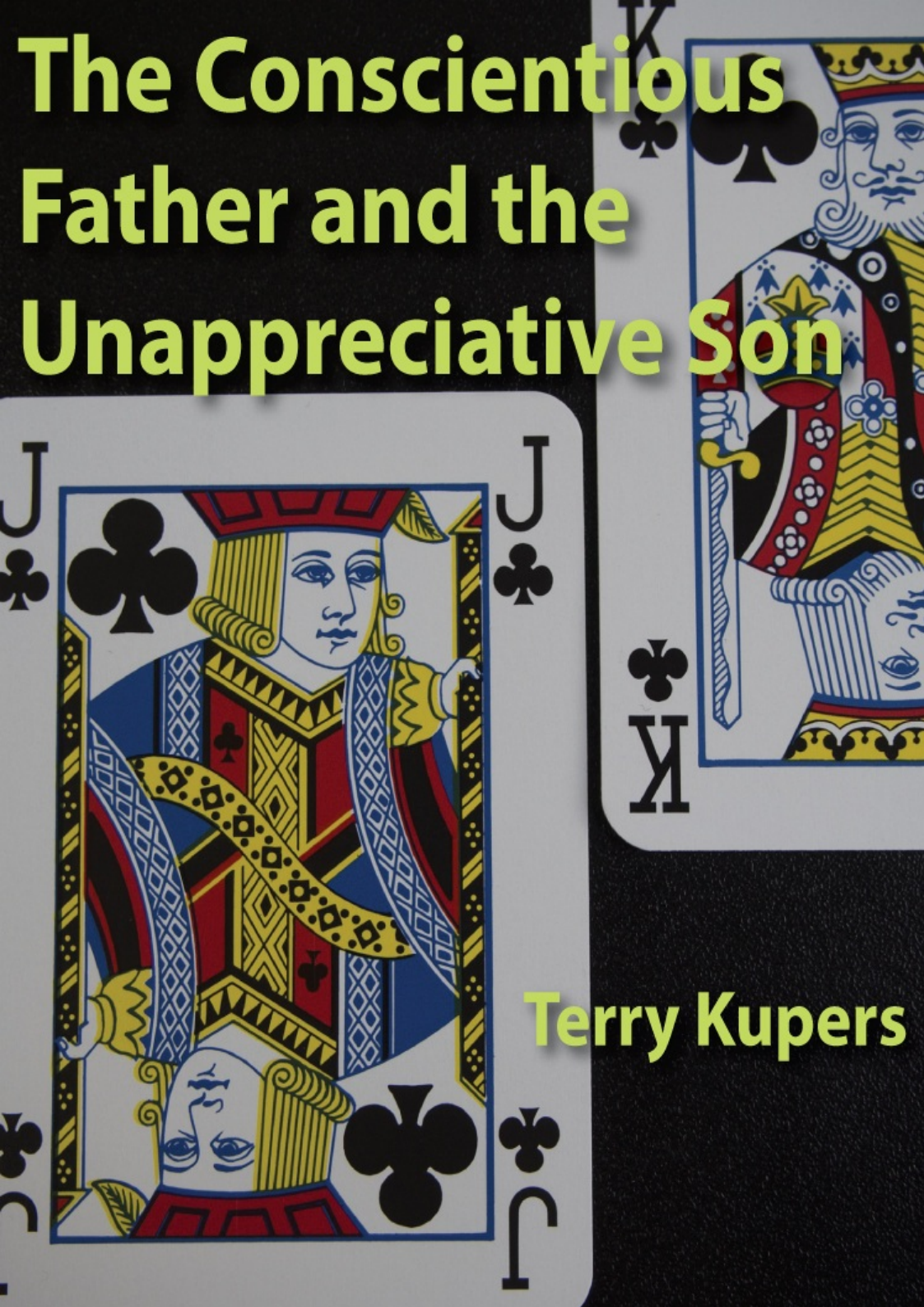
The Conscientious Father and the Unappreciative Son



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e-Book 2015 International Psychotherapy Institute

From *Revisioning Men's Lives* by Terry A. Kupers

Created in the United States of America

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I have seen several fathers in my office recently who were distraught over being rejected or physically or verbally assaulted by an almost grown or young adult son. These men take very seriously their responsibility as fathers. They were all caught off guard by their sons' attack or rejection, and felt hurt and unappreciated. The initial aim of therapy with these men is to understand why they react as they do to what they experience as a betrayal. Sometimes it is the son who seeks a therapist's counsel during a period when he is distainful and wants nothing to do with his father. The son needs to clarify for himself why he feels so compelled to distance his father. Of course, I do not see the father and the son unless both clearly desire family therapy. Instead, I tend to see the father from one family and the son from another. My clinical experience as well as my personal life as son and father lead me to witness, repeatedly, this curiously modern drama of the conscientious father and the unappreciative son.

