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Avoided Connections: Reflections on a Father, as a Son; and on Fathering, as a Father

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In this autoethnographic essay, I revisit memories from past experiences with my father in order to find new meanings that may have escaped me in the moments when we were together. These moments are times when I avoided connection with my father or when connection somehow avoided me. In an attempt to rebuild our relationship and prepare myself to be a better parent, I reframe our stories and question my creation of a fathering identity that rejects the father-son relationship I experienced. Finally, I try to reflexively look back on experiences with my father in order to heal and move forward in connecting with him.

Keywords: Autoethnography; Fathering; Reflexivity; Narrative

“A father! What a subject that is in an age such as ours, when no one seems to have the slightest idea of what it means to be the father of a family!”

– Diderot, *Conversations of the Natural Son* (1757)

Reflect and Rescue

On January 11, 2009, in the middle of a Chicago blizzard, my wife completed a 30-hour natural labor with the healthy delivery of our son, Emmett. Being a part of the birthing process, coaching Meghan during her contractions with words of encouragement and distraction, massaging the lowest part of her back where Emmett put the most pressure, guiding her unbalanced body into a variety of labor friendly positions, modeling animal-like moaning and grunting sounds alongside her, and being there for the moment he arrived has been the proudest moment of my life. I had prepared for the delivery for months. We went to a natural childbirth class for ten weeks and I thoroughly studied the materials given to the participants. I turned to books and the Internet to learn more about the pregnancy and

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birthing process. I took notes and created a binder with go-to tips I could easily access when the birthday came. I skipped out of work to accompany Meghan to every midwife meeting and ultrasound appointment. By being present during the pre-natal process and delivery, I wanted to demonstrate the type of post-natal father I could be. I wanted to be an available, nurturing, caring, and active parent. I had done the homework and knew I could be the dad that I thought my father wasn't.

Starting in my early teens, I told myself I would never be like my dad if I ever became a father. I developed an identity for fathering different from the father-son experience I had lived. I imagine that part of this identity was influenced by popular culture during my adolescence with nurturing and expressive dads such as Michael Keaton in the film *Mr. Mom* or Alan Thicke as Dr. Seaver in the television program *Growing Pains* (Berry, 2012). But, I also believe that these idealized media dads aligned with my intuitive needs as a son. As a sensitive child, I needed a supportive and caring environment. Time went on and, as my dad continued to not fulfill the role I wanted him to have, the gap grew between my understanding of fatherhood and my experience as his son. When Meghan and I decided to have kids, I believed that I had a firm grasp of how/who I did not want to be as a father. I felt strongly about creating an identity for myself as a dad that rejected the experience I had with my own father (Höfner, Schadler, & Richter, 2011).

Bochner (2012) writes about the relationship with his dad, saying “for a long time I thought I could break free from your grip by becoming everything you were not” (p. 169). For me, this became the only directive I needed for navigating my new role as father. I never doubted that I had to be the opposite of my dad. I wanted to be present. I wanted to listen. I wanted to be empathetic. I wanted to be nurturing. I even told my wife, “If you ever see me acting like my dad, let me know. I don't want to be like him.” However, harboring these thoughts of anger and continuing to portray myself as victim to my “non-nurturing” father only intensified my anxiety and the self-inflicted pain and confusion that followed. I decided to look back in order to heal, reframe, and create an empowered son/father identity (Bochner, 2012; Kiesinger, 2002).

Insisting on living out this narrative of “not wanting to be my dad” does not serve me well. Continuing to tell a life story of not knowing how to talk to my dad, or how to have the meaningful relationship I long for, does not allow me/us to progress in beneficial, more connected ways. Kiesinger (2002) tell us that “when our stories break down or no longer serve us well,” then it is critical that we reflect on these stories and empower ourselves to “actively reinvent our accounts in ways that permit us to have more fulfilling lives” (p. 107). I need to reframe our relationship and our story. I need the curiosity, the strength, the humility and the courage to relook at my experiences with my dad in order to reframe a story that helps me grow as a father and as a son. I am drawn to Freeman's (2010) articulation of reflection as hindsight

with the ability to “perform a kind of ‘rescue’ function” that allows me to repair my wounds by “taking up what could not, or would not, be seen in the immediacy of the moment” (p. 26). We are not lost, beyond repair. I still have a chance to work on us.

