

# THE LONGING FOR A FATHER

## THE EFFECTS OF PATERNAL ABSENCE ON DAUGHTERS

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From the time a child is born, everyone assumes her first word of spoken vocabulary will be some form of “mama” or “dada.” While friends and family smile at this precious endearment, it symbolizes how central parents are in children’s lives. From infancy until adolescence (and possibly beyond), family serves as the “basic social institution” for children (Carvalho 1). Specific parent-child relationships further impact children in unique ways. One relationship often overlooked is a daughter’s bond with her father, which is shown to be the most beneficial connection for daughters in high conflict family situations (Corwyn and Bradley 13). Sadly, many young women cannot benefit from this relationship because their fathers are absent in their lives. Absent fathers (whether emotionally or literally detached) are those who do not regularly interact with their children and consequently are not a part of their development (Peyper et al. 4). In her graphic memoir titled *Fun Home*, Alison Bechdel portrays her experiences growing up with Bruce, her emotionally absent father. While Bechdel navigates through the difficulties in her upbringing, she also attempts to find the good in her father. The book eventually ends with the conclusion that he was in some way there for her all those

years before he died, as he “caught” her when she fell. In her attempt to honor Bruce, Bechdel paints the relationship in an overall positive light, which is not the truth. Bechdel’s own story in concordance with many young women’s testimonies published in the *Journal of Psychology in Africa* reveal the most detrimental issues seen in daughters with absent fathers: engaging in behaviors and activities solely for attention, experiencing declining self-esteem and mental states, feeling prohibited to express their true selves, and having difficulty sharing emotions. In light of these horrible effects, daughters need the ability to deal honestly with their fathers’ impacts on their lives, while still demonstrating appropriate honor and respect.

One important way a daughter reacts to an emotionally absent father is by seeking ways to earn the attention and affection lacking in the relationship. *Journal of Psychology in Africa* published an article in 2015 summarizing a study exploring the “personal experiences of father emotional absence by young adult women” (Peyper et al. 128). The study revealed a common trend, which was that many young women engage in activities that their fathers enjoy (such as sports) in order to receive approval and attention. One young woman participating in the study commented, “I learned watching rugby and cricket because that would appear to be an opportunity for bonding. Those were the things that we could do together, so what I did was to literally determine what my father regarded as important so that I could share his interests with him. It at least resulted in his talking to me from time to time” (Peyper et al. 131). Another participant recalled how she continued playing cricket not because she enjoyed it, but because her father began showing interest in that area of her life (Peyper et al. 131). The general consensus was that participating in these activities was worthwhile in the moment, simply because it

prompted their fathers to give them some of the attention that was lacking before.

In *Fun Home*, Bechdel pays tribute to the daughter's struggle to find a connection point with her father. Alison is unable to start building a more concrete relationship with Bruce until she is old enough to be on a similar intellectual plane as him and gets interested in his passion: literature. As she says, "Dad didn't have much use for small children, but as I got older, he began to sense my potential as an intellectual companion" (Bechdel 198). This harkens to another participant's comment in an interview where she mentioned that engaging in activities her father enjoyed made her feel "almost as if he would allow me to be his friend" (Peyper et al. 131). This is similar to the situation in *Fun Home* when Alison goes through Bruce's English course in high school and then continues studying English in college. She remembers that they actually grew closer while she was in college; her father discussed her readings with her and offered help (Bechdel 200). When Alison came home for Christmas, she says, "I found Dad's delight about *Ulysses* a bit galling. But it was nice to have his attention... In a burst of tenderness, I encouraged him further" (Bechdel 204). This connection is the first time the reader sees a promising relationship, as Bruce even goes so far as to give Alison his own copy of *Ulysses* from college (Bechdel 204).

However nice these special moments are, Bruce spends most of the book ignoring Alison. Alison does make an attempt at relationship when she mentions that the gay group at school is going to picket a movie. This is a potential mutual topic, since she and her father are both gay. Disappointingly, Alison drops the subject when she notices both derision and fear in her father's eyes (Bechdel 219). What should have been an easy connection point fails as such, because Bruce does not show interest in that

area of his daughter's life. Not once is Bruce seen asking Alison about her life or showing interest in her aside from what she's currently reading. Bechdel begins to recognize this issue when she reflects that "He really was there all those years, a flesh-and-blood presence steaming off the wallpaper, digging up the dogwoods, polishing the finials... smelling of sawdust and sweat and designer cologne. But I ached as if he were already gone" (23). For all practical purposes, Bruce's physical presence was not enough to create a meaningful father-daughter connection. This is a real issue that Bechdel and daughters with similar experiences must be willing to face without burying it under the guise of respecting fathers and remembering them well.

