

A Father's Path looks at the unique relationship of fathers and sons through a developmental lens, offering valuable ideas to build, strengthen, and mend relationships. The Path offers an intergenerational view of son to father to son.

A Father's Path:
On Fathers and Sons, the Space in Between, and Beyond
(A Collection of Essays, Ideas, and Reflections)
By Dr. John C. Panepinto

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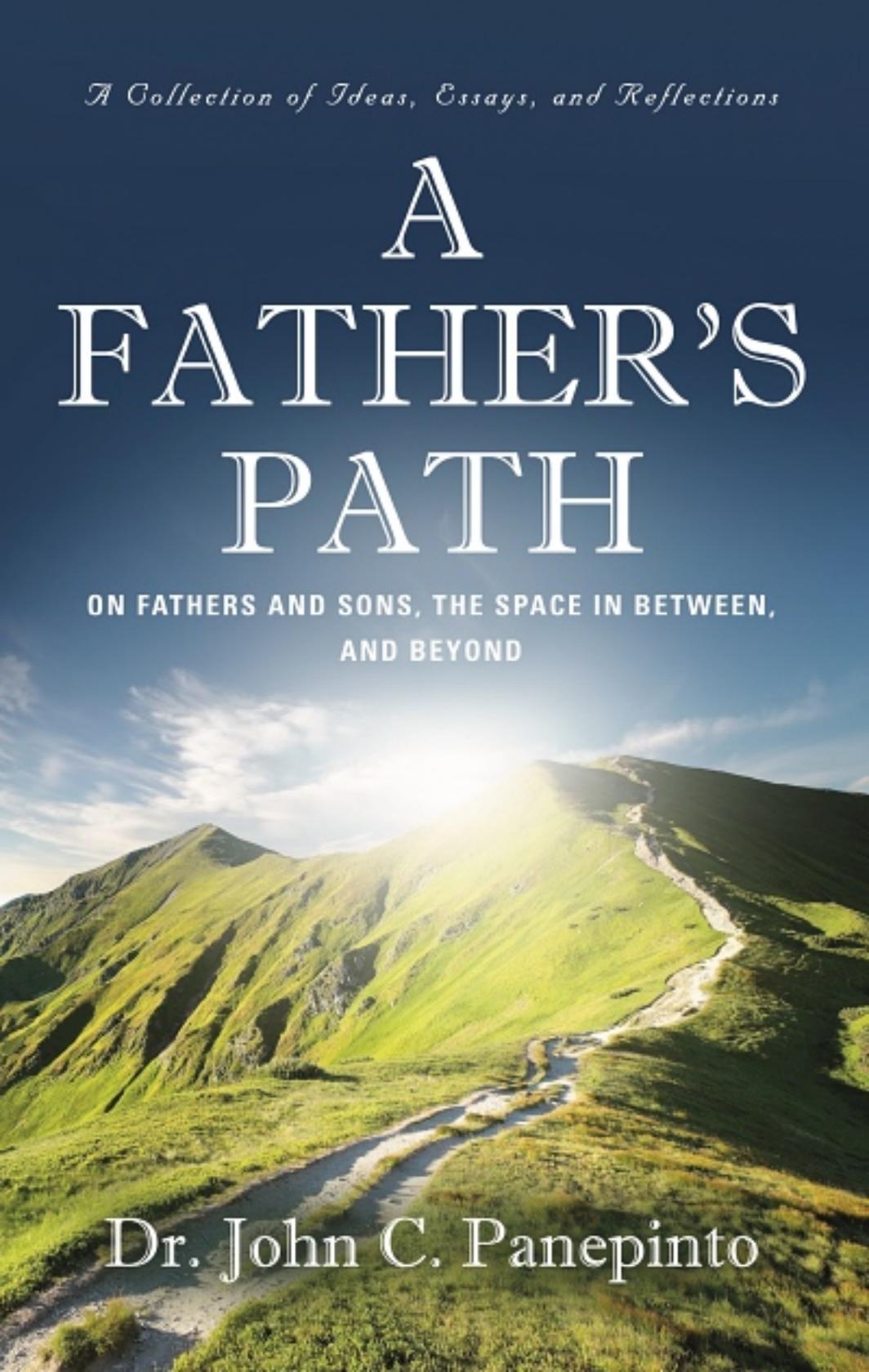
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A Collection of Ideas, Essays, and Reflections

