

Every son is molded and shaped by the male influencers in his life, but he is not confined to that mold. This book will offer the skill set to implement or improve the relationship between fathers and sons.

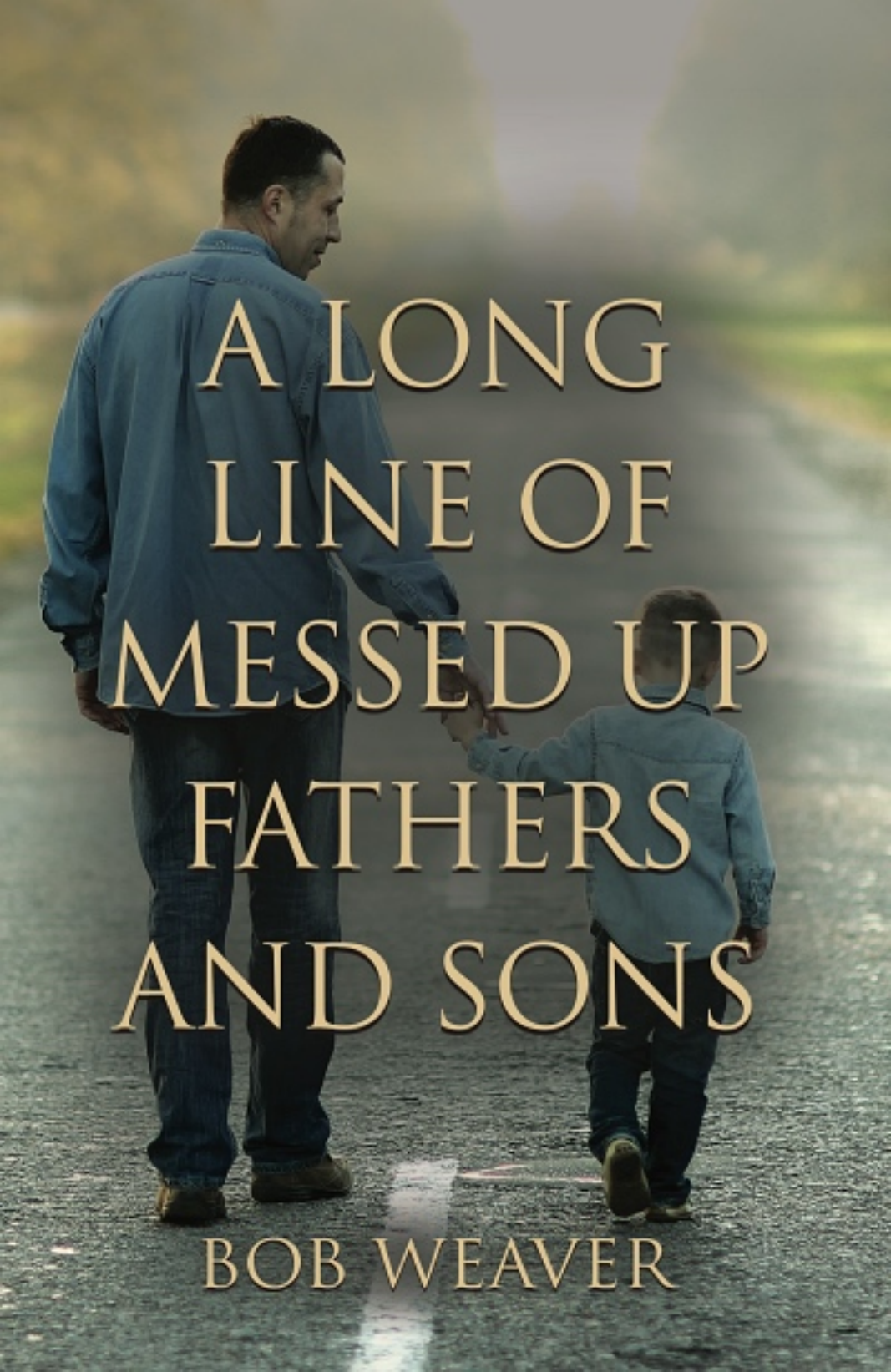
A Long Line of Messed-Up Fathers and Sons

By Bob Weaver

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A photograph of a man and a young boy walking away from the camera on a paved road. The man is on the left, wearing a blue button-down shirt and dark pants, looking back over his shoulder. The boy is on the right, also in a blue shirt and dark pants, holding the man's hand. The background is a blurred landscape with trees and a bright sky. The title text is overlaid in a gold, serif font.

A LONG
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FATHERS
AND SONS

BOB WEAVER

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Introduction

The relationship between fathers and sons has always been a challenging one. You can go back to the first father-son relationship between Adam and his firstborn son, Cain. We are not told about the relationship, but something just wasn't right with this son because we are told that in a fit of jealousy he killed his brother Abel, and while I cannot speak to a difficult relationship with his father before Abel's death, I can almost say with a certainty that after Cain's murder of his father's second son, things were bound to be bad. Just as no two boys or their father are the same, there is a wide variety of variables that contribute to the way their relationships evolve.

Most of a boy's early days are taken up with very close interaction with his mother, and I think that is the way God intended it to be. After all, his mother carried him around for the nine months after his conception, delivered him to a waiting world, and then nurtured and cared for him almost exclusively. His father, depending upon his level of interest, inserts himself into the little guy's life periodically, and these fragmented moments are the foundation to a relationship with his son—but usually these moments are not very lengthy and the boy ventures back to the comfort and care of his mother.

Many times as the boy gets older his interests fall more in line with those of his father, so he begins pulling away from his mother and desires to spend time with his dad. This is where things begin to get a little complicated. Men by nature are not normally very nurturing, and while they may have a desire to spend time with their sons, they tend to become easily frustrated by the lack of maturity in their little guys. “Stop crying.” “Be a big boy.” “Are you a sissy boy?” The father, not having attended any parenting classes, will usually refer to his default training or do what his dad did with him. Now if he and his father had a good relationship, this will work out okay, but if the memories he draws from were strained, then unless he puts forth a strong effort to change, his relationship with his son is very likely to be a reflection of his own past, and this next generation may be even worse because a copy of a copy always lessens the quality of the picture.

This book is addressed primarily to fathers and sons and focuses on a long line of messed-up father-son relationships. It tells the stories of seven fathers and sons, some related by blood and some by adoption, but each a part of the author’s immediate family, spanning a period of over one hundred and twenty years. Some of the relationships are better than others, but all are lacking. However, the good news to you as a father or son is that you can learn from your mistakes as some of the men depicted on these pages have—and if you are made aware of the need for change and are given the tools to

change, then the long line can stop with you. Blessings. A word from the weaver.

1

Beginnings

My grandfather was born at the beginning of a brand-new century. The year was 1900 and the future was full of promise, and even though the location of his birth was the western part of Kentucky, he had been born into a family of means who made their mark on the surrounding communities by owning several tobacco farms and being one of the largest producers of cattle in the state.

He was the eldest of two sons, so much was expected of him. He worked from daylight till suppertime, learning every aspect of the family business. His father was a hard taskmaster, giving him responsibility at an early age and expecting him to live up to his expectations, so he did his best not to disappoint him.

He did not have much time to socialize but found time to sneak into town to find the company of companions, both male and female. It was a time when many born in the area moved elsewhere to find work and a better way of life, so there was a lack of cheap farm labor. This required some ingenuity on the part of the landowners. My grandfather's family was no different, so they placed ads in papers in neighboring states searching for workers, sometimes bringing whole families to live in makeshift houses there on the farm.

My grandmother, whose name was Polly, came with her family from southwest Indiana to live and work on the farm. With such an arrangement, the landowner had employees whom they had greater control over. It is not easy to quit your job if you have to move out of your house when your employment is over. Also, there were potential younger laborers in the family who would not have to be paid the same as an adult worker. So Grandma Polly and her family became employees of my grandfather's farm when she was only sixteen. My grandfather must have posed an intriguing figure as he was ten years her senior, a full-grown man and a wealthy and powerful one at that.

Their affections for each other had to be a closely guarded secret since the high moral values of their day would not look kindly on their relationship. It was not proper for someone of his social status to be associated physically with a common girl from a farm laborer's family. But they managed to find time for each other. And as with most things done in the darkness, the passing of time brought their indiscretions into the light of day and my grandmother found herself pregnant. Not knowing what to do, she told her two sisters, who were both as scared and confused as she was.

There were only three options they could think of. The first was to tell the father of the baby. She wasn't too sure about that as he had already made it known to her that he wanted nothing to do with marriage. The second was to get rid of the child, but they had no knowledge of where to even look for

such help and anyway there were always stories of botched abortions that led to the young woman's death. The third was to find a home for unwed mothers. None of the options sounded good to Grandma Polly, but she had to choose. Her sisters urged her to speak to my grandpa. After all, it was his child and really he was older and should not have taken advantage of their younger sister, and he may want her and his baby and would be willing to get married. But inside they doubted that was the case. Being a little older and wiser in the ways of the world they knew that option was not very likely to happen. He would probably deny the baby was his and who knew if he or his family might even try to get rid of the situation by getting rid of their sister.

That night my grandma set up a private meeting with my grandpa. He had no idea about the news she was going to bring him and was ready to carry on as usual, but that night she seemed hesitant, so he asked her what was going on. She struggled as the words came flowing out through her many tears. He stood there rigid, his embrace lessening with each sobbing moment until finally he grabbed her by the shoulders and held her at arm's length. "Now wait just a minute. You aren't trying to tell me that this baby is mine, are you? You have probably been with a lot of guys. So don't go blaming me." He shoved her away and said, "This baby isn't mine and don't you tell anybody it is. Do you hear me? And don't try and talk to me about it again or I'll have your father fired and your family thrown out of your house. That's your baby and some other fella's. It's not mine. Now leave me alone."

Having said that, he ran out of the old tool shed and slammed the door, making it rattle.

She stayed a long while after he left with her face buried in her shawl, trying to lessen the sounds of her sobbing. What would she do now? He wanted nothing to do with her or her baby. How could she have been such a fool, believing that he had the same feelings for her that she had for him? What could she do now? He had threatened to fire her father and to kick her whole family out of their little home. Her life was a mess, it might as well be over, and for a brief moment in her anguish she even contemplated suicide. "Everyone would be better off if my baby and I were not around." A natural thought, I guess, but as one who was to be born later, I am glad it was quickly dismissed.

With her hopes of marriage dashed, she eventually decided to tell her parents, her mom first, to help prepare for telling her dad. They took the news as well as could be expected and stood together as a family to support my grandmother and the new baby as best they could. It was not mentioned in public, but the rumor mills spoke of it and applied blame and shame almost in the same breath.

My father came into this world in the summer of 1926. Born to a single mother, still a child herself, she was to be the only parental figure in his life. Even with a barrage of uncles and cousins, there was no father to set a standard or to seek guidance from. The situation was not that he had a good

father or a bad father—it was that he was missing a father, and that missing element would affect his relationship with his own children in the years ahead.

My Father

Bob Fritz was born August 8, 1926, in Hopkinsville Kentucky, and he died May 11, 2002, at the age of seventy-five. My biological father didn't start off with the best of circumstances. He was born to a young single mother whose skill set did not allow her any opportunities beyond farm laborer and domestic help, and with a little one to care for, she couldn't even take advantage of any of those opportunities, so she and her newborn existed on the handouts of family and friends. And to make matters even worse, the Great Depression was about to begin, which would limit employment opportunities for everyone. There was talk about who his father was, but my grandfather accepted no responsibility for my dad. And even though he had the means, he offered nothing in the way of financial or emotional support. My father was without a father to give any direction or guidance. It was not that this first example of what it means to be a man was bad—it was just missing altogether.

