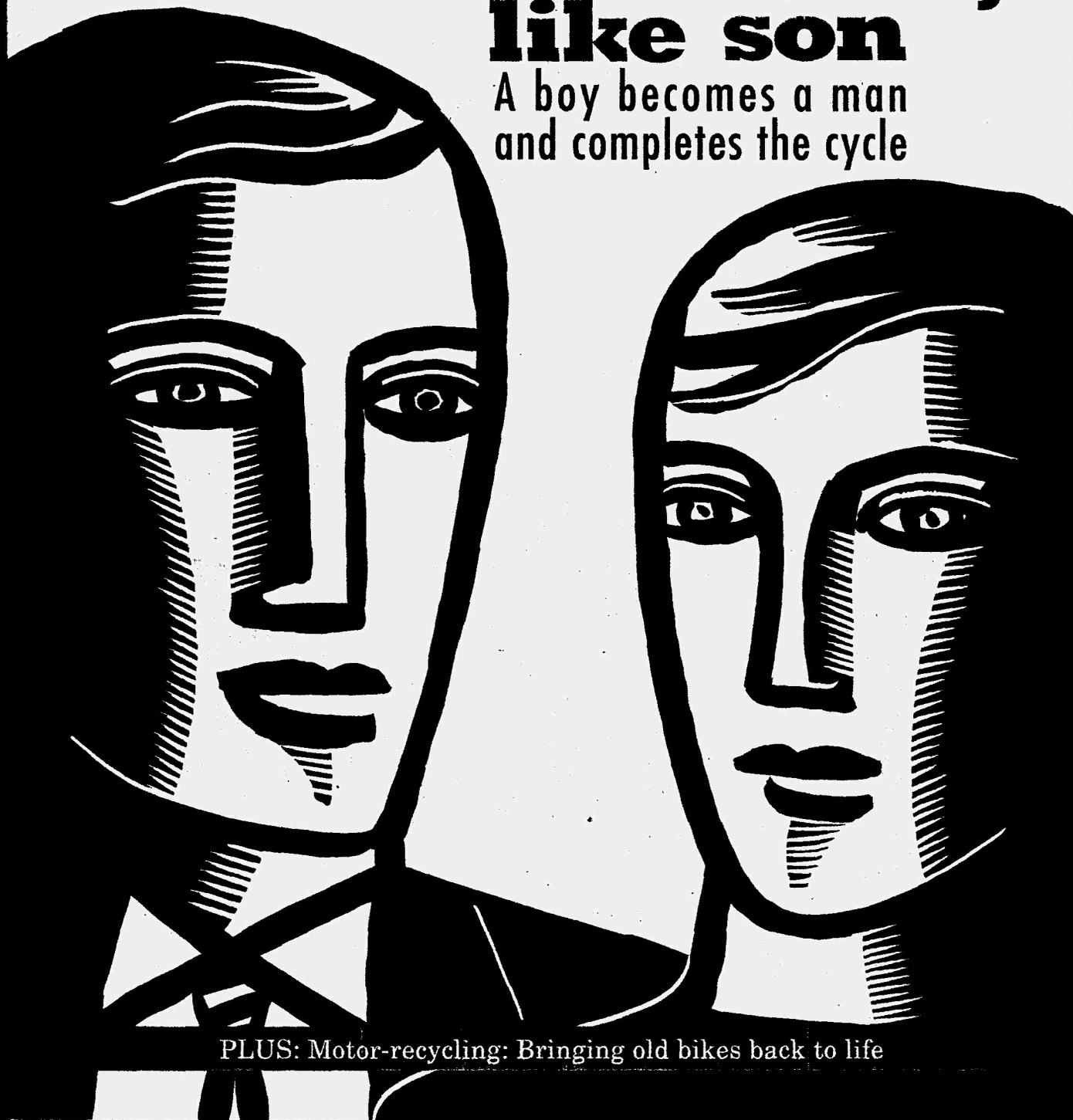


Chicago Tribune Magazine

JUNE 21, 1992 • SECTION 10

Like father, like son

A boy becomes a man
and completes the cycle



PLUS: Motor-recycling: Bringing old bikes back to life

Father figure

Getting to
know
the man
who
wasn't
there

BY RALPH KEYES

LIKE SO MANY FATHERS IN THE 1950s, mine lived on the outskirts of our family. He worked a lot, traveled at times and didn't have much to say when home.

