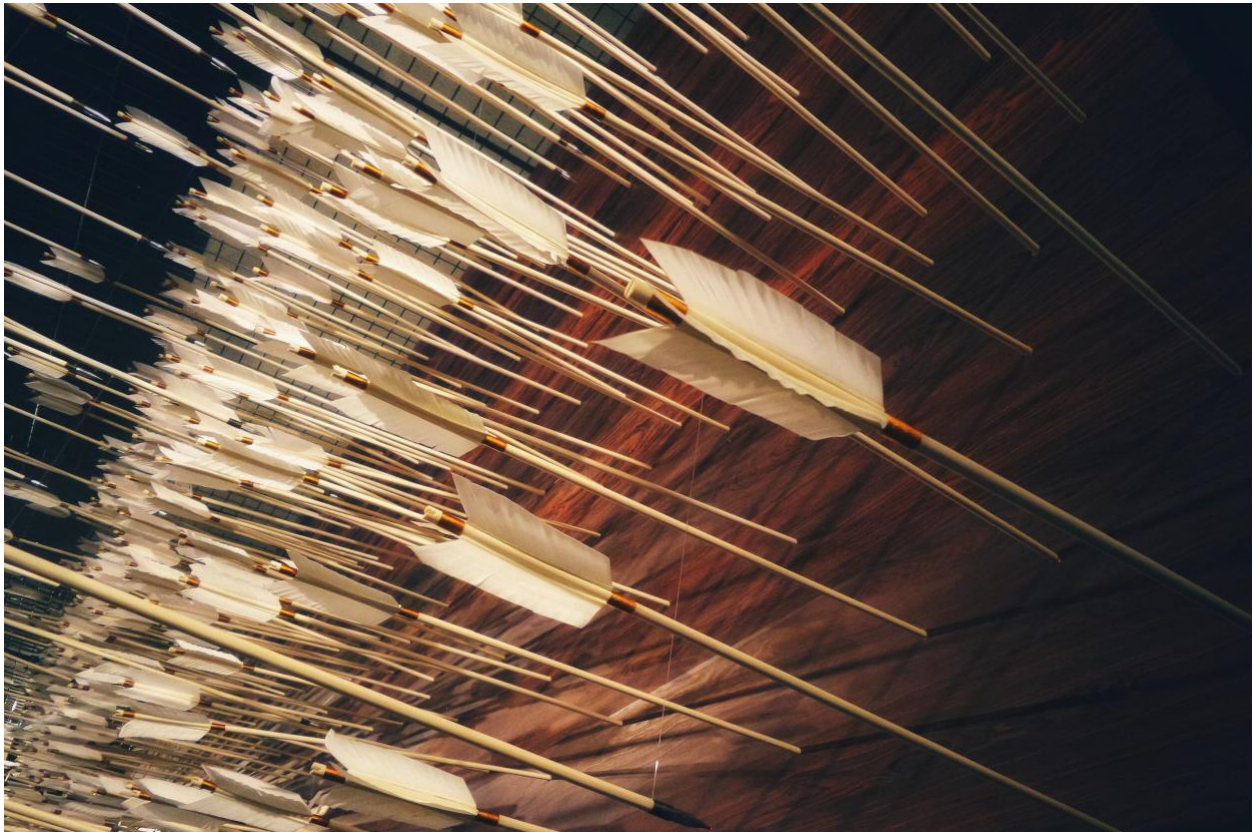




Death of a Thousand Cuts



Taking the risk of living in our bodies.

Occasionally, I have likened the challenges of fatherhood to “The Death of a Thousand Cuts,” the ancient Chinese practice of slow torture, each cut not deep enough to kill you but just deep enough to be painful.

What is the pain of fatherhood? There isn't just one kind of pain, there are many. In general, my own fathering pain tends to emerge out of:

1. The pain of the child letting go.
2. The pain of surrendering your own needs for those of your child.



3. The pain of knowing you've screwed up.
4. The pain of absence.
5. The pain of your own childhood wounds.

1. The pain of your child letting go

One of the biggest challenges a father will face is when he is called upon to manage his disappointments: During my son's first year in college, I tried often to swing by his campus for a dinner or breakfast. However, a "swing by" involved a six-hour drive or a two-hour flight, well worth the effort to spend a little time together, to stay connected as he charted his way into the world.

One Friday afternoon, I realized that I could make the drive. Traffic was thick so our tentative 8:00pm dinner would be delayed. As I was approaching his school, perhaps 45 minutes away, I received a call from him that there was an opportunity for him to attend an Improv show and "would I mind terribly if we cancelled our dinner plans, perhaps we could have an early breakfast." Truth be told, I was overly hungry and very disappointed. Not in him but with an all too familiar feeling of too many years of being a boy and alone. I didn't feel I could tell him this on the phone. I wanted him to figure out his life at college, and I also understood it is a precarious balance, learning to socialize in the early months of his freshman year. I suggested that he go ahead, and we could text in the morning to see if he was willing to be up early.

