

Fire in the Belly: Fathers' Day Reflection 2013

My father died when I was 9 years old. Although I have few memories of him, but for the most part he is a shadowy figure from my past that I don't really know. I remember once when I looked at one of my father's old ID cards. He was 34 years old when he died. I was 38 at the time. I realized that for the rest of my life I would be an older man than he ever was.

Throughout my teens, twenties and even into my thirties, I felt a vacuum or a void, and I did not even really know how to identify it.

At the same time I was feeling this absence, I was pretty convinced that I did not want children. In my earliest serious relationships, whenever the subject came up I was convinced. No children. It wasn't just no. (It was HECK NO!) Of course I had my rationalizations. I was too selfish. I didn't have enough money. I didn't have enough education. I didn't have the right job. It took me years to figure out what all of those rationalizations really meant. I simply felt not good enough.

Just after Jessica and I were married, she insisted that she was ready to either start a family or pursue her PhD – and I was so scared of having a child that I chose to move across the country, away from the only home I had ever known, my friends, my family, and give up everything I knew so she could pursue her PhD.

Even then, it only put off the question of parenthood for a little while. Three years later, she Jessica wanted to talk about it again. We had a home, a stable job, our relationship was stable, and she really wanted to have a family. So she enlisted the help of a close family friend, a lady who was like a second mother to me.

My dear friend (Gail) was terminally ill, and many of our last conversations were about fatherhood. This was a person I trusted her completely. I shared with her all of my fears and concerns. She told me that I had everything I needed to have a child. She said, "The only thing you need to have a child is love." And it was her opinion that I had that in abundance. She made it clear to me that I should not let fear make me miss the chance at being a father.

As I begin to seriously study and meditate about fatherhood, one of the books I was reading at the time was a book on men's spirituality, "Fire in the Belly" by Sam Keen. There was a passage that felt completely overwhelming:

"One of men's greatest resources for change is our wound and our longing for the missing father. We can heal ourselves by becoming the kind of fathers we wanted but did not have. Create out of the void, out of the absence. Our best map for parenting is outlined like a photographic negative in the shadow side of our psyches. Get in touch with your disappointment, your rage, your grief, your loneliness for the father, the intimate touching family you did not have, and you will find a blueprint for parenting, Become the father you longed for. We heal ourselves by learning to give to our children what we did not receive. "

When I read this, especially those last lines, I had a physical feeling that bypassed conscious mind. I felt it in my body before I could even think. What it told me was the thing I missed most in my life was a father I never knew. Although I had no way to get to know my father directly or personally, I had every opportunity to get to know him by becoming a father myself. I should not let fear or and rationalizations to stand in my way.

So Jessica and I made the conscious choice, and soon she was pregnant.

Almost before I knew it, she was having contractions and we were driving to the hospital on a mid-December night. I remember leaves blowing across the empty streets and I remember the moon shining down on us.

We had all these plans – we had a doula and a birthing tub. We read all the books and had a specific birth plan. And almost none of what we planned happened. It was incredibly fast and scary and -wonderful. Within three hours there was this little girl. I caught her and cut the cord. She was so small and so beautiful. I fell in love immediately. I stayed up the entire first night and held Ariana in my arms. She slept on me. The next day I changed her first diaper and gave her the first bath.

These moments were life-changing for me. And I wanted to be there for everything with every part of me.

For the first three years of Ariana's life I was a stay-at-home dad. While mommy worked and finished school, I took care of our little girl. I dressed her, changed her, put her to sleep... I remember night after night of walking up and down the hall with her in my arms, trying to get her to sleep. And suddenly she was crawling and talking and walking. Then came the play dates, playgrounds, the swim lessons and dance classes. Time just flew by.

When I was a child, my mother was always working and there was really no one there to provide boundaries or direction. I never had a set bedtime, specific time to do my homework, or chores. I didn't realize it at the time, but things were so much more complicated and confusing to figure out for myself. I want Ariana to have a structure that she can depend on – or even rebel against. It's important that she gets to bed on time, brushes her teeth, does her homework, is polite and respectful. It's also important that she has space to have lots of fun. That she dreams and lets her imagination be as active as possible. And it's important that she feels safe and that she feels love. - In abundance.

I look at her now. She's about to graduate from Kindergarten and she is becoming herself. I am her father and Jessica is her mother, but I can see her beginning to take charge of becoming the person she wants to be. I am not really in control. This is wonderful and terrible. Frustrating and delightful. And I wouldn't miss it for anything.

There's a long way to go and I am still getting to know who I am as a father. I can love her, protect her, and be there for her. I can also make mistakes and usually it all works out. There is something peaceful about knowing that. This is something I can do. I've gotten to know the father inside me, and he's an ok guy.

I've done a lot of things in my life. But the thing I am most proud of is being Ariana's father. There's a part of me that thinks and hopes that maybe my father would be proud of me.