A FATHER'S PATH

ON FATHERS AND SONS, THE SPACE IN BETWEEN,
AND BEYOND

Dr. John C. Panepinto

A scenic landscape photograph of a river flowing through a valley between green mountains under a bright sky. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a warm, golden glow over the scene. The mountains are covered in lush green grass, and the river winds its way through the valley floor. The sky is a clear, bright blue with some light clouds.

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Introduction

This work came to me in bits and pieces over decades, most of which I was unknowing of its form or that the work was taking form without my knowing. Of course, this had to be so for I was *in* the work in such different ways. It takes a long while to understand the enormity of the journey of all those who came before you and inhabited the roles of fathers and sons.

This work is a collection. Each piece exists on its own and you can open to any passage and find something different but connected to the whole. That is the space in between, the relationship, and the quality that speaks to the senses, thoughts, feelings, and themes of the connections between fathers and sons. But—I recommend starting from the start to get a sense of what I have termed: *A Father's Path*. Not my path, although my story is within these pages, but the territory of fatherhood, an expanse that extends in all directions in time and space. We are all somewhere in this territory and along this path. Though each section presents a theme, a few major themes weave through each piece...

The first is *light*. On so many occasions I've heard parents say, "Kids don't come with a manual." True. But to the same point, children don't get a user's guide on parents or for how life works. And what happens if a child (son or daughter) and a father (or mother) are reading from very different scripts? Best to shed some light on the space in between.

Light also serves this work in terms of a knowingness, an intuition we all possess, and the unique flame that burns inside. Light is wisdom, guidance, faith, and hope. It is what we seek, look to, and pray for when we enter the unknown, live

courageously and authentically, hit rock bottom or idle in neutral at the crossroads of wit's end. It is the innocence we see in the eyes of the newborn we hold in those precious first moments. It is the lightness of living when we are simply being, what we feel chasing little ones (or being chased) on the beach or in a field, playing catch, sitting side by side on a park bench, fishing, or skipping rocks across the pond. In its absence, life becomes heavy and dark, breeds pessimism, nurtures the shadow we all possess.

The second theme is *imperfection*. The imperfections in living, in communicating, in trying to do your best without access to the whole picture. Life is complicated. We are perfectly unique and are governed by deep principles of being, yet we are all a work in progress. We make mistakes, misinterpret others, fail to seek to understand, and get lured off *The Path* by shiny objects that seem to have value—but turn out to be hollow. Sometimes we don't see the other or hear the other. Sometimes we try to make the other in our image. Sometimes we don't honor the space in between us where the magic and miracles flow.

The third theme is *meaning*. As the world becomes more interconnected, more accessible through tools and technology, new forces enter the sacred space of our inner circle and most meaningful relationships. The longing or lunging for meaning to the outer bands of our existence prove devoid of substance and simply intensify the void we feel inside. Meaning is found, earned, developed over time in our most intimate relationships, and in developing our competence through worthy goals—which is just another expression of the intimate relationship with our self and a Higher Power.

The final theme is *forgiveness*, also a title of one of the selections ahead. So, for now I will say that the thread of

forgiveness is not the traditional apology or well-rehearsed “I’m sorry.” Rather it is closer to the roots of the word and intertwines with the prayer for light, the absoluteness of our imperfection, and the innate quest for meaning.

