

# WHAT I LEARNED FROM MY DAD

Reflecting on the roles and influences of fathers

WRITTEN BY CURTIS GILLESPIE

My father died when he was 60 years old. He had a stroke on my wedding day and passed away three days later. He was a much-loved and wise (though uneducated) man, and his passing was traumatic for me and dozens, if not hundreds of family and friends.

A quarter of a century later, I find that he influences me as much, or more, than ever. I have written about the impact he had on me in my memoir *Playing Through* and in various essays and reflections. I find it fascinating and revealing that my writing about my father has changed over time—it has become less emotional and more reflective. I think more now about his example, what he taught me, and how that learning is now expressing itself in my own life as a father. I'm becoming less sad for what I lost in his dying and more grateful for what I gained through knowing him.

But what precisely did he give me? I ponder that question all the time, and it's one being asked more and more in society today, as the role of the father continues to gather interest in modern life. *What precisely is a father?* How is the role of the father changing? What do we learn from them and what can we learn from them?

**R**eg Crowshoe has vivid memories of his father, Joe Crowshoe, a much-loved spiritual elder who lived to be 100 years old. Crowshoe, 64, is himself praised as a preserver and celebrant of his people's way of life. His early years were difficult and his father helped him through them.

"I'm from the Piikani First Nation in southern Alberta," Crowshoe says. "I grew up when we still had Indian agents and government people on the reserve 'looking after' Indian people. Every year from about the age of five or six, the Indian agent would come around at the start of the school year and take me away to the residential school. I was always so sad and I didn't want to go, and I could see that my father was sad, too, but he always told me, 'Just try really hard for the next 10 months, Reggie, and don't get too lonesome, because

those months will go by fast and then you'll be home again.'" Those are difficult memories for Crowshoe, not least because their annual separation was, simply, the law. "He'd have gone to jail if he had held me back from residential school. There was no choice."

Crowshoe remembers the elation of the last few days of school each June, knowing his father was coming to take him home to a summer of ranch work. "I was so happy and he was happy. I will never forget those truck rides. I also remember that was when he started talking to me about how much he believed in our traditional oral way of life, how much he taught me about our ceremonies, our language and our culture."

George Brookman, 70 this year, still runs the large reproduction and printing business, West Canadian Digital Imaging, he founded in Calgary decades ago.

A key lesson Brookman learned from his father was to use willpower to shape your life.

"My father was in World War II, and he met my mother

few months we had a community hall, a skating rink, boards, the works. That community hall [in Mount Pleasant] is still there in northwest Calgary."

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and turned her into a Dutch war bride, recalls Brookman. "They got married in Holland and came back to Calgary together. My father ended up going into commercial real estate, but I learned from him the value of community service while relying on yourself to get things done. I remember when I was about seven years old, I wanted to play hockey, but there was no community rink. Well, my dad, he just got to work organizing and within a

Few roles have changed as much in the last generation as the role of the father. In western culture especially, fatherhood has always been associated with patriarchy, singular authority and blunt masculinity. Not anymore. The father of today is an idea, a notion, a fluid and transitional belief system, the principles of which vary from person to person, town to town, region to region, country to country. It's also true that we are relatively

early on in the understanding of the role fathers play in the lives of their children. Paul Raeburn, writing in *Why Fathers Matter*, noted that even up until the 1970s researchers thought that fathers didn't play much of a role in the development of their infant children.

Matthew Stepanic, 26, is an Edmonton writer and editor. Growing up in Medicine Hat, he knew by the time he was nearing the end of junior high school that he was gay.

Not that he shared it right away with his father and mother. That was still a few years away. He always got along with his parents. "Although I think my father might have preferred it if I'd been a bit more interested in sports," laughs Stepanic. "Still, we always had a good relationship. I was the good kid. My sister was the rebellious one! But the funny thing is that we argue a lot more now than we did when

I was a teenager, which is when most people typically clash with their parents. But now I like to argue with my dad about things that are fun to argue about."

Ongoing research on how mothers and fathers parent is revealing interesting results. For example, fathers tend to hold babies outward, while mothers are more likely to hold babies facing inward. Mothers tend to favour games that promote connection and creativity; fathers are often more comfortable with games that require risk-taking. Mothers are more apt to get involved in helping their children solve problems, whereas fathers more often watch and advise.

Research has also shown that fathers tend to do best when they are part of an engaged and supportive couple who are parenting together and offset (or complement) each other's strengths and weaknesses.

Not only does this allow fathers to express themselves more as a parent, it allows children to see healthy relationships—which helps both boys and girls grow up to seek that out in their partner. It also makes it more likely that they'll have healthy relationships with their own children some day.