Mom was the garrulous parent. She discussed our day, put Band-Aids on our cuts and lavished praise on our finger painting. During the summer Dad would occasionally dig out a flat old baseball glove and play catch with his three sons. Sometimes he'd drive us all to the beach.

When we were little, my two brothers and I once took turns tickling my father as he dozed on the sofa. Without opening his eyes, Dad made a game of trying to catch us with a swooping hand as we screamed and giggled and dashed out of reach. But that sort of thing is rare in my memory. I just don't remember a whole lot about Dad during my childhood. To me he felt present but not accounted for.

This wasn't what I had in mind for a father. What I had in mind was a guy who took up more space. Someone who could hit home runs. Stare down the bad guys. Handy with a hammer, handy with his fists. At an age when bullies were picking on me, I wanted a model, someone to imitate when it came time to stick up for myself. I'd been hoping for Superman but had to settle for Clark Kent.

One episode stands out in my memory as an exception to Dad's mild-manneredness. When I was 6 or 7, we were at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago, which had a full-sized car simulator. My older brother and I couldn't wait to try it out. But a potbellied guard brushed us aside as "too small" to use the simulator. He then helped a comely blonde get behind the wheel and showed her how to steer. My father went over and talked to the guard. Dad spoke so softly that I had trouble catching his words but

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thought I heard, "There was no need for you to be rude to my children." I was shocked. My dad! Sticking up for his kids!

But that's the only such incident I can remember. Mostly I remember feeling that to be a member of my family was to be easy pickings for little Lex Luthors. With a soft-spoken father and an older brother who regularly got chased home from school by the Doyle brothers, I resolved early on to never, ever, run from a fight. And I didn't. I lost a lot of fights but felt that I'd made the distinction clear between me and my family. This became the theme of my childhood: letting the world know that at least one of my father's sons would put up his dukes.

For a long time, this approach served its purpose. I reveled in the many times a pal complimented me for not being a sissy like the rest of my family. But as I got older and wanted to pick



my fights more selectively, I found that I didn't know how. I still don't know how. It's counsel I wanted from my father and felt like I never got.

Our relationship picked up a bit after I started high school. Dad had an easier time talking with me once we could discuss Adlai Stevenson's presidential prospects in 1960 or the emerging civil rights movement. In time we settled into a genial relationship but not a close one. Our chief topic of conversation was current events. Anything else I looked for from Mom.

I got a glimmer of something different when Dad's mother died during my junior year of college. His relationship with her had been difficult. My father clearly was not eager to wrap up his mother's affairs, so I offered to give him a hand. He accepted my offer without hesitating.

During our few days together in Pittsburgh, Dad reminisced about the troubled years he'd



Scott Keyes and his son Ralph in 1945.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF RALPH KEYES



Well read: Ralph, Charlotte, Steve and Scott in 1959.



Mother Charlotte, holding Nicolette; Gene; Ralph; and father Scott with Steve in 1950.



Ralph (far left) next to his father at a 1978 gathering: A relationship that has grown easier over the years.

spent there sharing his mother's dark apartment. At one point he moved out, into a room at the YMCA, then spent his nights drinking in a bar across the street to numb the guilt his mother heaped on him for "deserting" her.

The time we spent together in Pittsburgh gave me a new sense of my father. It was the closest I'd ever felt to him. That interlude suspended our rules of conduct. Afterward, those rules were restored. Our conversations reverted to Eugene McCarthy's presidential prospects in 1968 and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.

After college I began to feel frustrated by this meager relationship. During the intensity of an "encounter group," I realized that the most vivid image I had of my father was of him reaching

out to shake hands with me as we met, always keeping an arm's length between us. As I cogitated about where we stood with each other, I couldn't come up with much. To me we felt more like cordial boarders in a rooming house than father and son.

About this time I read writer Burt Prelutsky's eulogy for his father in *West* magazine. Prelutsky's tribute was brief, direct and profoundly moving. "I didn't think I would, but I shed tears," he wrote. "I cried because he had worked too hard for too long for too little. For many years I had resented him because he had never told me he loved me; now I wept because I'd never told him."

Reading these words tightened my throat. I was not alone. Prelutsky's eulogy was among the

most clipped-out articles of its time. It was passed from one male hand to another, kept handy on desktops, folded and put in wallets so that it might be pulled out and shared. My own copy went into a newly created file folder labeled "Sons & Fathers."