There is an old saying that goes, “You cannot miss what you have never had,” and while there is an element of truth in that statement, it is not always true. A young boy who sees other

young boys with fathers in their lives will generally, I believe, wonder what it would be like to have his own special man to play catch with him and to live in the same house together and to watch over him. He will, at this young tender age, begin to yearn for something that he feels is missing in his life. That was my dad. With no strong male guidance, he basically did whatever wanted. He was a handful for his mom, my Grandma Polly, who was trying her best to survive and raise this young hellion on her own. So when a suitor came her way and offered to take on her and the boy, she married him.

Now it would make this story a little better if Jack would have been a kind and loving father who would fill in the empty spaces in this young boy's life, but such was not the case. Maybe because my father was rebellious, or maybe because Jack didn't know how to be a dad himself, but for whatever reason, he was physically abusive to my dad. Deciding not to take it anymore, he ran away from home when he was only nine and for the next several years lived with his two aunts and wherever else he could find to lay his head. He survived by working in the coal mines carrying water for the men who worked there.

He later worked as an iron worker and a house painter. He eventually moved to Ohio, where he found steady work and a certain young woman who took a liking to him. They were married when he was twenty-one and she was nineteen and life for the most part was good. Oh, he was still a handful and

developed a reputation as a drinker and an occasional womanizer, but his new wife loved him and thought he would settle down, especially when she told him she was pregnant. And I guess he did settle down for a while, but while he loved her and the family they were making together, he lacked the strength of character to be faithful to those around him. Perhaps it was because he had never seen it modeled in front of him. I don't know.

A few years later, a second son was added to the family. His arrival did little to alter the family dynamics, probably because a month after their second son was born, my father met my mother while traveling for work and began a relationship with her that left her pregnant. Nine months later, I was born. It is almost eerie to consider the similarities surrounding my father's birth and mine. His father was twenty-six when he was born and my dad was twenty-six when I was born. My grandfather was not married to my grandmother and my dad was not married to my mother. When my grandfather was told about my grandmother's pregnancy, he had nothing to do with her or my father, and when my father was told about my mother's pregnancy, he took off, abandoning my mother and his unborn son. Historical déjà vu.

My mother never saw my father again and he went back to his family. Whether he ever thought of me again I do not know, but I do know that like his father before him, he left an empty place inside a son where a father's love should have

been, and like his father, he was neither a good nor bad example. His was just not there. He continued to live his life, having five more children. Their stories are their own, but from my conversations with them he left a mark on their lives also, only as a sometimes-present dad. The course of his life led him through seventy-five years, and looking at them in their totality, would cause most people to ask, “Why did he live the way he did?” There is no easy answer to that question, but through a lifetime of decisions based upon a lot of different contributing factors both good and bad, he left his mark on those around him—just as each of us will.

Stepdad Paul

I need to move a bit from the biological fathers and sons and look at the man whom I spent most of my years with, my stepfather, Paul. This is his story from my perspective. He was born at home on a cold January day on a mountaintop in West Virginia. The nearest clinic was about fifteen miles away. The snow was deep and there was no way this poor Appalachian family could make it down the mountainside before the baby came. Babies were routinely born at home in this area, as they had been since the first settlers had started occupying the area about two hundred years before. My dad’s family lived on a small farm and made a living by selling the milk from their eight cows, selling the eggs from their flock of chickens, and my grandfather would cane chairs on the side. It was a very meager existence.

My father's only escape was his daily trek down the long one-mile dirt-and-rock road that lead to the main road, where an old school bus would take him the two miles to the one-room schoolhouse where he received his education through the eighth grade. Here his mind was opened to a world beyond the harsh life of rising early, milking cows, and performing arduous farm chores. Here he was shown some kindness by teachers and a world that told him he could do anything and become anything. This was in stark contrast to what he experienced at home.

His father was indifferent to him, seeing him as little more than a farmhand. There were no hugs, no father-son moments. When my dad was slow in doing what he was told to do, his father would curse him and throw a dirt clod or a rock at him to motivate him, and if he still didn't move quickly enough, his father would give him a beating with a belt or tree limb or anything else that was within reach. For his twelfth birthday he received from a relative a present wrapped in a box with a string around it. Being excited about the gift and having nothing sharp around to cut the string, he tried to break the string with a fork from the kitchen table. In one tragic moment his life was changed forever. The string broke and the fork went into his right eye. His father told him to stop crying and that he would be okay. His mother put a makeshift bandage over his eye.

Two days later she took him to see a doctor, who told her he would be blind in that eye for the rest of his life. My father

heard the doctor tell my grandmother that if they had brought him in when it had happened, they might have been able to save his sight—a very painful memory for my father that he carried with him for the rest of his life. What made the situation even more painful was that his father never apologized for the neglect, and if anything, he increased his abusive behavior toward him.

The years passed, and when he finally graduated from the one-room schoolhouse to the nearby high school, he found a job as janitor of the little schoolhouse he had just graduated from. He would arrive each morning to open up the building, shovel the snow, and start a fire in the old potbelly stove before making his way to the high school. This work provided him a small stipend unlike the many laborious chores he was assigned by his father back home on the farm. Nothing changed for him at home, and his only respite from his difficult home life was found at school. When he was eighteen and nearing graduation, he took some of the money from his janitor's pay and purchased a one-way bus ticket to Columbus, Ohio, where he had an aunt who said he could live with her while he looked for work. He was determined to leave the farm, but somewhere deep inside was his hope that someone would notice the bus ticket he had laid on the kitchen counter and would ask him to stay—but no one did. To the day he died he never knew if anyone saw the ticket or not, and he never asked. He was beginning a new life, and he was filled with feelings of excitement and some fear of the unknown. In the back of his mind he could hear his father's

harsh words of criticism, and even though in the days ahead he would be far away from the daily verbal abuse, he never fully left the criticism behind. The damage had been done; feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt had embedded themselves deeply into his psyche.

However, my stepdad was a man determined, so he made his way to a new city that promised a new start to anyone who would work for it. And work he did. He met my mother through some mutual friends and was attracted to her. She was an attractive young woman who was a couple of years older than him and offered a little more stability than other young women his age, probably because she had been through quite a lot of life for her years, having to deal with having a child out of wedlock and the challenges that went along with the early 1950s. My mother often told me that my stepfather took to me right away. She said it was because I was so cute, but in retrospect I have wondered if it wasn't on his part a desire to make himself somewhat whole by having a son of his own to fill the missing relationship that he didn't have with his own father.

For a two year-old who was told to call him "Daddy," I was more than happy to comply. He was, after all, the only father figure I really ever knew other than my earlier years when I lived with my mom in her parents' house. And while people who study early childhood years and their impact on later development will emphasize those years' importance, I cannot really attest to that truth as I don't remember much

about them. As a toddler of two, I looked up one day and there was this guy standing there whom everyone else called Paul, but to me he was “Daddy.” I believe my dad tried his best, but with a poor example or maybe what could be considered a toxic example in his life, he was not very good in the relationship department as either a husband or a father.

You would think that with the passing of time things would get better. The old saying after all is “Experience is the best teacher.” But if that were true, why do some people keep making the same mistakes over and over again? I believe the saying should be “‘Learned-from’ experience is the best teacher.” Unfortunately, both of my parents were plagued by a poor self-image that encouraged them toward selfish behavior that mandated their need to be right over their desire for a right relationship. The results of their actions always left our home in a continuous state of tension, with the possibility of angry outbursts from either parental camp at a moment’s notice.

Over the years two brothers came along, but the atmosphere remained the same if not worse because of the addition of going from three personalities in our home to five. In an effort to cope with the situation, my dad reverted to the only example of family life he knew from his own upbringing—that of physical and verbal abuse. An old Navy belt, minus the buckle, was hung in the stairwell that led to the basement and it became the go-to resource to settle disputes and maybe for taking out a little frustration. When the belt was not

within easy reach, being thrown or swung by our heels or hit with an open hand was also a possibility. Growing up, I never remember being told by my stepfather that he loved me and I was never hugged by him in all my years at home.

In brief, in all my years while living at home, until the time I left to be married, I lived in fear of my father even though I loved him. There were many nights I could not sleep because of the arguing going on between him and my mother, with the fear that something really bad might happen to one of my parents or even me or my brothers.

There were not many father-son moments that stand out in my memory during those growing-up years—other than three. The first was when I was in the fifth grade. I was not a very good student—not that I couldn't have been, but I was just not interested. My worst subject was spelling. Every Friday our teacher would organize all the boys and have them line up on one side of the room and the girls on the other; then he would have a spelling bee. Back and forth he would alternate between the two groups, saying a word, and then the whole class would listen closely to see if the word was spelled correctly. Whether it was or not, one side would cheer and the other boo. The boys always lost. After all, we didn't care about spelling—we were waiting for recess to go out and play baseball. Why should we care about spelling silly words anyway? I was always one of the first ones to go down, as I never even studied the words that we were given by the teacher ahead of the bee. One week my stepfather asked me

about school and somehow we got on the subject of the spelling bee. Now spelling was one of my dad's favorite subjects in school and he couldn't believe that the boys always lost.

I think he took it as a personal challenge to his abilities and instructed me to bring home my spelling book the Thursday night before our Friday competition. That Thursday night after the supper table was cleared, we began, and from 6:00 until my bedtime at 9:00, he coached me on spelling those words. I never liked going to bed, but that night I was ready.

The next day I headed off to school. At the appropriate time, our teacher, Mr. Knight, told us to line up for our spelling bee. I made the cut the first couple of words that came my way. At about the third round some of my friends began taking note that I was still standing. "Hey, Weaver—what's up?" they asked.

That Friday I managed to be the last boy standing. No one could believe it, least of all me. I mean, I was spelling big words like *cafeteria*, *ocean*, and *administration*. My peers and teacher were all amazed at my sudden scholastic abilities, and no one was more amazed than me. In the end there was one boy and one girl standing. It was clear to everyone that the girls were not walking away with an easy victory as they usually did. I had never been a standout before, but today I was the hero of all the boys in my class.

It was a heavy burden to bear, however—I was getting tired. I had never made it this far in the competition before, and to make matters worse, my final opponent, the one girl left standing, was the smartest student in the whole class, Mary Mullens. I don't know what eventually became of her. She had the ability to score higher than anyone else in our class and maybe the whole school. On that day as we both awaited the next word, she looked formidable to me. I'm proud to say that for the next couple of rounds I held my own against her—and then it was my turn again. The word was *wax*. All the boys cheered. What a break—we got an easy word to spell! They cheered me on. Did I mention I was tired? My brain had never worked so hard before, and when Mr. Knight asked me to spell that little three-letter word, my mind literally went blank. “Wax,” I said. “Yes. Wax.” I know I must have had a puzzled look on my face because it was as if I had never heard the word before and I actually said aloud, “I have never heard of the word *wax* before.”

There was a brief moment of silence and then the room broke out into laughter. Mr. Knight told me to sound it out. Well, I finally did: “w-a-c-k-s.” This time the laughter was even greater and even my teacher smiled. He looked at my opponent and said, “Mary, spell the word *wax*.” Of course, she spelled it flawlessly. I became the butt of many jokes after that, but I did learn two things. One, that my stepfather cared about me, demonstrated by his helping me excel in the spelling bee, and two, the correct spelling of the word *wax*, which I've never forgotten since that day.

