless the cycle is broken, the damage to the emotional and spiritual hearts of future fathers is almost as certain as a defect passed along to the physical heart through a chromosome.

"Boys grow into men with a wounded father within, a conflicted inner sense of masculinity," wrote Samuel Osherson, a Harvard research psychologist. After scores of interviews with men in their thirties and forties, Osherson concluded that "the psychological or physical absence of fathers from their families is one of the great underestimated tragedies of our times."²

Despite the overwhelming amount of research confirming the impact of a father on a son's ability to father, many men I have met are reluctant to think about their fathers and deal with underlying feelings. Some of that

reluctance is certainly a fear of pain. You can dredge up some hurts that seem to accrue compound interest over the years, and these seem overwhelming.

Other men aren't convinced that an inventory of the past will be productive: "That was then; this is now. I'm too busy raising my own kids to worry about how I was fathered. Besides, the way I was fathered has little effect on my fathering. Right?" Or, "My dad was just like everyone—each one of us has our good points and bad points—and we have to make do with what we are given."

And so these men, unaware of the condition of their hearts, jump blindly into fathering. Some of them fail immediately; others, fueled on the adrenaline of commitment and strong will, run a little longer, maybe even as gracefully as Phil. But eventually, often at what marathon runners call "the wall of pain," their damaged hearts simply fail them.

What Do We Do Now?

Psychologist Donald Joy points out, "Men with a damaged father connection will be healed only to the extent that they can describe the loss and the pain."³

A heart damaged by a father is often deeply bruised. Over the years, many movements have sprung up to help men deal with the pain from the damage left behind by poor fathering. Robert Bly, the poet and de facto guru of the "Men's Movement," conducted "Wild Man Weekends" in the 1980s and 90s to help men deal with their pain. Dancing to drum beating and giving emotionally charged personal histories were some of the forms of expression he encouraged men to try as a way to release their father pain. In his book *Iron John* he wrote: "[Father-] hungry sons hang around older men like the homeless do around a soup kitchen. Like the homeless, they feel shame over their condition, and it is nameless, bitter, inexpugnable shame."⁴

Before we run the race of fathering, it only makes sense to have our hearts checked, to see how they have been strengthened or damaged. The first section of this book, "The Shape of Your Heart," explores the relationship between a father and his own father. The goal is to restore whatever is faulty in the relationship with healthy attitudes and actions (to whatever extent that is possible). The section investigates three vital steps in the process: recognition, resolution, and relating.

To begin the process, you first must know the shape of your heart; then

you can make healing your goal. To bring healing, what you do next—as well as how and why you do it—is critical. For the damaged heart of a father to heal and remain healthy, it is important that a man seek to establish a new relationship with his own father as well as another Father.

Honoring Our Fathers

I believe there is something in us—a law written on our hearts—that says, “Honor your father and mother.” That’s how it’s stated in the Bible, but you’ll find it in all of the world’s religions. The ancient Chinese Analects advise, “Surely proper behavior to parents and elder brothers is the [tree] trunk of goodness.”

We must consciously attempt, first of all, to find the good in our fathers, no matter how badly they seemed to have fathered us. To put a spin on Marc Antony’s cry: “We have not come to bury our fathers under the dirt of our accusations; we’ve come to praise them for what we have discovered in them and for what they have given us.” What our fathers did right is every bit as important as what they did wrong.

If, as C. S. Lewis wrote, “fatherhood must be at the core of the universe,” then disrespect for a father means engaging in some very dangerous vandalism.⁵ That is true culturally, but also personally. Gordon Dalbey writes, “We had better teach our sons mercy. A man who curses his father . . . curses his own manhood.”⁶

The first safeguard against father-bashing is to maintain a high degree of respect for the office, regardless of the man who fills it. Fatherhood is an honorable calling. Certain men may bring dishonor to it, and we wouldn’t be so troubled by what these men do unless we had an innate sense that they were severely missing the mark. But being a father is a marvelous thing—to give life and sustain life, to sacrifice your own life for the sake of those who are helpless. We must honor our fathers and embrace our own honorable title as fathers.

If you are a father yourself, you’ve got a great deal at stake in preserving the integrity of the office, especially in the eyes of your children. That means fulfilling your responsibilities faithfully, but that also means refusing to shame the one who held the office before you—your dad.

