

MY FATHER did not play a big role in our family life. He worked hard, traveled at times and didn't say much when home. Occasionally, Dad would pull out a flat old baseball glove and play catch with his four kids. Sometimes he'd take us to the drive-in.

Once, my two brothers and I took turns tickling him as he dozed on the sofa. Without opening his eyes, Dad tried to catch us with a swooping hand as we screamed and laughed and dashed out of reach.

But that sort of memory is rare. Mostly, I don't remember a whole lot about my father. I wish it were otherwise.

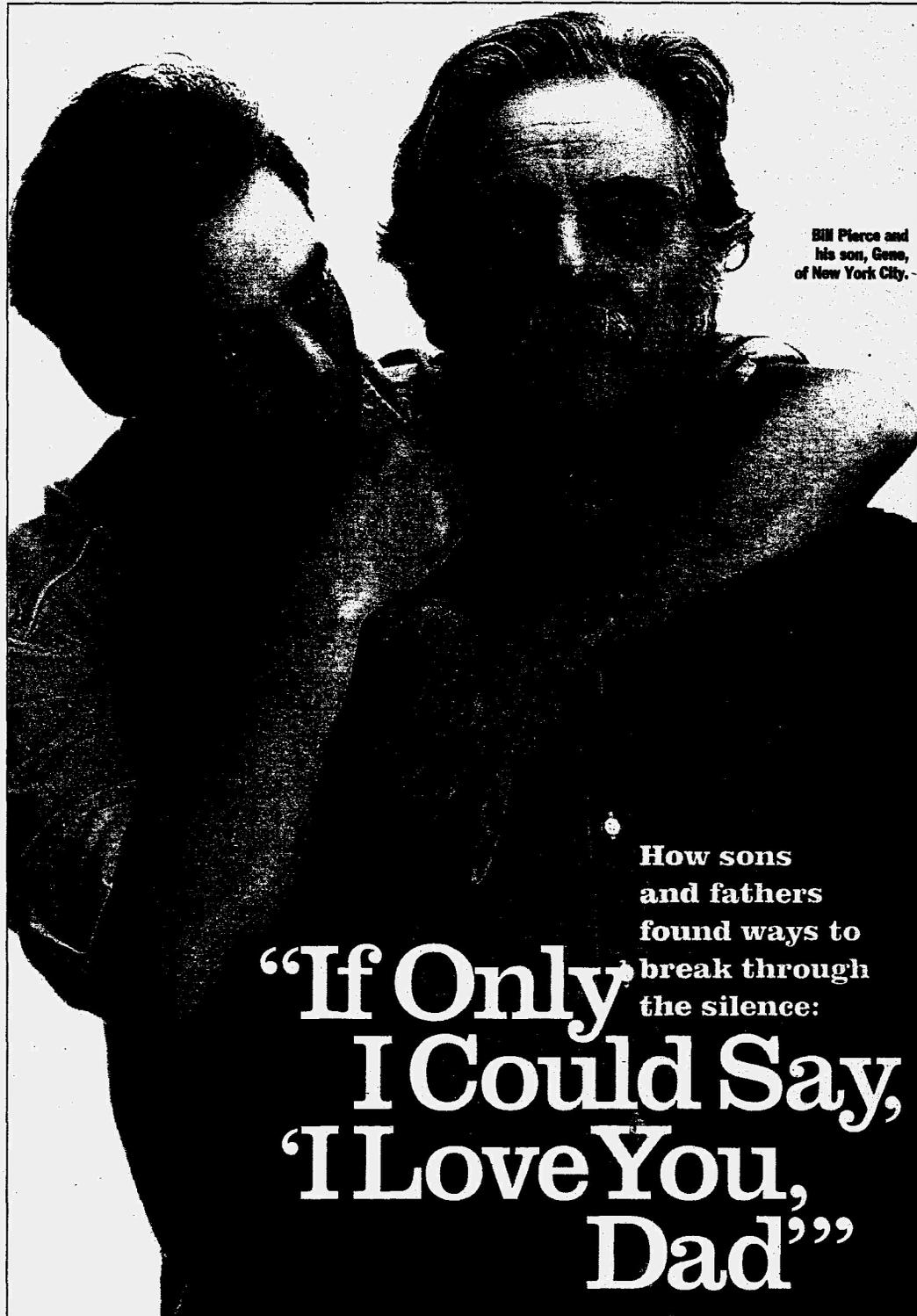
So do many men. Over the last two decades, I've interviewed dozens of men about their dads and collected hundreds of pieces of writing by sons about fathers. I've discovered that many other men have felt the same difficulty communicating with their fathers. "There was always a stiffness in the air between us," recalls Adam Hochschild, a writer from San Francisco, "as if we were both guests at a party, and the host had gone off without introducing us."

Feelings for his father can be a man's strongest. Yet these feelings are seldom expressed openly. Athletes never mouth "Hi, Dad!" to TV cameras. Few men tell me that they ever say, "I love you," to their fathers, no matter how much they yearn to.