One last word on the origin of these words. If we are sincere, honest to the bone, and ignore political correctness, the space between father and child, and children who become fathers is the source of some of the most painful maladies we suffer as sons, daughters, families, communities, and on outward to the larger whole. A striking finding of father involvement research is the similarity of negative child developmental outcomes of abusive fathers and fathers who simply are emotionally unavailable. In other words, to be abused or ignored are close in kind.

Just as striking are the positive findings when fathers are responsive, caring, and involved in the day-to-day structure and process of parenting: present, modeling, teaching, encouraging, setting limits, responsive, and available. This speaks to the sanctity of the inner circle, the connections when children are innocent and dependent, and a long way from independence. It matters.

This work looks through the lens of four generations of fathers and sons of which I am a father, a son, and a grandson (and in the wishing stage of “grand-fatherhood”). Sometimes it takes such a perspective of breadth and depth along the axis of time to understand the story and that it is all one story. A centerpiece is my relationship with my father whose passing was one of the impetuses of this work. And to capture the depth and paradox of the relationship is difficult at best. I could say our relationship was strained, volatile, painful, distant, disconnected, and at the same time loving, caring, devoted, and full of respect and admiration. That’s for starters and it barely

touches the surface. For the dissonance and substance existed in the space between us, the actual fabric of the relationship full of knots and voids and swirling with a glue that only fathers and sons can understand.

But, again, it matters. And it is always a work in progress. Perhaps, each generation benefits from the work, from son to father, and father to son. When I look into the eyes of my sons, this is what I hope for. That the space in between us that communicates the connection is one of flow, of acknowledgment, of commitment, of purpose. A current of love, trust, and appreciation, honoring the light gifted to all.

It is a hopeful notion, and as brilliant and abundant as *The Path* wide open before us.

Yesternight

At a similar point in their budding language skills, both sons uttered the word, “Yesternight.” “Dad, remember *yesternight* when...” There was something sweet and intuitive in their recollections and no need for the typical adult advice or correction. Yesternight, despite the constant alarm of spellcheck is and was *perfect*.

As a father (and, I think, as most adults would have experienced) a sense of “I wish” comes along and brushes the present with a longing for wisdom to have come sooner. Like yesternight instead of today when the past is long gone. You wonder if you did your best, if you could have been there more, been a better, more connected father. But what the clarity of hindsight misses is the effort and desire that comes in the moment and in the space between father and son.

At some point you realize that *space between* has significance and is meant for the both of you to grow in its current. We mistake the intensity of feeling, the sympathy and empathy we have in our fatherly experience for the need to act on that feeling. Our son is in pain, and we should fix it. Our son makes a great play in T-ball, and we puff out our chest. The intense message simply reminds of the singular connection. Unfortunately, without the space in between and with us “fixing it” or taking credit for their triumphs, we don’t let our children fully experience their own life.

It’s a big day when we make the space and nurture this current, this flow between father and son. It’s a triumph of personal development when we notice that the inner circle ripples outward and that our child is also a child in time and of the

universe—not just ours. We see the importance of our role in a very different way for now it is wider and deeper, extending in time beyond the brackets of *our* life here in this form.

When you look back to those moments with the eyes of your present station, the reflection reminds that on some level we retain our innocence and do the best we can. Life is a wonderful teacher—but our children are as well. Their uniqueness along the developmental path helps us to learn humility and an openness to the flow of creation. Nothing to fix, nothing to change. For their innocence constantly asks for nothing more than direction, an alignment with true principles and a destiny beyond our control.

This is not an excuse to do nothing or to be a spectator. To do so would ignore the pull of the current and the power of its space in between, the influence and responsibility of a most important connection. To be so detached would only create the same “I wish” upstream, an independent son looking back and wondering why his father wasn’t stepping into the stream when he needed him.

The moment is for you, too. Relationships are rich with second chances and opportunities to be what and who you truly want to be. And sometimes those ripples come across generations plowing through culture, traditions, miscommunication, mistakes, and mindless rules. Firsts, seconds, third tries—in the end it’s all the same. For in some form, just as a child’s intuition, you know we are not perfect, but we experience and cherish those *perfect* moments.