And there is hope.

It may surprise you to learn that, in one bit of research at the National

Center for Fathering, we discovered that a man's relationship with his father is not the most significant predictor of his current relationship with his children. In other words, a painful past is certainly an influence, but not the "silver bullet." Your commitment to become a dad of destiny can displace the negative effects resulting from a poor relationship with your dad. You can join the distinguished ranks of the "overcomer dads."

RECOGNIZE YOUR PAST

When he noticed the pain in his chest, recording artist David Meece went promptly to his doctor's office. There the doctor examined him for several hours and concluded the symptoms signaled a heart attack.

David told me the story one day on a Father's Day radio special: "They took me down to the emergency room and then to intensive care and hooked me up. At this point I was hyperventilating because I was flipping out—I didn't know what was going on and I was passing out and then waking up. I thought this was from having a heart attack. They told me later it was from hyperventilating.

"I'm later there, tubes in my arms, tubes up my nose, nurses coming in and sticking things in me, turning me over and rolling me back. Then, after several days in the hospital, my physician came in and told me that I had not had a heart attack—I was physically fit as a horse!"

David was shocked to hear that finding, but the question the doctor asked him was just as unsettling: "David, is there any alcoholism in your family?"

“Yeah, my father,” David answered. The response “just popped out of my mouth,” David recalls. “It was the first time I’d ever acknowledged that word [alcoholism] at all.”

David—who by his own words was an “extreme workaholic”—had never faced his feelings about his father. He knew he hadn’t felt anything at his funeral earlier that year, but he still refused to admit how much his father’s alcoholism had impacted him.

Many men are like David, unable to recognize the impact of their father’s past. To a large degree, your heart as a father is shaped by the heart of *your* father. You and I need to face that, and recognize any damage from our childhood. Without taking this step we run the risk of ending up like David. Even if our symptoms are different, we will assuredly have some type of symptoms—most likely in the way we relate to our families.

Here are the words of some other fathers, each of whom has a family history of what I call “father-heart disease,” passed down by their own dads.

Tom, who like David is just beginning to recognize how shortcomings in his father affected him: “You know, my dad gave thousands of dollars to various youth organizations, but he never helped his own kids.”

Jim: “I can’t tell you whether my father treated me harshly or warmly, because he left almost all interactions with me up to my mother. I guess the truth is, even though we lived in the same house, he was barely involved with me at all.”

Tyler: “Dad did little to satisfy my hunger for knowledge. He didn’t talk much, either about current events or, especially, about his own past. I knew he had grown up in Ireland, which sounded terribly exotic to me. But it was almost impossible to get him to talk about it.”

Dan: “Up until I turned into a teenager, my childhood was wonderful. My father created a magical world for us—one that was filled with imagination, safety, and play. But when I started having ideas of my own, my father and I clashed. I could sense that he didn’t like the idea of losing control over me.”

Bill: “I wanted my father to be so proud of me. Then all he did was drive me to the graduation ceremony in our pickup, and let me off. He never stayed to see me graduate. He just came and picked me up afterward.”

Who You Are

Today, in a culture that has been splintered by marital failure and mobility, our ties to our parents often seem less obvious. Yet, in research literature across the board, from genetics to psychology, it is increasingly clear that we have not escaped our family inheritance. Your father and mother have had a huge influence on who you are. Concerning our fathers, that means for some of us a legacy of pain or loss or feelings of being incomplete. For others, it means a less intense father-hunger, thanks to our dads' involvement. But we cannot deny that our dads have given us much, beginning with our identity.

The first and most important thing we receive from our fathers is our names. I am Ken Canfield, son of Melvin Canfield, who was the son of Merle Canfield. Et cetera.

Up until recent times, a name was more than just what you called yourself. It reflected, in one way or another, a deep connection with preceding generations. If your last name was Baker, for instance, you probably followed the recipe of a long line of men who baked bread for a living. Or Mr. Fuller, Mr. Fisher, Mr. Carpenter—all of these names indicate that early fathers passed on to their sons careers, livelihoods, and lifestyles. Names also could have represented personality traits. Bliss, Hope, Lovejoy. A last name originally was a simple way of saying, "Like father, like son."