I turned the car off the highway and headed to find a hotel closer to the airport. Within ten minutes, I received another call asking me to come ahead. He was also hungry for a second dinner, and he didn't want to miss seeing me. We ended up having a wonderful time eating some Chinese food, ending with a frozen yogurt and a walk on the campus.

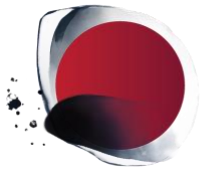


Ok, so I got off lucky this time. Maybe not lucky – maybe after all these years of showing up for him, he was learning to show up for me. But how about those many times that they just don't show up, allow you to show up, or simply demand that you let go in those inevitable moments when they walk away?

“Empty Nest Syndrome” is the only name I've heard for this lengthy brand of suffering – and even this is generally reserved for mothers and delivered with a sneer, as if the person suffering from this ailment was needy, clingy, in some way deficient to have given so much to their child in the first place. Children, for better or worse, are as vital to a parent as an appendage. When they walk away, something in us – something physical, something real – feels as though it has been amputated. Until they return, we will most likely feel it and reach for it as if it were still there.

2. The Pain of Surrender

All parents know about this one: the need to surrender, to place yourself on hold and rise to the occasion. I find that the circumstances that provoke this pain, while seemingly petty, are also relentless: dealing with a crying baby at 2am – again; changing a diaper after you just made a cup of coffee and knowing it will become cold; dropping everything as you respond to his question; waking up early, letting go of a restful sleep, to make sure that everything and everyone gets out of the door on time and successfully; sitting with her as she studies because she needs someone to hold the space; interrupting your dinner plans with your partner because his plans fell through and he needs to not be alone, picking her up 10,000 times without ever getting a thank you; attending the game in spite of other demanding priorities; being on time; listening with a genuine ear; dealing with your frustration and anxiety because of unanswered texts or phone calls, the rolling eyes, the snarky remarks. Small adjustments really, but despite all the benefits, they still hurt. This is the pain of present fathering, and I would not trade a moment of it.



Hold Your Child in Your Interest

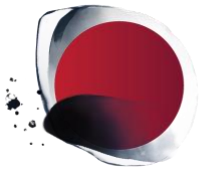
I am sharing lunch with my son, who is about five years old. In between bites, he talks, and talks, about his new ideas for electrical and mechanical devices. One device is for “trapping someone if they come into the backyard.” Another is to “smash a purse.” Another has “a microphone to record voices when someone comes to the back door and it will spill milk on their head when they come to the front door.” On and on he chatters, talking and imagining. I sit silently, eating my lunch and holding him in my interest. His mother walks by and occasionally rolls her eyes. I imagine she is wondering how or why I can sit for so long and listen. I am wondering the same myself. His rapid-fire fantasy exhausts my ability to hold interest. Yet, I remain. —Fathering Journal

3. The pain of knowing you’ve screwed up

There are so many opportunities to reconcile the pain of making mistakes with your children that I really don’t need to describe one to you: from minor infractions of too much or too little attention to major betrayals of abandonment and everything in between. When it becomes evident that you could have done it differently, ask for forgiveness and then do it differently, now.

4. The pain of absence

Now let’s think about how painful it is for a father when he cannot be present, whether by choice or circumstance. When we are absent, there is a life not lived. We don’t know what we are missing when we are not there for our children. They do not know what they are missing because we don’t or can’t show up. What happens is that rather than becoming a part of our child’s experience, we internalize the experience of non-participation and all that it means. When we are absent, it doesn’t mean that we don’t have



relevance in our child's experience. We have a profound impact in our absence. We pay dearly for our absence in sorrow, remorse, guilt, and lack of a child's joy. We are a character in the narrative, yet like a ghost, no one knows we are there.

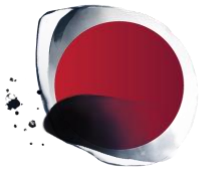
Whether you are present or absent, you will find that each occurrence results in an opportunity to embrace your experience, even if it's painful. The difference between the pain of presence and that of absence is determined by one fundamental characteristic – when you are present, you are the one who manages the pain. The pain of absence is not just yours to manage, and the pain of separation is passed onto them.

I would like all fathers to know that so much of the discomfort of fathering, whether experienced through presence or absence, is due to a momentary, yet profound experience of alienation. You can overcome this. The way to deal with your experience of alienation is simply to connect. Reach out, show up, receive, remember, look for, listen to, follow, lead, hold and be held by someone who loves you without question. You don't even need to know how, just show up and participate in what you get.

5. The pain of your own childhood wounds:

I recall this moment: My two-year-old son is in front of me curled up on a high-backed couch in front of the fireplace, asleep, an empty milk bottle clenched in his sweet, little lips. Today has been a day of tears. He is so energized and yet too small to command his world as fully as he would like. And he is still so dependent on his mother.

