

PART I:

The Goal of Co-Parenting

CHAPTER 1:

The First Days Are the Most Difficult

As a child, I was very angry with my parents. It seemed my father had abandoned me. He had been beaten by divorce and I resented him for not being there. I resented my mom and dad both for letting the family fall apart.

Mark, a child of divorce

“Nancy moved out,” I dutifully wrote in my DAY-AT-A-GLANCE® book.

It was April 25, 1987. I was imagining Stephany, my two-year-old, growing up wounded, feeling as I had when my father left me. In 1968, just nineteen years before, following the break-up of his marriage, my father chose to end his life. He left me emotionally scarred and burdened with grief. And now, after five years together, Nancy, my partner, left with our daughter. Shocked, I had no plans for the future; not for Stephany — who I loved most in this world — and not for myself. So it was in that terrible year I too contemplated suicide. Fortunately for Stephany and myself, I did not follow my father to the grave. And, although I shared only fourteen years of his life, I still think of my dad in a positive way.

Our time together showed me how important a father is to his child. Even though our home was at times a wild and tragic place, I still experienced some degree of love, security, and bonding. Though he took his own life, Dad remained my hero; no one could take his place. He was the man, after all, who taught me to walk quietly in the woods and to look people straight in the eyes when I talked. By his example, he demonstrated that it was good to work hard and to take pride in oneself. These simple lessons produced fond memories, yet the primal connection — the need to have a father — was deeper still.

Years after his death, I imagined I saw my father in a crowd of people, or driving past in a car, or standing in line at the grocery store. I wanted my mentor, my companion, my best friend — my dad. Even though he was not successful in the usual sense of the word — wealth and power — he did pass on one of life’s basic truths: children need fathers who will maintain a continuing presence in their lives.

What caused my father’s downfall was his inability to reach out for help. Instead, he isolated himself and failed to recognize situations where he needed support, such as with his drinking and his crumbling marriage. It would have been far nobler of him to have asked for assistance. However, in spite of his limitations, my experiences with him serve and empower my life today.

Over the past nine years, I have spoken with hundreds of men, many with dads who for one reason or another ceased to be in their lives. Every man admitted he wanted to be loved and needed by his father. North American society has yet to realize how essential fathers are to their children’s well-being, and many of us don’t recognize that until they are gone.

“I meant to shock your father into getting some help,” my mother says today, explaining the circumstances of their break-up. “I was at my wits’ end. You see, in the early years, our marriage was a good one. Ed was handsome and witty and lots of fun to be with. As an electrician, he could get a job anywhere... so we traveled. In the 1950s, people who lived as we did were known as ‘boomers.’ I remember once we even chipped in and bought an abandoned airfield in New Mexico and converted it into a drag strip so Ed could race cars for money. We used to spend our weekends at the airfield fooling around and hanging out with friends. Your dad would race his souped-up Willys coupe against other men’s Cadillacs. He won a car or two racing for pink slips. In some ways, your father

was like that Willys coupe of his — small and full of surprises. He would be crossing the finish line before those Cadillacs got up to speed.”

My mother always smiles when she talks about dad and his fast cars. He enjoyed his freedom and, at the same time, worked to support the family by moving from one construction project to another. In the late 1950s, our family arrived in Santa Cruz. Dad went to work for a local electrical contractor who was responsible for installing the electrical system that still powers the University of California at Santa Cruz.

I have memories of myself as a ten-year-old hiking with my dad over grassy hills and through the cool redwood forest. He would point to deer and trees and tell me which college buildings were going up there. He loved Santa Cruz as it was at that time — a sleepy retirement community — and, ready to put down roots and stay in one place, thought it would be a perfect location to raise a family.

Once the University opened its doors, students swarmed into town, and Santa Cruz began to change. Again my father was ready to move on, but my mom, who then held a well-paying position with the Department of Motor Vehicles, wanted to stay.

“My success at DMV was a real ego buster for your dad. I used to tell him when we were arguing, before we divorced, ‘I don’t need you, Ed.’ You see, I was working at a time when most women didn’t, and I hired baby-sitters when other mothers stayed at home.

“Your dad’s drinking got worse. Sometimes he’d play football with Randy, Dawn and you... his kids... on Saturday morning, and then just disappear until he’d turn up again Wednesday.”

He drank more and more, possibly to make up for the painful relationship with his verbally abusive father. I have heard stories of how my grandfather ridiculed his children in public and how painful that was for my father. My dad longed for a loving, supportive family, but his deep-seated hurt and unresolved problems overwhelmed him. He and my mother quarreled frequently. Once he had been a man who took pride in how he looked — strutting out the door and off to work in sharply-creased khakis. As his drinking worsened, he let himself go and became more and more haggard as he lost sight of his dream.

Like other children whose parents divorced, I was both relieved when my mother’s and father’s fighting ended and at the same time devastated when dad moved out.