In cases where the son was ignored or abused as a child and the father feels guilty about the way he raised his son, the son's rage seems appropriate enough and the negotiation is straightforward: the father feels remorse and asks the son's forgiveness; the son has the choice of forgiving or remaining furious. In cases where the father was neither absent nor abusive it is not as

easy to understand the son's need to hurt and distance him. In fact, conscientious fathers do not understand where they went wrong and ask me to explain why their sons are acting so strangely. Meanwhile, the son does not quite understand why he is so disappointed and angry at his father—after all,

"Dad tried so hard to be a good father."

The two males are locked in a battle that does not make sense to either of them. Are they merely arguing about who is the greater disappointment?

The son's rebellion begins with disillusionment. The son attacks and devalues the father who disappoints. One can hope it is only a phase, but in cases where the father has been conscientious and does not feel blameworthy, it is not easy to convince the father to more or less patiently await a filial return. Instead, he becomes enraged. A father tells me his son pushed him against a wall, raised his fist menacingly, and then ran out of the house, not to be heard from in the intervening six months. He exclaims:

"How dare that little bastard treat me with such disrespect!"

I worry lest this father's rage mount to the point where he decides to cut his son off and never talk to him again. If the father burns all the bridges, the son runs a high risk of being stuck in a quagmire of disillusionment and resentment for life. I caution both fathers and sons that they should not make

any permanent disconnection, they should permit themselves some rage about what has transpired, and perhaps take a vacation from each other, but neither should bum all the bridges. Time passes, as do the phases of adult life, including the phase wherein the young man needs to distance his father in order to get his own bearings on a life, and the phase wherein the older man feels a need to hold his son close before the two part ways and to give him that last little piece of advice.

Report of a Case of Father-Son Alienation

The son appears seeking help. He is twenty-one, halfway through college. He complains he is unable to focus his attention and complete his studies, and he is worried about his lack of interest in dating and sex. He tells me he has had no energy and has been losing weight for approximately six months, but he has only recognized his condition as a bout of depression for two months. His parents are divorced. He was twelve when they separated, and he spent his adolescence moving back and forth between their homes. His mother remarried, his father never did. His father established a very nice single-parent home. Father and son always remained close and loving, at least until six months ago. Then they had a fight—no blows, though it almost came to that at one point—and since then he has refused to speak to his father. He stopped visiting his father's home, and now when he returns to the area from his college in another locale, he stays at his mother's house. This really angers

his father, he reports with a grin.

The son explains he is used to saying only things his father wants to hear, and now he suddenly finds himself criticizing and yelling at his father, usually over minor issues. His father does not receive criticism very well; in fact he takes it as a sign of disrespect, but the son has passed the point where he can act cordially and keep his anger from seeping out or exploding. So he refuses to speak, at least that way he tells no lies. Since he cannot refuse to speak in his father's presence—the older man believes silence is a sign of disrespect, too—he has decided to stop relating to him altogether. He realizes he has come to see me, an older male, in order to speak to someone like his father. I am his father's age.

"Perhaps," he tells me in a very somber voice, "if I can get you to understand what I'm going through I'll know I'm not entirely crazy to be this angry at my dad!"

With the son's consent I speak to his father. I discover that the older man spent his young adulthood as an activist in civil rights and antiwar movements and then became a very successful professional. He reports that he and his ex-wife went through the late 1960s together and, when the women's movement blossumed, struggled with each other to split housework and childrearing responsibilities equitably. He cut back at work while his son

was very young. He prides himself on being unlike other men. For instance he was actively involved at the schools his son attended, often being the only father present at parents' meetings. After the divorce, he gave up a lucrative position in one city in order to follow his ex-wife and child when they moved to another locale. He is proud that he never lost contact with his son, but the move put his career in a tailspin and he is still not entirely happy with his professional accomplishments.

This father cannot understand his son's hostility toward him. He lists all he has done as a father and then asks if I think his son is being fair. He gave up career aspirations to stay close to his son, he runs a household on his own and provides well for his son, and he is forthright and flexible in this less-than-voluntary encounter with his son's psychiatrist. Later I ask the son if the father's list of his good qualities is accurate, and he says:

"Yes, my father was all those things. That's why it's so hard for me to hate him now!"