Autoethnography

As a researcher, autoethnography allows me to investigate and interrogate my personal experiences as a son and father in order to better understand the cultural phenomenon of fathering. When I reflexively look back and isolate key moments—“epiphanies” (Denzin, 1989)—autoethnography challenges me to examine these experiences for deeper, more complicated meanings. These examinations, or complications, are inductive in nature with insights and reframings that emerge through the research and writing process.

As an autoethnographer, I write through my confusion and uncertainty with connections to scholarly literature, blurring the line between story and theory (Bochner, 1997; Adams, 2012). I revisit my experiences to create possibilities that can be interpreted, experienced, and understood through multiple perspectives for not only myself, but for the reader as well. One goal for autoethnographers is for our stories to be accessible and meaningful to (non-) academic audiences so that others may connect and feel empowered to participate in personal and social change (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011; Adams 2006). As researchers and readers, we can use our past reflections to construct more hopeful and loving futures. As a praxis-oriented autoethnographer looking at my father-son relationships, I am given “hope that I might have more fond memories of my father in my life” (Toyosaki, 2012, p. 250).

I also have a therapeutic goal for doing autoethnography; I write in order to heal. I am motivated by Ellis, Adams, and Bochner’s (2011) declaration that autoethnography attempts to reposition the opposing stances of science and art. Autoethnography’s greatest attribute may be that its “research can be rigorous, theoretical, and analytical *and* emotional, therapeutic, and inclusive of personal and social phenomena” (p. 283). I recover my past in order to fill the void that is left from years of avoiding connection with my father. I cannot say if this process will uncover any explicit answers about why a son first begins avoiding his dad, but I hope this writing will encourage me to repair what we still have; I look back to move forward.

Through autoethnography I position myself *within* the process of examining father-son relationships. I observe and study fatherhood through my dad and myself. In this process, I have chosen moments with my dad when we had the chance to connect with each other, but for reasons I hope to understand through the writing process, we did not. These memories have become even more meaningful to me now as I investigate my developing identity as a father. By reflecting on and living with my stories, by thinking theoretically through my experiences of fathering, I can use my knowledge

today to better understand and reframe my past (Yerby, 1995; Bochner, 1997). I embrace this autoethnographic process as a researcher, as a performer, as an observer, as a writer, and as a participant.

By revisiting key memories from past experiences with my dad, I hope to find new meanings that may have escaped me in the moments of us being together. I know that most of these key moments are mundane. I often wonder if the mundaneness of this relationship with my dad stems from the emptiness and (lack of) tension within it. Would a traumatic experience have helped us generate emotion, good or bad, toward each other? Do I really wish we had experienced something so powerful? I feel guilty even writing about my “troubles” knowing that they cannot compare to the abuse Ronai (1996) experienced, the deception Goodall (2012) lived through, or the confusion and hatred Adams (2006, 2012) has felt toward his father. Instead, I am inspired by the less traumatic but powerful and beautiful autoethnographic work by Chawla (2013) and Bolen (2014). The mundane nature of the relationship with my dad allows us to better understand the everyday, common experiences of fathering.

The Father I Know

From my perspective, my dad and I have shared few moments of extreme tragedy or absolute joy. We have lived a simple relationship not too uncommon from what many fathers and sons have experienced. As Alexander, Moreira, and kumar (2012) tell us, “stories about father-son relationships are never the same and never not *not* the same” (p. 18). My dad was the breadwinner and disciplinarian. He ran a strict household and established himself as the authoritarian. My mom relieved him of most caretaking and nurturing responsibilities while he contributed mostly to those domestic chores assigned to our culturally dominant patriarchs, such as yard work and bill paying. He generally maintained an absence in terms of emotional support, unable to fill the void I longed for in our relationship. He was a commercial airline pilot and extended absences from the family were regular. He worked incredibly hard and wanted everything to be done the “right way.” I remember two phrases that sum up his work ethic: “If you are going to do something, do it right,” and “Look around and see if there is anything that needs to be done.” Growing up, I never witnessed my dad relaxing or having fun. He didn’t have any close friends and he never had any hobbies. He would either be at work for Northwest Airlines or fidgeting around our house in the suburbs of St. Paul, Minnesota.