The second time I remember a close interaction with my stepfather was at the conclusion of my twelfth-grade year in high school. I had a disagreement with the teacher of one of my classes that was needed for three of the credits required for me to graduate. He decided to withhold one of my credits because I did not complete a job-related task the way he wanted it done. The result was that without that one credit I would not be graduating. I had an appointment with the principal to explain my side of the issue and hoped he would overrule my teacher's decision.

When my stepfather heard about what had happened and about my meeting, he said he was going with me to meet the principal. I had no idea of what he might do, but he met me at the school office the next day. I introduced him to the principal and then began pleading my case. The principal backed my teacher and we left. Dad had not said anything at the meeting. We walked the three blocks home that night in silence and he never said another word to me about it. But once again, I was made to feel that he loved me, and that meant a great deal to me. Since I was not able to walk with my graduating class, I did earn my GED less than a year later.

A third time he made a positive memorable moment in my life was when I was in the seventh grade and walking home from school. I was one of those kids who walked over a mile to school each way. One snowy day as I was walking home with a group of friends, I looked down the street and recognized my stepfather coming in our direction. Not

knowing what he was doing there, since he never met me walking home before, I supposed the worst. After saying a quick goodbye to my friends, I darted between some houses and down an alley to avoid him and made my way home.

Later that afternoon my stepfather said he had tried to meet me on my way home. I lied and said I hadn't seen him because I went a different way. He then said he was bringing my boots to me because it had snowed. As I recall that day, I get a warm feeling knowing that he was willing to walk through the cold and snow because he was thinking about my well-being. But I still think I made the right decision to take off—after all, what seventh-grade boy wants his friends to see his dad bringing his boots to him so his feet won't get wet?

Even now as I look back on those positive memories, though far and few between, they continue warming my heart toward my stepfather. There was no consistent effort on his part to interact with me and build the kind of support and nurturing that a boy needs from his dad. Now as an adult with children of my own and having had the opportunity to view several father-and-son relationships, I have come to the conclusion that it was not his fault. He didn't know how to build a relationship with me. He was doing his best just to survive himself.

Although my stepfather and I did not have much of a relationship, it was not all bad. In all my years growing up,

both of my parents, and especially my stepfather, always provided for my needs and that proved to be the foundation for probably the greatest influence he had on my life—a positive example of a good work ethic. I never remember a time when he was without employment. He always worked at least two jobs to make ends meet and sometimes even picking up a third job around Christmas to provide Christmas gifts for his family. To this day I still benefit from his work ethic, a blessing that has always served me well.

Husbands and Wives

My mother and my stepdad had always had a rocky relationship. I was not around the house a lot after receiving my GED because I began working full time, but before I could get completely free of the chaos at home, I was caught up in the middle of a dispute between my parents.

One night I saw my dad walking toward our house on my way home from work one night. I didn't think much of it—he enjoyed walking. I didn't stop or even wave at him. My mistake was that when I got home I said something to my mom about having seen him; that's all I said. I had no idea that it would have an effect on anyone one way or another—but I was wrong.

The next morning my mom was off to work, my brothers were off to school, and my dad and I were home alone. I was

sleeping in a little late that morning as my shift wasn't until later that afternoon, when all of a sudden my dad burst into my bedroom, waking me from a deep sleep. He yelled at me to wake up, which I was trying to do. As he got closer to me I noticed he was waving a pair of pliers in my face and said to me, "You keep your nose out of my business and don't go spying on me for your mom!" I was terrified of him anyway, so without really knowing what he was talking about, I agreed to comply with his wishes.

He left in the same brisk manner he had come in. I was left shaking and wondering what he was talking about—and then remembered seeing him the day before and telling my mom. What was going on between them and what fuse I had lit I'll never know, but his actions and the memory did nothing to enhance our father-son relationship.

The day finally came to leave home when Cindy and I got married. I was only 19, in love, and ready to start my new life, which was just beginning. I wasn't spending much time at home, and anyway, there was a new storm brewing between my parents. My middle brother, Ed, was getting married soon and making his own exit. This left my youngest brother still at home, but he was away at college most of the time.

One day we all got a call from my mom asking us to meet at my brother Ed's house. When we got there she told us she was leaving my dad and getting a divorce. Since we all had

experienced his tirades, we told her she had our support and we would be there if she needed us. To our surprise, our dad agreed to the divorce and they went their separate ways. It didn't take long for their newfound freedom to begin spiraling downward for the both of them. They had found no happiness together, and now, being apart, they found that it still eluded them.

After not hearing from my dad for some time and having no idea where he was, I was quite surprised one day as Cindy and I pulled into the driveway of our home. I quickly recognized his camper parked out front. Cindy and I got out of our car with our newborn son, whom we had recently adopted. Cindy and the baby made their way into the house, and I went over to his camper and said it was nice to see him. He told me that my mother had told him about our new addition, and since he was passing through, he thought he would stop by and say hello. I was a little surprised about him and my mom talking, but I did the polite thing and invited him in.

“Come and have a look at my son, Seth.”

“You named your son after a clock?”

“No, Dad—after Adam and Eve's third son, Seth.”

That night he stayed for dinner, held his new grandson, and left. He had been there for only a couple of hours, and to this

day I don't know if it was an attempt on his part to continue our relationship or simply because he was lonely. I think it was maybe the latter. In all my years being around my dad, I never knew him to be close to anyone. I never recall him having a friend over for dinner or going out to any kind of a guys' event. I guess it is probably difficult to build into someone else's life when your own life has such a deficit in it.

Life had begun to settle down a little for us. We were new parents and were starting a new church, so even with all that was going on, there was a release from the internal drama that had plagued my family.

Shortly after my stepdad's visit, my mother had a terrible automobile accident that nearly took her life. She was in recovery and unemployed for some time. It was during her period of recovery that my dad offered to let her come and stay with him, and she agreed. Her decision caused my brothers and me to question her sanity, but she explained that we all lived far away and she did not want to leave the area. Besides, it was just until she got back on her feet. Eventually she went back to work.

They were still living together when one day she called me and said they were going to get remarried and wanted me to perform the ceremony. I was dumbfounded to say the least. After a lengthy conversation I agreed, but only on the condition that they submit to premarital counseling and I was

the guy who was going to do the counseling. They both agreed. I hung up the phone and told Cindy everything.

We awaited the arrival of my parents for their first counseling session. I cannot express everything I was thinking as my thoughts were a convoluted mess. The evening produced a tense atmosphere. A son is not usually at his parents' wedding, let alone asked to perform the ceremony—and I was even doing the pre-marital counseling. It was almost funny! What a night! I asked them to have a seat in my home office. I began with prayer and in retrospect I think it was more for me than them.

Things started off okay and then I began asking them some rather specific questions. “Are you sure you want to do this?” They both said yes. “But you couldn't get along in the past.” They both said they had changed and believed it would work out this time. Everything was all well and good until I asked them if they were going to give it their very best. My mom said she would, but my dad remained silent. I asked the question again. Still no response from dad. I looked at him rather forcefully and said, “Dad, I asked if you were going to give this your best.”

He responded by saying he couldn't guarantee that it would work. “That is not an answer to my question. You have to tell me you are going to give this marriage your very best effort. If you cannot tell me that, I am *not* going to perform the ceremony.” He abruptly stood to his feet and said again. “I

cannot guarantee it's going to work." With that he rushed out of the room.

I was fit to be tied. Suddenly I was in charge. I wasn't some kid he could intimidate, and I told my mother so. I said, "He has not changed." After a moment she followed him out of the house to their camper and was there for what seemed like an hour. I started to tell Cindy what had happened, but she said, "Don't bother. The walls in this house aren't that thick." I sat there stewing. Every once in a while I would look out the window, wondering what was going on out there.

Soon there was a knock at the front door and they came back in. This time my dad said he was sorry and would indeed say the words "I will give it my best effort." So I was present for my parents' second wedding, twenty-six years after the first one, only instead of being a ring bearer, this time I was the officiant.

Bob

My arrival to the world was a surprise, or maybe I should say a muted shock. My mother was the third child of the town's local part-time pastor. Grandpa was called a part-time pastor because the church he served could pay only part of a livable wage, so he subsidized his income by working as a farmer, barber, and on the assembly line at a local manufacturer. He would tell everyone the other work was really his part-time

work so that he could do what he loved to do—preaching and pastoring.

The life of a pastor can be a hard life, but probably even more so for his or her family. The adults who chose this life have an idea of what they are getting into, but their kids are there whether they like it or not, along for the ride so to speak, living in a glass house, many times with unfair expectations of their behavior. My mother felt that pressure as the preacher's daughter: "Sit up straight," "No talking in church," "Sing a song for the church," "Teach a Sunday school class," "Always be a nice young lady," and so on.

Growing up in a blue-collar family, she found that education was not high on the list of priorities. What mattered was doing good, not getting into trouble, getting a job, marrying, and having a family. My mother did pretty well with most of these except that she accomplished several of them out of chronological order. She quit school in the tenth grade and landed several jobs until she got her dream job as a telephone operator, working at a switchboard connecting callers. This job gave her the freedom to move out of her parents' house and live the somewhat rebellious lifestyle she longed for.

This is where my biological dad comes in if only for a brief time. He showed up in town as part of a pipe-laying crew for a local gas company expanding its pipelines. He was young, good-looking, a free spirit, full of confidence and swagger, and my young and shy mother was taken with him right

away. They both knew his time there was limited, so they threw caution to the wind and accelerated their relationship to one of intimacy in a short time and things seemed wonderful—that is, until the day my mother suspected she might be pregnant.

Bear in mind that this was 1952 and there were no readily available pregnancy test kits at the corner drugstore. She waited in hopes that her “symptoms” would go away, but when they didn’t, one of her friends took her to a doctor in another town and he confirmed her greatest fears: she was pregnant. In a state of panic, she went to her boyfriend (my father), hoping he would offer to marry her and thus avoiding her indiscretion becoming public knowledge. He did not take the news well, and after a heated exchange claiming that he was already married and didn’t want any more kids, he left town with no forwarding address.

This was devastating to my mother. She was unmarried and pregnant in 1952, a time when such a situation was looked upon unfavorably and made worse by being the local preacher’s daughter. She briefly contemplated suicide—surely that would be better than facing her parents, their church, and the local community at large. Fortunately, those thoughts did not take hold. When she confided in a friend of her family, she scolded my mother and said to her, “You are an embarrassment to your family and your father’s church. You should stand at the top of your stairwell, stick the toe of your shoe under the carpet, throw yourself down the stairs,

and put an end to this before it goes any farther. My mom only had a tenth-grade education but she understood the value of a human life, even one that was so small and inconvenient.

She eventually told her sister and her parents and then her father's church—and something strangely wonderful happened. Her family and her church family took in this prodigal daughter and with open arms loved her and then also me when I was born.

The first two years of my life my mother and I lived with my grandparents, who helped my mom with the necessary parenting chores that go along with raising a baby/toddler so that she could get a job to help support the two of us. I have a few memories of that time, but whether they are actually my own or were implanted by my mother or my grandparents, I do not know. What I do know is that I was always very close to them and they always showed me great love and kindness.

When I was just about two years-old, my mother met the man who became my stepfather but whom I call my father. Paul was a shy country boy from West Virginia who had left home to find work in Columbus, Ohio. Soon after he began dating my mother, he was introduced to me, and soon we became a family of three. My new little family moved far enough away from my grandparents that we were not influenced by their strict religious behavior, so church and Christianity were

both somewhat foreign concepts to me while I was growing up. The exception was when we went back for a visit—for those couple of Sundays every year we ventured into the world of Christianity.

