

The Fatherless Epidemic

✖ If you have a dad who loves you well, celebrate him with joy this Father's Day. But keep in mind that outside of Norman Rockwell's America, Father's Day can be a source of great pain.

Many children today don't live with their biological father. According to , the figure approaches 40 percent nationally and is almost double that in the inner city. Add to that those who simply have a strained relationship with their father over some disappointed expectation, and the pain multiplies greatly. I know many people who find these Hallmark days painful for the love they lacked because a father was absent, or even abusive.

The fallout from absent fathers has been well-documented. Eight-five percent of children with behavioral disorders come from fatherless homes, as do 90 percent of homeless children, 71 percent of dropouts and 63 percent of suicides. It seems we were made for the love of a father, and the pain of not having one has dire consequences.

That was driven home to me one day when I had jury duty. A 23-year-old woman I'd never met walked down a row of empty chairs to sit in the one right next to me in the assembly room. I greeted her briefly, curious why she'd chosen to sit next to me.

Moments later, she grabbed me around the arm and her eyes filled with tears. "I think my dad hates me," she said through her sniffles, choking back the sob that hung in her throat. Then she detailed the fight they'd had the night before. Her dad was upset about the provocative way she often dressed, and she was certain he had no respect for her choices.

I walked her back through the conversation, a surrogate dad who suggested that her father's fears were less about judging her than they were trying to protect her from men with less than honorable intentions.

"So you think my dad doesn't hate me?" she asked at the end.

"I have no idea. He's your dad, but I would be surprised if he didn't love you very much."

She smiled and assured me she'd go by his house that evening and talk with her dad. Dads are too precious to throw away over a misunderstanding. Suddenly her name was called for jury duty and she stood to leave. On a whim I grabbed her hand. "Nicole, can I ask how things are with your heavenly dad?"

Her twisted face told me my question had confused her. A moment passed. "Do you mean God?"

I nodded. "I grew up in church," she said. "I hate him."

Not all are so honest who have been so disillusioned. Unfortunately, religion often teaches us about a God who is an angry judge, rather than the loving Father Jesus told us he was. In one of his most beloved stories, The Parable of the Prodigal, he told about a son lost in his own selfishness and the affection of a father that waited for him to come home. This Father was truly like no other any of us have ever known, regardless of how abusive or how great our earthly fathers might have been.

I smiled as I looked back at Nicole, and whispered to her as if sharing the most incredible of secrets: "As wrong as you might be about your earthly dad, I can tell you you're dead wrong about your heavenly one."

Her eyes lit up. "What do you mean?"

"Nicole, you have a father who loves you more than anyone on this planet ever has or ever will."

The hope that we all have a father who knows us completely but loves us extravagantly is all but lost in our day. It might be time to uncover it again.

Wayne Jacobsen is the author of He Loves Me: Learning to Live in the Father's Affection.