Beyond just seeking affection, a father's behavior towards his daughter greatly impacts her overall self-esteem and mental state. *Journal of Psychology in Africa's* article also stresses how a father's emotional involvement benefits a child's "well-being, academic competence, persistence to complete complex tasks, and self-esteem, and has proved to protect adolescents from emotional distress" (Peyper et al. 127). In other words, a daughter who doesn't feel loved and supported may wonder if something is wrong with her, become incredibly self-conscious, worry about everything she does, or simply lack any motivation. When her father is involved in her life, she remains more secure in her identity (Peyper et al. 127). As one participant in the study said, "I think it must have been related to poor self-esteem—always those negative ideas and beliefs about yourself" (Peyper et al. 131). Another young woman relayed, "As soon as somebody acknowledges something I've done I start thinking there must be a mistake somewhere," while one participant admitted, "I never thought much of myself, I always tried to look great in his eyes or in the eyes of other people, but I never thought I was up too much or 'passing the

test' or was worth something..." (Peyper et al. 131). Clearly, a father's support greatly impacts a daughter's view of self-worth. These women did not experience a positive relationship with their fathers, and that took a toll on their self-esteem and confidence.

To further the case, a survey was taken of 310 girls in Turkey aged 14-18 to see if the same effects of fathers are prevalent in non-western cultures. The study identified that the three basic psychological needs of any person (autonomy, relatedness, and competence) are in fact indirectly related to the quality of father-daughter relationships (Sagkal et al.). When children, specifically daughters, do not receive these basic needs, it can lead to psychological ill-being and possibly even psychopathology (Sagkal et al.). Alison's obsessive-compulsive disorder beginning when she is ten years old arguably exemplifies this effect of emotionally distant parents (especially fathers). She describes how she religiously avoided odd numbers and multiples of thirteen, whether that meant counting water drops leaking out of the faucet or the edges of the flooring in a doorway (Bechdel 135). Alison felt that she had to follow specific rituals and daily routines (such as undressing or going to bed) in a special order and recite incantations to protect herself (Bechdel 136-137). Additionally, her insecurity rose when she began drawing "I think" over every statement in her journal. Bechdel says, "To save time I created a shorthand version of I think, a curvy circumflex. Soon I began drawing it right over names and pronouns. It became a sort of amulet, warding off evil from my subjects" (142). She described these journal entries as "a sort of epistemological crisis. How did I know that the things I was writing were absolutely, objectively true?... My simple, declarative sentences began to strike me as hubristic at best, utter lies at worst" (Bechdel 141). By this point, Alison's

self-esteem and mental state are clearly declining. Since *Fun Home* strongly focuses on the father-daughter relationship, noticing how disconnected Bruce is from Alison explains a possible contribution towards the disorder. Whenever Bruce is seen interacting with Alison, he is making her help him with work around the house, punishing her for doing a task incorrectly, or engaging in a game of airplane or baseball only to notice the dirty rug or weedy flower bed and place more importance on those than the game (Bechdel 4, 91). In this way, Alison's story demonstrates how a father's neglect affects his daughter's self-esteem and mental state.

Furthermore, many daughters living with emotionally distant fathers do not feel free to be themselves due to repressed emotions. They learn to maintain a façade in front of other people, because their fathers do not allow them to show emotion (Peyper et al. 131). One participant said, "I think if people were to observe me from the outside they would have thought that I was a totally balanced and happy child. In true fact I was all but. That which I presented to the outside world was not at all the truth, not at all what I was feeling deep inside myself" (Peyper et al. 131). In this way, a daughter's social and emotional behavior is altered so that people don't truly see what is going on "behind the scenes." Bechdel touches on this in *Fun Home* when she remarks that her father "used his skillful artifice not to make things, but to make things appear to be what they were not. He appeared to be an ideal husband and father, for example" (16-17). Bruce, who seemed to others to be a quality role model, was really a man having sex with teenage boys and controlling many aspects of Alison's life. For instance, he decorated her room in a way that she hated and forced her to dress in certain ways (Bechdel 14-15). In these situations, she was not free to express her thoughts, preferences, or opinions.

Alison also appeared to be a normal young girl who enjoyed playing dress-up in Daddy's clothes, but much more was going on in her life (such as the previously mentioned obsessive-compulsive disorder) connected to the strained relationship with her father. The reader feels that their entire relationship is a façade, a perfect model covering up the truth, when a family friend makes the remark that they seem unusually close (Bechdel 225). Bechdel agrees that they had indeed become closer than they used to be, but the entire relationship was still a shadow of what it could have been. Alison never began opening up, being herself, and living the truth until she moved out from under Bruce's influence in her life.

In a broader sense, emotionally disconnected fathers also make it difficult for daughters to freely share emotion, even when they want to be open with their fathers. This begins when the father "neither shows affection nor expresses his love in return" (Peyper et al. 129). Many fathers are found to be uncomfortable when a daughter expresses her emotions, causing them to discourage it altogether (Peyper et al. 129). One young woman who was interviewed shared that "an emotional conversation with my father was very difficult. I couldn't go to him and I still cannot. If, for example, I shared with him that my boyfriend had upset me he was quick to cut the conversation short by telling me to get rid of the boyfriend. That was his solution, just like that. He would tell me to drop discussions on emotions and emotional trivialities..." (Peyper et al. 129). Another participant realized that "my father failed to make me feel at ease. In his presence I was almost always shy for having emotions and of showing emotions. I think the reason for this was that my father didn't allow room or space for emotions... He didn't accommodate or embrace it" (Peyper et al. 129). Yet another woman relayed that her father taught her "if you cry

you're a weakling, if you display emotions you're a weakling" (Peyper et al. 131). One examination of "parental socialization of children's sadness" found that spouses perceive fathers to "provide more support for their daughters' sadness expressivity," while mothers tend to support sons better (Cassano et al. 3). This examination reinforces the young women's testimonies that a daughter's ability to be emotionally open is greatly dependent on how her father encourages or discourages the behavior.

