

Your Daughter Aches for This One Simple Thing From You

There wasn't a dry eye in the room.

As they sat side by side on the platform in front of a packed auditorium, their raw emotion was palpable, expressed visibly as each of them told their story through tears. We all sat there mesmerized, with an awareness that we were being invited into one of the most honest interactions we'd ever witnessed between a dad and his adult daughter. She went first.

Affirmation. My dad never gave it and still never does. I think that is why I'm never sure I matter. He is available in a variety of ways—there if I want to talk, for example, but not affirming. I can't even explain the hole I've felt in my heart at his lack of affirmation. For many years, I didn't even realize that hole was there. And once I did, I first ignored it and told myself I didn't care. But eventually it hurt too much to ignore.

It was my dear friend Constance on the stage that day, her voice cracking as she spoke those words in front of a live audience. In that moment, she wasn't thinking about the fact that she was the CEO of a long-running nonprofit organization, an accomplished musician, a vibrant national speaker, an author of two books or a wife and a mother to three amazing children, notwithstanding the fact that she had coordinated the conference we were all attending.

Right then it was as if she was a 10-year old girl again, acutely in touch with the longings of her heart. She wished for her daddy to notice her, to tell her she was beautiful in his eyes, and to let her know he had time for her because she was one of the most important priorities in his life.

With her dad's permission to share these details publicly, she then began reading an email dialogue between her and me that had taken place a couple years earlier with regard to hurts from her father, Dan. Here is some of what I had written to encourage her:

Constance, it saddens me to think of how amazing you and your sister are, and it breaks my heart to hear that your dad elevates ministry ventures over connecting with the two of you. It shows that he doesn't have a cup that is full enough to pour into your life. I imagine that he gives you the best that he has, and it's definitely not enough. When he does ministry, he must not have to give of himself in the same way he has to as a dad. It must tap into a different place inside of him.

Looking directly at her father there on the platform, Constance turned and asked him: "Dad, how did it make you feel to hear those emails read?"

With script in hand, Dan read his carefully prepared response to his daughter's query (she had given him the questions ahead of time so he had ample time to think through his answers):

I was saddened to realize how much you craved my approval and affirmation and I was oblivious to your need. I was so focused on avoiding the loss of my business of 25 years and losing my home as a result of the 'Great Recession,' combined with the concerns of pastoring a new church, that I didn't recognize your need.

Then, in her beautifully authentic way, Constance led her dad to dig deeper and share why he agreed to join her there that day to tell their story:

Because I love you and you asked me to come. You have asked me before to attend your events, and I've always had a reason

not to attend. But because I now realize how important it is to you, I am making you a priority and accepted your invitation. I recognize mistakes I've made in the past and am thankful for the opportunity to make better decisions. You are important to me, and I want to affirm you.

Dan could hardly get through that part without fighting back tears. As you can imagine, his daughter was right there with him, feeling every word of his heartfelt emotion. He continued:

I hope that our strengthened relationship will give hope to those in attendance who may be dealing with similar issues with their parents. I also want to bring this to the attention of parents with adult or soon-to-be-adult children so they'll know that down deep at some level, your children still need your approval, your acceptance, your affirmation and your love. It may not seem like it, but they do.

Then the two of them, as if in a well-choreographed dance, began to tell the backstory of their family history, beginning with Dan marrying Constance's mom when she was 15 and he was 17 to their divorce 14 years later. They added many more heartbreaking details, including Dan eventually remarrying and starting a new family that didn't always include his three older children, part of which led Constance to explode at her dad years earlier in a restaurant because of his dismissive responses towards her, an accumulation of hurt that had built up over the years.

By this time, we, the audience, were all on the edge of our seats, feeling their pain and distress right along with them. I don't think there was a dry eye in the place. Dan kept going:

In my mind, I thought I was affirming my daughter with my occasional compliments, so with regret, I now realize it was

not enough to satisfy her need. I was aware that Constance was not happy with me, and I honestly didn't know why. I didn't realize the depth of her hurt and bitterness. And I will admit that I was raised without much affirmation from my parents and succumbed to the same malady.

But I can now be painfully honest; I needed to learn to respect my adult children and not just give them unwanted criticism. There is a time parents have to begin to deal with their children on a respect basis; like many, I was late in recognizing this. But I have now!

