

WHAT'S A GOOD FATHER?

Sunday is Father's Day, a permanent national holiday signed into law in 1972 by President Richard Nixon. A natural question – either contemplated or asked out loud – is “What makes a good father?”

An answer to that question was offered by the late Erma Bombeck, one of the nation's best-loved syndicated columnists. Called *At Wit's End*, her column was published three times a week in 900 of the nation's newspapers, including *The Cleveland Daily Banner*, where I worked. It was easily our most popular feature.

Erma and her husband, Bill Bombeck, were told by doctors that having a child was improbable, so they adopted a girl, Betsy, in 1953. Despite the former diagnoses, Erma gave birth to a son, Andrew, in 1955, and had her second son, Matthew, in 1958. Here is what she wrote about a father:



I received a letter from a single mother who had raised a son who was about to become a dad. Since he had no recollection of his own father, her question to me was, “What do I tell him a father does?”

When my dad died in my ninth year, I, too, was raised by my mother, giving rise to the same question, “What do fathers do?” As far as I could observe, they brought around the car when it rained so everyone else could stay dry.

They always took the family pictures, which is why they were never in them. They carved turkeys on Thanksgiving, kept the car gassed up, weren't afraid to go into the basement, mowed the lawn, and tightened the clothesline to keep it from sagging.

It wasn't until my husband and I had children that I was able to observe firsthand what a father contributed to a child's life. What did he do to deserve the children's respect? He rarely fed them, did anything about their sagging diapers, wiped their noses or fannies, played ball, or bonded with them under the hoods of their cars.

What did he do?

He threw them higher than his head until they were weak from laughter. He cast the deciding vote on the puppy debate. He listened more than he talked. He let them make mistakes. He allowed them to fall from their first two-wheeler without having a heart attack. He read a newspaper while they were trying to parallel-park a car for the first time in preparation for their driving test.

(more)

If I had to tell someone's son what a father really does that is important, it would be that he shows up for the job in good times and bad times. He's a man who is constantly being observed by his children. They learn from him how to handle adversity, anger, disappointment and success.

He won't laugh at their dreams no matter how impossible they might seem. He will dig out at 1 a.m. when one of his children runs out of gas. He will make unpopular decisions and stand by them. When he is wrong and makes a mistake, he will admit it. He sets the tone for how family members treat one another, members of the opposite sex, and people who are different than they are. By example, he can instill a desire to give something back to the community when its needs are greater than theirs.

But mostly, a good father involves himself in his kids' lives. The more responsibility he has for a child, the harder it is to walk out of his life.

A father has the potential to be a powerful force in the life of a child. Grab it! Maybe you'll get a greeting card for your efforts. Maybe not. But it's steady work.

Even beyond her grave (Erma died in 1996), her wisdom still resonates. She was able to touch hearts with her talent.

– Beecher Hunter

