

NOT JUST ANOTHER FATHER-SON STORY

Adapted and inspired by Sean Hotchkiss's "How to Change Your Story" piece originally printed in April 2020 Men's Health Magazine.

Growing up I was below average. I wasn't a good athlete nor did I have any special talents; I was a C student, at best. I dreaded my parents receiving my report card or worse: parent-teacher conferences. I knew it would disappoint my father and would likely result in another whipping for me. I would start crying almost as soon as he would leave the house and begin the silly childhood prayers that a truck might hit him in route. This fear carried over to all aspects of my life and I often felt I could do nothing right. Eventually, I would become an honor student and varsity athlete, but always carried the idea that it wasn't enough for my dad.

My father was an old-school, strict, perfectionist with high hopes and expectations for his children (my older sister and I). Even something as mundane as Saturday morning chores was a nerve-racking ordeal. The grass had to be cut just so, perfect edges and finely tailored shrubs. The same went for washing the car; wash, wax, buff; same for the chrome and interior -- all without missing a spot or so much as a errant streak. I could tell by his demeanor and singular remark, "You don't take your time. You're not trying," that I had let him down yet again.

I understand now that if my father was hard on us, he was even harder on himself. But, back then, when I knew he would be around, I'd hide to avoid him. I went so far as to take summer school classes; less out of need and more because it meant having a valid excuse to be away from home. This is how I spent my formative years, looking for any excuse to be away from him and the first chance I got, I tried to make it permanent. I graduated high school at 16 and joined the Army on my 17th birthday. My sister similarly was out of the house, married, and a mother all by 20 years old. I think we both found a way to escape the pressures of home as soon as we could, although I'm not certain we were completely aware of what we were doing at the time.

We all have stories in our histories we're holding onto -- tragic plot lines that seem to run through everything we do. "I'll never be a success. I'll never get passed what happened to me." The more we believe them, the more our prophecies seem to self-fulfill.

But let's be clear: my issues were more drama than trauma. I know there are all kinds of horrendous unspeakable things that happen to innocent children and yet they somehow find a way to overcome these seemingly unsummountable woes. And I don't blame anyone for resenting the mildness of my story that my father had seen some fatal flaw in me, but it ran deep in me; I believed I was inherently bad or inferior, that nothing about me was okay. My therapist calls it, toxic shame, that feeling that no matter what we do, we're wrong. And this feeling festers and slowly infects every aspect of your existence and worse; no amount of success or accolades can help you heal.

Trust me, I tried. I went out into the world trying to be perfect. If I impressed everyone I came into contact with, maybe I'd feel okay. I learned how to become charming and likable -- always quick with a joke and easy with a compliment. The powerful, important, rich, and influential came into my cross-hairs. They represented my dad for me, and winning these types of people over became an obsession. In college, I joined the rich-kid fraternity; I dated wealthy girls and tried to integrate into their milieu of North Shore mansions and celebrity friends. Years later, in NYC, LA, and South Beach, I set my sights on the world of celebrity events and publicity as an international events director and PR executive. I thought rising to the highest ranks would prove to everyone -- myself most of all -- that I was worthy of being alive. It didn't work.

No matter how many times my face or name appeared in print, no matter how beautiful the women I dated, how expensive the car, or how impressive my Facebook feed, I felt unfulfilled. I even tried drugs as a remedy for feeling inferior, but there's not enough coke in the world to fix an old story that says: I'm a piece of shit.

Meanwhile, the anger and confusion I carried about my dad came out in strange ways. For instance,

any women in my life who wasn't family or an old friend -- girlfriends, exes, bosses, co-workers -- I took a special interest in treating badly. I disrespected, disgraced, and dishonored them. I was trying to lift myself up by putting down those I deemed weak (easy prey). I was also doing a good job of living up to the piece-of-shit moniker I carried.

My father and I had a fight that went DEFCON 1. I said some terrible things. He disowned me. I would still see him at the occasional family gathering, but we never spoke. This went on for 10 years. He would miss out on getting to know his grand-daughter or many of my success stories. Early on he had sent me a 20 pg. letter, but in my anger I refused to read it and shelved it away. Then the proverbial shit hit the fan. He bailed me out, literally and figuratively, more than once. It was after a particularly long stretch in the drunk tank at county jail that I finally read the letter he had written to me almost a decade earlier. In it he wrote about his anger and disappointment, but he also spoke of his love and admiration for me and my sister. I felt a pain and shame well-up in my chest. At this point, my parents were retired living in Mexico. The next week, I was on a flight. Sitting across from him, still unable to make eye contact with tears streaming down my face, I dropped to my knees and begged for his forgiveness. He scooped me up in his arms and whispered: welcome home son, I've missed you.

This began the type of father-son relationship I had always dreamed of. I asked my sister, is it possible that as an adult I actually like dad? We took family vacations together where he was able to get to know his grand-daughter. He shared in my highs and consoled me in my lows. During one of those trips he apologized for being so hard on us and spoke of regret. With each conversation, I realized I had wasted so much time being scared and angry at him that it had clouded my perception of him. I could see him now. He wasn't scary and surely not evil. In fact, every day, I saw more of his pain and joy, more of his humanity.

It's been my experience that behind every trauma we've been through -- sexual, physical, emotional abuse; addiction, divorce, suicide, et cetera -- is a core story we have about ourselves. Common ones in prison include, I'll never be enough; I don't deserve love; I'm better off dead. As long as the stories exist, we find ways to perpetuate them.

There's a funny thing about these stories, though. They tend to crumble under examination. This can be done in many ways including with a professional or 12-step program. It can also be done by going back and facing the very fear that has controlled us.

I painted my dad as the enemy in my mind which kept me angrily trying to prove him wrong, and it nearly buried me. But, thanks to his letter and my willingness to follow through, the story I'd been carrying around for all those years was proven untrue. My father clearly loved me (loves) me and if that's true, maybe I'm not so terrible. Maybe I don't have anything to prove.

Now, my father is my best friend. He has demonstrated his unfailing, unflinching love for me in every conceivable way. I can't imagine I would be here today without his support. After my arrest and eventual incarceration, I became completely unmoored. I did not recognize myself in my own reflection. But, he did and he refused to let this experience define me or worse, kill me. He lifted me up and carried me when necessary. It was the first time I really actually felt his love (mainly because it was the first time he ever said it). It made an indelible impression on me and touched my soul.

I became less angry. I started treating myself better. I took a moral inventory and swore to make amends whenever and wherever possible. The critical voice inside my head that I'd always identified with my father was replaced by a kinder voice coming from inside a secret chamber of my heart: You're okay son. I got you. And it worked. In fact, I got so okay that I started thinking about how I could help others. In prison, of all places, I became the kind of man he would be proud of: I tutored others, volunteered to teach yoga to the special needs inmates, and started a newsletter to help my fellow inmates.

Last Father's Day I wrote him a card sharing my feelings of deep appreciation and love. The next evening I had a vision of the four of us -- mom, dad, sister, and me -- all laying on a pile of blankets and pillows in the living room, eating pizza, and watching a movie (our Sunday tradition). It was the first time in a long time I could remember having such a happy memory from my childhood, and I knew that it meant I was free. I'd finally let go of the old story. Now, all my stories are wonderful and joyous.

I have re-written my story and although I'm still stuck in prison, I am free in every other important way. I'm living a life better than I could have ever imagined. Letting go of the old story of who I thought my dad was has allowed me and him to lean and support each other on this tougher-than-I-ever imagined road of life. And that's the best ending anyone could ask for from their story.

By Leo Cardez (pen name)

Please forgive any grammatical turbulence and feel free to edit at will -- no further approval needed.

