

# *Hippies, Fathers, and Forgiveness*

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Late in the summer of 1969, I reached out hopefully, thumb raised high, beside a shady two-lane road in the redwood country of Northern California. My VW bug had died months before, and--as commonly done in that more innocent age--I was hitchhiking home from visiting a friend in San Francisco. Every sedan that passed me up earned a muttered curse, as I waited and hoped for an old VW bus—the preferred ride and sure bet to stop.

Suddenly, a long white Cadillac passed, and to my surprise, pulled over and crunched to a stop. Caught mid-mutter, I thought better of my curse as sunset loomed and ran up to the car. Peering into the passenger window, I was startled to see a gray-haired man complete with ponytail, tie-dye T-shirt and patched bellbottom jeans! I mean, like, groovy--my old man's age, already!

A history lesson here for younger readers to understand what's coming:

The hippies were the sons of the World War II warriors. My own father, a career Navy officer, almost lost his life--and thereby, mine--to a Nazi torpedo that demolished his carrier stateroom before I was conceived.

Fighting a war may be good for a nation, but not for a man's heart. Veterans often find it hard to talk about their painful experiences, and therefore, even harder to hear a little boy's heartfelt cry for Daddy. What's more, my father's generation had been boys during the Great Depression, which taught them to stifle a boy's desires. No costly ice cream for you at two cents a scoop!

Like most of my peers, I learned early not to admit or express pain to my father. "Stop crying, or I'll give you something to cry about," as dads in those days threatened. We feared not only Dad, therefore, but also our wounds—indeed, our own manhood as modeled by Dad. We despised our fathers for teaching us that it's unmanly to be real.

In the sixties, the Vietnam War and its life-or-death threat of the draft crystallized our anger. "Don't trust anyone over 30," we chanted at rallies. "Bring the war home; kill your parents."

I tried hard. My parents lived on the East Coast in an all-white community, so I fled to California and lived among African-Americans. Dad was career Navy, so I dodged the draft and joined peace marches. He drove a Chevy, so I puttered in my VW bug. He ate Wheaties; I ate granola. He had short military hair; mine hung to my shoulders. He ensconced in suburbia; I crashed at any commune with an empty couch.

Meanwhile, back in the Redwoods--confused but grateful--I hopped into the Cadillac beside my aging hippie wannabee and we sped away. Quickly, the generation gap closed as together we mocked "capitalist militarism" and traded radical political views.

"My wife should have dinner ready by now," my host interjected after a few miles, "want to come up to our place and crash for the night?"

Having no other pressing plans, I shrugged. "Sure."

Another word to my younger readers: Don't try this today.

Hours later, as we sat organically-fed and chatting cross-legged on the floor of his A-frame, my new friend hospitably lit up a joint and offered it to me. My body has never tolerated mood-altering substances well—at my first beer in college I slid off the barstool—so I declined politely.

At that, my host's eyes misted. "I...I'm sorry," he managed, wiping a tear. "This is so sad. I can't help it—I just have to tell you that you...you remind me...of my son."

"Really?" I offered. "Why does that make you so sad?"

Turning away, he lowered his eyes. "Well, my son...I mean, he's...he's been such a disappointment to me."

I hesitated, wondering what sort of dastardly deed this young man might have committed to prompt such grief in his father. Did he rob a bank? Murder someone? "Why...I mean, like, what did your son do?" Uneasily, I held my breath.

My host sucked deeply on his cigarette, held it, and then exhaled, "He joined the Navy."

Years later, while pastoring a church in Los Angeles, I was chatting with a rabbi friend and before long began telling him angrily how my father had disappointed me. Himself in my father's generation and a Holocaust survivor, he listened graciously, then asked, "Why didn't your father give you the love you needed?"

After exhausting my long list of grievances—each followed by a matter-of-fact "No" from my friend—I sighed and yielded. "I guess...because he never got much love to give me."

In that humbling confession, I stepped at last beyond a boy's blaming to a man's taking responsibility for his future.

As "flower children," my generation tried to escape adult restraint and recapture the innocence of childhood denied to—and therefore by--our fathers. Even as we cursed them, our cause often seemed so righteously humane and unassailably just.

Dad, however, was as often unyielding. Forgiveness simply wasn't in his vocabulary—neither to ask for nor, therefore, to give. You know why: you can't give what you never got.

Today, long into the untrustworthy years beyond 30, I'm a father myself. Working hard to end this generational wounding, I've found ancient wisdom is remarkably apt. "Honor your father and mother," as the Hebrew Commandment declares, "so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you" (Exodus 20:12 NIV).

I've come to appreciate not only the explicit promise here, but the implied warning as well. "Whatever you don't forgive your father for," as an older and wiser man once cautioned me, "you'll do to your son."

Thankfully, even now, the times—as the hearts of men--are a-changin'. By grace, I've known both love and forgiveness in my adulthood. And so, long before he died last year at 93, in my heart I forgave Dad for all he wasn't able to give me, and myself for expecting God-like perfection from him.

What's more, I visited him and asked him to forgive me for how I'd dishonored him years ago. I told him how much I respected him for struggling through overwhelming circumstances in his life. I thanked him for teaching me to question appearances, to be grateful for what you have and share it with others, to live with both

faith and perseverance. Years later, I released a long-held tear at Dad's retirement home when two little boys finally enjoyed an ice cream together as men.

However tardy and uncertain, I did my best to honor my father. For my gift this Father's Day, therefore, I'm banking on the ancient promise. I'm asking not only to live long, but for a heart to live grateful for all I'm given.

To heed the warning, I'm asking the same for my son. If the Commandment holds, that means he'll need to honor me. Maybe I've helped him do that by honoring my dad.

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