



You're Still Dad – And How Was Your Week?

Currently, I co-facilitate a program created for separated fathers who are trying to maintain or rebuild their relationship with their children in an often non-cooperative environment. As co-facilitators, we bring our own experiences from past separations to the task of supporting our dads through their pain to hopefully the other side. Any one who runs such groups knows that their stories often bring back past events that refuse to leave your own consciousness.

It is those Tuesday evenings that are the most rewarding of my week. It is about providing support to fathers and therefore children who are going through what I called in my life 'the dark years'. Their stories are often incomprehensible for its difficult to believe that a loving parent (mother) would allow their anger and rage to outweigh their child's need for a loving, involved dad.

Last Tuesday had the 'normal' range of happenings for our fathers. Our check-in gives each father the opportunity to speak, if they wish, about their week. Some had spent time with their children, others had legal business and some had a child's birthday where they were the missing parent. Some had a small positive step that was received as a victory by a group of dads in need of sharing the hope offered by a success; others suffered a rejection that was viewed as a defeat and thus a setback for all.

Last week was thus a week like all weeks, except for some reason I spent more time reflecting afterwards upon the 'happenings'.

One of our dads who is engaged in a long protracted up and down process for full custody of his daughter spoke about his previous Saturday with his daughter. They had purchased a Barbie sewing machine (they actually work!) and the two of them were both learning the lost art of sewing. There was something wonderful about this big rough and ready Dad doing his thing with the love of his life. I was reminded of earlier weeks when his daughter was in care and how he would take his portable B.B.Q. to the supervised visit and create his daughter's favorite Hawaiian dinner.

This is a parent who creates magic moments for his child and he is innocently unaware of that special gift that is his.

Another of our Dads was feeling more damaged than usual. An older, gentle individual who was determined from the beginning to be accommodating with his children's mother to avoid the waste of a legal battle, both emotionally and financially, on his family. He had recently requested to have the children for a short vacation to visit their grandmother in the States. The mother's response was quick and sharp; he would need her signed permission to leave the country. None was offered! They had no signed agreement thus she had de facto custody!

His new reality had struck home. Being reasonable, seeking fairness seemed to count for nothing. The group understood the lesson.

A newer member was recounting his efforts with the bureaucrats at the Court House trying to gain information. His daughter was being withheld. After several months of some co-operation, weeks had turned into months and finally a year had passed without his daughter in his arms, listening to him reading a story or sharing her father's warm reassuring embrace. He often asked that evening how society could condone a child being kept from their dad?

Of course no one had a response that made any sense, so his pleas were met with an eerie, uncomfortable silence as we shared his pain.

Another of our members, but really another facilitator told how he and his sons were building a dirt bike from an old bike and an investment of 25 dollars. This father had lost his battle for shared custody but had found as many creative ways to be an involved dad as humanly possible. I was reminded that he was a model to our fathers for his resiliency, commitment, creativity, and doggedness. He had managed to set aside his rage, and understood that if he did all that he could to participate in his children's lives, then time would be on his side.

Another of our fathers is an older dad who has been devastated by the loss of children and family. His hurt and fragility is apparent whenever he speaks about his 'life crisis', and that is exactly what it is. He has started his rebuilding by his move to us and tonight he announced that he gained a work position doing what he had done professionally. He was starting to regain his shattered confidence. He was telling us that he was summoning the courage to try to re-enter the lives of his children. He conveyed with every word about his attempts to create an E-mail to send to his daughter, his hurt and his love for his daughter.

He symbolized what our group is about; personal renewal, friendship, caring and commitment to parenting.

Our final check in came from an individual who has been determined to fully share decision making in the life of his child; after all his agreement said he had joint custody. The reality of course was very different. He was describing his previous evening with his young child, but on this night his time included two hours after her bedtime. As such this dad returned his daughter to her mother early because he wanted to cause less disruption to her routine. This particular evening was to be her birthday time with him and they celebrated it with a Tim Horton's donut with sprinkles and of course a birthday candle.

It was all he had to offer, except for his boundless love and daily concern for her welfare.

These stories are certainly not unique or perhaps even exceptional and yet it was the simplicity and the common plight of these separated fathers stories that moved me to believe that there was something heroic about each of them and all the fathers who refuse to go away or be driven away by the human made obstacles placed in their way.

These dads are my light for all they want is to support their children to become a healthy, responsible adults who know that they have been and always will be loved.

Each of their children would be proud to say loudly, 'You're Still Dad'!

***Kids 'n' Dad** services families in the Waterloo Region. Its goal is to ensure that children from a separated family have two parents co-operating and actively supporting them as they develop and mature into adulthood.*

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