In between those times our lives played out back home. It was a strained environment that found my mother and father engaged in varying states of conflict probably because both of them suffered from poor self-images and limited abilities in conflict resolution. But my dad was the leader of our merry band and his word was law, probably because that was the model he grew up with.

In the years to come two brothers were added to our family, and from all outward appearances we seemed okay, and that's what we were—just okay. My parents managed to stay together and keep me and my brothers out of too much trouble. We knew that if we got a paddling at school we would get one at home too, so the threat of twice the punishment seemed to work on us. As noted earlier, I remember a couple of times during my formative years when my dad put forth the effort to break through the wall that separated us, but it was so foreign and uncomfortable to the both of us that it didn't go any further than a few awkward moments. He knew how to be tough, but the whole concept of tenderness was missing from his mindset. The result, as noted before, was that our relationship never developed beyond keeping my distance in fearful obedience.

It wasn't until the last ten years of my father's life that our relationship changed for the better. He had developed an interest in the Bible and this led to several positive changes in his life. He started attending church and a men's Bible study; he even started praying every day, using a four-page handwritten prayer list, one page of which hangs in my office to remind me of him. The most notable change was his desire to hug me whenever I visited him and Mom. He would wrap his arms around me and hold on for dear life—it was an awkward moment, I had never experienced this side of him before, so I just stood there, arms to my side, until he let go and then I would leave.

You have to understand that I am a demonstrative person. The church I grew up in during my mid-teens was a hugging one, so I am a hugger—just not with my dad. I could hug a perfect stranger on a street corner and feel more comfortable than hugging my dad. But here's my problem: I was a pastor, I talked to people every week about having positive and uplifting family relationships—and I had trouble hugging my own dad. Something was not right here.

Fathers and Sons Meet

I'm sure that living in a small town, my grandfather had to have known who my dad was, and I'm sure that my dad was aware of my grandfather. I was told that they met face to face one time when my father went to my grandfather to ask him

for a job, and my grandfather told him no and not to come around anymore. My Aunt Vi told me that while he was never officially recognized as a legitimate son, he was allowed to hunt on his father's farm lands free without getting chased off. I guess that says something, although I am not sure what. My grandfather died at the age of ninety-six, and I often wonder if he ever regretted not having a relationship with my dad, if he ever saw him on the street and thought about what might have been. I wonder whether in his last few moments there was a moment of sadness over not having known him. I don't know.

But *my* father *did* meet the son *he* had abandoned, not because he searched me out, but rather because I sought *him* out. It was not that I had a desire to find him—my life was really pretty complete and I had not thought anything was missing. But one day while visiting with my mother, she asked if I had ever thought about him and I said no. She then said, “Well, you know that he is getting up in years, and if you ever want to meet him, you had better do it quickly.” That thought had never occurred to me before, but it did make me think about my limited window of opportunity to find him.

Then one day I heard about the Social Security Master Death List and decided to look up my father. I had limited information about him but entered it into my search and came up with a name matching his, but the age was wrong. After a little more investigation, I realized the name listed there was

my *grandfather*, who had died a few years earlier. I spent the rest of the day searching through family records and made a huge discovery. I found the telephone number of my grandfather's brother. I sat for several minutes debating whether to call. He was in his late eighties himself. What would I say? "Hi. You don't know me, but your dead brother may be my grandfather." After a while I thought, "What have I got to lose?"

I made the call and he answered the phone. I hemmed and hawed around information about his dead brother, and when he had put up with my stammering long enough, he asked me what this was really all about, so I told him that I was looking for my dad, who had the same name as his brother and thought my dad might be related to them in some way.

He then got quiet for a while. I actually thought he had hung up on me, but he cleared his throat and said there was a story about his older brother getting a young farm girl pregnant and never admitting to it. He said that it was not spoken of in the family so he could not help me with any of the details. He told me he was sorry and then said goodbye and hung up.

I sat there for several minutes, taken aback a little, I had not expected to get much if any information, but this was like opening up a whole new can of worms. Over the next several weeks I continued searching and found a fellow who remembered my father and said he stayed in Hopkinsville,

Kentucky, with an aunt named Vietta, who still lived in the area, but he had lost track of my father.

A few weeks later I was attending a conference in Nashville and had to pass near Hopkinsville, so I thought I would make a quick stop to see if I could find this “Aunt Vi.” When I got into town, I stopped to search through a local phone book and found her phone number listed there.

It was a strange journey. It seemed that as I looked into the whole thing, I would find a piece of information that would lead me to another clue and then another. To tell you the truth, I was prepared, even a little hopeful, that this would all come to a dead end because I was not sure I really wanted to find out what was waiting out there for me, but like breadcrumbs leading to a prize, I just kept collecting clues. I called her number but it was busy. I tried a few minutes later but it was still busy. This is a waste of time, I thought. I needed to get on my way home, for I still had several hours to drive. But I was urged on by the thought that I may never get this chance again.

The address was only a few miles up this road, so I pressed on and soon found the simple little two-room white house with a chain-link fence and a goat in the front yard. I got out and made my way to the porch and knocked on the front door. A young woman came to the door and I asked for Vietta. “Come on in,” a gruff voice said to me. I walked into the modest little home and saw her sitting in a rocker. “Have a

seat,” she said. “Now what can I do for you?” “Well, this may sound a little crazy,” I replied, “but I’m looking for my father.” I then proceeded to tell her everything I knew.

She took it all in as I said, “I don’t want anything—I just want to meet him and see if maybe I had any brothers or sisters. She had a little can beside her chair that she would pick up occasionally to spit tobacco into. She did that now, looked at me, and said, “You are your father’s boy. She told me to turn around to look at a picture on the wall and I got the first glimpse at my father. Then she added, “You have five brothers and two sisters.”

My first sight of my father in the picture on the wall left me a little bit disappointed. I had always thought of him in the terms my mother had used to describe him. She would always talk of his handsome build and good looks, like Rod Taylor the movie star, she would say, but the man in the picture was an overweight bald guy wearing bib overalls. It wasn’t until years later when one of my sisters sent me a picture of him in his early twenties that I saw the guy my mother had met. In hindsight the picture I saw of him was taken some forty-plus years later, and as is the case with most of us, the years had taken their toll.

I asked my aunt if she knew how I could get hold of him. She said she didn’t know because he traveled between his kids and lived with different ones of them, but she had my oldest sister’s telephone number, and she gave it to me.

I stood to leave and thanked her for seeing me and giving me information about my father. When I went over to shake her hand, she arose from her chair and embraced me with a “Welcome to the family” kind of hug. As this wonderful lady who had been a total stranger just a few minutes ago continued hugging me, I suddenly knew why my father had spent so much time with her—she really knew how to make you feel loved. As I was about to leave she gave me an additional piece of information that I had not counted on: “Your father’s mother still lives in town, just down the road. Her name is Polly.” I asked her if she thought it would be okay for me to stop by and see her. She said she would give her a call to make sure it would be okay, and after a few minutes on the phone, she gave me the address and directions to get to my grandmother’s house.

For the second time that day I was knocking on the door of another piece of the puzzle. This wee frame of a woman opened the door and asked me to come in. She was hospitable to me but not as welcoming as her sister, my Great-aunt Vi, had been. I could tell from her demeanor that she was someone who had been through a lot and that those life experiences had left their mark. She answered some of my questions and after a few minutes, I left with the sad feeling that my father’s relationship with his aunt had been greater than his relationship with his own mother. Nevertheless, I am glad I got the chance to meet her—since she died the next month.

My efforts had paid off. I had found my father, my grandmother, a dear great-aunt, and even information about brothers and sisters. I got into my car and drove away as tears filled my eyes. I didn't know exactly why I was crying; I didn't really know any of these people, but I had something that I did not have earlier that morning: a picture of my father and a dear relative that I actually felt loved me. My father's aunt over the next several months would write to me to see how I was faring and even called me a couple of times. I would recognize her raspy voice immediately and shared our conversations with my wife, Cindy. I tried my best to describe her, with her frail little body, sitting in her rocking chair chewing tobacco.

I passed through the area again later that year with Cindy on vacation and stopped by her house, and Cindy had to agree that she was definitely one of a kind. Later that year her granddaughter called me and told me of her passing. I saw her only twice, and that briefly, but we made a connection that I will forever be grateful for.

A Step Closer, but What Do I Say?

You might think I was on my way to discovering a new part of my life that, up until now, had been hidden from me, and that I would move forward with abandon. But it wasn't really that simple. I didn't have my biological dad's phone number, only that of one of my sisters. What would I say to her?

Would she think I was crazy? I would be accusing her father of betraying her mother. She would probably hang up on me and that would be the end of it.

I decided to talk it over with Cindy, my mind filled with this new information and was full of questions that I would not be able to answer unless I called. When I got home I spent the next couple of hours just talking with Cindy about it, and we eventually decided that there was no rush. We would pray about it and consider my next move—if there would even be a next move. It was difficult to concentrate over the next few days on anything other than this new information, so about three days later I told Cindy I had decided to call my sister.

How would I begin? What would I say? I went over our potential conversation several times in my mind to try coming up with the best way to begin the phone call. Finally, I garnered the nerve and dialed her number. When she answered I asked if she was Kim, and she said it was. I believe I must have stammered for a moment, and then I dove in. “You don’t know me, and this may sound a little crazy, but I think we may have the same father.” There was quiet on the other end of the line and then she began to stammer. “What makes you think that?” she asked. I explained my mother’s account of my birth, my finding our grandfather, and my conversation with our aunt in Hopkinsville, Kentucky, and meeting our grandmother.

When I was through with my reasoning, there was a long pause; then she finally said, “Well, my dad’s not here but I will get this information to him. Can I have your number so he can get back with you?” I gave her my number and thanked her for hearing me out and we said goodbye. The call that I feared would be uncomfortably weird proved to be just that. I reported my conversation to my wife and wondered what would happen. Would I get a call back? Would my father deny me again? So I waited.

As it turned out, I didn’t have to wait that long. That night I was at a meeting at a friend’s church when the secretary came and said I had a call and could take it on the pastor’s private line in his office. I excused myself from the meeting and went into my friend’s office. Picking up the line, I heard a man’s voice say, “I called your home phone and your wife said I could reach you here. This is Bob Fritz. I’m your father.”

Now as a preacher and professional speaker, I am able to speak on a variety of subjects at a moment’s notice—but for the life of me I couldn’t think of anything to say. He finally asked if I was still there, and I found the gumption to say, “Yes.” He told me that my sister Kim had passed our conversation on to him and she had given him my number and told him to call me.

He told me that he remembered my mother and that he was sorry he had not been in my life. He said he was going to make it up to me and that I could have anything he had. (Later

I found out he really didn't have anything to give, but at the time it sounded like a nice gesture.) I told him that I had a happy life and that I didn't want anything other than the chance to meet him and my siblings someday. He said he would like that and he would be back in touch with me. Then we hung up.

For a moment I stood there trying to regain my composure as I was sure my friends in the other room would be inquiring about the nature of the emergency that had called me away to the phone. How would I explain this to them without sounding like a potential guest for the then wildly popular *Oprah Winfrey Show*? I explained the whole thing as briefly as I could and they listened as they sat there that evening. Our regular business was put on the back burner for the next half hour as they asked questions and gave advice.