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What we get from our in other words, is going to differ significantly from what we get from our mothers. It's not any more or less valuable. It's just different.

"In native culture the father is the doer," says Reg Crowshoe, "and the mother instils moral values and principles. So I would

say my father represented a doer to me, someone who physically facilitated our way of life. He instilled in me the moral values and belief of our traditional people. We come from an oral culture and there are just so many stories. My dad taught me to understand our oral literacy and comprehension so that



Matthew Stepanic (left) with his father Dean at a family gathering.

We absorb so much from our fathers without realizing the extent of their influence on us



The two George Brookmans in 1948 in the Calgary community of Hillhurst.

I could extract the knowledge from those stories.”

Crowshoe thinks often about when he and his father would just sit. Every now and then Joe would say something, but mostly he just wanted to sit beside his son. “We would sit there and share that silence,” Crowshoe says. “That silence was a real spiritual connection, a connection that he was transferring to help me understand what spirituality was. Sometimes he said things that were instructive, but I always remember just sitting there with him.”

George Brookman remembers that his father, also named George, seldom stopped to sit. George Sr. was a man who threw his whole passion behind his ideas. “In 1955,” says Brookman, “he got invited to coach a baseball team, in Shepherd, just outside Calgary. By 1956, he’d decided to move it to Calgary and call the team the

Brookman Dodgers! Sadly, he put so much into that team that he ended up going bankrupt, but he did what he always did, which was get up and get going again. He rebuilt his life. It was a great lesson for me about forging my own way. I was working early and started a family early. I ended up running my own successful company. But he used to say, ‘You don’t have to be lawyer or doctor, and I don’t care what you do, just be the best at what you do.’ He taught me that there’s no better way to approach life

He taught me that there’s no better way to approach life than to just dive right in

than to just dive right in.”

If we’re lucky, we’ll all recognize that we can love our fathers in spite of their

flaws and *our* flaws. Matthew Stepanic can see this clearly with his father when it comes to issues such as culture and politics. “He’s a guy from a smaller prairie city, so I guess it might be more natural that he’s fairly conservative, which I am not!”

But what Stepanic increasingly appreciates about his father (and his mother, he adds) is that despite their different philosophies, they respect and admire what Stepanic is doing and who he is. He gave a PechaKucha talk

he spoke about the power of stories and how he’d grown up as a young gay man in a culture and place that didn’t provide him with many guiding narratives. “My parents have always been supportive,” he says, “and they came up from Medicine Hat to listen to the talk. At one point, I used the word queer. After, I was driving home with my dad and he said he thought the talk went really well, but he said, ‘You know, I do have one question, though . . . why do you use the word queer? What’s behind that?’ ”

Stepanic paused briefly as he told me this, perhaps not even sure quite what he was saying about his father. Perhaps you and he both have a good-natured curiosity, I suggested.

After all, I said, it’s not every middle-aged sports-loving conservative white male from southern Alberta who, upon sitting through a lecture

wherein his son broadcasts his gayness, can commend his son on the talk and make his first question afterwards about word choice. That takes a certain kind of respect and curiosity and simple agreeability.

the extent of their influence on us. Then the curtain falls away years or decades later and we see the imprint our fathers have made upon us.

Decades after his death, I see ever more clearly that the single most important

styles" in a parenting book. But my siblings and I grew up knowing who our father was because he lived with honesty and integrity. He and my mother were true to who they were, and the best example they set for their children was that they were happy with themselves.

Our fathers send us messages through vivid scenes and words, but also through impressionistic feelings and senses. At its best, fatherhood is a kind of teaching that gathers power and wisdom over time, through action as much as language, through the consistency of behaviour (often when they don't even know we're watching). The domineering patriarch is increasingly a museum piece, a character in a costume drama. A father today is a role model, a teacher, a foundation and, perhaps most importantly, a conduit. Fatherhood is an important

role that transfers to better ways of being from one generation to the next. When we find such fathers in our midst, it's worth listening to them, because sometimes they speak softly. Sometimes they don't even use words at all. | a

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Stepanic thought about that for a minute. "I think you might be right! I do think of my father that way. Of course, I also inherited his clumsiness so I've got him to thank for that!"

Whether it's clumsiness or curiosity, wisdom or wit, dignity or drive, we absorb so much from our fathers, without always realizing

thing my father gave me was himself. Simply that. He was who he was. He liked himself. He wasn't a saint. Far from it. He spanked his kids, smoked, had a bad diet and never exercised (I have made a different choice in each case). He had a temper and sometimes said or did things that you wouldn't find on the "recommended list of