The second item I put in this folder was Larry King's essay "The Old Man." This Harper's magazine article was also destined to become a classic. "The Old Man was an old-fashioned father," King wrote, "one who relied on corporal punishments, biblical exhortation and a ready temper." King's memoir described a more complicated relationship than did Prelutsky's. But both ended up in the same place: Post-funeral remorse and

(Continued on page 12)

Father

Continued

empathy.

Men treasured these two articles as if they were vintage Mickey Mantle cards. One friend told me of writing a fan letter to King right after reading his memoir on an airplane, even though his tear-blurred vision made this hard to do.

Reading the eulogies by Prelutsky and King made me realize how eloquent men can be when writing about their fathers. Some of the best reading I've done since is portraits of fathers by sons. Perhaps this subject is just too important to sully with poses or pretense. As examples of good writing, if nothing else, I began to gather prose and poetry by sons about their fathers. During the last two decades this has been my hobby.

When I mentioned this hobby to a prominent poet, he wondered why my collection was limited to sons and fathers. Is that relationship so unique? Why not include sons on mothers? Or daughters on fathers? I can't imagine that he himself believed those relationships are equivalent. There is no doubt in my mind—or the minds of most men—that the way we feel about our fathers is singular. Although such feelings are very strong, they are seldom expressed. Athletes never mouth, "Hi, Dad!" to television cameras. No biker has "Pop" tattooed on his arm. Few men ever say "I love you" to their fathers, no matter how much they yearn to. And they do yearn.

"My only regret," Dwight Eisenhower wrote shortly after his father's death, "is that it was always so difficult to let him know the great depth of my affection for him."

THIS IS TRUE OF MOST MEN. Conditioned to play our cards cagily in an imagined poker game with our father, we don't say enough to him while he's alive. Only when it's time for a eulogy do we realize that our tongues were tied not because we had too little to say but too much; not that our feelings were too weak but that they were too strong; not that we loved our fathers too little but that we loved them too much. It is usually not until a father dies that unspoken words finally get said. "I wish I could have my father back, even for just a minute," eulogizers often conclude, "to tell him what I've just told you."

Few men are able to let a living father know how they feel about him. Yet feelings for his father can be a man's strongest. Time makes them more so. For lack of an outlet these feelings grow explosive. When thinking about their fathers, men can feel as though they're sitting on a rumbling volcano. Sensing this intensity had something to do with my drive to gather son-father writing as I once collected baseball cards. Perhaps reading about other men's fathers could make it easier to deal

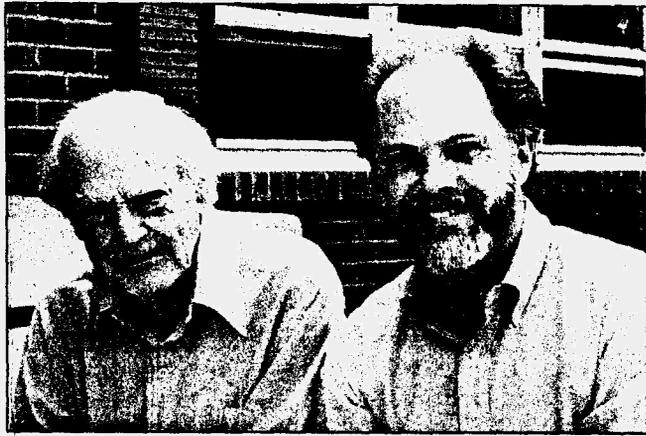


PHOTO BY BOB WALKER

Father and son in 1991: When talk among men turns to fathers, a hush settles over the crowd.

with our own.

The most common theme in such writing is frustration about the distance so many men feel from their fathers. "There was always a stiffness in the air between us," observed writer Adam Hochschild, in a memoir about his father, "as if we were both guests at a party and the host had gone off somewhere without introducing us." Talk between sons and fathers tends to have a strained quality. The crosscurrents can feel treacherous. They communicate through codes and symbols, glances and grunts. Or by putting words on paper that are impossible to say aloud.

"My writing was about you," wrote Franz Kafka in a letter to his father. "In it I only poured out the grief I could not sigh at your breast." This emotional paralysis is not one-way. Sons can have as much trouble talking to fathers as fathers have hearing them. But many men see their fathers as too remote to allow them even to try.

