



Angry like Dad

by Rick Belden

When I was a child, one of the inviolable rules of the household, as articulated over and over again to my younger brother and me by my mother, was this:

Do not, under any circumstances, talk to your father when he comes home from work.

This was, of course, the precise opposite of what I wanted. I adored my father when I was a boy. I was just about shaking with excitement to see him every afternoon when he came home from his job in the factory. I had so much to tell him about my day, whether I'd spent it inside at school or outside playing during the summer. More than anything, I missed him terribly every day and wanted to be near him, to be close to him, to hear his voice, and to know that he was interested in me.

We did our best, my brother and me, to obey Mom's rule to the letter. I recall many a late afternoon sitting quietly on the couch, waiting as patiently as I could for the signal from my mom that it was finally okay to pass from the living room into the kitchen, where my father would be sitting at the dinette table, as he did every day upon his re-entry into the family home, still dressed in his greasy work clothes and finishing a cup of coffee.

As I sat on the couch and waited, I would listen carefully to my parents talking for any clues I might gather about my dad's day at work and his mood. Sometimes I would sneak over to the doorway between living room and kitchen, that invisible boundary I

was not to cross, to try to hear the conversation a little better. If I was feeling unusually eager, I might try to crook my head around the door jamb to sneak a peek at the two of them. If feeling exceptionally brave, I might even attempt to catch my mother's eye to remind her that I was still waiting, which, if I succeeded, invariably resulted in a very stern "Back on the couch right now!" look from Mom.

It was hard to wait, and as I said we did our best, but being kids, we were sometimes overtaken by our natural excitement and spontaneity, approaching Dad immediately as he walked in the door after work (or shortly thereafter) in spite of the prohibition against doing so. The result was inevitably a quick and dramatic reminder of why the rule was in place, generally some variation of my dad reacting angrily at our presence, glaring at my mom, and growling something like "Get those goddam kids away from me!"

It was no surprise to see my father angry. It seemed to me, as a boy, that he was angry almost all the time, but he was especially angry at the end of the workday. This was something I could not understand. I knew that he had a hard, dirty job, but I'd only seen the building where he worked from the outside, so I could only imagine what a day there might be like for him. Nothing I could come up with, given my very limited experience as a child, was sufficiently horrible to make him not want to see me right away when he got home every day, so I began to wonder if it was something I'd done, or something about me, that would make him crazy if I approached him too soon.

Even after the necessary time to sit at the table talking with my mom and settle himself, my father was hardly what I'd call enthusiastic to see his boys. It seemed more like seeing us at the end of the day was something he tolerated, a duty he was required to perform. He was still, on most days, irritable, like he had to make a big effort to deal with us in a civil manner.

This was always a huge letdown, a big disappointment for me. I'd waited, I'd followed the rule, and I'd been patient, hard as it was to do so, and there was no real payoff. It was like talking to a surly statue, or maybe an asocial robot. I wanted so badly to interact with him, to *engage* with him, but there was no engagement to be had, just distracted silence on his part as I poured my heart out to him, punctuated by an occasional monotone "Okay" or "That's good" or a non-verbal grunt.

The visit typically ended with me dejected, hopes crushed, feeling like I'd failed with him yet again, and the rest of the evening felt blue. Then I'd start the whole cycle again the next day, and the next, and the next, in the optimistic expectation that one day things would be different, or that maybe I could figure out how to be better somehow so my dad would want to see me and would be interested in me at the end of his day.

As time passed and I got older, I became more independent and developed friends and other interests outside the home that ended my "waiting for Dad to come home from

work” ritual. But even as a teen, I knew better than to go anywhere near him as he was pulling into the driveway at the end of his shift because that was just asking for trouble.

As a boy, I idealized my father. His anger when he arrived home every day mystified me. I knew, or had some sense, that his job was difficult, and that he was tired, but I couldn’t understand why that would make him so hateful toward his own boys. In the absence of any reason or explanation that made sense to me, I came to the conclusion that he was reacting to some failure or deficiency on my part, and devoted myself to doing better.

By the time I’d reached my late teens, years of relentlessly abusive behavior toward me on my father’s part had stripped away my boyhood idealization, and I was left with the view that he was just a mean-spirited old bastard I could never satisfy, no matter what I did. That wasn’t far from the truth, either. But it wasn’t the whole truth.

Many years down the road and having done an enormous amount of personal work to come to terms with my history with this man, I’m able to see him more fully as what he was and is: another human being with his own pain and disappointments, trials and tribulations. This doesn’t excuse or absolve him of any of his bad behavior, but what it does do is help me understand him a little better, bit by bit, which is something I’ve been driven to do for as long as I can remember, ever since I was a child. Understanding him, in turn, lets me off the hook, bit by bit, because it allows me to correct the belief I’d taken on as a child that I was somehow responsible for his moods and behavior, a view youngsters develop all too often when their parents act out their unhappiness as openly and dramatically as my father did.

This process of coming into a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of my father and his behavior during my childhood (and after) has not been a strictly intellectual, analytical experience. Far from it. There’s been a lot of gut-wrenching emotional work to do, a lot of anger and a lot of grief to be felt, acknowledged, and expressed. I’ve also had to look at myself, at my own behavior, failures, and flaws, as unflinchingly as I’ve looked at his, and there have been many times when I didn’t like what I saw.

I, too, have been an angry man, although I haven’t expressed that anger in my life the way my father did. Where he tended to direct his anger outward toward others (mostly in the home: wife, children, pets), I’ve tended to direct my anger toward myself, with relentless expectations of achievement and perfectionism and, as a younger man, a brazen recklessness with alcohol and other risk-taking behaviors that could’ve easily put me on a slab.