Cindy was waiting at the door on pins and needles when I got home that night. Once again I repeated the conversation I had had with my long-lost father and suddenly I realized that something is lost only if you don't know where it is and that I now knew what my father looked like and where he lived. He was no longer lost. I had found him.

Now there was a new question on my mind. Did I really want to see him? That was a question I would have to answer later that week as he called again and asked if Cindy and I would be willing to drive to northern Ohio to meet him and my siblings. He would rent a facility and have some food brought

in for us to eat and we could all sit down and get to know each other. I said I would have to check my schedule and get back with him. This was a new turn of events. The shoe was now on the other foot. I had been seeking him out, and now that I had found him, he wanted to meet me.

So far my experience with father figures had not necessarily been the best, so I wasn't sure how meeting him would go. Maybe what I thought I wanted would turn out to be something really awful for me and my family. I mean, we had a pretty good thing going here. His entrance into my life, the addition of seven brothers and sisters whom I didn't know, could complicate my life, which I had worked so hard to put together. So, I engaged in more thinking, more prayers, and seeking more advice from friends and family. My mom was enthusiastic about the whole thing. A good friend from my church said, "This will make you feel complete, and even though that sounded nice, I can truthfully say I didn't feel incomplete. I was just really curious more than anything else, so I finally agreed to meet with him and my siblings. The time and date were set, and I counted down the days.

Cindy and I mapped out our route and left early one Saturday morning for the three-hour trip. We arrived at the county fairgrounds and pulled into the parking lot in front of a small building that was rented out to individuals for private family gatherings. There were several cars parked outside and we found a spot among them. I turned off the car, looked at Cindy, and said, "Well, I guess we might as well go in."

It's an everyday part of my job to go into crisis-type situations and meet people I have never met before in an attempt to offer comfort—but on that day *I* was the one who needed directions and comfort. It was indeed a very awkward and strange sensation to have every face turn in our direction as we entered the room, some smiling, some not. Then my sister Kim, whom I first talked to on the phone, came to us, introduced herself and her husband, and followed up with an awkward hug. The others came and introduced themselves, two brothers and another sister and their families. Three of my brothers were absent—one was at traffic court because of a moving violation, and the two others because they didn't want to meet me. And my father was missing—again. Kim assured me he was just picking up some deli trays he had ordered for our meeting.

In the Flesh

We made small talk for about fifteen minutes. Then the door opened and in walked my father, carrying in a deli tray in each hand. My sister Kim went to help him with the food he had brought and then brought him to me and introduced father and son. We shook hands and I introduced him to Cindy. We all gathered around the food and someone said, "Let's eat." And we did, Cindy and I and my father sitting at the table with Kim and her husband. There was polite conversation, but that was the extent of things.

What do you say in such an awkward situation? There was no frame of reference or past experiences for any of us to draw from, so we sat and exchanged pleasantries. When he found out I was a preacher, his eyes lit up. I believe that gave him a sense of relief that I hadn't been messed up too badly because of his lack of presence in my life, and maybe the fact that I was a man of the cloth gave his life a little more meaning. It was good to get to hear his story and those of my siblings who were present.

He had spent his life working as a pipe fitter and iron worker, with some painting and logging thrown in from time to time. His traveling for work, his heavy drinking, and the many accusations of unfaithfulness against him had led to an end of his marriage of thirty-five years and had put a heavy strain on his relationships with my siblings. Each of them had been adversely affected by his life, and most of them had difficulties with alcohol themselves. The thought occurred to me driving home that I probably had some of those same tendencies toward addictive behaviors in my own personality, and it was fortunate for me that I had been raised in an environment of teetotalers or I might be dealing with some of the same destructive behaviors that my father and some of my siblings had or were still battling.

I guess that may give some light to the question about our behavior and the influences around and in us. Why are we the way we are? Is it inherited or is it due to environment? In my case I would say that while I had definitely inherited the

DNA and propensity for the same behaviors, I was not in an environment where it was displayed regularly, nor was it readily available to me. When our time came to leave, I was somewhat relieved and we exchanged goodbyes with the promise to keep in touch—you know, the kind of polite words you say with no real intentions of carrying through with them.

On the drive home there was silence for a long while until Cindy finally said, “Are you going to start wearing pants like your father when you get his age?” I laughed as I remembered what he was wearing. He was no longer the handsome young man my mother had told me about; time had added girth, and his hairline had receded, but it was his attire that stood out and what had prompted her question. He had on a pair of old sneakers, a flannel shirt, and a pair of bib overalls that were so short that a friend had sewn on about four inches of material to make them long enough. The problem was that the person had not sewn on matching denim material but one with a flowery pattern. It had really stood out, hence Cindy’s jesting inquiry. I could only smile, but her question did break the silence and we talked the rest of the way home.

That night it was not easy to get to sleep, and neither was the week that followed. Fortunately, I had a busy schedule that could fill my time and keep my mind occupied. A pastor’s schedule is much more than an hour on Sunday mornings; there are as many things to do as there are people associated

with his or her congregation. My busy schedule helped distract me from the quagmire of questions.

A few folks in my church knew of my adventure, and one of them approached me that next week and asked, “Don’t you feel complete now?” Her question made me think for a moment about why I was doing all of this, and I looked back at her and said, “You know, I don’t think I ever really felt like I was *incomplete*. I mean, I didn’t sense anything was missing in my life. I was curious more than anything else, and now I don’t know how I feel about it.”

In the weeks and months that followed, I did nothing with my newfound family and they made no effort to contact me. We lived a good distance from each other and had little in common. My mother thought that by contacting my father and meeting my brothers and sisters, it would bring about an awakening in my life—that we would start going on picnics together or begin familial relationships. But I had lived the first forty-seven years of my life without them and they without me, and we really didn’t know what to do with each other. So—we did nothing.

My newfound family did give opportunity for some interesting conversations, though. They would go something like this: “I found out I have five brothers and two sisters from my biological father, and the interesting thing is that in the family I grew up in I have a brother named Ed and a brother named Randy—in my new-found family I also have

a brother named Ed and a brother named Randy.” One friend replied, “You need to go on the *Oprah Winfrey Show*.”

A few weeks after our initial visit my father called me to see how I was doing and we talked for some time. I had actually grown used to the sound of his voice and found it pleasing that he wanted to be involved in my life. As time passed, so did the frequency of his calls. I think that maybe he felt much the same as I and the rest of my new family did—he just didn’t know what to do with me. My sister Kim told me that when she initially told him about my call, he was very emotional about hearing the news. I like to think that maybe he sensed some regret for time lost. Maybe he was reminded of how he hurt over missed time with his own father. I don’t know. His problem now was—How do you become a father to a forty-seven-year-old man you have never known?

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Death Brings Us Together

Professionally, I have found that death brings a family together like nothing else, and my newfound family was like any other in that regard. I had not heard from any of my siblings or my father for some time. Then I received a call early one morning from my sister Kim informing me that one of my brothers, Joe, had passed away. I was immediately saddened because there had been a real connection between Joe and me during our initial meeting. We were about the same age. He was born in April and I was born that next January, and he had a pleasant demeanor. You could tell that he had lived a pretty rough life, but he had survived what had been thrown at him and came out smiling. His death was a sudden thing that no one had been prepared for, so the whole family was in shock. And surprisingly, his family—my family—wanted to know if I would officiate his funeral. I was taken aback somewhat but said I would be honored. She shared the information and arrangements with me and we said goodbye.

I shared the conversation with Cindy and cleared my calendar for the next few days, making arrangements to drive from West Virginia, where we pastored, to their hometown in northwestern Ohio, a trip of about three hundred miles. The funeral itself was a strange occurrence in that my brother had been cremated and his urn had been placed near the front of the chapel next to the speaker's stand where I would be speaking. I have performed hundreds of funerals over the

years and each is unique, but some pose bigger challenges than others; Joe's funeral was to be one of them.

For one thing, I knew next to nothing about my brother's personal life so I had to talk to the people who were there that day, family and friends, to try to get a perspective on his life. Another problem was that he was my brother and that can lead to all kinds of emotional upheaval, and what you don't need at a funeral service, when the family and friends are coping with loss and grief, is for the preacher to become emotionally unwound. I'm sure many might ask why I would become emotional when I didn't have a chance to get to know him. That is the very reason I had to fight my emotions—I had not had a chance to get to know my brother.

I was amazed at the number of people who showed up for Joe's service. The little chapel was packed with an eclectic group of mourners, everything from suits and ties to leather jackets and jeans; they had all come out to pay their final respects to my brother. His life had impacted a lot of people, and that made me feel glad—but also sad since he had not been in my life other than the couple of hours we had one Saturday afternoon, and in that time we said our only hellos and goodbyes. Being asked to officiate his funeral would at least give me an opportunity to say one final goodbye, and I did.

I'm sure those there were wondering who I was and why I was speaking about Joe. I often wondered that myself. The family didn't really know me—why ask me to perform such a personal task? It was some years later when talking to Kim

about how my siblings took the news of my existence that she told me the reaction was mixed. Five of the seven were kind of shocked but were willing to meet me, but the other two saw me as just another example of how their dad had hurt their mom and they didn't want to meet me. I can understand that no one likes to see his or her family hurt even by someone in that family; and sometimes because they are family, it makes a person a little more upset. When Joe heard their reaction to me he had said, "Well, I want him to do my funeral when I die, just to tick them off." Now mind you, he was not ill at that time, but when he died his words were remembered and that's why I was asked. No matter—I'm glad to have had the privilege and it provided another opportunity to see once more my father and my siblings, including the two who hadn't wished to meet with me earlier.

As I was leaving the small gathering that someone hosted for the family after the service, I went to my father, who was seated at a table with friends and family. I said goodbye and then without too much thought involved, I leaned over and placed a kiss on his head and said, "I love you." I don't know if it surprised him, but it did me. *Where did that come from?* I asked myself later. It was more than just a kindness to an old man who had lost his son and it was not something down deep that I had longed to say to him. However, it was real. I know because I pondered the words in my mind on my way back home and for the next few days. Did I really love him? I didn't even know him. He had never contributed anything to my life—no financial provision, no physical care, nothing to lift my spirits when I was down, not one thing. How could

I say, *I love you*, to such a man? Over the next month I would try to answer that question as I thought it through.

One month later I received another early-morning call from Kim. “We lost dad during the night.” Once again I felt what I had felt a month earlier at the passing of my brother Joe. “His funeral is going to be this Saturday and we wanted to know if you could come and do it.” Once again I was at a loss for words, but knowing that the family had no strong church affiliation, I said that I would. I cleared my schedule and headed to the town of Tiffin, Ohio, to the same funeral home I had been to a month earlier for my brother Joe.

Once again the little chapel was filled and once again I am sure that people were there out of respect but also possibly a little curious about what I might say. I had managed to say several good things about my brother, but what good things could I possibly say about my dad? Would I mention his abandonment of me as a child? Would I use the opportunity to let everyone know what I really thought of him? Well, that’s exactly what I did. A month earlier while saying goodbye, I had given him that kiss on the head and told him I loved him. I had the past month to think that through, so on that afternoon in May I stood up straight, looked everyone in the eye, and said, “Robert was my father and I loved him, not because he was always there for me but because he gave me life and there is no more precious gift in the world than life. If you have it, you can do just about anything; if you don’t, you cannot do anything. So I loved this man and I still do and always will.”