When men gather to discuss common concerns, they return insistently to the emotional abyss so many feel separates them from their male parents. "Father hunger" is what some call this feeling. Much attention is currently being paid to the topic of preoccupied fathers and neglected sons. One man spoke for many when he said of his childhood: "My father would come home, tired; he gave it all at the office. He had nothing left at home."

This was similar to what I'd experienced. When I looked at my relationship with my father, I mostly saw a void. Would this gap stay unbridged forever? I hoped not. In letters I told Dad that I wanted to get to know him better. During my next visit home, he spent the first couple of days following me around the house, recounting one story after another from his childhood. I had no idea why my father was telling me these stories. Finally, I asked him. Dad said that he was trying to let me know him better, as I'd requested.

This clumsy rapprochement between father and son was hard on my mother. By custom she was my

parents' spokesperson. Traditions die hard, and Mom was visibly unnerved by seeing her husband and second son huddled in conversations that didn't include her. She dealt with this by taking charge. "Why don't you two guys go off by yourselves?" Mom would say heartily when I came home to visit. "You know, father and son." We did anyway.

Over the next few years, Dad and I talked a lot. This process was helped immeasurably by his retirement. As a city planner, my father's favorite topics of conversation had been things like regional development compacts and the need for coordinated national planning policies. Such topics interested us kids about as much as the price of rice in Siam. In retrospect, I'm not sure how much they interested him. Because within a year after he retired, Dad had put his planning books in storage and begun writing poetry. This has been his principal occupation for the last 15 years.

Shortly after Dad retired, I enrolled in a Dale Carnegie course to write an article about it. Our concluding assignment was to talk on a topic of general interest. My classmates ranged from a flower shop owner through a Burger King manager to an appliance refinisher with a greasy pompadour. Most were men.

I chose to talk about sons and fathers. In previous speeches I'd sometimes had trouble holding my audience's attention. Not this time. Now my listeners stayed with me from beginning to end. Afterward the appliance painter said haltingly, "You know, that stuff you were saying about your dad. I think that's something any man can understand."

In conversations with men generally, I saw how potent the subject of sons and fathers could be—a blasting cap setting off bombs of memory. Men generally are deft at sticking to safe topics of conversation: baseball, the price of corn, stock options. When talk turns to fathers, however, a hush settles over the crowd. Eyes look off as thoughts turn inward. Even the most glib talkers grow tongue-tied when discussing their fathers. On

more than one occasion I've seen a man start, then stop because his throat grew too tight. Even more than sports and money, the topic of sons and fathers is a male universal.

Among the pieces of writing I've collected by sons about their fathers, the eulogies stand out for their eloquence. In the first flush of loss, a torrent of dammed-up words bursts free. It is hard to read such poignant tributes to dead fathers without feeling something for our own. The essays written by sons of living fathers are a bit more circumspect—understandably. Their authors are in far greater danger.

After profiling his late father in Harper's, Larry King noted that he'd spent years trying unsuccessfully to write about the man when he was still alive. "Goddammit, I'm intimidated," King explained to his editor, Willie Morris. "I guess I just don't understand him well enough." Morris conceded the first point but not the second. He was right. Two hours after his father's funeral, King told his editor, "I can write it now."

Although writing about a dead father is less risky, it can also be more frustrating. Some of the most affecting memoirs are those written by remorseful men whose fathers are no longer around to hear their son's confession. One reason that the movie "Field of Dreams" struck such a powerful chord for many men was its portrayal of a 36-year-old man struggling to reach a dead father whom he now regretted alienating.

A FRIEND OF MINE, WHOSE father died unreconciled with his son, told me that this was the first movie in years to make him cry. I said that hadn't been my reaction. "Is your father alive?" asked my friend. Yes, he is, I responded. "Well, there you go."

To understand ourselves we must first understand our fathers. Accepting ourselves means accepting him. At some point in his life, every man looks in the mirror and sees his father. I did, and it unnerved me—at first, anyway. While growing up, the cornerstone of my identity consisted of not being the man my father was. He was usually late, I was always prompt. Dad never fought, I often did. He was soft-spoken, I raised my voice.

As the years passed, however, my guard dropped. Now I have trouble being on time. People frequently ask me to speak up. Accepting any and all invitations to fight has come to seem more stupid than manly, even though avoiding conflict puts me in danger of feeling like the chicken I'd imagined my father to be.

But Dad no longer seems to be quite the pushover I thought he was. He didn't change; my attitude did.