There were other obvious connections that tied generation to generation. Inheritances, for example. In the old days, the reading of the last will and testament meant more than receiving a few disconnected items—some china, furniture, and money. It meant, instead, the passing on of a livelihood. Children received the raw material they would need to begin conducting the business, the deed to a farm, or utensils for the kitchen.

In Middle America, some family farms survive. I know some fifth-generation farmers, descendants of original homesteaders. When their parents died, they received the farm, and with it a mission—to grow crops and raise cattle and provide for their families, the next generation. And the inheritance's inventory included more than just acreage and machinery. Sometimes it included poorly managed fields, sucked dry by erosion and overuse. It even included the family operation's reputation. The feed store owner knew how good the family's credit was. The cattle auctioneer knew how pure the family stock was. It was like the father was saying to his son,

“Here you go. This is what I was able to do with what my father entrusted to me. Now it’s your turn. When you pass it on to your son, may the assets outweigh the liabilities.”

Such concrete ties with preceding generations made it clear to nearly everyone that the passing on of names and livelihoods marked the cycle: What you possess, you have been given, you pass on.

The Power of Our Dads

Cookie-holics and Other Legacies

Some years ago, I was in Wichita visiting my parents. For some reason, I borrowed Dad’s car to run some errands, and as I was driving along something caught my eye on the floor of the car, just below my leg. I knew immediately what it was: a sackful of cookies.

I laughed out loud (but stopped long enough to stuff a cookie into my mouth). I remembered that my dad is a cookie-holic. He was in his sixties, but he still drove around munching on cookies as he went about his business. But there was another reason that I laughed: I also used to hide my bag of cookies in the same place. I never knew I was so like my dad.

Certainly this is a silly example, yet I’m sure some fathers and sons stash bottles under the seat instead of cookies. I suspect you’d be surprised to discover the influence your father has had on you, even down to how you imitate some of his gestures, behaviors, and attitudes. How can you help but be influenced by your father? His Y chromosome resides in every single cell of your body. Your very DNA cries out that you owe your person to another. And how can you not be affected by the words and actions of your father that say, *Son, I love you*, or, *Son, I wish you were a little more like so and so*? The impact, biologically and emotionally, is irrefutable and immense.

Wrong Responses to Our Father’s Influence

But still there are some who deny their father’s influence. In essence, they say, “The past is past; I need to get on with life. I will simply choose to be different from my father.” Yet, the underlying issues remain unresolved, and, in time, the son becomes just like the father. Good intentions are simply not enough.

I compare this kind of denial to our country's national debt, which as of 2006, is more than \$8 trillion (and though it fluctuates wildly, it can grow by more than \$100 million in an hour).¹ "If we wait long enough," we kid ourselves, "one day we'll wake up and it will be gone; the math will rework itself and balance out to a big zero in the end."

The same kind of logic is often also applied to the fathering deficit. The consequences of such denial, on both a personal and community level, are staggering. "The ultimate economic and spiritual unity of any civilization is still the family," writes playwright Clare Boothe Luce.

The other extreme to denial is exacting justice. Some men recognize their fathers' failings, become angry, and want to take revenge. They go to their fathers and demand payment for the way they have treated them.

Like denial, though, taking revenge won't help a man deal with his past. His father, who is probably already feeling guilty, is handed blame that is beyond his capability to resolve. And the son, awash in anger, typically will refuse to move forward until his father does. So, the son is reduced to bashing his father.

Deficits and Assets

Your family, generation after generation, may be passing along a "fathering deficit." Did your father make any deposits in your emotional bank account as you were growing up? If your father hasn't provided affirmation and affection for you, you will most likely run up a big overdraft. The result of continuing overdrafts is emotional bankruptcy. Unless you stop and take a look at the balance of your intergenerational fathering accounts, you will be in danger of passing that "fathering debt" on to your children. One day, someone will have to pay.

And we're not only looking for deficits. We are also looking for the assets—those areas where our fathers excelled and were faithful. We want to be doubly sure that these pools of strength are passed on to our children with no decrease in their value. There are many men who've been given wonderful legacies, but like farmers who let their family farms go to weed, they don't act on what they've been given. In this chapter, we will recognize our past: the influence, good and bad, of our fathers that has made us who we are today. This first step of recognition is not simply for those with traumatic childhoods. It's for every father, and it is the only way we can

get a good assessment of our strengths and weaknesses, our assets and liabilities.