This essay is not about hating my father, but rather an attempt to critically examine the minor traumas and mundane experiences that define our father-son relationship. I don’t want to write about all of the ways I feel as though my dad and I do not connect. I don’t want to write about memories of fear, regret, and pain. I don’t want to revisit memories and uncover evidence of him being a “bad” dad. I am not interested in retelling the story about not

wanting to become my dad. Instead, I hope to reflect on and reframe our past experiences. I hope to rebuild the relationship with my dad and to prepare myself to be a better parent. Goodall (2005) describes a desire not to pass on the “silent poison” (p. 498) that is the narrative inheritance of his deceptive father. For us, this silent poison is much more literal: We struggle to bond and share with each other. And, like Goodall, I do not want to pass this struggle on to my son (and, perhaps one day, daughters). I do not want my kids to feel as though I am avoiding them. I must begin then with examining my formative father-son relationship. My fathering narrative begins there and whatever conflicts and disappointments exist within it should be addressed and gently revisited (Goodall, 2012).

Paths Towards Happiness

I love seeing my dad smile. It is the cutest and most endearing thing. I think it has something to do with how rare it happens. His smile is so memorable because it is strikingly out of the ordinary. When I am present for these moments, I find myself yearning to extend them. I want to parlay his happiness into an episode of laughter and exultation. I want him to feel that happiness and to want more. He should be happier. I fear my kids may be witnessing and saying the same thing about me. I don’t have time for them. I yell at them too much. I discipline them too much. I tell myself to be fully present to their needs, but I do not have the capacity. I have to make dinner, do the dishes, mow the lawn, or find a way to escape. I am too stressed. I want to extend my moments of happiness, too.

When I reflect on key moments that have shaped my relationship with my dad, it saddens me that, at first, I mostly conjure images of frustration, sternness, disappointment, concern, judgment or uncertainty. I do not immediately think about instances of laughter, embrace, or joy. I cannot say that I have a childhood memory of us playing catch, wrestling on the family room floor, or chasing each other around the house. I remember thinking that it was gross when he would randomly put forward a request for a kiss on the lips before bed or forcing a laugh out of me during a painful tickling session.

Berry (2012) recalls how his dad would come home from a long day of work as a roofer and ask him to “playfully” take off his father’s dirty, stinky socks. “I rarely wanted to play this game as a child,” Berry said, but through hindsight he now sees his dad’s request as a moment when his dad tried to connect (p. 135). Unfortunately, from our son-perspectives, our dads inadequately connected with us, but our dads may not have realized this either. Alexander (2000) describes a similar experience to Berry’s in removing the work boots of his garbage man father and, through a critical reflection, frames this moment as a time of pleasure and pride. I engage my memories “as a refracting mirror that allows me points of access and an occasion to reflect on my own past” (Alexander, 2000, p. 97) to move beyond a simply negative critique of my father-son relationship.

Reflections on a Father, as a Son; and on Fathering, as a Father

In this reflexive process, I hope to undergo a type of memory work in pulling forward the most vivid recollections of my dad. The following reflective vignettes are the metaphorical “box of books” (Denzin, 2012) that I carry with me. My memories weigh on me and sit in the back of my mind collecting dust, waiting for me to take them out of the box, brush them off, and reread them. They are the “aesthetic moments” (Bolen, 2014, p. 141) that accumulate over time, and separately may seem to have little impact, but collectively create the construct of our relationship. I remember these vignettes of my relationship with my dad because they represent when we (almost) connected. These experiences are filled with “maybes” and “what ifs.” Maybe my experiences with my dad are mundane because he did everything he could to protect me from tragedy. Maybe his fathering role confused him as much as it has confused me. What would it feel like if I felt better connected to him? What if my dad has been trying to connect with me all of these years?

