

Growing up and forgiving my father

by Ginger Gentile

I didn't want to read the letter my father had sent me; I wanted nothing to do with him. But I forced myself to open it, and began to cry as I read the words, "When you were born, you weren't breathing and I gave you infant CPR until you did." Not only was I surprised that my entry into this world was so fragile, I was surprised that my father saved my life. I had thought he hated me so much and that my birth was such a disappointment to him that given the choice, he would have preferred me dead.



Photo credit: Bruce Stanfield

The letter had arrived in the mail after I hung up the phone on him, within seconds of hearing his voice; enraged despite him saying nothing more than, "Hello."

I was 29 years old and while I had seen him sporadically since my mom and he divorced when I was 13, I had tried to avoid him as much as possible. He didn't reach out to me much, either.

"Marrying your mom was the biggest mistake of my life," he had screamed at me when I was a teen.

All I could think of was that I must have been that mistake: they got married because she was pregnant.

It was obvious to me that he didn't like me. He was always mad at how much money I cost him and begged me to not make him pay for my college education. My mother would often point out how my acne, my thick ankles and bad genes came from him. By the time I was 20, I considered changing my last name to remove any traces of him that I could.

My mom supported this thinking. While she encouraged me to see him, she expressed that she couldn't blame me for wanting to avoid someone who didn't love me and had abandoned us. Someone so awful, stupid and violent.

"You sound like a divorced woman, more than like a daughter," Gabriel, my husband at the time, told me.

I had fallen in love with Gabriel because he was so unlike my father: he was prevented from seeing his daughter almost since she was born but never gave up fighting for her. The fight had cost him jobs, all his money and even his liberty. But he said she was worth it all.

My desire to help him get his daughter back grew so strong that I, as a documentary film-maker, began making a film called 'Erasing Dad', about fathers who fight to be in their kids' lives after divorce. I was two years into this

all-consuming endeavor when I was filled with a realization that I had been subconsciously drawn to a topic acute in my own life.

Insidiously, I had been taught to reject my own father after my parents divorced.

Spurred by both the letter and Gabriel's comments, I agreed to meet with my dad. Sitting across from me in a coffee shop, he asked if I wanted to know what happened during the divorce.

"My journey back to my father has been one of choosing to learn from his shortcomings."

"No," I said, trying to hold back the tears. It would be too confronting to reconcile his kind and loving form of today with the debris of the past. Too painful to hear his compassionate voice through the echoes of him defensively yelling through the years gone by, that he had done the best he could; through my ruthless responses, dismissing him altogether because his best was clearly not good enough.

Years later, as I began to make my second documentary on this topic, 'Erasing Family', I was finally ready to hear what happened. As he spoke, I learned that he and my mother had had joint custody until she demanded sole custody while accusing him of domestic violence. His lawyer said that he could fight it, but it would cost him \$100,000 and he would lose. That is when my dad signed his custody away, like so many fathers who give up when they see the cards as stacked against them.

Would things have been different for my dad and I if he had had the resources available to today's parents? Would I have still rejected him if he had responded with love when I yelled, "I hate you, Dad!" (like so many teens do), rather than screaming that he

hated me, too? Would he have responded better if he had sought therapy or read books on parental alienation?

I wish he had acted differently, though I do not blame him for giving up in court. If there is one thing that I have learned, it is that the system does not seek to resolve family conflict; only to prolong it.

When I myself divorced, I vowed never to end up in court fighting over money; never to poison a once-loving bond. Unlike my parents, my ex and I have remained friends; we talk on Skype each day and even run a business together. This is an unexpected gift from my journey back to my father.

This journey has been one of choosing to learn from his shortcomings instead of rejecting him for them. I have sought therapy and I now talk openly about my feelings. Instead of rejecting family, I now embrace mine with their imperfections. He is not a perfect father, but he is my dad.

One hot summer's day, we were getting gelato with my sister and cousin when my father remarked that he had never taught my sister and I anything. I responded that not only had he taught me all the things a parent teaches a child - to walk, talk, eat solid food - but he had also taught me the state capitals, the Pythagorean Theorem, how to draw a blueprint for a house and how to paint with oils.

"The list goes on," I said assuredly.

His eyes lit up with gratitude. And I didn't even mention that he had also taught me the power of forgiveness. 🙏

Ginger Gentile is the director of an upcoming documentary Erasing Family on family bond obstruction.
www.erasingfamily.org