Tell Me About Your Dad

For some people, taking an inventory of the past can be a complicated process. If your father abused you as a child—and the statistics suggest that many fathers did—then you may be wise to find a professional counselor who can more thoroughly and personally lead you through this inventory process. For most men, however, the inventory process is a lot less complicated. In fact, once you've dug a core sample, toxic waste really isn't that hard to detect. Memories will come back. And with those memories—emotion. I have a friend named Jeff who felt emotionally overwhelmed after he broke off his marriage engagement. The first person he reached out to was a sympathetic college professor, who listened to Jeff speak for a while and then simply said, "Tell me about your dad." That did it. Jeff broke down weeping.

"Tell me about your dad." That's really all I'm asking in this chapter. Because each of your situations is so varied, this chapter cannot be arranged in a typical, step-by-step, universal problem, universal solution fashion. What follows is a series of interactive questions, which will allow you to get a better grip on your relationship with your father. All of us will find our inheritances lacking to some degree. I trust that whatever lack we identify will motivate us to work on the next step: resolving our feelings, attitudes, and actions as sons.

And remember what author Samuel Osherson writes: "Every man needs to identify the good in his father, to feel how we are like them, as well as the ways we are different from them."²

Now for some of you, your father was largely absent. It's hard to even get a handle on the questions in Father Inventory #2. I would suggest trying this exercise twice: once for your natural father, from whatever you know about him, and then once for the man who most treated you like a son.

Before you begin Father Inventory #1, I recommend that you enlist the help of others to complete the inventory. In any relationship as powerful as that with a father, strong emotions are inevitable. And, even if you want to honestly explore the similarities and differences with your father,

your perspective may be hopelessly clouded by your feelings. By asking others to help, you are saying, “Do you think I’m assessing myself and my father honestly?”

Your wife is an obvious choice for a sounding board, even though she too may be influenced by your feelings. Close friends and family can be helpful, especially if they are familiar with both you and your father. Some of you, depending on how healthy your relationship with your dad already is, may wish to work through this exercise with him.

Once you finish your lists, you might also want to share them with others (besides those who helped you during the process) before taking any action. Author and psychologist David Stoop writes, “Many people’s initial impulse is to go straight to the person who has hurt them—in this case, Dad—and confront him, letting the chips fall where they may. That is seldom a helpful approach to dealing with the kinds of issues we are talking about.”³ Dr. Stoop recommends talking to someone.

A listening ear can help you accomplish what you need to do, namely, verbalize your memories and your feelings, as well as provide a double check on your accuracy.

FATHER INVENTORY #1

Your Father and Your Past

For this inventory, you will evaluate the similarities and differences between your father and yourself to get a picture of his influence on you. Guidelines for completing this inventory can be found on the following pages.

To identify similarities and differences, please write down:

- **Five ways you are like your father**
- **Five ways you are not like your father**

In an effort to give you some clues on what might be included in such lists, here are my responses to Inventory #1, reflections on my own relationship with my dad.

SIMILARITIES WITH AND DIFFERENCES FROM MY FATHER**FIVE WAYS I'M LIKE MY FATHER****1. Frugal Lifestyle**

For example, my dad rarely makes car payments. Instead, he buys used cars and saves his money toward the purchase of a replacement. Similarly, I always purchase used cars outright and drive them until they're barely worth fixing anymore.

2. Harder on the Older Children

My father was the oldest child in his family. I was the oldest child in mine. My father raised his oldest son (me) the way he was raised, and I seem to be doing the same. I have higher expectations of my two oldest children, whom I seem more ready to discipline and correct.

3. Ice Cream Late at Night

Vanilla is fine for both of us, just as long as it's three healthy scoops and served after the sun goes down.

4. A Subtle Workaholism

My dad had a tendency to get too many projects going at one time. When the pressure of deadlines built up, he'd end up starting to work at 4 a.m. I am writing this paragraph at 2 a.m.

FIVE WAYS I'M NOT LIKE MY FATHER**1. A Circle of Outside Acquaintances**

My father rarely socialized outside the family. Home was a private refuge, not a public watering hole. By contrast, Dee and I entertain friends quite regularly.

2. Spiritual Concerns

My father wasn't very interested in the spiritual side of life, but I've chosen to be active in my church and place high value on a relationship with God.