I am beginning to see these key moments as times when I avoided connection or connection somehow avoided me. This collective avoidance defines our relationship. While I do not have a single epiphanic moment that captures my relationship with my father, each reflective vignette investigated here has become “but one moment in a constellation of experience forming an epiphany” (Bolen, 2014, p. 142). In weaving through these memories, I work through them from the perspective of my father, myself as a son, and myself as a father, sometimes through all three lenses, sometimes individually. The short vignettes unfold as one engaging in a type of memory work would expect, coming in and out of focus in a non-formulaic sequence. Memories surface and then vanish, crystal clear at one moment and incredibly distant in the next. As I reflect on moments of avoided connection with my father as a son, I develop an understanding of fathering, as a father.

Reflective Vignettes

When my dad attempted to tickle me, it created more anxiety and discomfort than joy. When I combine the interpretation of these experiences with the even more painful tickling episodes my dad’s sister attempted, I can see that my dad’s family clearly never taught him how to engage in playful and tender tickling. And now, when I find myself squeezing my son Emmett’s inner thigh or scrambling my fingers under his armpits and chin, I mostly think about how awkward the tickling feels and if I am tickling correctly. The tickling seems so forced. And, it is. No one ever taught me how to gently and lovingly tickle. I hope my attempts to tickle inflict less tension than my dad’s prior attempts. The sensation of doubting my ability to be a nurturing father often leaves me feeling distraught. As I fumble through these tickling moments with Emmett, I wonder if he can sense my unease and the “forced”

nature of it. I wonder if he yearns for me to connect with him in a way that feels more organic and natural.

I worry that I will not have the strength or skill to address my kids' needs as they navigate through life. Will I rely on my skills of avoidance that I routinely polished through interactions with my father? The unknown of parenting scares me and I can imagine that my dad was scared of the unknown as well. The relationship I hold with my dad feels awkward. It is filled with love for each other, but lacks many of the qualities I want in a strong and loving relationship. We don't reach out to each other during challenging moments. In the first five years of my experience as a dad, I have never asked my father for parenting advice. Our conversations cover mostly non-contentious topics such as generic updates from the last couple of weeks. Maybe our lives are simply boring. That could be the case, but it doesn't explain our inability to discuss this boringness. We make small talk because we don't know how to talk to each other. It reminds me of Adams' (2012) metaphor of missing each other, like two ships passing in the night, unaware of the other, moments when "I long for him" and when "he longs for me," moments when "we hurt and are hurt but never decide to quit" (p. 194). My dad and I are constantly missing each other.

I don't know much about my dad's past. The narrative I know that belongs to him has missing pages, even entire chapters, loosely bound like the book of loose-leaf paper I tied together with yarn for my fourth grade book report. I know little about my dad's youth, his family life, his experiences in college, his courting of my mom or the early years of his life as a dad. I would not have been surprised to learn that my dad lived a double life alongside Harold Goodall, a.k.a., "Duke" (Goodall, 2005). For all I know, his extended trips as a pilot that took him across the world could have been cover-ups for his double-agent lifestyle. Maybe he didn't lead the clandestine lifestyle of Duke, but maybe he had a mistress or two. Maybe he had another family with kids he hugged and playfully tickled and nurtured. Although I now know these possibilities are not true, these were thoughts that I once had, thoughts that informed my experiences with my dad and shaped my understanding of fathering.

I know nothing about how he handled his transition to fatherhood. I have no idea if he experienced the same inner conflicts I struggle with as I learn how to become the father I want to be. I wish I knew more about my dad's transition. I wish he would connect with me through this similar experience. But, I wonder, why do our fathers have the responsibility to make this connection? The perceived notion that we father in different ways holds me back from asking such questions. I have assumed as a "new father" that my dad would not be able to relate to me. My distant and absent father couldn't possibly relate to me as a present and nurturing father. I try to parent in such opposing ways that we could not possibly connect. I have created and maintained a well-defined mental barrier that has allowed me

to avoid connecting with my dad. But, fatherhood unavoidably has become one of the few experiences we share. Maybe this 66 year-old father of five has some worthwhile advice from thirty-eight years of fathering that he could pass down to his novice son. What if he advises me to not do what he did? What if his advice aligns with my directive of not being like him? I could learn how to not be like my father by listening to what he would have done differently. I no longer want to rely on books, websites, or intuitive self-knowing; I want to talk with my dad.

