



FAMILY RENEWAL RESOURCES PROJECT
parenting forever, through whatever

An Open Letter: On Being a Dad and Grandpa! Father's Day 2019

My 47th Father's Day intersects with the recent passage of my 75th birthday, a milestone that set off a journey of remembrances from childhood to adolescence to parenting and grandparenting. There are those who suggest that today's 75 is really 60. My response is that the advocates of that position don't have a rapidly declining golf game, nor 4 grandchildren between the ages of 9 and 2.

28 years ago I became a separated dad. It was and is a profound experience, almost 3 decades later.

On my office desk are pictures of my 6 grandchildren and they are a daily reminder of my family's miracle journey to this time and place.

A specific picture taken by my son-in-law captured my 3-year-old granddaughter and I, hand-in-hand, quietly watching the magical sunset on the Gulf of Mexico. None of this was certain. My eyes misted over at that moment, for I knew that my father and gramps were on that beach, hand in hand with us through their gifts of love forever, through whatever.

Once the worst of the chaos and a semblance of normalcy and calm were restored following the separation, I committed to supporting families one by one, and ensuring that every child has both parents and extended families in their daily lives. The mission of our little agency is based on a basic belief that separating parents are capable of loving their children more than they are angry with the other parent, provided the right supports are available.

Barack Obama articulated the transformation and aspirational mission of every dad when he penned the following in an open letter to his two daughters in 2009, prior to his inauguration.

"But then the two of you came into my world with all your curiosity and those smiles that never fail to fill my heart and light up my day, and suddenly, all my big plans for myself didn't seem so important anymore. I soon found that the greatest joy in my life was the joy I saw in yours. And that my life wouldn't count for much unless I was able to ensure that you had every opportunity for happiness and fulfillment in yours."

Barack Obama is a dad first, just like all the dads and grand dads in my personal and professional life. He couldn't imagine life without his daughters perched securely on his shoulders; or snuggling with him at bedtime, reading a great novel; or guiding his daughters through the ups and downs of adolescence.

My transformational experience to fatherhood began almost 48 years ago through the scrutiny of the adoption process. My son was placed in my arms by a Children's Aid worker. She left the two-month-old infant with us for 10 minutes and returned to ask: do you want to take him home? She didn't seem to understand- that infant became my son forever, the moment he was placed in my arms.

I still recall feeding him his first bottle and the radio appropriately playing the Teddy Bears' Picnic and Brahms Lullaby. Tears of joy were my companion that day.

One child, in time, became three and 25 years later a new, joyful role began- I became a grandpa, now to six.

There is a wonderful adjective that captures the role of parents and grandparents- 'necessary to the completeness of the whole' i.e. the whole is of course our children and grandchildren.

Supporting integral parenting relationships through a family separation should be the mission of Family Law and social services. Unfortunately, it is unclear that ensuring integral, parenting relationships for separated dads is in any way a priority.

Community lawyer Diane McInnis courageously and succinctly sets out the failings of Family Law in a May 5, 2018 Record essay:

'Lawyers are rigorous advocates for our clients, which in an adversarial system, pits one parent against the other, in a *blood-sport* of trying to discredit the other person and inflate his or her own virtuous behavior'.

The Law Commission of Ontario in a 2010 Report offered similar, frightening conclusions from the users of the Family Law legal system. 'Too often solvable problems turn into unsolvable outcomes'.

The devastating consequences are unnecessary conflict and chaos, that too often leads to interrupted parenting or worse- almost always for dads and paternal grandparents.

There is a basic question that the divorce industry of lawyers, F&CS, counsellors, assessors, etc. need to answer. Is a dad and the paternal grandparents a necessary, integral partner in the completeness of their child's and grandchild's life?

I wonder who celebrates and advocates for separated, single dads, whatever their parenting time, within these bodies. I fear the response is too often a shrug or it's time to move on. The message given to children is that the dad is not essential to their lives.

Noted children's advocate Barbara Coloroso offers family supports a simple direction: "It is impossible to have too many loving people in your life." Would Barack Obama be a marginalized, separated dad?

My father was an imperfect, flawed, loving, supportive and integral parent and an almost perfect grandpa to 5. He suffered a massive stroke 12 hours after visiting this still wounded and vulnerable son, two months before my remarriage.

The chaos over three years claimed him as yet another victim. His last conscious act was to be my dad at the age of 76; to continue to be the integral parent and grandparent. He is my model and symbolizes the desire of every dad and grandfather that has graced my life.

The following is an excerpt from **12 Years A Slave** by Solomon Northup (1853): 'The influence of the iniquitous system necessarily fosters an unfeeling and cruel spirit, even in the bosoms of those who, among their equals, are regarded as humane and generous.'

My thanks go to the parents/grandparents and stepparents who have inspired me with their commitment to be an integral partner in their children's and grandchildren's lives over the last 17 years.

Barry Lillie

In memory of my dad and gramps;

Special thanks to my wife, stepparent and grandma who made good fortune happen.

2013 Recipient of the Fernand Lozier Award of Excellence in Father Involvement Practice;

Kids n Dad Shared Support

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