3. A Real Competitor

My father was president of his senior class and very involved in sports (he was starting quarterback and won a state championship in tennis). I was average athletically and wasn't involved in student government.

4. Leadership Styles

My father likes to be in control, while I am much more laid-back. He will likely take charge in a meeting to assure some productive conclusion. I am more likely to be a consensus leader.

FIVE WAYS I'M LIKE MY FATHER**5. Emotionally Inexpressive**

My dad came out of the era when men didn't express feelings. He rarely touched me except for discipline, and only occasionally affirmed me verbally for an accomplishment. I still struggle with this tendency toward emotional distance from my children.

FIVE WAYS I'M NOT LIKE MY FATHER**5. Variety**

My father demands regularity. I like to travel, while he prefers to stay home. I will take a new route to see the different sights; he beats the same path home every night.

Your list, of course, will be different. That's the idea. Each of us, because we are different and come from varying situations, will develop entirely unique lists. As you work on your list, here are some additional tips:

Start simple. If you have trouble starting your list, begin with physical characteristics. Do you have your father's nose? Is he a stocky man, while you are more trim? These might get you started as you think about comparisons and contrasts, and give you a greater sense of your father's far-reaching influence—even in the way you look. Also, you might want to consider listing what seem like trivial issues, such as eating ice cream at night or hiding cookies under your seat. Listing these incidental observations may be helpful, giving you clues to other deeper issues.

List both positive and negative qualities. The best way to honor a man is to seek to understand him accurately. To err on the side of his negative points is to malign his character; to err on the side of his positive points is to idolize him. If you have experienced a particularly difficult childhood, it may seem unjust to even consider putting your father's positive inheritance in writing. Try anyway. You may have to become creative in your search for positive items. I remember one man who told me about his parents' divorce and how painful it was for him as a young boy. "But you know," this man said, "my dad never once missed a child support payment. He was as regular as clockwork."

Be sure to pay equal attention to your "not like" list. It is possible that your father has influenced your "not like" list as much as he has influenced your "like" list. In other words, while the "like" list may reveal cycles you wish to break, the "not like" list may reveal reactions you wish to avoid. A man may think he's being proactive when in reality he only wishes to avoid being like

his father. We need to find the freedom to make our own choices as fathers, choices based on wisdom and effectiveness, not on the pendulum swing of emotion. The “not like” list may reveal some deep psychological insights. Other characteristics will also help you see your genuine independence from your father.

Be specific. Include examples. Fathering knowledge is caught, not taught. As you review your list, probably only a few of your items are things that you and your father ever discussed outright. It’s unlikely your dad said, “Son, let me tell you about workaholism, how to fall into it, and why it’s good for America.” Instead, as sons we’ve picked up certain traits and behaviors from our dads because they modeled them. By including specific examples to the general traits, the memories will be more vivid and result in greater benefits as you begin to process the items on your list.

Assessing Your Father

Understanding your father as a man is an important step. It is our desire, however, to focus the perspective a little tighter—what kind of a dad was your father? Perhaps the first—and maybe the most critical—aspect that you need to understand about your father was that he, too, was a son. This can be a powerful revelation, allowing you great insight into your father.

My friend Andrew recently showed me a photograph. “That’s me,” he said. “I’m standing in front of my grandpa’s grave.” The shot was out of focus and taken from a distance, but Andrew stands before the grave of his father’s father with his head bowed. His dark blue jacket is a sharp contrast to the vibrant yellow leaves on the ground and the light marble gray of the tombstones.

“I had never really made the connection before,” Andrew told me, “that my father had a father. I mean, I knew Charles Axelrod as Grandpa and I knew my father as Dad, but right then at the grave site, it struck me that these two men were also father and son.”

Later Andrew would ask his father, “Tell me about Grandpa,” but the information he was really gathering was: “Tell me about your relationship with your dad—how you two interacted, ways you are like and not like him.” Andrew came to a better understanding of how and why his father fathered.

By viewing your father as a son, you can make comparisons to your own experience as a son, and you may discover in yourself a well of empathy to help you reconcile with your father. We tend to picture our fathers as all-powerful beings because that's how they appeared in our childhood perspective, but we never stop to realize that they too were once boys, and sons of a father. Many of the wounds we have suffered as sons were handed down from our fathers and their fathers and beyond.