After the service we stayed around for a while to talk to family and friends and especially those who knew him best over the years. Several thanked me for the way I handled the service considering the situation. There were a good many there who loved him despite his shortcomings. I believe that is the mark of a true friend—one who, even knowing the negative things about you, loves you anyway. Kim told me before I left that my father's will said that his estate should be divided equally among his children and that he had included my name as one of his kids. That left a kind of final acceptance that made me feel good. Unfortunately, he had nothing to give, but it was the fact that he recognized and remembered me as one of his sons that has helped with my memories of him. He was my father and I loved him and still do.

Not What I Expected

When I was fourteen my mother accepted an invitation from my uncle, a local pastor, to attend church one Sunday morning. When she told me and my brothers, well, let's just say I threw a fit. I was not the least bit interested in church. I had friends and activities that satisfied me and I could see nothing to my advantage about going to some boring church building, singing boring old songs, and hearing some old boring preacher preach. To make matters worse, the invitation was really for Sunday school and church, which meant getting up an hour earlier and having to sit with other kids my age whom I didn't know and listen to some boring teacher talking to us about Bible stories.

Finally, after a good bit of arguing and whining from me, my mother said, “You’re going this Sunday, and if you don’t like it you don’t ever have to go again.” I gave in, and when my uncle pulled into our driveway that Sunday morning I begrudgingly got into his car, my mind set on not having a good time. After we got to church that morning, for the next two and a half hours people just loved on me and made me feel welcome. They were actually excited to see me there, and not just the older folk—even the other teens. I was blown away by the experience. When my uncle took us back home, he asked as we were exiting the car if anybody would like to go next week, and before anybody else could say anything, I spoke up and said, “I want to go.”

The long and short of it was that the experience was more than I expected. I remember the story of Peter and John in Acts 3:4–6: “Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, ‘Look at us!’ So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them. Then Peter said, ‘Silver or gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.’” The beggar in the story didn’t wake up that morning saying to himself, “I’m going to walk today.” He just thought it was going to be the same old same old, nothing new, nothing exciting—but was he wrong! God had other plans for him and He had other plans for me that day. That Sunday morning was almost fifty-five years ago, and I’m still going to church every Sunday and God is still showing me more than I expected. What are you expecting for today and for the rest of your life? I believe God has more than you could ever imagine just waiting for you.

Becoming a Man

I met my wife in church when I was just fourteen years of age and I fell in love with her the second time I saw her. Let me explain. I mentioned before that my uncle on my mother's side was a pastor of a church near us. One day I spent the night at my cousin's with the understanding that I would go to church with them the next morning. My cousin was my best friend and he was telling me about a girl in the church. "She's so pretty and so nice," he said. I kind of thought he liked her but they were not going together. We decided to scout out where she lived. Her home was just across the field out back, so we made our way up the hill to a set of railroad tracks and began walking along them until we came to an area just a few hundred yards from her house. She lived in a modest little two-bedroom home that was located below where the tracks ran.

Suddenly the back door opened and she made her way across the lawn to get some clothes off the clothesline, dressed in green cut-off jeans and a long white shirt. She had her hair up in what I could describe only as orange-juice-can-sized rollers. She was wearing black horn-rimmed glasses, and the sun glinted off her braces. I thought, "He thinks this girl is good looking? He must need his eyes examined!" As soon as she had gathered up the clothes, she rushed back inside and we continued on our walk, returning to his home before dark and settling in for the night.

The next morning, as promised, I went with my cousin's family to church. We were sitting near the piano side near the

front of the sanctuary when he nudged me and said, “Here she comes.” I turned and was transfixed. She had on a really nice burgundy dress, her hair was all combed out, and she had the most alluring smile. I thought, *Wow! She cleans up nice*, and that was when I fell in love with the girl who would be my wife and soulmate in ministry. Even though at that point in my life I had no real interest in spiritual matters, I had an interest in her, so church became a regular part of my weekly calendar after that Sunday morning.

After a couple of years of my hanging around her, she took note of me. We dated, but not for long. I was socially awkward and had never even kissed a girl. Time went by and we tried again—still no connection. By this time I was like a lovesick puppy, but I knew my pestering her would not help my situation so I left her alone for a while. One day out of the blue, she called me and asked if I could stop by because she had something to tell me. I tried to contain my enthusiasm and said I would be over a little later that day.

When I got to her house her mother told me she was out back on the swing. I found her there swinging and asked her what it was she wanted to tell me. She began acting shy and say she wasn’t sure how to say what she wanted to say and kept swinging. I was more than a little curious so I pursued the matter. “Awe, come on. I came all this way—what is it you wanted to tell me?”

“Well, I just wanted to tell you that I think maybe I could like you.” That was like music to my ears. If I had been a cartoon character, I would have been bouncing around her yard as if

I had springs on my feet, but I tried to act cool about it and said I thought maybe I could like her too.

After that day we were inseparable. I slept at my house but probably ate most of my meals at hers. My parents were okay with the arrangement as long as we would show up at our house for an occasional dinner and night of television. Cindy's parents were kind about the whole thing, putting up with me and probably thinking that it was better for us to be there rather than out who-knows-where. In the end I received a double blessing about the whole thing. Not only did I get to be with Cindy and get to know her better, but I also saw firsthand what a more stable family life was like, especially the relationship her father had with his kids. I watched how he cared for them and laughed with them and in time with me. I became a part of their family and enjoyed every minute of it.

My mother, on the other hand, let me know that my new family alliance was somewhat hurtful to her. She wanted for me to have a better relationship with our own family, but I didn't know how to fix the broken family I had been a part of, and for the first time in my young life I was developing a positive outlook. Even though I would always love my family, the relationship with them was always a draining one, while my newfound relationships were nurturing and added value to my life, something I desperately needed.

Breaking the Cycle

It was during my young teen years that other strong influences came into my life. Foremost was the church I had started attending at my uncle's invitation. I'm sure the fact that the whole thing clicked with me was not lost on my extended family. My grandfather on my mother's side had been a pastor for many years and my uncle followed in his footsteps as a full-time minister, but I also had two other uncles and two cousins who were called into pastoral ministry, which they performed either full time or part time. So I guess you could say that pastoral ministry was my family's business.

That little country church provided other benefits to the mix of who I was to become. Of first note were the people I met there. The church was made up of mainly blue-collar families whose average level of education probably went no farther than high school and their selections of pastors were of ones whose academic level did not exceed their own, but they were the most loving and accepting group of people I had ever met. They took me in and treated me like a member of the family, and I soaked up every ounce of love and attention they lavished on me. It was under their loving tutelage that I sensed my need to take a different direction in my life than the one I had been brought up into that point in my life. That is when I became a Christian.

Now it is worth digressing here, just for a moment, to emphasize their collective involvement in this most important decision that would ultimately change the course

of my life. Several years later, in a seminary class on personal evangelism, we were asked by the instructor to go back to the initial point of our walk with Christ and draft a paper on why we became Christians.

It seemed a simple assignment until I started thinking seriously about the course of events that led me to my decision. It was not that I felt a strong sense of guilt over my past sins; I was only fifteen, after all. It was not that I arrived at some intellectual epiphany about the truth of the universe. It was not because of the superior preaching. I finally came to the understanding that it was *the people of the church*. I loved them so much and was so impressed with the character and lifestyle they modeled that I decided I wanted to be like them and to find what it was that they had in their lives but I didn't—Jesus. So that was the reason for this life-altering event that took place during my fifteenth year when I accepted Christ as my Savior.

That single action did not right all the wrongs I had done nor did it nullify the wrongs that had been done to me—but it did give me a sense of forgiveness for my past indiscretions and provided a starting place where I could work on the early negatives of my life. This was and remains a journey. I have experienced several setbacks along the way, but to this point I have succeeded overall in making my life better, and part of that is trying to be a good son and a better father. I am still a work in progress.

I remember one incident in which the sins of the past almost took me down the same path as my father and grandfather,

but thank the Lord, he saw to it that there was an intervention to help me stay clear of it. As I said, I was just fourteen when I started attending church and fifteen when I decided to follow Christ. Deciding to follow Christ and actually succeeding at it every day are no easy tasks. Becoming a Christian while you are a teenager does not remove the raging hormones that are suddenly awakening in your body. Cindy and I attended church every time the doors were open and held leadership positions among the young people at our church. We read our Bibles regularly and prayed together, but our closeness spiritually and mentally only added to the temptation to become involved in ways that were not permissible for two young unmarried people.

I am sure that this thought probably weighed on Cindy's parents, especially her dad. One afternoon I had driven her home after a date and we parked just on the other side of some bushes in an alleyway adjacent to her house. We thought we were hidden pretty well, but after a while you can imagine our shock when from the other side of the bushes we heard her father say, "Cindy, it's time to come in now." Well, she did and we hadn't, if you are wondering, but that night during dinner her father said, "I don't want to have a Pam in this house," a reference to one of Cindy's high school friends who had gotten pregnant. His statement was met with silence, and when it was told to me later, maybe a little fear of the Lord and certainly a little of her father. This and other interventions by family and friends, and some I attribute directly to the Lord, allowed us to save our sexual purity for our wedding night.

What Is a Calling?

My mother and father were both very hard workers, for which I will be eternally grateful because I saw modeled in front of me a good work ethic. My new church family displayed the same work ethic. Together they agreed that the ultimate goal for young men and women was to graduate from high school, get a job, and get married, because that's pretty much the goals they had been raised with. That's the track that Cindy and I were both going down until one of my mentors asked me to speak one night at a youth rally. I prepared a speech of about five minutes, and afterward my mentor asked me if I had ever considered that the Lord may be calling me to preach.

Even with all the other preachers in my family, I can honestly say that the thought had never crossed mind. The only thing I knew about preachers was that they were for the most part dirt poor, living on meager wages and in parsonages. When my grandparents finally retired from full-time pastoral ministry, they had no house to retire to, so their children put some money together to buy them a mobile home in which they could live out their last days. I wanted no part of such an illustrious calling.

However, as time went by I found myself considering it as one option of several until in my seventeenth year, when I submitted to what I felt was the Lord's calling on my life. During this time I talked it over with Cindy to get her feelings on the possibility. After all, I assumed that if this were really of God, He would also be calling her. She was okay with the

thought of going into ministry as she had already at a younger age told the Lord that she would be willing to be a missionary somewhere in the world, so being married to a preacher just may be part of his plan for her too. So at 17 I started preaching whenever the opportunity presented itself, but things didn't work out quite the way I thought they would.

The church I attended had a lot of preachers in the congregation that were referred to as "lay preachers." That meant they supported themselves with a secular job and preached whenever the pastor was gone or occasionally held revivals at other churches, so that is what I thought the Lord had in mind for me, and I did that for a while—but he had a little more planned for our ministry. The course he directed would lead us toward ministry full time.

Our church supported a small Bible college, and when people associated with the college heard about my calling into ministry, they began sending me materials about the school. I did not pay much attention to them as going to college was not part of my plan, and anyway, Cindy and I had set a date to be married and that was my highest priority at the time.

Sometime between the Towels and the Ring

We were married at the tender age of nineteen, just one year out of high school. The funny thing about our engagement is that neither of us actually remembers me asking her to marry her. We both agree that one Sunday afternoon while walking through a local department store we saw towels on sale so we

put them in layaway. It was not very romantic, but it worked for us. As we moved forward with our plans, I asked Cindy's father if I could talk to him one Sunday afternoon. When we were alone I asked for his daughter's hand in marriage. I knew that he liked me, and the thought of me marrying his daughter would come as no surprise to him because we had been dating our junior and senior years of high school.