Separated from my mother and living alone in a motel room, my dad was served with a restraining order. This occurred just before Christmas. Ignoring the restraining order, he tried to visit his kids, but because he had been drinking, my mother turned him away. As my father left, he grabbed the garden hose and threw it into the back seat of his car. He drove eight miles to Watsonville, and parked behind a little bar called “My Place.” With the engine idling, he pushed one end of the hose into the tail pipe and left the other end lying on the back seat. He got back in the car and shut the door. Ralph Edward Ashley died December 26, 1968.

That day, the day after Christmas, I spent hanging out at the beach until it was time to head home. As I walked towards our house on Center Street, I saw my mother standing on the front lawn surrounded by neighbors and friends. She met me with the muscles of her face straining to hide her trembling chin. Her eyes were puffy and red. She struggled to hold herself together.

“Steven, your father has killed himself.”

At once defiant and numb, refusing to feel the pain, I asked, “Can I have his car?”

Shocked at my apparent lack of emotion, she gasped, “No! It’s full of his blood!”

For months after my father’s suicide, I lived in fear of any stressful situation, afraid that I might explode into sobs. Occasionally, the suffering bubbled to the surface. My chin quivered, my eyes filled with tears, and I hid my face from my friends. Some days I just stayed in my room to

avoid the risk of further embarrassment. Soon I was trying to escape the pain by drinking beer and smoking marijuana. It didn't work.

Many years later, I realized I couldn't hide from my grief. I felt I had no alternative but to examine my past and deal with the hurt. Once I knew what my parents had been through — and experienced some of that myself — I was no longer the victim. I was free to move on with my life.

Recently, my mother explained the social attitudes at the time she and Dad broke up. “Divorce with co-parenting was not considered. Your father was to visit, I think, one weekend a month. Very few people divorced in those days, and we did not consider any options or the consequences.”

It seems few people asked what would happen to the children when one of their parents was removed or, indeed, what would become of the parent who appeared every week or two as a visitor. Then — as now — most people simply followed a system that failed to protect and nurture the needs of all family members.

“Twenty-eight years ago, when I divorced your father, it gave us all this awful sense of failure, and there was no support system, really. Even your best friend is not as good as a family member when you need help. It was just foolish of us to think that we could throw someone out of the family and not have everyone suffer.”

Today, looking across the yard at the white front door of the two-story house where my family once lived, I now see how our society, lacking in imagination and understanding, sets mothers and fathers against one another — and causes children to feel shamed and abandoned. Then as now, children often grow up with ill-informed parents, adults who are ignorant of their options and, therefore, unable to create new models.

As a parent, I understand how difficult it is to make time during a family crisis to look for a better way. The obstacles that work to prevent couples from finding positive new solutions haven't changed. Too often friends and counselors encourage others to follow in their footsteps, even if their paths led to disaster. It takes time and courage to discover something better. In the context of divorce, where the mental health of loved ones, the custody of children, and possession of property are concerned, it is critical that we search for the best alternative. Fortunately, the love for our family is often powerful enough to drive us to do something different, especially when we discover that the solutions of previously divorced parents often created excessive damage and pain.

When a father commits to looking at divorce objectively, and thinks past the divorce decree, he can find positive goals for himself, his ex-wife and their kids. His vision for the future, if built on compassion and understanding, can be the catalyst for the reconstruction of his family.

An Objective View

In a *Time* magazine article, “The Price of a Broken Home,” [February 27, 1995], Judith Wallerstein reports the results of studying 131 children whose parents were divorcing: “Eighteen months after the breakup...we didn't see a single child that was well adjusted. And we didn't see a single child to whom divorce was not the central event of their lives... We realized that the whole trajectory of the child's life changes. Over half of the [now grown] children I have been studying have psychological problems they attribute to divorce.”

Judith Wallerstein's conclusions have long been corroborated by more statistically comprehensive studies. Princeton's Sarra McLanahan, a recognized expert in social studies, found that “children of divorce drop out of high school, became teen mothers [and fathers], and are jobless far more frequently than their peers.” Experts like Wallerstein and McLanahan bring to our attention some of the by-products of divorce — children unable to succeed in society, and young adults crippled in their attempts at love.

Currently in the United States, according to the Coalition of Parental Support (C.O.P.S.), 18 million children live in single parent households. The following statistics were supplied by C.O.P.S. The first set deals with young women raised in fatherless families:

- 71% of teenage pregnancies are to children of single parents.
- Daughters of single parents are 2.1 times more likely to have children during their teenage years than are daughters from intact families.
- Daughters of single parents are 53% more likely to marry as teenagers.
- Daughters of single parents are 164% more likely to have a premarital birth.
- Daughters of single parents are 92% more likely to choose to opt out of their marriages.

Young men, like their female peers, are at risk when raised in fatherless families:

- 90 % of all homeless and runaway children are from fatherless homes.
- 75 % of all adolescent patients in chemical abuse centers come from fatherless homes.
- 63 % of youth suicides are from fatherless homes.
- 85 % of all youths incarcerated grew up in fatherless homes.