In Father Inventory #2, we will look at some of the fathering fundamentals in order to get a handle on how our fathers fathered us. Some insights may startle you.

The four questions in Inventory #2 are simple questions about the four major functions at the heart of fathering—involvement, consistency, awareness, and nurturance. In the last two sections of this book we will examine these issues in great detail, but for now we simply want to ask, “How'd your dad do?”

FATHER INVENTORY #2

Assessing My Father

The four major questions below will help you evaluate your father's functioning in four major areas of your life: his involvement, consistency, awareness, and nurturance. Take your time in answering these questions; it may even be helpful to write your observations into a journal. It also may be helpful to get another perspective, perhaps of a sibling or someone else who was aware of your relationship with your dad while you were growing up. As you write, try to clear your mind, as much as possible, of emotion.

These questions serve only as a guide to helping you understand your dad as a father. You may, as you write, begin to ask yourself other questions. That's OK. The goal is not to specifically answer *these* questions, but to arrive at a clearer perspective.

1. Was my father *involved* in my life as a child?

Did your father spend time with you? Did he attend those events that were important to you? Did he include you in what he did? Perhaps you can remember a specific time when you were deeply disappointed because your father failed to be involved in something important. Or perhaps you can recall a surge of joy or pride during a specific time when your father participated in a particular moment or event.

2. Was my father *consistent*?

How regular and predictable was your father? Did you know what to expect when you approached him? Could you rely on him to give order to your young world? Reflect on certain moments when he either succeeded or failed in his consistency.

3. Was my father *aware* of my feelings and thoughts?

Did you have a sense that your father was interested in you? Did he seek to know who you were and what your world was like? Perhaps he could name your favorite color or baseball player or the girl who had a crush on you. Recall specific moments.

4. How much *nurture* did I receive from my father?

Can you remember hearing the words “I love you”? Can you still feel your dad’s hand on your shoulder? Maybe he listened to you when you needed to talk, or he encouraged you when you were uncertain. He might have created an environment where you could be uniquely you, or he might have tried to shape you in someone else’s image. Again, try to think of specific examples.

In some cases, it’s possible for a father to *try too hard*. An overly involved father, for example, is overattached. An overly consistent dad is rigid. An overly aware father is intrusive. And an overly nurturing dad can be smothering. Was this your experience? Once again, try to think about specific incidents.

As you work through these questions, you may become troubled. It is almost as if you had more than one father—say, a creative, powerful,

involved father in your early school years, and an overly busy, distant, controlling dad when you were a teenager. This is not unusual. As a son, you went through different stages where you grew and changed and moved on. But did your father grow and change and move with you? Or were there certain periods of your life where he bailed out or abandoned you totally?

To properly answer these questions you will need to think back (or for the early years have someone help you think back) through major periods of your life: your very first memories, your early school-age years, your teenage years, your first years on your own, and the birth of your first child. Try looking at some snapshots or mementos as pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. You will want to try to uncover some specific memories and examples from each period, which will help you answer this question: "How close or how distant do you remember being with your father during each of these periods?"

You may want to start by writing a summary paragraph on each one of these periods in your life. If your thoughts begin to spill out about one particular time frame, keep writing. Possibly something has been dammed up. And when it flows out, new freedom is possible.

Like Father, Like Son

After completing these two inventories, it will be easier to see how your father's influence affects your thoughts and actions today. In the exercise below, answer questions about your father's legacy to you.

My Father's Impact

1. *How has my dad affected the way I show affection to my children? Do I show affection the same way he did?*
2. *How did my father discipline me? Do I use the same methods? Is my attitude or tone when I'm correcting my children the same?*
3. *How did my dad communicate his values and principles to me? Which ones took root and why? How am I doing this with my own children?*
4. *Did my father teach me about sexuality? How? Were we able to talk about other facts of life—dishonesty, racism, jealousy? Do I talk naturally to my children about these same kinds of concerns?*

Living with the Lack

Each month, our bank sends a long, itemized statement to my house and I sit down and reconcile the bank's records with our checkbook—or at least check to make sure the online download of the statement matches my records. The goal is accuracy—to know exactly where the Canfield family stands. If it turns out that we don't have as much in the checking account as we thought we did, then we force ourselves to live the next month under the newly discovered constraints. "Sorry, kids. We have to cut back on eating out this month." Likewise, if we have more money, then we plan accordingly.