Dad and I were at Mom's bedside when she died two years after their 40th anniversary.

As much as I miss my mother, the best years of my relationship with my father have been the ones since

she died. Partly this is because we now could talk directly, with no intermediary. Partly it's because without Mom's effervescent personality as a buffer, Dad became more outgoing.

As he grew older, it became easier for us to talk. It turns out that my father has a lot to say. Or perhaps I'm just listening better. Dad tells me how his own absentee father was kicked out of the house by his mother when he was 4. He and his sister saw their father only sporadically after that, usually in hotel lobbies. Though he grew close to his father in later years, Dad says he could never quite shake his mother's "programming" of him to hate her ex-husband. She was a difficult woman. My father has told me often about the night he was awakened by his mother, who was pretending to be a policeman come to take her 4-year-old to jail for throwing a cow pie at a friend. A few years later she bade her son farewell as he left for Boy Scout camp with a tongue-lashing that left him weeping on a friend's shoulder during much of the train ride.

Since his mother never worked outside their home, my father grew up in virtual poverty. His grandfather refused to lend him money for college on the grounds that young men should make their own way in life. Dad did. He got through college by waiting on tables, stoking furnaces, framing pictures and selling books. In his early 20s my father

hitchhiked around Pennsylvania and West Virginia, checking into hotels knowing he could only pay his bill if he sold some books. While he earned his Ph.D. during the Depression, Dad and Mom lived on what was left from the \$90 a month he was paid as a graduate assistant after they'd sent much of this money to their mothers.

As I learned more about him, I began to see my father differently. I noticed the devotion of his friends, men and women of all ages. "Your dad is one of my favorites," the man who handled his medical claims once told me. "Did you know that he wrote a poem for me?"

His friends see something in my father I have sometimes overlooked: not just a gentle good nature but integrity to the bone. In time, my own perspective has changed. The mildness I'd mistaken for passivity has come to look more like quiet self-possession. My father is a basically uncomplicated person. There is no difference that I can detect between his inner and outer self.

He has difficulty sustaining a conversation with his grandchildren just as he had trouble talking with his children. Kid talk is not my father's strong suit. This is part of his integrity. He talks the same way to everyone. Dad does nothing for effect, partly because this would violate his sense of honor, partly because he just doesn't know how. He lacks guile.

I wish that were more true of me.

I have different faces for different situations and have cut ethical corners. Someone once asked me what type of man my father was. Without thinking, I responded: "He's high quality. I wish I had half his quality."

OUR RELATIONSHIP HAS grown easier over the years. By now it feels like friendship. Dad calls me to discuss his poetry, what kind of car to buy and whether or not he should marry. When together, we sometimes just sit quietly. There are few people in the world with whom I'm that comfortable.

Although Dad was always taller than me, he has shrunk in recent years and we now share clothes. The first time he passed along some undershirts to me, it felt good to wear them—both the idea and the fit. We are still not too good at hugs and kisses and "I love you's," but we do the best that we can do.

The key to our current relationship lies in my father's genes. The fact that he has lived to be 82 has allowed us to navigate perilous seas and end up—him old, me middle-aged—as close companions on a safe shore. For the past few years Dad has had bladder cancer. Rather than let this disease take its course or limit himself to a single treatment approach, he has sought various opinions, tried different therapies.

At one point, Dad contacted a friend at the National Institute of Health and became a candidate for experimental treatment there. Although he wasn't accepted, I admired the spirit of his attempt. It seemed that my father was trying both to increase his odds of survival and to make his illness have meaning for others.

It turns out that my father is the model I always wanted. When talking to my own two sons, I often hear his voice emerge. "If something's worth doing, it's worth doing right," Dad tells them through me. Or, "Come on, push like you meant it," when putting on their shoes. Following his lead, I don't deny myself the last piece of candy for my children's sake, with bills for self-sacrifice coming due later. And I hear echoes of my younger self when my 12-year-old moans that his father sure can be boring.

Reading what sons have to say about fathers has made me wonder what my own might write about me. That sort of question is hard to avoid when reading sons on fathers. Hopefully, sharing other men's experiences with their fathers will make it less difficult to deal with our own. Reconciliation may not always be possible. Understanding is. ■

From the book "Sons On Fathers: A Book of Men's Writings," edited by Ralph Keyes, recently published by HarperCollins. Copyright ©1992 by Ralph Keyes. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.