In other words, the father's "goodness," as well as the son's need to see the father in a positive light, makes it difficult for the son to express negative feelings toward the older man; but at some point all the unexpressed negative sentiments burst forth and the two do not have the kind of understanding between them that would permit such feelings to be explored openly.

The Son's Situation

As boys we believed that our powerful fathers would figure out a way to make the world safe for their beloved offspring. Our disillusionment came in stages. Heinz Kohut (1971) explains that some degree of disillusionment is inevitable every time a child reaches a new level of cognitive and psychological sophistication. Dad cannot remain Superman forever. Kohut worries about the sons who continue into adulthood idealizing their fathers. If the timing and dosage of the moments of disillusionment are right—and this means small, well-timed incremental disapppointments—the child develops ways to cope with disappointments and learns to accept the fact that all men are flawed to some extent, and still worthy of loving relationships. But if abrupt departures or disjunctions occur—the father abandons the family and fails to maintain contact with his son, or abuses the family, or lands in prison or commits suicide, or if the father desperately needs the son to continue idealizing him past the appropriate moment for disillusionment—then the son's psychological development suffers.

Peter Bios' (1984) explication of the stages of male development provides a context for understanding the son's disillusionment. He believes too little attention has been given to the negative Oedipus complex in males. The positive Oedipus complex is the boy's love for his mother and animosity toward his father. The negative complex centers on an early affectionate bond

with father. According to Bios, it is not only the close relationship with mother that is internalized by very young children, an early loving bond with the father is also internalized and provides a "lifelong sense of safety in a Boschian world of horrors and dangers" (p. 303).

Bios believes that the boy's early positive bond with his father is repressed during the years when the positive Oedipus complex is played out; this is the time when incremental disappointments are likely to occur. The repression continues through early adolescence. This is the phase when the boy is busy developing exaggerated male characteristics in order to prove to himself and others that he is in fact a man. It is not until late adolescence that the negative complex surfaces again and the boy, by now confident that he is a male and is capable of loving a woman, can reaffirm his affection for his father. In fact, the boy must reaffirm this affection, or resolve the negative complex, if he is to progress to a healthy adulthood.

Bios' formulation sheds some light on the boy's crisis in late adolescence or early adulthood. In other words, in the ideal case the son has already expressed his negative feelings toward his father and is prepared for a reconciliation, but in many less-than-ideal cases the negative feelings surface late and make the son's leave-taking problematic. Often a nearly grown son complains that his father failed to prepare him to face the cruel world out there. Perhaps the father was overprotective, causing the son to feel

unprepared when the time came for him to leave home. Perhaps the son feels that his father's ways do not work in today's world. There are many versions of the son's lament.

And the charge contains a kernel of truth, given the contemporary cultural context. American consumer culture is constructed on the assumption there will be qualitatively new styles and technologies every few years. These rapid stylistic and cultural turnovers cause people to feel that their three-year-old wardrobes, autos, compact disc players, and personal computers are outmoded. Meanwhile, consumers' distain for outdated styles and equipment creates a virtual bonanza for companies that depend on product obsolescence to expand their markets. In cultures that do not "advance" quite this fast, the wisdom of the elders is cherished and young men respect their fathers' opinions and utilize their fathers' wisdom in the conduct of their daily lives. But in American middle class culture, the advice of the elders seems off-target. Perhaps filial rebellion of some kind must eventually occur if the son is to become whole and independent and develop his own innovative ways of coping with a rapidly changing and increasingly hostile world.

In Lyle Kessler's (1983) play, *Orphans,* two orphaned brothers live alone until Harold, a nebulous gangster character, comes along to act as a surrogate father. Treat, the worldly brother who supports the duo with petty thievery

had naive Phillip convinced he had to remain indoors all the time in order to avoid the "germs" that awaited him outside. Harold encourages Phillip to go outside in defiance of Treat's warnings, and Phillip nervously does so only to get lost in the big city. He retreats indoors, vowing never to go outside again. Then Harold gives him a street map, saying: "You're going to know exactly where you are in time and space." It is as if the father, who would soon be shot to death on the street, were saying to the son: "It's a dangerous world out there and I can't guarantee anyone's safety, so all I can give you is this map to help you navigate."