My dad was a decent mid-fielder in soccer. Talented and dedicated enough to play at the collegiate level, something I never did. I loved playing soccer in high school and I loved the idea that my dad and I had something in common, something we could talk about it. Unfortunately, I used to dread walking out of the locker room after a game knowing I would have to endure comments from my dad about my performance. I remember after one game, the feedback on my effort seemed more insulting than encouraging. "You need to work on the way you run," he said. "You're out there flopping around and you look funny." Maybe he resented not being physically able to show me how to play or that I did not possess the skills he imagined he had as a youthful soccer player. Maybe he wanted to be encouraging, but didn't know how to express it. His dad was never there to coach him. Part of his "narrative inheritance" (Goodall, 2005) includes having an absent father as well. His father never even made it to a soccer match. His father never told him he looked funny when he ran. By attending my games and giving me feedback, my dad attempted not to be the father that his dad was, but still could not be the father that I wanted him to be. Can a father fulfill the fathering identity his child envisions? My dad made it to every game that he could, but that still fell short of what I wanted/needed. As I learn more about the parenting choices my dad made and the regrets he carries with him today, I learn more about forgiving him.

At my younger sister's wedding, I noticed my dad standing at the edge of the dance floor with his eye's fixed on the new bride and an expression of joy on his face. I can imagine the pride he must have had as a father and the happiness he must have felt in seeing her enjoy this moment. I walked over to my dad and soaked in the experience of my little sister dancing under the stars of northern Minnesota with her closest friends and family. At that moment, as a new dad myself, I felt a strong connection with my dad. I leaned in and told him, "You must be so proud. I think I kind of understand now that I'm a dad. I have a different perspective." My dad grinned. But the music was too loud and there were too many distractions for conversation. I think that I chose that environment to briefly "connect" with my dad because I knew it would be fleeting. It offered a low-risk opportunity to let my dad know that I was thinking about him and trying to understand him more. Later that week, around a quiet campfire, my dad asked me what I meant about a "different perspective," and in this more intimate environment I cowered

away. I shrugged it off pretending like I didn't remember my comment. I couldn't embrace the chance to open up to my dad. I could have answered that I now have a small glimpse into the enormous sacrifices a dad makes just to experience those moments when your child is completely carefree and filled with joy. At the edge of that dance floor, I began to see the multiplicities of my dad through a larger panoramic lens rather than through the micro focus of me in relation to him. I saw him as a man who experienced the pure joy of being a father. I saw the dad I had always wanted him to be with me.

As I learn more about reading and deciphering my narrative inheritance, I acquire a different understanding of not only who I am, but also who my dad is. By way of hindsight, I begin to have new interpretations of past events. These changes in knowing have altered our relationship, but so far I have not shared these changes with my dad. I am now more equipped to evaluate my dad in more sensitive and comprehensive ways. I am more understanding and more forgiving. I no longer say that I don't want to be like my dad, but instead I try to understand why my dad fathered the way he did. What was happening in his life at a particular time? What was happening in the world around him? I have to think of his actions as reactions to his experiences. I can see that (as dads) we try to rely on *our* intuitive knowing of what a dad should be, actively attempt to reject the notion of fatherhood *our* dads embodied, but know, experientially, only one model of fatherhood.

I remember when I took a trip home as a sophomore in college and the entire family went out for a nice dinner. After we said grace, my dad went around the table and said how proud he had become of all his kids. When he got to me, he stumbled for words and sputtered something about how I know a lot about sports. I don't remember all the accolades for my siblings, but I am sure they had more substance. I do, however, remember realizing at that moment that my dad didn't know me. Another moment of not knowing me occurred when my parents visited me when I had first moved to Chicago. The stress of job hunting weighed on me, but my dad assured me everything would be okay. He had confidence in my ability of climbing the corporate ladder and becoming the CEO of a company someday. He did not know that I had no interest in being a member of the corporate world, especially at a CEO-level. It annoyed me that my dad did not know what I wanted to do with my life. I became upset at him for projecting his aspirations on me. As I reflect on these moments, I begin to understand that I cannot resent my dad for not knowing me, when I did not share myself with him. I wonder if these are moments of connection that I avoided by accusing my dad of not knowing.