I was expecting an enthusiastic approval, so when he hesitated I became a bit nervous. When he finally replied, he said to me, "Bobby, I like you and would like to say yes, but it concerns me that you do not have a high school diploma." Even though the job that I had at the time didn't require a high school diploma, I had considered getting my General Educational Development certificate (GED), so I asked him if that would ease his thoughts and he said it would. When we came from the room where we had been talking, Cindy and her mom were waiting outside to hear what happened. I told them that Cindy's father had agreed—and the wedding planning began.

During the next several months we made plans, or maybe I should say my future bride made plans and I just kind of went along. My only big part was buying her the ring we had seen at a local jewelry store. It was not much by today's standards, I am sure, but to me it was a one-hundred-fifty-nine-dollar expression of my love and devotion to her. Looking back, I have some regrets over my lack of involvement in the whole wedding process. First was the fact that we were offered no premarital counseling and did not seek out any; probably because it was rarely done in the culture we grew up in. The

prevailing attitude was that you just got “hitched” and figured it out as you went along.

My second regret, was not expressing more interest and being more involved in the ceremony itself. Again, the prevailing attitude in the male community then was “It’s the bride’s thing—let her and her mother and friends take care of it.” The macho characteristic of the day for the groom was to plan the honeymoon (more about that later). I remember the night of the rehearsal we were all going through the ceremony and Cindy was wondering if we could change a thing or two when her dad, in an effort to help keep things flowing, said, “Cindy, he [referring to the pastor] knows what he’s doing. Just let him decide.” I spoke up, agreeing with my future father-in-law and said, “Let’s get this over and go to the barbecue my mom has planned for us all.” She never said anything and complied to the pressure that was put on her that night, but I think I saw a little hurt in her that night that I regret to this very day.

As a pastor I have performed hundreds of weddings and I always demand two things. First, I insist that they meet with me three times before the ceremony for premarital counseling. Second, as we look at their actual ceremony, I instruct the bride to make it as wonderful a ceremony as she can imagine and that the groom contribute to the process as well, since it will become a precious memory they will always share.

The day we married went pretty well, with a good crowd and a nice ceremony and reception. There were a lot of nice gifts

and well wishes for us. After we were through with our social responsibilities that the day demanded, we left town, and in keeping with a big part of the rest of our lives, we stopped and made a hospital visit on the way. Now, this would not have been so strange except for the fact that I had made plans to spend our honeymoon camping out and we were pulling an Apache roll-up camper behind our car. Neither one of us had ever driven a car pulling a camper, nor had we ever been camping before for that matter, so trying to find a parking place in the heart of downtown Columbus Ohio, was difficult to say the least.

Our visit done, we headed to a neighboring town for dinner at the local Jerry's Drive-in. At the conclusion of dinner, I excused myself to go and make a telephone call to local hotels to get a room for the night. I know—I should have done that already, but as I said before, no one talked to us about anything, and since I had never been on such an adventure like this one before, I figured, “No problem. You just call a hotel and get a room”—except it was three days before the Independence Day (July 4), and there was a big race in town, with not a hotel room to be found anywhere. I had to go back to our table and tell my young bride that we had no place to celebrate our wedding night. I tried to reassure her not to worry and that we would just take off toward the lake where we would be camping that next week and would surely pass by a hotel somewhere along the way. So off we went, driving out of town across the farmland of Ohio, pulling a camper and moving ahead toward our life together, two innocent newlyweds.

Catching on Fire during My Honeymoon

As I recall the details of that night and my complete lack of preparation, I have to smile about it now. We made our way in the dark through the unfamiliar countryside. These were the days before GPS, of course, and I did not think to bring a map. Even if we had one, there were no streetlights, and as I remember, the dome light in our car was not working. We drove and drove for several hours without seeing any sign of civilization. Around midnight Cindy began crying and said, “Just pull over and roll up the camper. I don’t want to spend my wedding night driving around all over the countryside.” Believe you me—I shared her sentiment, but I was almost certain that with my luck about the time we were getting comfortable, a sheriff’s deputy doing night patrol out in the boonies would come along and knock on our door. So being the stronger weak one, I said “Let’s just go a little farther.” My patience paid off and we came to the town of Urbana, Ohio, about 1:00 a.m. We woke up the manager of the Motel 68 and there we spent our honeymoon night. The next morning we woke up as man and wife, and Cindy had forgiven my lack of planning as we got ready for the day ahead.

We drove the remaining twenty miles to our destination, a small lake known as Kiser Lake that boasted trails and campgrounds. Now the honeymoon was not without some planning ahead. I had managed to secure the camper for the week and reserved a campsite for the rest of the week. Cindy and I had never been camping before, but we managed to get the camper in the designated campsite and began setting up

what was to be our home for the next week. We had everything we needed for a great week except good weather. It rained every day we were there. You might be saying to yourself, “You were on your honeymoon—the weather shouldn’t matter.” And that may be, but you can zip your camper closed only so many times in a day.

It was in July but the temperature never rose above sixty-three degrees most days. The one day it did get about sixty-seven, we went to the little beach and laid out a blanket. When the clouds were covering the sun we would lie there covered by the blanket, and when the sun was out, we would uncover and enjoy the sun. We repeated this for the most part of the day to enjoy the good weather while we had a chance. We learned later that night that we both had acquired pretty serious sunburns. That night the temperature set a new record low for the area for that time of year, forty-some degrees. Normally that should not present a problem for two lovebirds on their honeymoon; they could just cuddle up. But not if you each had a bad sunburn that made it painful to be touched. And to make things even worse, the only possible heat in our camper was from the gas burners on the little cook stove, which we would light for brief periods during the night, just long enough to get a little warmth and then turn them off as long as we could stand it. After all, we didn’t want our family and friends reading about our succumbing to gas fumes during our honeymoon.

Having survived the night, we decided the next day to unhitch the car and go exploring. We asked the locals about anything interesting to see in the area and they recommended

we visit an old castle in the area. Later we stopped by a little country store to pick up some supplies. We purchased a card game that neither of us had ever heard of, called “Pit,” to play back at our campsite. As we were leaving the store, Cindy saw some bundled wood for campfires and suggested we get some for a campfire that night. We bought a bundle and headed back. When we got there we opened up our new card game and read the instructions. You needed three players to play. I think we kept the game, but I don’t remember ever playing it.

Later that evening as the sun was going down, I decided it would be a perfect way to end the day by starting a campfire with the bundle of logs we had purchased earlier in the day. I carefully arranged the three logs as I had seen somewhere, I believe maybe in a Boy Scout commercial, and then struck a match and held it to the logs. They were wet and I knew nothing about kindling—so no fire. I needed some help here and I remembered the supplies that had come with the camper, including a half-gallon can of Coleman’s lighter fluid. I retrieved the can from the camper and began dousing the logs, pouring about a third of the contents onto the unsuspecting logs. I looked at Cindy and in a he-man voice said, “You might want to stand back a little, darlin.’ This may flare up a bit.” She did—and *it* did. A lot! The flames flushed against my face and singed my eyebrows, but that was not the worst of it. The flames had escaped the fire pit and began burning the grass.

By now we had begun to attract unwanted attention. Little children riding their bicycles had stopped and began

pointing. “Hey! Look over there.” And most everyone within earshot did just that. I wanted to go hide in the camper, but despite my initial embarrassment, I knew I had to put the fire out. I just kept thinking about Smokey Bear holding up a “wanted” poster of me and saying, “Only you can prevent forest fires.”

I immediately began looking around for something to put the fire out with, and the only thing I could think of was to stomp it out with my foot, so I started doing that—but something was wrong. It wasn’t working. As a matter of fact, it was getting worse. The flames were actually making their way up my bell-bottom pants leg. In my enthusiasm I had apparently sprinkled some of the lighter fluid on my pants. What to do? By this time the crowd of onlookers was growing, parents were telling their kids to get away from the fire, and I’m sure my young bride was considering the possibility that she might end her honeymoon as a widow.

While this was all going on around me, I did what you are told never to do. I shook my leg with such ferocity that it extinguished the flames. I was saved and intact—everything, that is, except for my pride. I had never been on fire before or since and can only say that it added to the story of my life.

Marriage Takes Work

Cindy is my best friend and my soul mate. She has been my administrative assistant for over twenty-five years, which means we work together, we eat together, and we spend time

at home together. It would not be too much of an extreme to say that on most days we spend twenty-four hours together, and if there were a twenty-fifth hour, I would just as well spend it with her. We have been married for fifty years and many people look at us as role models and our relationship as a thing of beauty, but it has not always looked so beautiful, and the harmony we express has been fine-tuned over the years.

Most fairytales end with “And they lived happily ever after.” It sounds good, but I’m here to tell you that this ending is not automatically experienced by everyone. I know from firsthand experience that marriage is not all hugs and kisses.

The Bible describes the action this way: “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). The “becoming one” here is usually associated with the wedding night and the physical intimacy shared, and that is part of it, but the real becoming one involves much more than a single night—it can take a lifetime. No matter how much in love you may think you are, you will not even begin to understand the process (and it is indeed a process) until you have to consider someone else’s needs. These include the person’s physical, spiritual, and mental needs and his or her personal perspective on each, and then you add your own to the mix and you have the two who are attempting to become one.

When Cindy and I were married, we were not given the benefit of premarital counseling, so we just jumped in with the misguided belief that love would find a way. The problem

is that for most couples the assumption that love will find a way is based upon the romantic feelings of love they have for each other, and those feelings can be fueled by our biological wants and desires and will probably run hot and cold, depending upon the circumstances. Real love is based on a decision, a decision that says, “I will whether you do or not.” The vows say, “For richer or poorer, in sickness and health.” That is where the work comes in.

I have married hundreds of couples over the years, and as I noted earlier, from the beginning of my ministry I have insisted that they sit down with me and talk about what they are getting into. I remember in my first year of pastoral ministry a local judge assigned a young teen couple to me for premarital counseling. during our first meeting I asked the guy why he was getting married and he said, “I thought we would give it a whirl and if it didn’t work out we would get it annulled.” That first session got a little intense— but he finally began looking at it a little more seriously and they were married.

Premarital counseling, while it is good, still gives you only a glimpse into your future. Each of us walks into marriage with high ideals, and they will likely work fine—that is, until something comes up that challenges the very way we’re wired.

Let me give you an example from my own life that I’m ashamed to admit, so if you think highly of me and don’t want to hear about my faults, just skip this part and move on to the next chapter.

One night while we were driving down a busy and crowded street, the car in front of us hit a cat and the animal went rolling across the pavement onto the grass. Cindy immediately went into her love-for-all-animals mode, expressed by a raised pitch in her voice and her insistence that I stop the car so we could rescue the cat. My reaction was to raise my hand to strike her in order to silence her. (I told you it was bad.) My movement toward her was only part way when we both realized in that moment what I was about to do.

I'm sure that the look on her face could not have been of more surprise than the one I must have had. I was reacting the way I had seen my father react to my mother when he was under pressure. I had said to myself when witnessing his abusive behavior, *I will never do that*. And yet here I was reenacting the same behavior.

I cannot recall what actually happened next, but I remember apologizing profusely to Cindy over the next couple of days. I had never been in a situation like that before, and not being prepared, I had reacted with a built-in default mannerism. The action did two things. Number one, I promised Cindy that I would never act like that again; and, two, I had to wrestle against the beating I was getting from myself and the devil, both of who were saying, "How can you be a good man? You're just like your father."