I am reminded of a dream I had when my sons were very young. I recorded it in my journal:

2/2/79: A Dream:

In sports arena-type building with Eric and Jesse (my two natural sons)—we are fighting with three men who have attacked us—One is my age, two are older—we run around the outside hall of a huge sports arena. I fight one man—beat him—run all around— find Jesse—help him fight his opponent—we run all the way around, anxious we can't find Eric—we finally find him—the three of us united beat up the third man.

My associations to the dream images: the hall is circular like my post-divorce apartment, in which the rooms are arranged around a staircase and a hallway encircles the staircase and provides a good place for a father to chase his sons—the older man is weak like my kids are in terms of street-fighting, like my father is, like I am—fighting vs. age—I want to be young to be with my kids—having kids is a way to fight the aging process. Circles: I run around in circles in my life.

Mainly, the dream is about making the world safe for kids—trying to figure out how to raise them to have qualities I admire: sensitivity, creativity, openness, concern for others, unselfishness—but also the capacity to survive in a tough, competitive, cruel world.

Will I be too old to help my sensitive boys cope with the world I Will the world be harder on them ? Can I guarantee them a good future?

Some of the rebellion that precedes departure from the family home is a challenge to the father to step forward and make sense of it all for the conflicted son. If the father successfully arrives at the correct proportion of limit-setting and respect for the son's power—the former serving to help the son control his new-found powers, the latter to give him the message the father approves of his being powerful and independent—then the early affectionate tie can be renewed and strengthened, there can be a reconciliation, and the boy can leave home feeling both powerful and loved. This is the ideal scenario.

Robert Bly (1982, 1990) believes men—and he speaks mainly to men in their late thirties and older—must resolve leftover conflicts with their fathers if they are to be whole. Men need to acknowledge their fathers if they are satisfied with the way they were raised; if their fathering was not optimal they need to grieve for the father they never had and then make amends with the disappointing one who exists; or, if their father is dead, they can forgive him for his shortcomings and honor his memory. I think Bly's advice is very sound, if it is well-timed. Some men, even at midlife, have never gotten in

touch with their anger toward and disappointment in their fathers; for them, forgiveness would be premature. But the suggestion that men grieve and forgive serves to short-circuit the kind of endless resentment that prevents men from moving on.

Sam Osherson (1986) interviewed adult men about their relationships with their fathers, and in presenting the results of his study includes many poignant stories from his own experience as a son and a father. He gives advice to men who would reconcile with their fathers, for instance: "One way of healing the wounded father is to plunge into your father's history. A man needs to find ways of empathizing with his father's pain" (p. 206). And he sums up with some good advice to the conscientious father as well as the unappreciative son:

> Healing the wounded father means accepting some of our aloneness, giving up the wish that Dad will take care of you, will set you on your feet so you'll never fear slipping. There is grief in that loss of the fantasied all-powerful father we wish we had. Accepting that loss means tolerating the wish for such a father and seeing that it is really a childhood dream. Our fathers harbored such a yearning too; it doesn't make one less of a man to admit to it. So one man could finally write of his father, "Dad, we share the same bewilderment, the same mystery in the face of what is." Seeing our fathers as human, accepting their frailties and lapses, allows us to accept our own frailties and imperfections in this world, (p. 212)

Philip Roth (1991) has written poignantly of his father's death from a tumor pressing on his brain stem. He comments:

> You can say that it doesn't mean much for a son to be tenderly protective of a father once the father is powerless and nearly destroyed. I can only reply that I felt as protective of his vulnerability (as an emotional family man vulnerable to family friction, as a breadwinner vulnerable to financial uncertainty, as a rough-hewn son of Jewish immigrants vulnerable to social prejudice) when I was still at home and he was powerfully healthy and driving me crazy with advice that was useless... . (p. 180)

If the father is too invested in always looking good in the son's eyes, and the son, who is interested in pleasing the father, senses the father's need and continues to idealize him long after it is appropriate for a son to do so, then the moment of disillusionment may be postponed into early adulthood, and be quite traumatic. In the average developmental sequence there is a shift from idealization during the latency period—from age five until ten or eleven —to filial rivalry during adolescence (the positive Oedipal complex) and then to reconciliation during late adolescence (the reemergence of the negative complex). But the compliant son of a father who needs constant appreciation and praise for his fathering is likely to run into trouble when the disillusionments occur.

Prior to the time when the sons I am describing attacked their fathers or cut off contact, the sons' disillusionment had been an entirely private experience. This is the reason the fathers were caught off guard by their fall from grace. For instance, in those "happy families" where it seems to the outside world that everyone is having a good time, there are usually unspoken rules against criticizing one's father and openly expressing anger.