I remember when I used to watch Fox News before my dad would visit in order to prepare for our conversations. I had no interest in learning more about current world affairs. I had a firm grasp on them. The interest lied in wanting to learn more about the conservative perspective I knew my dad would attempt to debate me on. But, I also held no interest in having a critically engaging conversation. I wanted to co-opt the conservative

thoughts as my own to avoid confrontation. I intentionally prepared the least confrontational environment possible. I prepared to avoid my dad. Avoidance maintains my comfort zone, keeps me emotionally detached, and protects me from confrontation (Berry, 2012).

As a kid, when my dad would come home from work, I didn't run to the door to give him a hug and tell him about my day. I would hide or pretend to be busy. It wasn't uncommon to be watching some afternoon cartoon that my dad would not approve of. I would be sitting in a chair in the family room that had a clear line of vision to the driveway through a bay of windows dressed with café curtains. The family room was situated right next to the garage, so as soon as I heard the garage door open, I would immediately turn the television off and slide off the chair. Once on the floor and hidden from view by the curtains, I would flip onto my belly and crawl out of the family room, into the kitchen and quickly pretend I was helping my mom make dinner or that I was working on my homework. I can't remember our exchanges or interactions with each other when he first walked through the door. I think I continued to avoid him by not making eye contact or deeply immersing myself in the activity I had just picked up. As this type of avoidance continued to accumulate, I imagine these moments of coming home from work seemed to be nothing out of the ordinary for my father. Although we may have grown accustomed to this type of behavior, I wonder if he ever reflected on these moments, if he ever felt unloved or unwanted.

When my dad met our first child, Emmett, the first thing he said to him was, "Hey, you little shit." I probably forced a half smile and a possible giggle, but I know I felt confused and upset. Did he really want those to be the first words to his first grandchild? I'm not sure what expectations I had, but I know that comment did not meet them. I felt saddened that my dad didn't express himself to Emmett in a more meaningful manner. I guess I had hoped he would gently grab his hand, or hold him, and stare into his eyes like I did when I first held him at the hospital. That type of response aligned with my intuitive reaction as a father. Maybe I was hoping to connect with my dad in a way we had never been able to before. Fathering was now something we were mutually experiencing. I think the hope existed that somehow it would immediately unlock the layers of deadbolts and latches that guarded my dad. Maybe Emmett could be the key to all the locks I put up to maintain my perimeter of avoidance.

Bochner (2012) developed a sense that his father's work was a means for him to rise "above the absurd struggles of (his) life" (p. 171). For a father and husband absent from the family life for three to ten days at a time, I can see now that it must have been difficult for my dad to continually re-enter a family narrative and know how to interact. Children have ever-changing needs, personalities emerge overnight, parenting tactics might work one day but not the next, and life in a family remains eternally fluid. My dad had to navigate this fluidity every time he came home for a couple of days before

leaving again. I know I have also reverted to the tactic of avoiding parenting by immersing in work. I have used the excuse of having to do the dishes or make dinner in order to not play with my kids. I've thought about staying at work longer to avoid having to spend more time at home with them. I am not proud of myself during these moments. I feel as though I should embrace every chance I have to connect with my kids and attend to their needs. Isn't that what I hoped for from my dad? Am I becoming my dad? The dad I did not want to be but cannot avoid becoming.