I’m long past the worst of that now, although I still tend to drive myself too hard and expect too much, to the point of paralyzing myself with doubt at times. I remember my mom rationalizing my dad’s brutal behavior toward me many times by telling me, “You know, he’s actually much harder on himself than he is on anyone else.” I received, accepted, and internalized this information as a fundamental lesson in how to be a man.

It became one of my unconscious operating principles of manhood: a man is much harder on himself than he is on anyone else.

In practice, this creates all sorts of rather obvious problems, not the least of which is an ongoing state of self-imposed martyrdom/victimhood and its equally pernicious twin, resentment. Life is experienced as a series of traps within traps: *I can never be hard enough on myself and no one else can ever appreciate it enough. If someone does me wrong, it must really be my fault somehow, even when I really know it's not.* And so on.

I operated this way for years and, not surprisingly, it wreaked all sorts of havoc on my life. I'm far more conscious of the pattern now, and far more aware of the way it was conditioned into me, so I'm far less likely to fall into that way of thinking, seeing, and relating to myself and others than before. It takes time, sometimes the better part of a life, to unwind these snakes that coil around our psyches when we are so very young and so very open to everything.

There are still areas of my life in which anger is a persistent companion. Probably the most obvious and problematic of these is that, much like my father was, I am frequently angry as hell at the end of the workday. I've written many times over the years about my unhappiness with the work I do for a living, as well as my ongoing struggle to move myself into a work life that's meaningful and satisfying to me. It's my failure to make such a move that prompted me to ask myself this question a few months back: "What can I learn from doing work that feels like such a waste of my life and my energy that I'm furious at the end of every day?" And that's when it hit me: maybe I've needed to relive a part of my dad's life so I can understand him a bit more.

Like me, my father had an enormous amount of creative, expressive energy, but for him, the mode of expression was manual (building and fixing things) rather than verbal as in my case. He loved being outside, doing projects, making things, taking things apart and putting them back together. He always had a long list of projects in mind and never enough time to do them. Every holiday and vacation was his opportunity to do the work he really wanted and needed to do, the work his interests and energy naturally drove him to do. He was, in his way, an artist, and brilliant one at that: an artist with a hammer, a wrench, a shovel, and a welding torch.

I can only imagine how painful it must have been for him to wake up every morning and put his ideas and his natural motivations aside to go into a dark, noisy, dirty, dangerous factory for eight hours, then come home exhausted with only a few hours left, at best, to do what he really wanted and needed to do. I don't know if he hated me or not, or whether or how much he blamed me for his situation (I think he often did, given that I was the first-born child), but I do think he hated his life, and more than that, hated himself for sacrificing it every day to do someone else's work under someone else's thumb for a paycheck.

There's no way for me to know if I'm actually right about any of this. I may be projecting. Maybe I'm still trying to explain his behavior on my own terms. But it does give me pause, as it did the first time I made the connection, to observe that I am, after all the years and everything I've seen, experienced, and learned, still living out my father's legacy of anger at the end of the workday.

Maybe by making this connection, by making what had been unconscious conscious, I'm taking a step toward changing things for myself. Maybe, as I said, I needed to experience all this frustration for all these years in order to understand my father a little better. Maybe, in my desire as a kid to emulate him, I unconsciously took on his experience as my own, perhaps as a way to feel closer to him, perhaps as a way to share his burden, or perhaps as a task to finish for him. Maybe all of this. Maybe more.

Robert Bly has said, "When a father, absent during the day, returns home at six, his children receive only his temperament, not his teaching." Carl Jung once wrote, "Nothing has a stronger influence psychologically on their environment and especially on their children than the unlived life of the parent." My father, the flesh and blood man, has been out of my life for many years, but he is still with me, in his temperament and in his unlived life, at the end of every workday.

Writing this now, I'm realizing for the first time how much this pattern and experience of feeling angry like Dad at the end of the workday has been a way for me to continue to feel close to him. I'm surprisingly sad at the prospect of letting go of one of the few experiences I feel I've ever shared with him. I feel as if I'm betraying him somehow if I leave him, that young father who now exists only in my own childhood and psyche, to his own frustration and misery. So strange how these silent deals, these unspoken bargains we make as kids with our parents in an effort to be close with them (often without their knowledge), continue to hold so much psychic and emotional power over our lives.

There's deep grief here for me, grief for the frustrated young father in his greasy blue overalls, a man I loved so much and for whom I wanted so much. Grief for the child who tried so hard and waited so long for the father who never really came home from work. Grief for a grown man so desperate to maintain any semblance of a connection with his father that he's been willing to carry the man's misery, anger, and frustration as his own for years and years.

It's hard to know to what extent (if any) having this knowledge, and processing the grief that comes with it, will impact my own working life. This is but one of many factors with a bearing on that situation. It's only one root of the tree, but one of the oldest and the deepest, and I will follow it to see where it leads.

Originally posted at [poetry, dreams, and the body](#) on Oct 23 2012.

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Rick Belden is a respected explorer and chronicler of the psychology and inner lives of men. His book, [Iron Man Family Outing: Poems about Transition into a More Conscious Manhood](#), is widely used in the United States and internationally by therapists, counselors, and men's groups as an aid in the exploration of masculine psychology and men's issues, and as a resource for men who grew up in dysfunctional, abusive, or neglectful family systems. His second book, [Scapegoat's Cross: Poems about Finding and Reclaiming the Lost Man Within](#), is currently awaiting publication. He lives in Austin, Texas.

More information, including excerpts from Rick's books, is available on his [website](#) and [blog](#). You can also find him on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [YouTube](#).