

Dads can be maternal too

Sensitivity and intelligence shine thru in the following essay by my cousin, Lonna Kirkpatrick. I felt her account of her relationship with her father was so powerful that it just had to be published. Lonna's article was first published in "The Northerner" in July, 1999.

A comment by my cousin started me thinking that we need a new way of describing the concept of maternal touch. Too often we assume that the mother, by default, is the more nurturant of a child's parents. Sometimes this assumption is true and yet many times it is the father that is the primary emotional parent to a child.

My own father was my emotional mooring. He was older when I was born and simply loved me as I was. He took great pride in the fact that I was artistic like him and took me out on art forays from a young age. I'm sure I was the only child in grade three who knew not only what "atmospheric haze"; was in a painting but also that adding purple to it made your eye believe in it more. By teaching me at such a young age about art he taught me to believe in my creative abilities and other capabilities.

I remember being about six when the whole family went for a vacation at the lake. That spring I'd had a very bad ear and throat infection that deafened me for a while. My Mom had to pour oil in my ears as part of the treatment and that further terrified me. Afterwards I was afraid to even get water in my ears. At the lake my Dad said I could hang on to his shoulders and he would swim out into the lake. He told me that he wouldn't go under the water and that I would be OK. I was afraid but trusted him completely. I hung on desperately, nearly choking him, but he didn't let me down. After that I was brave enough for swim lessons at the YWCA. From this he taught me to let go of old fears, try again and really feel what was going on and judge for myself whether I still needed an old fear or not.

I remember being even smaller, probably about 3, fresh from my bath and in my clean nightie. I ran into the living room where my Dad was lying on the couch and I snuggled into his arms. We were both on our sides, watching TV. I remember the feeling of his arms around me, the familiar Dad-smell of him. That memory brings tears of joy to my eyes even now and reminds me of the peace and safeness I felt with my Dad. I remember throughout childhood the lovely sensation of being carried in from the car when I'd fallen asleep in the back seat on the way home. I knew I really didn't have to wake up because I would be tucked into bed in just a few moments and all was right in the world.

My Dad also made up stories for me about Water Babies. He would invent wonderful adventures of a whole family of magical people who lived under the river just below a large tree on the bank. I could see everything he told me in vivid detail and never fell asleep before the story was over. One night I was so excited by the story that I took a blanket and crawled under the bed so that I could pretend that I was under the riverbank myself. My parents were horrified to find me missing but I woke up when they called and after explaining why I was under the bed, they laughed like crazy and told me not to scare them like that again.

My Dad wasn't without flaws. He was human as we are all human. He lived honestly, admitted his weaknesses and pain and tried to live each new day by the Golden Rule. By his example he taught me that it's okay to be who I am. Among the gifts he gave me this has given me the most peace.

When I was eleven I went away for the day with the neighbours. When I came home my Mom told me that my Dad had had a heart attack that day on the golf course and was in the hospital. I was frantic with worry and could not believe that I couldn't go and see him. They took me to the hospital anyway and I had to stay in the car while my Mom went in. When she came out, she said my Dad was in the window and that I could wave at him. I waved and waved until they drove so far that I couldn't see him anymore. I wanted him to know that I loved him and that I missed him so much. For about two years after that I had a hard time leaving the city. Rationally I knew that he hadn't got sick because I was out of town that day but emotionally I couldn't bear to think that he'd ever get sick again and I was willing to miss out rather than feel I was leaving him.

By the time I married and was expecting my second child my Dad was not doing very well. He'd had a series of heart attacks and strokes along the way and was getting weaker. I still believe that he waited until my daughter was born before he died. I remember the day we brought her home and he came in to see her lying on the bed. He looked very closely at her and then leaned back against wall to steady himself. He was so moved by the miracle of her that we both just stood there looking, with tears in our eyes. He died a few months later and it was my kids that got me through my grief.

That was twenty seven years ago and he's with me now when I'm creative or when I pluck up my courage and try something new or when I hold and comfort a sleepy child.

I miss you Dad. I love you. I'm still waving.