R. D. Laing (1969) describes “happy families” where the members are required to act as if everyone loves each other and there are no significant conflicts, even if in actuality the children hate each other and feel abused or neglected by the parents. Laing’s point is that the children are taught to pretend their family is something other than it is, and in the process they are alienated from their true selves. In such a family, when a rift in the filial relationship occurs, neither father nor son knows how to discuss the tensions in their relationship, and the son concludes they must separate.

The Father's Situation

A father whose twenty-four-year-old son refuses to have anything to do with him tells me he was not happy in his relationship with his own father; he continues to be disappointed in his father in various ways; and he would like to break the generational pattern and have a better relationship with his own son. To the best of this man’s ability he has tried to be a different kind of father so his son would grow up without the emotional baggage he feels he is fated to carry, and he feels he has done a fairly decent job. He thinks he and his son have a good relationship—or at least he thought that until a few months ago. His son, who graduated college and moved to a city several hundred miles away, suddenly cut off contact with his parents, leaving them to wonder what they had done wrong.

There is another issue. Parents raise children with a vision of who the child will become. In the early years, the vision guides the parents' approach to the child, for instance: "You have to study if you want to go to college and get a rewarding job"; or "It would be nice if you expressed more appreciation to people who do nice things for you; they'll like you better and you'll have good friends." This is quite appropriate—to a point. Hans Loewald (1980) employs the parent's age-appropriate envisioning as a model for the therapeutic relationship:

> The parent ideally is in an empathic relationship of understanding the child's particular stage in development, yet ahead in his vision of the child's future and mediating this vision to the child in his dealing with him. This vision, informed by the parent's own experience and knowledge of growth and future, is, ideally, a more articulate and more integrated version of the core of being that the child presents to the parent. This 'more' that the parent sees and knows, he mediates to the child so that the child in identification with it can grow (p. 229).

At one moment of development the parent envisions and the child becomes. At another moment the child becomes someone the parent never envisioned, and the parent must step back from the role of child-shaper and begin to get to know and appreciate the unique and extraordinary child who is emerging. There are mini-crises in the progression, of course, when the child dresses outrageously, lies, breaks rules, stays out all night, experiments with drugs and sex, chooses friends whom the parents cannot accept, decides to drop out of school, and so forth. Sometimes it is the son's declared

homosexuality that forces the parents to give up their preconceptions and either accept the unenvisioned offspring or risk losing him altogether. Stephen Levine (1992) captures the moment: “We hate them for not being who we hate ourselves for not being.”

The son does best when the parents are willing to get to know anew a son who is unfamiliar in important regards, and one who they now know will never fulfill all their expectations. Sons can surprise fathers. The ones who seem a failure when they are in their early twenties can turn out to be real gems at age 30 or 40. The ones who seem to lack ambition at age 25 can turn around and get serious about their work at 30 or 35. Often it is the people who think the deepest about a variety of issues who take the longest to get started as adults. If one has to not only find a job that pays decently, but also must figure out whether the ethics of the company offering the job are acceptable—or the ethics of a whole profession—it takes longer to make decisions about what work to pursue. People who do not ask as many questions are able to get started on a career track sooner, but later they are more prone to unhappiness at work. I am generalizing, of course, and there are many exceptions.

The father is disillusioned when the son fails to become the man he had envisioned. If the father can cope, accept his son as an autonomous other, and let his son know he loves him for who he is, then the son is in a better position

to accept himself in spite of his faults, to reconcile with the father who disappoints, and perhaps to become a father himself and pass the experience of constructive disillusionment on to still another generation. Sometimes it helps for the father to recall his own passage into adulthood, and consider the ways in which he was a disappointment to his father. Or the father might look into his own motives for wishing his son will turn out to be a certain kind of man—is he expecting his son to live out some of his unfulfilled aspirations?

A male client in his late twenties describes himself as a loser, "a n'er-do-well," and recalls that he never was able to satisfy his father's expectations.

"The old man wanted me to be a high-power lawyer, just like him. When I dropped out of college and started working in a cooperative produce market, he told me I'd never amount to anything. We didn't have much contact after that, until he got sick. Then it was too late. I went to see him a bunch of times before he died, but we never really talked. I've been moving around, living on subsistence wages. But it's hard to imagine myself ever really pursuing a career—I can't think of any that would make him proud of me, anyway."