Beyond simply encouraging emotions in their own daughters, parents have been found to be emotional role models for their kids; they set the example for how to act (Cassano et al. 3). If the father does not display it first, it is extremely difficult for the daughter to navigate expressing and understanding her emotions on her own. Alison's father in *Fun Home* is definitely an example of this kind of father. When reading his written response to Alison's letter about her homosexuality, Alison felt that "instead of at last confiding in me [concerning his own homosexuality], he took the novel approach of assuming that I already knew—although at the time he wrote the letter, I did not" (Bechdel 211). Here, Bruce was unwilling to be open with Alison and express his own emotional turmoil. The result was Alison's continuing frustration and confusion. Her father also discouraged physical affection in the family, which made Alison shy and uneasy when she decided to kiss him goodnight. She remembers that "all I managed was to grab his hand and buss the knuckles lightly as if he were a bishop or an elegant lady, before rushing from the room in embarrassment" (Bechdel 19). She even says, "this embarrassment on my part was a tiny scale model of my father's more fully developed self-loathing. His shame inhabited our house as pervasively and invisibly as the aromatic musk of aging mahogany" (Bechdel 20). Liv-



ing in his shame and emotional distance inhibited Alison from reaching out to him without feeling embarrassed or like she was imposing on him. By living on his own emotional island and shutting her out, Bruce failed as an emotional role model and did not create an environment for her to freely express her feelings.

In light of these testimonies and research findings, some may argue that too much emphasis is being placed on the father-daughter connection, since a father is not the sole influence in his daughter's life. It is true that no family relationship exists in a vacuum; general family dynamics always play a part in how the child is feeling and what she may be struggling with (Corwyn and Bradley 17). An article from *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal* states that "the behavior of one of the elements is inseparable from the other elements and that what happens to one of them influences the whole family system" (Carvalho et al. 1). While each variable in the family dynamics ultimately affects the others, that does not mean specific relationships cannot be very forming and influential on daughters in distinct ways. For those who believe the mother-daughter relationship is being ignored in order to exalt a father's influence, again the important factor is that each relationship can be fundamental for varying reasons. Comparing them and proclaiming one to consistently be more important is tricky, since fathers and mothers often offer different kinds of support for their daughters. While it is important to recognize the family as a whole, the picture of fathers as helpless morons who don't matter when it comes to parenting needs to be counteracted and revealed as a lie (Carvalho et al. 1).

Overall, it is incredibly clear that a daughter's behavior and well-being are dependent on having "a secure base for emotional development" (Peyper et al. 8). As the primary male

influence in her life, a father's place is crucial. Daughters who feel overlooked are often driven to engage in activities they don't enjoy and conform to his personal preference in order to receive attention (Peyper et al. 131). Disconnection with fathers also impacts self-esteem and their mental states, while creating the feeling of having to repress their personalities and who they are. Emotionally distant fathers also fail to create space for daughters to learn how to freely and healthily express their emotions. Women's testimonies, including Bechdel's own, provide the basis for these claims concerning fatherhood and bring up an important issue concerning emotionally distant fathers. In *Fun Home*, Bechdel is reviewing her relationship with Bruce before he died, hoping to discover some insight into what made him the way he was. This is important for her to process but must be done with caution. Bechdel plays with the possibility of Bruce being the result of the small-minded town he lived in and its oppression on him. While this may be important to recognize, it would be wrong to conclude that he's therefore a practically innocent victim of circumstances. Bechdel ends the memoir saying that "in the tricky reverse narration that impels our entwined stories, he was there to catch me when I leapt" (232). In reality, Bruce did nothing except recommend a book that she ended up identifying with; in every other situation, he ran from honesty and conversations concerning their similarities. It is ultimately important to recognize that making deceased fathers sound better than they were to find the good in them only encourages denial. While Bechdel certainly has a few precious moments to remember with Bruce, her story struggles with the tension surrounding their relationship. Healthy families must learn to bear this tension of giving genuine respect to imperfect parents and honest consideration of the impact of their weaknesses.

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## QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

### Context

1. The author uses Alison Bechdel's graphic memoir *Fun Home* as a basis for inquiry into father-daughter relationships. How does the author use research to support their analysis of such relationships as portrayed in *Fun Home*? Similarly, how does the author's depiction of *Fun Home* reinforce the research presented in the essay?
2. Can you think of other texts or personal experiences that relate similar testimonies about parent-child relationships?

### Style

1. The author goes back and forth between analysis of *Fun Home* (a creative work) and synthesis of secondary source material (research articles). Do you find this formatting effective? Is this style something you have practiced in your own writing?
2. How does the author address potential counterarguments near the end of the essay?