

"Old man take a look at my life - I'm a lot like you."

The title of this article comes from a song by Neil Young. "Old Man" is not meant as an insult; rather, it is a song of common ground. I've known this song for at least ten years now and have sung it for as many years. I am, at twenty-seven years old, the young man singing to the old. I am the son saying to the father, "I'm not so different than you, you know." "Look into my eyes, you can tell it's true." And it is true. Fathers, your children are more of you than you sometimes care to know.

My father is the man who writes this column. My mother is the woman who shares in this mission -- this fatherhood mission. I am the younger son who stayed home while his older brother raised hell. One of the more memorable phrases of my youth was my father saying to me, "For all we know your brother could be lying dead in a gutter somewhere." Though there was a certain amount of truth to this, such words from a father don't exactly inspire hope in a kid.

Most of my childhood was a lesson in duality. There was the outer image, the shell that was our family: the church-going, community-involved, hard-working, American family stuff. Then there was the private reality, the inner sanctum of conflict. There's always dirty laundry that no one wants to air in public. And naturally so. But what about when you need help? To whom do you turn when nothing is going right? Here is where the public Clark family and the private Clark family clashed. The private issues of brokenness, rebellion, disrespect (and the list goes on), needed to be dealt with. But when my family turned to the Church, there was no one there who understood. Sure, there were prayers passed around, like "Thank you, Jesus, that's not my family," and "We just pray that Brady stops wearing baggy clothes and listening to evil music." Totally missing the point. When our family hit bottom, Sunday school Christian morality didn't cut it anymore. This was evident to every one of us, Dave, Kim, Brady, and Casey. Though it would take time and pain to learn, the outer image meant nothing. The real tragedy was that a father and son hated each other exactly for who they were. And they were remarkably alike.

I can't say I ever hated my father. Perhaps it is because we are different enough. My brother and my dad are similar, and this is exactly why they butted heads. My brother was rebellious because my father taught him and drove him to be so. Operating simultaneously in fear and hope, my dad was trying to involve himself and shape my brother in such a way that Brady succeeded where he did not. When Brady did not live up to expectations on the soccer field or in the classroom, my dad's disappointment was audible and tangible. Most of the time I caught his spit, wind, and fury in the backseat beside my brother. I was not often the object of his fire, and so I did not hate my father. But I feared him.

Though I have no children of my own, I understand now more than ever the reasons why fathers and mothers put so much pressure on children. Most of the time, it is for a child's benefit. The world is not fair. You don't always get what you want. Share. Say, "Thank you." Make good grades. Success in this world takes hard work, and as the shepherd of his family the father naturally nurtures and prepares his children for the realities that life

holds.

But expectations are always beholden to disappointment. When a child doesn't do well in school or forgets to take out the trash, a parent rightly expresses disapproval. But when a child feels he/she can never live up to a parent's expectations, then maybe there is a disconnect. A parent may feel justified in putting on pressure, but a child may end up feeling conditionally loved. You may tell them differently, but in my experience, a kid is watching and learning even when you're not trying to teach. This was the case with my family. Somehow along the way, the disconnect between my father and brother had grown to a gulf. How was the gulf healed? Not by a church, but by the Father himself. My dad had to be practically hit over the head a couple of times to wake up, but the restoration of our family happened to begin when a father was himself healed. Only then could the son come home, because he no longer recognized the hate that had been in his own eye.

I now feel that there is nothing that would separate me from the love of my parents. This, I think is a commendable example of God's love, The Love.

I think it could have easily gone the other way. I mean, the disconnect could still be there, like it is for a lot of families. But the message of hope is this: Our family was hopeless, and here I am writing about how it worked out, despite our low points. Not that there won't be new low points as the next Clark generation emerges, but by the pure grace of God it will be built on a strong foundation.

Note from Dave Clark, Column author and Father to Casey.

Casey,

I want to thank you for being such a great son and man whom I respect and love. Thank you for speaking out the pain and victory you experienced in our family. I am really proud of you and I am sorry for the years you were a part of such torment in our home; every little boy deserves better – my fault, my mistake and I am glad there is Grace for guys like me.

Love, Dad

Casey Clark, Son and member of The Fathers Cry Ministry