It was so refreshing to hear a dad—and a pastor, no less—honestly admitting his failures as a father to his adult daughter out in the open, in front of strangers. There wasn't defensiveness or mudslinging in an attempt to explain, justify or qualify his actions. Instead, his honesty and tender willingness to understand how he had hurt his daughter was part of the process that allowed her to continue releasing the hurts she had carried for so many years.

Now it was Constance's turn to respond:

Even though I was really angry at my dad, for some reason there was also a part of me that wanted to hope for something more. I think it was God in me. He gave me eyes to see my dad in a new light. Through conversations, I saw more of the pain and rejection he had carried as a little boy and also as a father and husband. I also realized that he was actually genuinely ignorant of my need for his affirmation. The more I looked at him through eyes of compassion for his brokenness, the easier it was to believe things could be better.

But the biggest boost to our relationship was that he wanted to change. He was in a season of having retired from work and was looking at his life in new ways and asking God to change him. And that is what I have seen the most these past few years—my dad is actively choosing to look at the parts of

himself that are not loving and is open to change.”

Can you hear the softness in her voice that was evident now in the telling of her story? And she didn't stop there:

Two years ago, I felt God nudging me to pray a prayer of blessing over my dad. Even though I was still holding on to some of the old feelings of bitterness, I started to cry. Something huge shifted in me in that moment. And I noticed a big shift in our relationship ever since. It was like something was loosed when I chose to pray blessing instead of holding on to old bitterness, and I think it meant something in him to hear me do that too. Since that time, I have noticed that my dad frequently tells me that he loves me, and more importantly (at least for me), that he is proud of me.

This has changed not only our relationship, but my relationship with myself. Somehow, knowing that my dad is proud of me has diminished my need to have others be proud of me too. And the more I know that and can rest in his love for me, the better and better our relationship gets.

What hope their story brings in highlighting that it's never too late for a dad and a daughter to mend their relationship. Here is a woman disclosing that it took her until her late 30's to begin peeling back the layers of her father wounds and voids.

But the other amazing reality is that she has a dad who was willing to meet her in that process by also looking at himself and owning his part of the whole.

The lessons I take from their story are numerous. Among them:

- It's never too late to heal a broken relationship between a dad and his daughter.
- In order to move forward, a dad needs to hear the impact

of his actions (or inaction) on his daughter's heart and life ... without defensiveness.

- It takes tremendous courage for a dad to ask God to change him, but if he does, it will yield positive results with children.
- When a dad opens up about his life (particularly his childhood), it gives his daughter more insight into why he is the way he is.
- A daughter can ask God to help her look at her dad through the eyes of compassion for his own brokenness as she begins to take steps to forgive him.
- When a daughter prays for God to bless her father, it helps to release her bitterness.

I want to close by giving Dan the last word—from one dad to another. I hope that his words will touch your heart as a dad so that like him, you will be willing to look within yourself in order to pursue a more vibrant and positive relationship with your daughter:

Looking back, I can remember the clues she was sending, but at the time, I was clueless. It is never too late, and yes, I am committed to continuously changing to conform to God's will for me as a father. The great thing about God is He wants to restore broken relationships, and if we will cooperate with Him, He will change us if we will pray for those we have hurt or been hurt by. Then God will begin a work of restoration in them because with God, all things are possible.

Well said, Dan. And on behalf of daughters everywhere, I want to give you my most sincere thanks for your humble willingness to honestly admit your shortcomings as a father, coupled with publicly modeling what it looks like for a dad to actively

turn his heart toward his grown-up girl.

Your story gives us all great hope that we ever too old to a dad or an adult daughter. {eo}

Dr. Michelle Watson has a clinical counseling practice in Portland, Oregon, and has served in that role for the past 17 years. She is founder of The Abba Project, a nine-month group forum that is designed to equip dads with daughters ages 13 to 30 to help them focus more intentionally on consistently pursuing their daughters' hearts. She released her first book titled, *Dad, Here's What I Really Need from You: A Guide for Connecting with Your Daughter's Heart*. She invites you to visit for more information and to sign up for her weekly Dad-Daughter Friday blogs where she provides practical tools so that every dad in America can become the action hero he wants to be and his daughter needs him to be. You can also follow or send feedback on Facebook and Twitter.