If you've spent some time answering questions about your father as a man and a dad, and you have worked through how you are both *like* him and *different* from him, you are now in a position to begin to understand how those balances affect your life.

This will be tough and often painful work. It can be like a man waking up in the morning with only a little sleep; sometimes you just don't have the heart to look into the mirror. When you look deeply into your relationship with your father, it often serves as a mirror into some very hidden areas. They reveal certain things about you and how you feel about how you were fathered. You can look in that mirror, turn away, and immediately forget what you see. Or you can pause long enough to face the fact that your face is dirty, your beard is scraggly, and your eyes are bloodshot.

But it is vital that we face the facts. Claim ownership of your feelings. Avoid denying that your father had some pretty profound effects on who you are and how you feel. Until we can face ourselves in the mirror, and make some necessary changes, we have little hope of ever walking with confidence in the merciless light of day.

Speak the Truth

One of the best ways to face the facts is to speak the truth. If you've identified a deficient account in your relationship with your father, write it down on paper or tell your wife, a family member, or a trusted friend. Get it out in the open where it is on record.

Your words open a door that can lead into freedom and healing and a firm foundation for your children. If your relationship with your father is

damaged, “healing can only occur to the extent that the loss and pain can be described.”⁴ Basically, I am asking you to find the courage to “live with the loss,” to live with the ambiguity of a relationship with your father that wasn’t all you wanted it to be—to finally admit that some dreams die, and they die hard. You need to grieve.

In processing our past, we need to admit that something very real and important—what we wanted from our fathers—has died. The loss of what you expected—and even needed—from your father is much like a death in the family. Your father, in one sense, has died in his role as guardian, protector, and counselor. Grief is the natural response to such a loss. Grief is the means by which we heal loss. The biblical beatitude rings true: Blessed are those who mourn. Many of us are familiar with Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross’s early research of the five stages of the grieving process: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance.⁵ Some men, in grieving their father’s “death,” get stuck in the anger stage. They focus on the list of grievances against their dads instead of letting themselves grieve further. But I’m afraid most men get stuck in the denial stage. “Nobody—,” writes Gordon Dalbey, “neither men nor women—wants to face the painful father-wound.”⁶

The Faces of Denial

Denial can assume a thousand different faces. Some young inner-city men who grieve their absent fathers try to fill the void through gang membership, sexual exploits, and violence. Young suburban men may choose workaholicism or promiscuity or pornography. Other older rural men lose themselves in routine or resignation.

Behavior resulting from our frantic attempt to deny our father-hunger is essentially “deficit spending.” We are like those people who pay off their MasterCard bill by getting a cash advance on their Visa card. We are like those people who realistically can’t afford to maintain their present lifestyle, but do so by taking out loans they can’t afford to repay. We are living on credit, dangerously denying what we know to be true: that all our compensating and compulsive behavior may cost us dearly when the bills come due. We overspend as men and persons, but I am even more concerned about the deficit spending we do as fathers. What do we do if we lack something in our sonship? Typically, we exact it from our children in our fathering. We make them pay. We pass the debt on to our children.

For example, say your father never said, “I love you.” It would be possible—and common—to react to this deficit in one of two extremes—either by also withholding affection from your children, providing an identification *with* your father, or by overcompensating and smothering your children with affection in a reaction against your dad. You either demand affection from your children that you really wish your father had given, or else you become permissive in a false attempt to create an atmosphere of nurturance. Either way, you manage to temporarily avoid having to face your father-wound by having your children pay the deficit instead.

And the cycle goes on.

But it doesn’t have to be this way. As you admit ways in which your father may have fallen short, you can also make this commitment: “The deficit spending stops here. I won’t willfully pass these cycles on to my children.”

Many men now recognize the deficits with their dads. A National Center for Fathering/Gallup survey found that a majority of men agree that “most people have unresolved problems with their fathers.” In addition, one of every four men said that they struggle to talk openly with their fathers. See Father Fact #1 on the next page for specific results of this survey (and see appendix 3 for other key findings).