As I am mindful of being with my son, as he sleeps, I am also aware of the chains that bind me to the memory of how my father held me, and still holds me, in his absence. His holding is not an embrace but a restraint. I do not have one memory of being asleep with my father in the room. I do not have one memory of trusting his presence. Rather, I remember lying in my bedroom or on a couch as a little boy and hearing his car roar into the driveway. A churning, raking feeling would rip through my stomach. I would hide from



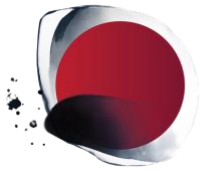
him, not because he was abusive, rather because he was intrusive. He would charge into my present moment so unaware of me, of my mind state, of my day's meaning. How many times was he not aware of me? He would penetrate my reality and then turn from me in an instant, leaving me alone, abandoned.

How much did I suffer in the darkness of his shadow? I fled from him, yet I also waited for him, hoping that he would seek me out. I so much wanted to be discovered.

How is it, I wonder, that this memory arises in a moment of peace and contentment as I watch my sleeping son? How can this be, two streams of competing and contradictory feelings arising concomitantly? In the presence of my little boy, this pain can warp even the sweetest, purest love.

Such memories are painful, and plentiful. Unless I am willing to do the hard work to embrace their content, remember and make space for the hurt, it is all too easy to let them interfere with my relationship with my child. I know this is true for many men. Perhaps you respond as I have: getting defensive, aggressive, even enraged. Please stop and simply take the cut like you would a paper cut. Those little suckers can really hurt but you can still stay present. Just make sure you don't approach getting anywhere near one thousand cuts in any given moment.

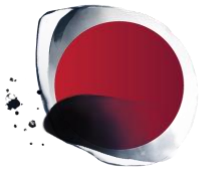
As a new father my intention was to break the chains of abuse, neglect, and suffering. I am not accusing my father or anyone in my family of anything. I am simply giving voice to what happens to a young boy when left alone to find his way in the world. I was fed and clothed and loved, and everyone did the best they could. What was wrong was that I was not seen or guided by a very important person in my life. I know, in looking back, that my father could not afford to show up for me. He had four children, worked all the time, and



lived in a challenging relationship with my mother. This is not to judge them or their parenting. My stories are to awaken you to what a simple adjustment it is for a father to show up for his children. If you are wounded and a father, you carry a father wound that if not managed well and has the potential to be passed onto your relationship with your child. Not because you do anything that is so outrageous, it is just because your wound can keep you from showing up. Yet, if you ignore this child within you by attempting to be something that you are not -a father free of pain while loving his child- then we are surely doomed to failure.

A friend of mine who has two children ages five and seven found himself in a situation where he spanked his seven-year-old boy on the bare bottom. He said it only happened once, one swat, but according to his wife, it left a welt. His five-year-old daughter witnessed this, and it all occurred while Mom was trying to have a business call in a bedroom down the hall. Upon reflection, after we talked, I realized that he did not find himself in this situation; he put himself there and his child paid the price. It turns out that this was the day after returning from a long vacation. The night before, Dad had taken both kids to an event; they missed dinner and stayed up too late. This was an event that interested Dad; the children went in tow. That morning Dad left the kids to their own devices while attending to some emails. The agreement was that he would feed the children breakfast so that Mom could have her call. The children had not been fed, Dad was hungry, something happened, the kids were fussing, and something triggered Dad: “Whack!”

Upon reflection and after the fact, this father spoke to his children, assuring them that his behavior was not due to anything they did, and he reached out for help. However, what remained hidden was just how wounded this man had been by his father. Even



though he tries to address these wounds, he continues to respond in just the same manner as his father. If we pass our pain onto our children, we displace an opportunity to claim our father wound. Not to mention that Dad is much better equipped to handle the pain. When wondering how and when I will deal with this pain, I ask myself: "If not now, then when?"

I remember a time with my son. "Let's play with the ball," he says. Inwardly I groan. I honestly don't want to play with this three-foot ball ever again. It kills me to play with the ball. He has me lie there, draped over its surface like a beached octopus dying on a rock. I do nothing. He climbs on me, laughs, and plays while I wither. Yet, you should have seen his face, he was so happy to be with me.

Thich Nhat Hanh, a Buddhist teacher, tells us that we gain understanding by going to the depths of the darkness, pain, and suffering of one another. To do this, we must be willing to open to the physical experience of our emotions, stopping the struggle against our feelings and taking the risk of living in our bodies. We need to find compassion for ourselves. In the story above, I was not suffering because of play with my son and a ball. I was suffering because of something deeper and darker that I could not see. The more I adapted to the play, the more I suffered. Though it may not feel like it to you at the time, this voluntary suffering is an expression of love. In most every situation between father and child, the father's expression of love is clearly reflected in his child's face. As a friend of mine recently declared, "I didn't need a father who was perfect. I just needed one who admitted his humanity." What if suffering is an innate part of the parental experience?

What if the measure of a father's love in some way relates to his capacity to experience and make room for this level of discomfort while continuing to remain present and related to his child?



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