In sharp contrast, another man, a gay professional in his mid-thirties whose father refused to talk to him for three years after he "came out" in his early twenties, tells me that his father has done an about-face. He lives in San

Francisco, his parents in the East. Since their "reconciliation," he visits his parents on Christmas and Easter and they visit him at least twice a year. Recently he bought a new house with a long-term lover, and his parents came to visit. His father took him aside and said that he would have preferred for him to be doing this with a wife, but given his choice to be with a man, he was proud of his son's solidity and the way he and his partner were able to set up a warm and inviting home. During the same visit the father confided in the son that he was worried about his daughter, whose marriage was a lot less loving and stable than the son's long-term relationship. I do not mean this contrast to imply there is a causal link between the support a man receives from his father and his potential for success. Support helps, but it is far from a guarantee of success, and quite a few successful people suffered abuse or inattention as children.

My Own Experience

While still in elementary school I was out on an errand with my father when he nosed into a parking place just ahead of another car that was heading for the same space from the opposite direction. Before we could open the door a large man leapt out of the other car and approached our driver's side menacingly. He demanded my father get out of the car and fight. Dad muttered something about not having any reason to fight, and rolled up his window. The man slammed his palm on the fender, yelled at my father for

another minute, threatened to break the window and haul him out of the car, and then turned, got back into his car, and drove away. Dad said very little, got out of the car, and ran his errand.

I was not shattered by this momentary disillusionment, and there were still many moments of disillusionment to come in our relationship. It would have been nice if we could have talked about the event. After all, I was struggling with the question of fighting or being called chicken, and here was my father "chickening out" of a fight. Did he think he was a chicken, or was he convinced, as I would become a dozen years later, that fighting whenever one is called out is a ridiculous thing to do? I did not talk with my father about all this and none of my friends talked with their dads about such things. In my early thirties I joined a men's group, and it was at one of the group meetings that I recalled some of my filial disillusionments.

Men's groups, like psychotherapy, provide a safe haven for taking risks, and often, when one is willing to expose a part of the inner life that had been painfully secret, great things can happen. Is it any surprise that so many men find that they end up talking in men's groups about their relationships with their fathers? As one member after another of my men's group talked about his father, I noticed that it was easier for the sons who had been severely abused to blow the whistle on their brutal fathers than it was for the sons who were treated pretty well to come up with a list of grievances. Lacking the

venom, one is left to wonder what use there is in exposing all those embarrassing things about one's father.

One evening I took a deep breath and began telling my story: As a youngster, through my teens, I idealized my father and had little bad to say about him. I wanted to be like him, a physician who cared more about his patients than about making a profit—the model came from the novel, *The Last Angry Man,* which was made into a movie in my formative years. It was not until my third year of medical school that I realized that, though I loved the image of "the last angry man" battling the medical establishment, the actual practice of medicine held no appeal for me. That realization led me to my specializing in psychiatry so I could spend time talking to patients without having to be too concerned about their medical problems.

It was in early adulthood that I finally acted out my rebelliousness through radical politics. I should add that I do not believe it is fair to reduce social activism to unresolved Oedipal conflicts. It is, in almost every case, also based on a well-informed social analysis and sense of social responsibility, something we could use more of today (Kupers, 1993). And I cannot agree with those who selectively interpret activism as an acting out of unresolved Oedipal conflicts (Feuer, 1969; Bettelheim, 1971) while leaving the inactivism of the "silent majority" uninterpreted, as if it is normal to accept what is wrong with our social arrangements and abnormal to protest vigorously. But,

in addition to being a time of righteous struggle for social justice, the 1960s were also a good time to do battle with one's father. I remember a meeting in a restaurant with my parents where they were arguing that my political activities were dangerous and would ruin my career. I was serving very publicly as the physician for the Black Panther Party and they worried lest I be arrested and my license be revoked. I countered self-righteously that their politics were neolithic, and that was why they were incapable of understanding the importance of my risk-taking. Things became quite heated and my father stormed out of the restaurant, leaving me to feel very pained by the fact that my principled political stance had to be a hardship for him.

I have been closer to my parents in recent years, but we rarely discuss our political differences. During the Persian Gulf War I was interviewed on radio in the city where my parents live. The topic was the mass psychology of war. They listened. A few days later I received a long letter from my father complimenting me on the eloquence of my argument against the war and the passion and sincerity of my commitment. Of course, he did not entirely agree with my position.