One of our few father-son rituals involved going to the barber to get haircuts. My dad used to take my brother, Tim, and I to a traditional barbershop. I used to love going to this place. I loved that the barber would use warm shaving cream on the back of your neck and a small vacuum type contraption to clean up the loose hairs that fell onto your shoulders and lap. I felt so grown up as I sat around the shop listening to the older men talk about sports and politics. I used to think it was cool that my dad would bring me to a place that had *Playboy* magazines on the waiting area tables. I don't know the importance of this ritual to my dad. It's not as though my dad and I ever talked about the barbershop experience or engaged in meaningful conversations with each other as we got our haircuts. The barbershop was not conveniently located and any other hair salon could match the quality of the haircut. We probably drove to the location in silence, sat in silence while we waited for a barber to call our name, and most likely sat in silence as we drove home. I always assumed my dad took us there for the cheap haircuts. My dad was (is) an extremely frugal man, but looking back I think that the experience of going to a "real man's" barbershop meant something more to my dad than saving a couple of dollars; he may have tried to create his version of a meaningful father-son bonding experience.

Have a Drink

When I attempt to look back and reflect on my relationship, I know that I am struggling with the restraints of transcending time and context. I am looking back in order to understand how my point of view at that time influences my construction of fatherhood today. I am creating meaning through a different perspective than before (Yerby, 1995). As Adams (2006) asserts, we have a responsibility to reflexively examine our influences and roles in the relationships we create with others. By replaying and reexamining these moments with my dad through my contemporary lens of fatherhood, I hope to redefine my notion of fathering and (re)build my relationship with my dad. My ideas about fatherhood cannot be static and stuck in the past. They require fluidity, evolution, and revision (Ellis, 2009). My meaning making of fatherhood changes with time and with my experiences of being a son, and now being a dad. What I believe to be true about fathering and being fathered is the ever-changing interpretation of my narrative. I must consider Toyoaki's (2012) caution not to become "lazy at interpreting"

the social reality of fathering and attempt to be “living in the moment and understanding my identity as it is at the moment of making” (p. 246).

Lately, when I crawl into bed and curl up to sleep, I have been questioning the value of my life. Not in a suicidal manner, but in a way that wonders if I have made the right decisions. The challenges and stresses of parenting seem to break me down by the time I am ready to rest my head on the pillow. It hurts to fall asleep thinking that I don’t always like how I see myself as a father. Am I happy with who and where I am? Am I a good dad? It hurts to question my fathering identity. Why is there such disconnect between the idealized notion of the father I have/want and the father that I see myself performing every day? This is the tension in which I currently find myself, although I am attempting to take charge through writing. I need to reconcile the emptiness I feel as a father and as a son.

A couple of days after we had our third kid, while driving home from work, suddenly, I could hardly breathe. My chest felt like it was collapsing and my jaw began clenching like a vise. When I got home, the symptoms didn’t go away as I had hoped the comfort of home would bring, but instead gradually intensified. My arms and chest started to tingle, slowly creeping through my shoulders and into my neck. I tried to ignore my concerns and carry on with the nightly routine. I began to make dinner when the baby started crying. I went to comfort her but could barely pick her up. I did not know whether I should stress my wife Meghan with my concerns or continue to hope they would go away. Eventually, good judgment won the battle. The symptoms weren’t going away and allowing them to continue until something terrible happened would be far worse for Meghan than telling her ahead of time. I casually mentioned that I thought she should take me to the doctor, hoping to make the situation as stress free as possible. Unfortunately, a statement like this from the guy who rarely goes to the doctor and occasionally rants about the scam of healthcare could not be received with calm. We called a close friend who arrived to our house in minutes. She stayed with our two oldest kids and we brought the baby with us to the hospital. She was too young to be away from her mom (and her dad?). Shortly afterward I was admitted to the ER for what I thought was a possible heart attack or stroke. A few hours later, after a variety of tests and scans and with my self-diagnosed life threatening symptoms receding, the doctor told me I most likely had a panic attack. The nurse left me with some breathing exercises, advice to acknowledge and handle the symptoms, and to relax with a stiff drink from time to time.