Some parents ask, “If I remarried, would I lower the risk to my children?” Unfortunately, remarrying doesn’t offer much protection. Again, according to statistics, seventy-five percent of all second marriages fail.

Today, the percentage of marriages ending in divorce is almost twice that of 1968, the year my parents separated. Using the Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1960 through 1994, we can see a progressive disintegration of the family as shown by the increase in divorce and annulment. In 1910, 8.75% of marriages ended in divorce; in 1930, 17.39% unions failed; in 1960, 25.80% of all marriages failed; and in 1990, 48% of those who said they would remain together later changed their minds. In 1992, according to Time, 2.3 million couples married and 1.2 million couples divorced. The U.S. Census Bureau currently projects six out of ten first marriages will end in divorce.

Of the more than thirty million couples who have divorced in the last thirty-four years, a few individuals have come up with workable alternatives to the traditional “solution”: The kids go to Mom, and Dad visits.

No longer is it necessary for single or divorced mothers to miss opportunities to pursue a financially rewarding career. Single men and women do not have to be trapped at home and solely responsible for caring for the kids.

I am grateful for my mother’s tenacity and courage, and the fact that she never abandoned her three children. But Randy, Dawn and I watched her struggle daily to provide for us. Typically, she arrived home after working so exhausted that she could only collapse onto the couch.

Today, fathers are still expected to move out of the house and to send money. Society’s message is clear: If you continue to work and send a certain amount of money every month you can see your children on the weekend. If you don’t, your wages will be attached and, if the problem continues, you will be sent to jail.

Why should dads be forced to spend every spare moment struggling to earn enough money to support two homes — especially when they see the devastating effect their absence has on their children?

There Is a Solution

When two people marry and create a child, they make a commitment to care for that child. The majority of the time, they divide the domestic duties and each parent fulfills a different role, either breadwinner or nurturer. When the couple divorces, both parents can still honor their commitment to the child. With the parents no longer living in the same house, however, it makes less

sense to divide duties. Can we expect Dad to work harder, providing more financially, in return for less time with his child while Mom, also working hard, receives the gift of their children's presence?

When kids spend equal time at both Dad's and Mom's home, they enjoy two nurturing parents who happily and responsibly participate in their lives. Children who are co-parented have a better chance of growing up with the skills necessary to succeed in life than children of broken families whose fathers are forced to work at every opportunity and forgo parenting.

What is co-parenting? It is a proven option, far better than visitation.

Two parents living apart share the responsibility of raising their children and each parent, independent of the other, provides for the children's emotional and physical needs. Both parents are self-supporting and working to be financially independent.

On this book's cover sheet, Eloise Anderson, director of California's Department of Social Services, says that she believes fathers can nurture children just like mothers can and that she wants to take some of the financial weight off fathers and place it on mothers. It's an idea whose time has come.

Mickie and Dan know from experience that co-parenting works. They divorced when Deirdre was six and in turn cooperatively raised their daughter until she was twenty-four years of age and graduated from U.C. Santa Barbara with a Masters in Biology. Mickie has this to say:

"If I would have set out to collect child-support from my daughter's father I would have had to make him my enemy. He wasn't really. Our marriage was detrimental to all three of us, but our parenting didn't have much wrong with it.

"Co-parenting gives women a chance to get their self-esteem and self-worth from places other than men and our image as mothers. For men, I think it gives them a chance to have their ego satisfaction come from raising their children well instead of competing with the outside world.:

Working Together for the Good of All

Another reason both parents must be self-sufficient is they may not have the rapport necessary to work as a team. According to the Kelly and Wallerstein's study, "Surviving the Break-up," fifty percent of mothers see no value in the father's continued contact with the children after separation. Stanford Braver, in the American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 1991, states that 40% of mothers respond that they had interfered with the non-custodial father's visitation on at least one occasion in order to punish the ex-spouse.

Divorced couples should work to lessen the impact of negative change on their families. For the good of all, parents who find themselves incapable of living together now need to provide two independent homes to care for their kids. Doing so will demonstrate to their children that both parents are committed, capable, and loving adults.

A divorced father needs to remain in his children's lives. This is true even if both parents remarry. If a man remarries and his new wife has children of her own, he should not be distracted from his responsibility to his own offspring. From the children's point of view nothing is valued more than their relationship with Dad and nothing hurts more than having their father give his love to a step-child instead of to them. His new wife's children, when old enough to understand, may not respect a disloyal stepfather either.

With women wanting the opportunity to have well-rounded lives, and fathers eager for the opportunity to co-parent, the equal sharing of parental responsibility after divorce is an idea that fits the times. Unfortunately, there are fathers who are afraid to parent, women who do not want to take on financial roles, judges with outmoded ideas, and counselors who view men as inept caregivers for children.

Today, it is the father who can take the lead in a process that moves one broken family into two cooperative homes. His determination to parent more and on an equal footing with his former partner can help his children survive divorce with a minimum of trauma. His insistence on parenting can also benefit the mother by allowing her to do more with her life. Dad can create a win-win situation.