But he had obviously listened very closely, realized how my political stance was based on deeply held principles, and was able to let me know he respected my efforts to live by the principles I held dear. Until that exchange, while I knew in general that my father loved me and was proud of my

accomplishments, I never knew if he really understood who I was; perhaps his love was based solely on the accidental fact that I was his son. Earlier I had told my men's group I wished my father would have known more about the person I was becoming and backed off earlier on giving advice about how I should live my life. The exchange about my radio interview finally made me feel recognized.

With my sons, I try to maintain closer communication than I had with my father. We have done a lot together. Still, there are moments when it is clear a son is disappointed in me. I teach a young son that he must follow the law and then I slow down when a police car appears and he tells me I am hypocritical, or I say something wrong in front of his friends and a slightly older son gives me a drop-dead look. Each son has serious complaints, too, and at a certain age he is very willing to tell me about them. For two of my sons the main complaint is that I divorced their mother when they were young. There are levels to their resentment about that, and we work through the issue as it resurfaces at each level. And sometimes the working through alternates with long periods of relative noncommunication, sometimes even mutual resentment. When I hear my sons' complaints I get a sinking feeling in my stomach and realize anew that I always wanted to believe I was a better father. Our children teach us humility.

From the 'Sixties to the 'Nineties

Each generation vows never to make the mistakes their fathers made. Perhaps it is a vow never to be absent, never to be abusive, never to fail to spend time teaching a son to throw a ball or understand a math problem. Each generation dreams of correcting all that was wrong with the parenting they received. The father's conscientiousness makes it very hard for him to accept the fact that his son might eventually be disillusioned with him and find him lacking in some very important regards, just as he found his father lacking. And the father is likely to feel hurt when the son expresses his disilluionment, and to feel unappreciated for all of his efforts to make things different for his son.

My father must have felt unappreciated, too; his idea of a good father was one who worked hard at the office and provided for the family better than his own father, a Jewish Russian immigrant who was barely able to provide for him and his brother and sisters. The fathers felt unappreciated when the sons rebelled in the 1960s; now the sons have grown up and feel unappreciated when their sons seem to be going off in yet a different direction.

What if I had come of age in a different decade and there had not been mass movements to provide a political rationale for jettisoning the ways of one's father? Perhaps I would have needed to distance myself from him in a different way, and then the distancing might have been as inexplicable to me

as it is to the young men I see in my office today; and I might have felt as lonely in rebelling. Whereas, in the 1960s the son who rebelled against his father conceptualized his rebellion in political terms and had a large support network among counterculturalists and social activists, today's rebel is likely to be quite isolated. Like most other men, he lacks close male friends, and since he views his alienation from his father as a personal matter, he is unlikely to share his pain about it with anyone but a lover or a psychotherapist. The radical movements of the 1960s provided a slogan for filial alienation: "Don't trust anyone over thirty." In the absence of this kind of countercultural epithet today, many sons, as well as fathers, find themselves sitting in therapists' consulting rooms scratching their heads and wondering why it has to be this way.

The Male Theme

Freud explained how male concerns about dominance and hierarchy began. Borrowing from Darwin the notion of a primal horde, Freud (1913a, 1921) hypothesized that it was ruled by a jealous father who subjugated all the younger and weaker males and kept the most desirable females for himself. One day the sons banded together to kill and eat the father. (Freud, 1913a, traces cannibalism to this prehistoric event.) Then the brothers found that, lacking a tyrannical ruler to keep them in their place, they were prone to fight and kill each other as they competed for the women. Seeking; to avoid

constant bloodshed, they set up hierarchical religious and social institutions that henceforth would structure their social relations. They evolved a consensual authority structure so that they would not be compelled to fight constantly. According to Freud, our civilization was established in the interest of diminishing the ever present danger of intragroup and intergenerational violence. Of course, historians and anthropologists tend to disagree with Freud about the historical facts (Kroeber, 1920, 1939). Actually, Freud's story is a very nice piece of science fiction, but it does capture something about the male condition, and therefore contains an element of truth.

The male theme of top dog and fallen subordinate is passed on from generation to generation. Consider the case where the father has been anxious all of his life about the possibility he might fall to the bottom of the heap, and the son's most intense disappointment in his father occurs just at the moment of the father's fall. Arthur Miller explores this variation on the theme in *Death of a Salesman,* the denoument being every son's worst case scenario. There are other variations. The father who has worked very hard to reach the top may be disappointed in a son who is not ambitious, and even if the son decides to forgo the cutthroat battles that punctuate the climb to the top, there will be a scar in his psyche where his father's approval might have been. In fact, it is very difficult for young adults to manage financially today, even with a college degree. Many are deciding it is not worth it, or that they do not want to take part in the cutthroat competition in order to climb the

ladder to success, and they are opting to live marginal lives or find low-paying jobs and live at home with their parents.