In the time since that night, I've kept my promise to Cindy and have never attempted to strike or harm her in any way. I have become victorious over the demons that seeped into my

mannerisms while I was growing up, and I have proven to the devil that I am not just a replication of my dad—I am a new man and one I hope is improving every day. I’ve learned that you can indeed stop the cycle of abuse if you want to and are willing to work at it. As I said earlier, marriage takes work, but if you will try your best, every day will be a payday.

The Route to Becoming a Father Myself

Cindy and I both always loved kids but made the decision prior to getting married that we would wait for a while to start a family. We wanted to get to know each other and get established financially before going down that route. We actually had no lack of relationships with children because we started a route for picking up children for church in a van owned by our church. It was a rewarding activity that we relished every Sunday morning. We would drive the van into an impoverished area near our church known as “Wonderland.” It was a small subdivision that contained several unpaved streets, one church, a little market, and two bars. The people of the area used to joke that it was called “Wonderland” because you always wondered what was going to happen there.

Our little ministry met with great success because we showered love on the kids and they loved the attention we gave them. One Sunday morning we pulled into our church parking lot with thirty-two souls on board that fifteen-passenger van. I know it sounds crazy and I don’t know how

we got them all in there, but that's how many got off the van that morning and sat with us in several pews near the front of the sanctuary. We had plenty of kids around us.

A four- or five-year-old little girl named Ginger would come out and meet the van each week and tell us she was going to come next week but her mom thought she was too young. Every Sunday she would meet us and asked to go, but we were insistent that her mom had to give permission. Finally, her mom said yes, and little Ginger became a regular. Ginger loved riding the van and quickly became one of our favorites. It was devastating to everyone when a year later she was diagnosed with leukemia. Her parents did their best taking her to doctors and appointments for treatments, but she continued to fail and eventually died. Her mother asked Cindy and me to sing a song at her funeral. Not having had much experience with death, and especially someone so young, I could barely make it through the song. After the service was over, we all passed by the casket and extended our condolences to the family. The little girl lying there portrayed little resemblance to the little blond-haired, blue-eyed, perky Ginger we first picked up for church. Her little body had been ravaged by the disease, her beautiful blonde hair gone and replaced with a wig, her skin lacking the youthful flesh tone it once had, and her body bloated, the result of the toll the illness and medications had taken.

It was here at this sad occasion that I was to learn one of my greatest lessons that has helped me throughout my life. Ginger's mother took me aside and thanked me for all we had done for Ginger and the family, and especially for the

Saturday when she was nearing death and I stopped by to visit. I'm now ashamed about my thoughts at that moment of talking to Ginger's mother, because they were all about me and wondering what wonderful thing I must have said that day when I stopped to see Ginger. I asked her what she meant, because truthfully I could not remember the details of that Saturday.

She related the following account of the visit: "You and Bert came by that Saturday afternoon. Everyone was gone from the house except me and Ginger. She was sleeping, so we sat in the living room for a while. Ginger had been crying for the last several nights and no one in the house was getting any sleep, so I had stayed up with her. Her legs were in a lot of pain and I rubbed them for several hours every night until she fell asleep, and then I would lie beside her until the pain woke her and I would rub her legs some more. This had gone on until I had rubbed all the hair off her legs, so I hoped you didn't mind that I let her sleep during the visit. We talked briefly and the room grew silent, and then I began to cry. I didn't want to, but I couldn't hold it back—and you just let me cry and then I heard your father-in-law, Bert, begin crying with me. No words or no hugs. Just those tears he shed with me on that Saturday gave me more comfort than I had ever received. So thank you for your visit that day."

Her retelling of the story jogged my memory of that day and here's where the lesson came in. When the room was silent, I remembered that I became uncomfortable because I didn't know what to say to offer comfort. When she began crying, I became more uncomfortable. My father-in-law had made

many more visits to homes than I had, so I nervously waited for him to say something, anything that would bring comfort. Instead, he began softly crying with her. That day I felt we should have said something to help her so she would stop crying, but in hindsight and after hearing Ginger's mom's gratitude, I understood the scripture that says we are to weep with those who weep and laugh with those who laugh.

It was about this time that Cindy and I decided that we were ready to have children of our own; hamsters and a small dog no longer fulfilled her desire to be a mother. Cindy went to her doctor to discontinue our birth control and we waited anxiously for some sign of her becoming pregnant. There was none. This was perplexing to us since both sides of our families had no difficulties getting pregnant, so we soldiered on, attending family activities and with each passing year enduring some well-meaning but insensitive relative asking us when we were going to have a little one. "What's wrong?" "Don't you like kids?" "Don't come back next year without a baby." And they would smile. And all the while we wanted to shout out that we would like nothing more and that our hearts longed for a child and our arms ached to hold a baby of our own. We eventually went through infertility testing with the end results being inconclusive.

After several years we decided to look into adoption, which was a lengthy process of meetings and paperwork and hoops to jump through and more waiting. It was during this time that we heard news of a class-action lawsuit against the makers of the Dalkon Shield IUD for all kinds of complications, including infertility, and suddenly we knew

what the problem was and that there would probably be no naturally born children added to our family.

The Calling Clarified

Cindy and I were enjoying married life and the relationships we had with our friends, family, and church. We had no idea of the changes that were in store for us in the very near future. We had made a move in our area of ministry responsibilities at the church we attended and had begun working with the youth. It was an exhilarating time and we felt that maybe this was to be our direction for the future, but there were folks around us who repeatedly expressed their opinion that the Lord had more in store for us and that we needed to consider leaving and attending a Bible college where we could receive specialized training for the ministry. That sounded crazy to me. This was not on my agenda at all. The idea of getting some training didn't sound so bad, but I didn't want to give up our jobs and the ministry we had and move away from everyone we knew. We were doing pretty well and I didn't want to give up all we had going for us.

It was about this time that I was about to learn another important life lesson. I had applied with a national company to drive a truck for them, and a friend who already worked for the company informed me of a position that was open in another town about three hours from where we lived. I immediately applied and was assured that the job would be mine for the taking. Cindy and I were very excited about this new prospect as it would almost double what I

currently was being paid. We began telling people about our new plans and started thinking about moving—then I got a call telling me that I did *not* get the job. Talk about being disappointed! I must have moped around for about a week or so.

One Sunday morning I was at church feeling glum when one of the old-timers asked why I was so down, and I told him. He looked at me and said, “Bobby, did you talk to anyone about this move?”

“No, why would I do that?”

“Because a lot of people care about you and Cindy and some of them might have prayed with you about it so you could get some direction from the Lord. You did pray and ask the Lord about it, didn’t you?”

“No. I guess I hadn’t thought about that. It didn’t seem like a spiritual thing, and I didn’t think the Lord would be interested.”

“Bobby, He’s interested in *everything* about you. You and Cindy haven’t been married very long and you have family and friends and a church family who are here to help you. Where you were moving to you may not have had that support.”

I had not thought of it like that. God cares about everything that happens to me and has a plan for me. My job is not to try finding my own way but to find the way He has marked out

for me. With that job falling through and no new prospects, a cousin of mine approached me again about attending Bible college. I looked at her and said, “How can I give all this up?”

She responded, “What is there that you’re really giving up?”

I could not answer her because I knew she was talking about more than just the house we lived in and the jobs we had. She was asking me to consider what I would be giving up for what I would be gaining—my own plans, for God’s plans—and I knew at that moment that I was not going to be giving anything up that could even begin to compare to what I was going to gain.

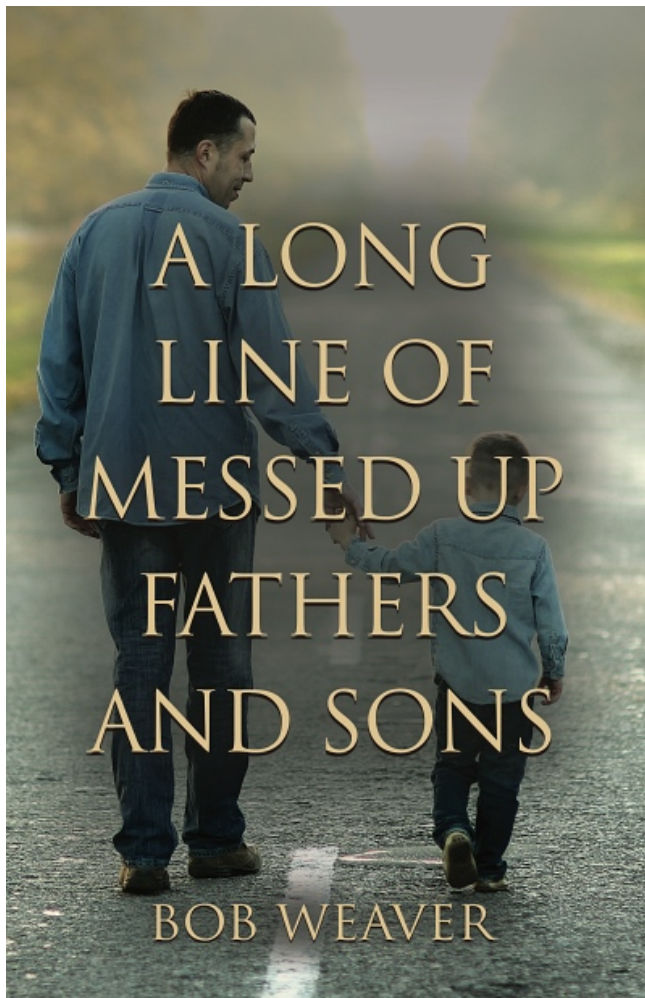
A month later I had left my job, Cindy was able to keep hers and commute, and we moved to the town where the college was located. I was still thinking that after a time at college we would return to our old jobs and our local church to minister, only being new and improved, but after a year we were asked to pastor a small church northeast of where we lived in central Ohio. It was something we never expected, but we accepted the challenge. We were both only twenty two years old. I liked to say that I had parishioners with socks that were older than us and it probably was true.

I had preached maybe a dozen times when all of a sudden I was asked to speak two times every Sunday. I married and buried the folks in that small town, made friends for life, and gained firsthand knowledge about how to get along with people through positive and negative experiences.

It was a baptism by fire for a young couple trying to find their way and would prove invaluable in the days ahead. Our resolve was tested here as we had been a part of the laity up to this point and now we were looking at the situation from the pastor's point of view. To put it another way, we had been a part of the labor force, but now we were a part of management, and just as labor will question and grumble about management, laity may rise up against pastors on occasions. When people left, when there was not enough money to pay the bills, or when there was a disagreement, people would look at me either to solve a problem or because they felt it was my fault. That's a lot of pressure on a twenty-two-year-old kid and his wife.

At the end of one pretty rough Sunday, Cindy through her tears said, "Let's just go back to our old jobs. I just want to be regular laypeople in the church." We cried ourselves to sleep that night. It seemed the only thing we had was each other and a calling from the Lord, who we sensed wanted us there, but truth be told, if I could have left with a clear conscience about it, I would have packed up our things that night and not looked back. But we stayed and accepted the fact that criticism came with the territory.

We stayed at that church for almost two years, during which we cried a lot, prayed a lot, and learned a lot. This place was the beginning of what was to be our life's work. With the help of good friends, we were mentors, and God was establishing a foundation that would take us on a long journey together—with both of us growing along the way.



Every son is molded and shaped by the male influencers in his life, but he is not confined to that mold. This book will offer the skill set to implement or improve the relationship between fathers and sons.

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