"There is a deep hunger on the part of men to feel that they're valued and appreciated and beloved by their fathers," explains the psychologist Samuel Osherson, the author of *Finding Our Fathers*. "They long to hear that they're loved. Instead, many come away confused from the relationship with their fathers. Their fathers work very hard, they sacrifice, but they're not present."

Yet many men have found that it doesn't have to be that way. As they grow older, sons and fathers alike often realize their need to straighten things out. These are the years in which real closeness becomes possible. "We are so quick to think about alienation and hostility between fathers and sons," says Osherson, "that we can overlook their poignant search for connection." The ways in which they connect are as different as each son and each father. Yet certain things are common to all.

"Talk to me straight." Even when fathers and sons do communicate, it tends to be indirectly, increasing the possibility of misunderstanding. Osherson, who also leads workshops around the country on the son-father relationship, recalls one man named Carl who



Bill Pierce and his son, Gene, of New York City.

How sons and fathers found ways to break through the silence:

"If Only I Could Say, 'I Love You, Dad'"

B Y R A L P H K E Y E S

brought his father with him to the workshop. Ten years earlier, Carl was the first in his family to get a divorce. For Thanksgiving, he'd gone home, seeking reassurance. Alone with his father in the TV room, Carl tried to talk about getting divorced. His father turned on the Raiders-Broncos game. Carl shut up. They watched football together.

At the workshop a decade later, Carl asked his father why he'd turned on the TV instead of talking to him. "I knew you were hurting," he responded. "But I didn't know what to say. So I put on the game, because that was something we'd always done together."

George Sargent, a family therapist in San Diego, says such crossed signals are common. He sympathizes. "My own father was gone a lot," he says, "working for the Pennsylvania Railroad. Our best times together were down in the basement, fixing things or making things. Dad's usual response to something I'd made was, 'Pretty good—but you could do better.'"

After Sargent moved to San Diego in 1969, his parents paid him a visit. He showed off a fence he'd built. "That's great," he recalls his father saying. "But, you know, if you want to do that better next time..." As his father held forth about trees and working with wood, Sargent exploded: "I don't want to hear about trees! I want to hear that you're interested in me. That you're proud of me. That you love me." His father looked stunned. "I thought you knew I loved

their relationships with their fathers, but the distance can be on both sides. "One of my clients had worked hard to keep his distance from a difficult father," recalls George Sargent. "'Come on, Bob,' I told him. 'You've proved that he can't get to you in a negative way. Now he can't get to you in a positive way either.'"

Some men put off telling their fathers they care about them until it's too late. "My only regret," Dwight Eisenhower wrote shortly after his father died, "is that it was always so difficult to let him know the great depth of my affection for him."

Charles O'Connell

Far right: Dick Goldberg at 7, with his father, Milton, and sister, Norma, 13, in Winston-Salem, N.C., in 1954 and (right) with father today. Below: George Sargent III with his father, George Sargent Jr., in San Diego.



you," he finally said. "You know how proud I am of you." "But I need to hear it once in a while, Dad," responded Sargent.

Although he confronted his dad about his emotional reticence a long time ago, it was only recently that Sargent opened up to his father himself. "It's interesting," he muses, "me being a family therapist, that I put it off for so long."

Who's creating the distance? Many men use the word "distant" to describe

the ball into a cornfield beyond the ballpark. Afterward, they shared an Orange Crush and a Moon Pie.

Although Cunningham says he loved his father very much, he put off telling him so. In 1985, his father developed terminal cancer. He didn't want to die in a hospital. As an alternative, Cunningham remodeled an office in his clinic. There, his dad spent his final days chatting with patients, watching ballgames

and being tended to by his son and daughter-in-law. "You know that we love you very much," Cunningham told him one night. "It shows," murmured his father before drifting off to sleep. He died the next morning. "I still miss him," says Cunningham, "but I don't feel like we had any unfinished business."

Working up the nerve. Why don't more men reach out this way? I've asked many of them. Procrastination is one reason they give. ("I'll get around to it one of these days.") Inhibition is another.

When Dick Goldberg, a Philadelphia

screenwriter and playwright, got married in 1970, his father took him for a walk. He tried to tell Dick how much he meant to him. "I changed the subject," recalls Goldberg, 45. "I wasn't ready to hear that. I couldn't handle it."

Two decades later, he worked up the nerve to tell his 79-year-old father how much he admired and cared about him. "My father was moved," says Goldberg, who since then has repeated himself often. "Once you've done it, it becomes easier. You get over the threshold of anxiety about what the response will be. You know

what it will be: reinforcement and joy." Many men are concerned about how their fathers will react to such an approach. As Goldberg discovered, however, that concern usually turns out to be groundless.

George Sargent discovered the same thing. For years, the family therapist postponed having the type of open, two-way discussion with his father that he recommended to clients. On the eve of his 50th birthday, Sargent gathered his courage and took the plunge. He told his father how much he'd missed him as a child, how much he loved him and

needed his love in return. The result? "Our relationship has entered a new phase," Sargent reports. "When he comes to San Diego now, he'll gather us all in his arms—me, my wife, Berendien, our kids—and tell us how much he loves us. I just got a letter from him saying, 'I'm so proud of you and Berendien and the life you've created.' He has consistently said that. I'm so glad I set that up, because it wouldn't have happened otherwise."