The manner in which the father copes or fails to cope with the male theme influences the son's options. One hopes that the father who has managed to attain a modicum of confidence in his own adequacy will be able to give his son—who is having a hard time making ends meet and deciding what career path to take—the message that he will love him no matter what he decides to do with his life. If the father feels secure enough to weather the moments of his son's intense disillusionment and somehow finds a way to maintain the continuity of the relationship in spite of the distance and animosity, the son is given the opportunity to work through his conflicted feelings toward his father while remaining confident that his father will survive and be flexible and understanding enough at a later time to permit reconciliation.

James Hillman (1964) conceives of the issue in terms of betrayal. According to him, in the early years, there is primal trust, the parent protects the child from his own treachery and ambivalence. But this situation "is not viable for life." Eventually the child is betrayed in the very same close relationship where primal trust is possible. In fact, according to Hillman:

> It may be expected that primal trust will be broken if relationships are to advance; and, moreover, that the primal trust will not just be grown out of. There will be a crisis, a break characterized by betrayal, which according

> to the tale is the sine qua non for the expulsion from Eden into the real world of human consciousness and responsibility (p. 7).

Hillman proceeds to a discussion of the father's "capacity to betray," an important ingredient in full fatherhood, and the son's related capacity to forgive.

Of course, the son's relationship with the father is not the only variable. Many men have been raised entirely by their mothers or by gay and lesbian couples, many have grown up in extended families and communes, and some men whose early interactions with their fathers were very traumatic have nevertheless become quite capable of quality intimacy. To focus for a moment on the son's interaction with the disillusioning father is not to say that the father is at fault for all the son's difficulties, nor that there is a single healthy model for family life.

Does it have to be as Freud predicted? Do men need hierarchical institutions in order to keep the peace, or might more cooperative and less hierarchical social relationships lead to a greater peace, and more justice? Alexander Mittscherlich (1969) examines the social consequences of this society's "fatherlessness," that is, the relative diminution of the father's status and power over the past century that has accompanied the process of industrialization and state intervention in family life. He believes there must be a strengthening of "conscious critical capacities" if society is to transcend

the filial "omnipotence-impotence relationship" (that was characteristic of patriarchy) and make possible an "association between equals." The other possibility is that citizens will become frightened of the ensuing freedom and regress to patriarchal, hierarchical forms of social organization as German society did in the thirties. Mittscherlich's argument borrows from Erich Fromm's (1941) work and that of the Frankfurt School of critical theory (Jay, 1973).

I believe the choice we make as a society is related to the way fathers and sons handle disillusionment. The theme of disillusionment plays a big part in intergenerational strife. Even the overly idealizing son eventually becomes disillusioned in the father—and the way the father handles the moment influences the way the son is likely to handle disillusionment in the future. Too much disillusionment—or too much resignation in the face of disillusionment—can lead to depression or suicide. Or it can lead to total denial of the disillusioning reality and escape into fantasy and madness. The capacity to cope with disillusionment is an indispensable asset to a man who would live according to his principles in a very complex and constantly disillusioning world.

The drama of the conscientious father and the unappreciative son is repeated daily, even more so in this age of redefining masculinity. The drama can limit the redefining. If the father and son become frozen in their

antagonistic stances, neither wanting to give in—as if both were transferring their training for success in the competitive business world to the filial competition—then both will suffer a great amount of pain and lose a valuable opportunity to reconcile.

Open discussion of these issues can be an immense help to father and son alike, even if the two discuss their relationship with their very separate support networks. But then male shame intrudes. Males who feel they are failing in the role expectations of father or son feel some shame and are consequently disinclined to share their pain with others and seek support. The result can be isolation. Alternatively, if the men can transcend shame and the impulse to isolate themselves, the support of others can help both father and son weather a period of alienation and begin to figure out ways to reconcile.

If the father is too inadequate, defensive, or rigid to permit the moment to pass and the reconciliation to proceed, then the son might develop very conflictual feelings toward powerful men. To the extent the male theme is involved in the filial dynamic, it helps if the father can figure out a third alternative stance vis & vis his son: if the father can see himself as neither top dog nor loser in the mini-drama, then the son, too, might eventually learn to respect his father for the strong way he played his hand, and might be free to find a constructive third alternative for himself.

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