Bridging the emotional gap between father and son

“Did it ever bother you that I loved your sister more than I did you?” My father gave the question a casual sound, as though he was inquiring about the weather.

Years later the moment remains clear in my mind—my father sitting on the edge of the hotel bed, the usual drink in his hand, looking at me slouched in a chair across the room. He was drunk, as he usually was during one of his unexpected visits to the city where I lived.

He had called asking if I would stop by his hotel. I took a deep breath, and felt the icy caress of the forced calm that I willed into place whenever he invaded my space.

Years of putting up with the dark moods that boiled up around him when he was drinking had resulted in an emotional distance—my defense against his presence. Just don’t let yourself feel anything, I had told myself repeatedly.

The thing I had not learned to do was to say no—as in, “no I can’t visit.” He was my father. I couldn’t say no. I armored myself and drove to his hotel room, accepting the drink he poured me, forcing a smile, taking a sip, and then leaving the rest of it untouched.

I let the weight of his question rest in my mind for a few moments before I answered with a careful shrug, keeping that tight grip on my feelings. “No, not really,” I said, doing a good job of hiding my surprise, because my father had never talked about any feelings except his own. Although I had always sensed his absence of interest in me, he had never approached the issue so directly.

Years later, I can remember his lack of expression, the way he looked at me but beyond me, his mind probably fastened on thoughts I could not imagine. Was he considering a follow-up question or had his mind moved on? Was he trying to force his way into the thicket of emotions that separated father and son?

I was tempted to ask, imitating his casual manner, if he had ever loved me at all. But I could not find my voice and let it go. Our conversation rolled off in directions I no longer recall.

The shock of my father’s unexpected question and my sense of having confirmed the loss of a relationship that never really existed remained rock solid in my mind long after time had washed away other shapes associated with that day. Several years later I would ask an Al-Anon friend, “Is loneliness one of those personality defects our program talks about or is it a condition of the heart that causes other defects to flourish?”
What could I do about it? I was tired of carrying the weight. Could I take this mountain of a memory involving my father and compress it into a manageable molehill, maybe even make it go away?

The answer is yes, as I would eventually discover, but as with so many things the answers did not arrive in gift-wrapped packages. I found them in my regular use of Al-Anon tools. Tools that helped me re-prioritize and put what my Sponsor saw as “accurate labels” on circumstances that had filled me with years of unexplored anger, depression, and resentments as they shaped the person I had become.

“People like us do a lousy job of accurately labeling things,” my Sponsor said.

Ironically, it was my father who provided the moment that enabled me to forgive and eventually understand, but not necessarily forget.

The moment came in the form of a phone call several years after that conversation in the hotel room. I answered the phone and he did not ask whether I had time to talk, or how I was doing. He simply started talking. He stumbled down memory lane, remembering the embarrassment, the anger, and pain he had felt at the age of 11 or 12, more than a half century before, when his mother would send him down the street to the bar where his father was drinking.

“She wanted me to persuade him to come home.” He rambled on, asking rhetorically, “Now how was I supposed to do that?” Didn’t she know how this tore him up and embarrassed him?

I shook my head impatiently and interrupted to say there was something I had to do. Putting the phone down without waiting for his response, I walked across the room and poured a cup of coffee. Then I stopped, standing there staring into the distance, because a mind-churning thought had suddenly blossomed!

The disease that gripped both my father and I in different ways was leap-frogging across generations. We had been living parallel lives, drawing our thinking from a polluted pool of instincts that alcoholism had filled in the lives of parents years before either of us had been born.

My father had spent years mourning his inability to control the basic dynamics of family life. Even late in life he felt like a victim without options.

What about me? What I had was an Al-Anon program telling me how to find the truth, if I would only listen and pay attention, as I was struggling to do in that moment. I could use it to repair my thinking, learning to respect the reality of circumstances I could not change. My father had done the best he could with what he had. Whatever he was or had been...well, I couldn’t do anything about it.

I stood there, that cup of coffee in my hand, my father waiting for me, feeling as though I had suddenly put my arms around the essence of the First Step and my inability to control attitudes that may have been several generations in the making.

I returned to the phone prepared to apologize for my interruption, but my father was still talking as though he did not realize I had walked away. I sat back to listen, happier than I had ever been to give him some time.
Neither of us could undo much, but my use of the Al-Anon tools helped me realize that perhaps with his effort to ask a single question in that hotel room, he might have been making his best effort to cross the bridge that separated father and son. I was grateful for that possibility.

I had come into the Al-Anon program not to help myself, but to do a favor for my wife who had decided to do something about her drinking problem. What I discovered was that Al-Anon had more for me than I could ever have imagined.

By Phil H., Nevada
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