Overcoming resentment. Reaching out takes initiative, pluck and understanding. "The main thing," says Bob Walker, 37, of his own reconcil-

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Where To Begin

Here are some suggestions for sons who want to reach out to their fathers:

- **Keep in mind that your father is a son too.**
- **Take the initiative.** Sons are in a better position to do this than fathers. If sons don't begin talking to their dads, that conversation may never take place.
- **Don't begin a conversation with grievances, no matter how justified.** Ease into a discussion of your feelings about your father with a more general conversation about his childhood and yours.
- **Listen to what your father has to say.** Don't butt in, argue or mentally compose a response as he's talking. Look for dimensions of your father that you didn't know existed.
- **Search for common ground.** Are you experiencing some of the same things he went through? Do you have fond memories of time you spent together? Say so.
- **Remember, it's as important for your father to hear that you care about him as it is for you to hear this from your dad.**
- **Tell him. Soon.** Next year may be too late—or next week, or even tomorrow. The best day to tell your father that you love him may be today.

I LOVE YOU, DAD/*continued*

iation with his father, "is that I was able to respect him and love him and sympathize with his plight."

During most of his childhood in Dayton, Ohio, Walker had to deal with the real physical absence of his father, who was in prison for a drug conviction. His beautician mother did a heroic job of raising him alone. Walker felt his father's absence most when he saw other fathers watching their sons play ball or taking them on trips. "I wished he had worked at the Post Office or for Frigidaire like my friends' dads," recalls Walker, who went on to manage the cable-TV station at Ohio's Wright State University.

After his father got out of prison in 1973, Walker made a point of visiting him regularly. His dad had a lot of anger to vent. Walker listened. "I wanted to help him heal," he explains, "to give him love and understanding. My feeling was, 'That's my father. No matter what he did, that's my dad.'"

There were still disappointments. When his son was born in 1988, an elated Walker was set to take his father to see the new grandson. But a fear of heights he'd developed in prison made it impossible for the elder man to leave the hospital's parking garage. "Another big time of my life he won't be part of," Bob Walker said to himself. Rather than take it out on his father, however, he came to respect the toughness that had allowed his dad to survive a long stay in prison. "I don't think I'd last a week, let alone 18 years like he did," says Walker. "The admiration I have for him is that for a survivor."

Walker told his father this. He also told him that he loved him. When his father died in 1990, Walker was not filled with regrets. "I felt I was able to give him love and respect," he says, "and that I had overcome any resentment."

How to talk to your father. Many men I interviewed told me they'd like to talk with their fathers more openly. How is this best accomplished? It is important to approach one's father in a nonthreatening way, emphasizes Marvin Allen, director of the Texas Men's Institute in San Antonio. He suggests that a son ask, "What was your childhood like, Dad?" "What was *your* father like?" Invariably, says Allen, the father he describes will

Many men want to reach out but are afraid of what their father's reaction will be. That fear usually is groundless.

"Talking to your father won't make up for all the hurt," says a counselor. "But it's a healing point. Things can change a bit."

resemble himself. This gives the son an opportunity to say, "Dad, I know how you felt, because I had a father like that."

Allen recalls the man he counseled who rehearsed these lines many times before approaching his father—a formidable man nearing 80. The son was apprehensive about his father's reaction. When he got around to saying, "I had a dad like that," his father burst into tears. For the first time, they were able to talk.

Fathers aren't always that responsive, Allen stresses. And even when they are, difficult years can't be erased overnight. "It doesn't make up for all the hurt," he says, "but it's a healing point. Things can change a bit."

Sam Osherson also emphasizes how important it is for sons to *listen* when they get together with their fathers. "Men find it hard to put things into words," he explains. "In my workshops, I have people write down moments with their fathers that they really treasure, then we read them aloud anonymously." Such moments might include the perfect spiral their father taught them to throw with a football, the fish they caught and cooked together, museums they visited. "Men will hear these memories," says Osherson, "and realize, 'Gee, there was a lot of stuff that was unspoken going on.'"

That's about what happened with my own father and me. As we got older, it became easier for us to talk. It turned out he had a lot to say. Or perhaps I was just listening better. "I have exactly the same feeling about our relationship growing easier over the years," Dad once told me. In time, that relationship began to feel like friendship. My father would call to discuss what kind of car to buy and whether he should go to Texas for the winter. When together, we sometimes just sat quietly. There are few people in the world with whom I'm that comfortable.

My father died last October. He was 82. I miss him and wish he were still here. But I'm aware that during our 47 years together, we said pretty much everything we had to say to each other. That makes me feel like a lucky son. When it comes to my father, there's nothing else I would have hoped for. ■

Ralph Keyes wrote the introduction to and edited "Sons on Fathers: A Book of Men's Writing" (HarperCollins, 1992).