

# It's Never Too Late...

By

Jonathan Lockett

I didn't call my dad on Father's day. It wasn't because I forgot. We just don't speak any more.

I can't even tell you why we are the way we are—I can only say that it's been a while since I've had a conversation with the man I use to affectionately call my daddy. And that makes me sad.

I was thinking about him yesterday. How could I not have? My ten-year old son and I began our Sunday together the way we always do—with us doing that one thing only we share—this routine that we've been following for years now.

I always wake him first and put him in the shower before anyone else, like it has become his birthright to do so—he likes to spend a few extra minutes just standing there, steam and spray perched on his smooth, taut skin as he rests his head against the warm, sweating tile. And after about ten minutes, fifteen if I'm really nice—I go in, turn the water off and make him get out. And then we do what we've done since I don't know when—I place a thick, aging towel around his bony frame and let him sit on my lap. We sit there, the two of us, steam still wafting upwards and off his head, with the towel wrapped across his shoulders and back. He leans into me, and we feel the warmth and love as our bodies touch and connect the way blood brothers should. Most times, we don't speak, no need really—it's too early in the morning, or more importantly, nothing needs to be said. Other times, it may be small talk, but what's essential to me, and I know to him, is the connection that we share, this thing that is physical, emotional, and spiritual—this closeness, where two males, father and son, can bond and share love that is true and unblemished, like fresh fallen snow.

I sat there in the steamy bathroom with my eyes closed yesterday morning, relishing our time together while the rest of the house slept. It was early, my daughter still in her own bed down the hall, our two cats laid out on the thick, off-white comforter watching the ceiling fan's blades make their slow, lazy orbit. I wrapped my large arms around his small ones because he likes it when I do that—I thought about my son and how my love for him is firm and unconditional—like the stars and planets that rise every evening in the nighttime sky—there is nothing more essential—higher priority, or more vital in my realm than my children. And then I became sad, and felt the juices that line my veins

slowly drain—my own Dad was without his son on this day. And that, regardless of what awful stuff had transpired between us was hard—for me and I'm sure for him.

It's difficult for me to remember exactly what went wrong between us. I recall the days of my youth when life growing up was about feeling safe and content, and that the walls, which one's family erected like an enormously wide moat would forever protect them. And I can still remember how I felt back then about my dad—the way I got when he smiled—or when he told me that he was proud of me. Yes—dad and I had grown together and become friends, respected each other the way real men do, considered life through the same set of lens—when I became a father I vowed to be just like him—a man always there for his son.

And then something happened. I guess the walls weakened and fell down. I moved away—learned what it meant to be a man in this day and age—no longer sheltered by those who had raised me. I grew like a weed, fast and furious, learned to make up my own mind, decide for myself what was right, and what I liked. Along the way this tension—this simple little vein of trouble that perhaps had always been there in the hallways of my mind began to spread like a ripple in a pond from a pebble being thrown. It widened, stretched, as I grew older, stronger, wiser; more determined to live my life the way I wanted. And as I watched like a stranger on the outside looking in, I saw something in me change. Like the seasons, it was subtle at first—like that slow shift of clouds that roll in to foretell of impending rain. It was resolve that I was developing—resolve that I knew what I was feeling and thinking was right. And at some point along our journey we began to differ in the way our lens viewed the landscape before us...two completely different sets of eyes...

Somewhere along the way, I'm sorry to say, I lost respect for him, and he for me. When he last came to my house, he treated me in a way that struck hard and straight to the bone. I first thought he was just tiring and growing old, simply aging, but we kept riding on different wavelengths and disconnecting—then I ceased to care and reason why. It was the hurt that drove me to say things that were wounding and cold. Finally, like any relationship that slowly dies, day-by-day, year-by-year—we reached the core where nerves were raw and bloody. It no longer mattered what I said to him. We ceased to treat each other like family, like father and son. Even words between us dried up like a meandering stream in the desert—leaving only dust and a hot, unforgiving wind, pushing at our backs, making us forget the good times.

But yesterday, when I was with my own son, enjoying the warmth and love that I get when I'm close to my boy—cherishing that morning ritual—that feeling of being topped off, filling up with juice that seeps back into your skin and takes control like a wonderful, soothing drug—I remembered that my dad was getting old. And one of these days, I would come to that fork in the road, and look east then west before deciding that I was willing to forgive and forget. But I fear that it might very well be too late. I would find myself departing for his gravesite, sitting or staring down at the graying slab of concrete that would mark his passing...and then I'd grieve for all of those missed opportunities—those days that would never come—minutes to hours—hours to days—days to weeks—month, then years of never having that closure, that ability to say what is in my heart. On that day, it would already be too late...

And so, I shuddered in my seat and tightened my grip on my son, rubbed my face into his hair and smelled his skin, squeezing my eyes shut to ward off the tears that were sure to come. It was only a matter of time.

Today, my readers, is a fresh, new day. As I lead my son out of the tub and wrap a fresh towel around his body, I sit him down for a moment and stare into his unflinching eyes; tell him that I love him—and that this kind of love is something that is constant and rock steady in a ever changing universe. Unlike anything else I can point to—a flower that withers; a tree that loses its limbs; a stream that eventually dries up; or a snowflake, which eventually melts away—I will always love him, no matter what...

I towel him off with newfound tenacity. He turns to stare silently at my face—senses a change in me—senses the resolve that is now hiding just under the surface, like ice. I know what I have to do. It's never too late to change, I tell myself—to acknowledge one's shortcomings and certainly one's wrongdoing. Old dogs can turn new tricks—I've seen it happen.

I'm scared to call my dad, afraid of what he'll say after all of this wasted time. But that's just one risk I have to take. And I go willingly and headfirst into the flames, not looking back, afraid not of the scorching heat nor the burns it may inflict. Because, when I think about it, I really have no choice. It's my dad we are talking about. Blood brothers. And this is important to me. It always has been. Somewhere along the way I lost sight of that fact.

Today's a new day. I'm going to call my dad. Wish him Happy Father's day. And tell him that I miss him.

It's never too late.

© 2001 by Jonathan Lockett