News spread quickly about the trip to the hospital and my doctor-diagnosed stress. This did not surprise anyone close to me. Life with three young children is difficult. I am a sensitive individual. And stress and anxiety are common in my family. What has intrigued me is the reaction of my dad. Since that visit to the hospital, my dad has seemed to be concerned with my emotional wellbeing. Suddenly, my dad wants to listen and to talk. He

sits there with his arms wide-open waiting for me to jump at the invitation for which I have longed. Unfortunately, now that I feel that the invitation exists, I seem unable to embrace it. I feel as though my dad took a step to (re)build our relationship and I have no idea how to enter into his father-son construction. I don't know how to share my feelings and my thoughts, my fears and anxieties, or my regrets and disappointments. I revert to the practice of mentally rehearsing my conversations before letting them leave my mouth. I want to be able to talk with him, but I don't know how. Is he sincere in his openness? Will he be judgmental? Will he understand me? I still have to identify and massage the barriers that lie in our way. This cautious and sensitive approach is how I avoid.

I sense that my dad is now able to connect to me through our shared experiences of intense anxiety attached to raising a family. He empathizes with the stresses and inner turmoil of fatherhood that he also struggles with. He recently told me, in one of my "spy mission" (Kiesinger, 2002, p. 108) conversations that I have been engaging in to learn more about him, that he reached his peak stress level at a time in his mid-thirties when he relocated us, his young family, to Atlanta, GA, but still had to commute to Chicago, IL for his active duty position in the Air Force. Now, as if my dad called the doctor who treated me for my panic attack and asked for her diagnosis, he never shows up to the house without a bottle of whiskey. He tells me he knows I need it. As I continue to investigate this relationship, I have a vision of sharing drinks over the much needed deep and meaningful conversations I believe we both long for.

An Unexpected Opening

I still do not have a firm understanding of how to be a dad day in and day out. There are beautiful moments when I know I am performing my sense of an ideal father. There are also ugly moments when I know I am not. My troubles are not new. They have been felt throughout time, as Diderot (2000) related to over 250 years ago.

I think I am ready to learn from my dad. I have to realize that he is the only experienced dad I have a relationship with, even if that relationship is in need of connective work. I don't have an older male co-worker who could be a surrogate mentor. Most of my close friends do not have kids. My brothers are not dads. If I don't want to be like my dad, I still need to learn from him. Trying not to be my dad is not a strong foundation to guide me through this experience. In fact, trying to not be my dad leaves me more isolated and confused. It gives me no pillar to lean on or no mentor to consult. My dad admittedly has made some mistakes about his parenting choices. He has mentioned some of these mistakes from time to time, and I imagine he would be willing to engage in more complicated and meaningful conversations about these mistakes. I should listen. All sons should listen. If we learn to listen we can come to feel empowered to participate in the personal change we seek.

While writing this essay, I received a text message from my dad after a short visit to our house. He wrote, “Thanks for the hospitality. Your life is obviously quite full. Call any time to talk if you want.” The moment was surreal. I haven’t replied and I only hope the invitation remains open-ended. We must be willing to confront our discomforts with the past if we wish to heal, repair and strengthen our personal relationships going forward. This work requires not only seeing our past selves, but also taking care to consider the contexts of the others we hold relationships with during those moments. I keep that text message in my inbox, refusing to delete it, as a sort of contract with myself. I cannot let this opportunity pass me by. Through reflection and examination of key moments with our past, we prepare ourselves for the vulnerability of being open to these opportunities. We cannot mess them up and let them pass.

Unfortunately, I am now the one who is not ready. I hope my dad doesn’t judge my inability to embrace moments of connection as I have judged him. He can still perform the nurturing and supportive fathering role I yearn for. I can envision a future relationship with my father that is more substantial and fulfilling. I hope he can wait. Being a “new father” or a nurturing and supportive father cannot simply be a rejection of the role we witnessed our own fathers embody. We must confront and interrogate the uncomfortable experiences we had with our fathers, see ourselves as sons from a new perspective, and attempt to understand the context in which our fathers fathered. This reflective practice requires looking back in order to actively encounter our relationships in the present. This space is where the healing occurs. I am on my way, knowing that this path only strengthens my ability to be the father my son needs me to be for him. I am becoming a better parent, seeing my dad as a better man, and offering all fathers and sons reason to critically look back in order to move forward.

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