The process of recognition is an ongoing one. Because the father-son relationship is so critical and powerful, there will be new issues arising along the way. As you deal with one issue, others will spring up. What is important, for the time being, is to begin to prioritize what you have learned from working through the questions in this chapter. You (and your friend) will have to determine what things are the most significant. I’d suggest using two questions as your criteria:

- What one issue, if it were resolved, would do the most to reestablish or strengthen your relationship with your father?
- What one issue in your own life hinders you the most from having a healthy, functioning relationship with your kids?

I suspect you won’t have to think long on these questions. The issues should pop to the surface fairly rapidly. Again, your big task will be in accepting their significance. If sexual deviancy is an issue, admit it. If anger

or workaholism is an issue, admit it. Your temptation will be to focus on the smaller, even nitpicky things, when larger issues are pressing.

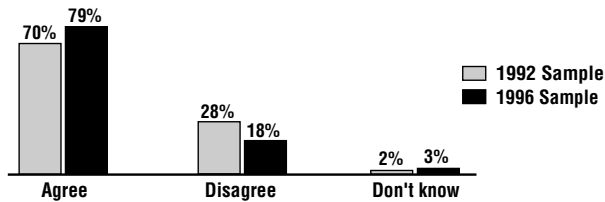
With those issues firmly in hand, you are ready to move on to the next step of processing the past: resolution. The cracks in your fathering foundation have all been identified. It's time to begin to patch them up.

FATHER FACT #1

The Father Problem

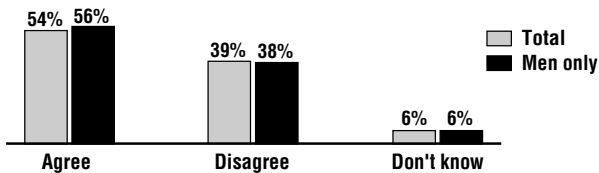
The National Center for Fathering/Gallup Poll on the Role of Fathering in America measured attitudes toward fathering. By a large majority, Americans agreed that the most significant social problem facing America is the physical absence of the father from the home.

1. The most significant family or social problem facing America is the physical absence of the father from the home.



Thus four of every five respondents agreed that the father's physical absence is the most significant social problem in America. This 79 percent agreement is an increase of 9 percentage points from a similar NCF/Gallup poll conducted four years earlier.

2. Most people have unresolved problems with their fathers.



Notice that among men the level of agreement is 56 percent. This suggests that men continue to struggle as adults with the relationship to their fathers. Significantly, the generation that has borne the brunt of father neglect, 18- to 34-year-olds, displayed the highest level of agreement with the statement, 61 percent.

Three items in the survey measured the level of tension that adults feel toward their fathers. Although it is difficult to admit any estrangement from a parent, men and women are recognizing a tension in their relationships with their fathers, according to the results. Between a quarter and a third of adults acknowledged an impaired relationship with their fathers. Only 26 percent of men were strongly confident they could talk freely with their fathers.

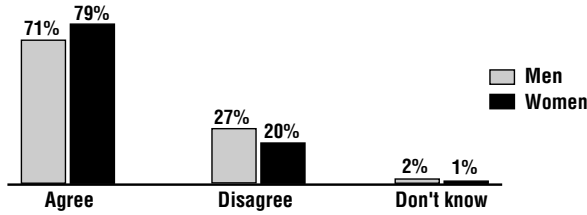
3. I can talk freely with my father.

RESULTS FOR MEN AND WOMEN:

	Men	Women
Strongly agree	26%	31%
Agree	50%	38%
Disagree	17%	22%
Strongly disagree	4%	6%
Don't know	1%	1%
Not applicable	2%	1%

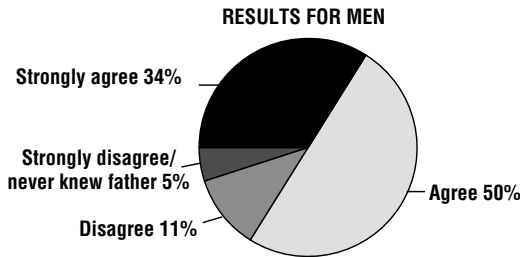
The results offer an interesting contrast between men and women—women were less likely to feel free to talk with their father, but more women than men knew what their fathers felt toward them during their childhood.

4. As a child you knew what your father felt about you.



Certainly there is room for men to resolve their feelings for their fathers, as shown by male response to the following statement:

5. I feel at peace with my father.



Significantly, only one-third of the men surveyed could say with assurance that they felt at peace with their fathers.