Looking back with the wisdom of hindsight to our imperfections, we grieve something that we cannot touch but only feel. In the seams between who we were and who we are something is lost, and something is gained like the wrinkle of

time where skin once was smooth. But that wrinkle speaks of love, joy, pain, and sorrow, earned in being there, being present.

Looking back across time truly is a human experience. And the greater the expanse the more you notice and the more you catch a glimpse of life's current. Wondering is in our nature, just as real as "What if" or "I wish." But truthfully, in that moment you wonder about, you couldn't have done any better than you did. Not yesternight or yesteryear.

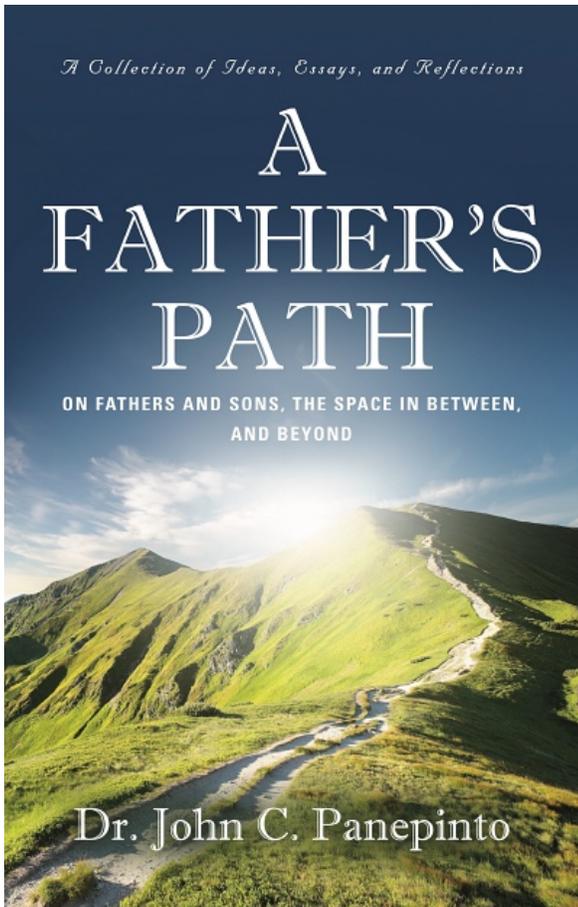
I don't recall when the boys stopped saying "yesternight," but I remember that same feeling of something lost and something gained. In between yesternight and yesterday they had changed. The bittersweet feeling of growing up. Once they leaped, they never looked back. Though I waited with an intent ear, yesternight was gone. A breath, a sigh, and then back in the stream where the who they had become waited.

About the Author

Dr. John C. Panepinto has worked in educational, clinical, and private settings for over twenty-five years (and counting). Presently, he balances roles as a consultant and clinical supervisor in early intervention, and as Clinical Psychologist for Carolina Developmental Pediatrics. He also has maintained a private practice for over 20 years. With specialties in developmental psychology, parenting, attachment, and performance psychology, Dr. Panepinto has written several books as well as articles for various resources including *The New England Psychologist*, *Psyche Central*, and *Additudemag.org*. As a coach and teaching professional for over 30 years, he has also written articles for *Tennis Pro* and been a featured guest on podcasts. Dr. Panepinto writes and presents on parenting, development, emotional intelligence, resiliency, raising and teaching boys, and performance psychology. He helped develop and implement a character education program that received a national award in 2003. He was the keynote speaker for the 2017 National Stay-At-Home Dad's convention, and blogs on his passions for fatherhood (*AFathersPath.net*) and performance psychology and leadership (*AbovetheFieldofPlay.com*).

Most importantly, he is married and the father of two wonderful sons.

Find out more at DrJohnPanepinto.com.



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