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Frankenstein: In Search of My Father



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The two characters, Victor and the creature, have the most opposite beginnings, which contribute to their experiences and shape their viewpoints. Victor Frankenstein is born into an upper-middle class household in Geneva, with doting parents. He describes his childhood as one of great joy and happiness and that,

"No human being could have passed a happier childhood than my self. My parents were possessed by the very spirit of kindness and indulgence. We felt that they were not the tyrants to rule our lot according to their caprice, but the agents and creators of all the many delights which we enjoyed (Shelley).

It is this background which gives the monster's first years of life such stark contrast. When the monster received life by Victor, he was immediately abandoned by his creator. Frankenstein, who instantly abhorred his creation, fled his attic where his monster was taking in the first sensations of life. Unlike a regular newborn, the daemon is able to remember the bombardment of sensations when he received life, and is therefore more vulnerable (in a psychological manner) than a traditional baby because of his ability to later analyze what transpired.

Unable to discern his surroundings and unable to communicate, he is essentially a newborn left defenseless. The fact that his creator abandons him at his first breath will leave an even larger emotional impact in the monster, eventually contributing to his decision to wreck vengeance on his creator who deserted him at his most vulnerable moment. After several days of life, he is alone, in the forests near the town of Ingolstadt, still unaware of a multitude of basic things which allow for everyday comforts and successful survival. "I was miserable wretch; I knew, and could distinguish, nothing; but feeling pain invade me on all sides. I sat down and wept (Shelley)."

Frankenstein: The Creature speaks

"It was dark when I awoke; I felt cold also, and half-frightened, as it were instinctively, finding myself so desolate. Before I had quitted your apartment, on a sensation of cold, I had covered myself with some clothes; but these were insufficient to secure me from the dews of night. I was a poor, helpless, miserable wretch; I knew, and could distinguish, nothing; but feeling pain invade me on all sides, I sat down and wept....

.....The vegetables in the gardens, the milk and cheese that I saw placed at the windows of some of the cottages, allured my appetite. One of the best of these I entered; but I had hardly placed my foot within the door, before the children shrieked, and one of the women fainted. The whole village was mused; some fled, some attacked me, until, grievously bruised by stones and many other kinds of missile weapons, I escaped to the open country, and fearfully took

refuge in a low hovel, quite bare, and making a wretched appearance after the palaces I had beheld in the village....

.....I was, besides, endued with a figure hideously deformed and loathsome; I was not even of the same nature as man. I was more agile than they, and could subsist upon coarser diet; I bore the extremes of heat and cold with less injury to my frame; my stature far exceeded theirs. When I looked around, I saw and heard of none like me. Was I then a monster, a blot upon the earth, from which all men fled, and whom all men disowned?

"I cannot describe to you the agony that these reflections inflicted upon me: I tried to dispel them, but sorrow only increased with knowledge. Oh, that I had for ever remained in my native wood, nor known nor felt beyond the sensations of hunger, thirst, and heat!

But where were my friends and relations? No father had watched my infant days, no mother had blessed me with smiles and caresses; or if they had, all my past life was now a blot, a blind vacancy in which I distinguished nothing. From my earliest remembrance I had been as I then was in height and proportion. I had never yet seen a being resembling me, or who claimed any intercourse with me. What was I? The question again recurred, to be answered only with groans.

....."As I read, however, I applied much personally to my own feelings and condition. I found myself similar, yet at the same time strangely unlike to the beings concerning whom I read, and to whose conversation I was a listener. I sympathised with, and partly understood them, but I was unformed in mind; I was dependent on none and related to none. 'The path of my departure was free;' and there was none to lament my annihilation. My person was hideous and my stature gigantic. What did this mean? Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination? These questions continually recurred, but I was unable to solve them.

"Cursed, cursed creator! Why did I live? Why, in that instant, did I not extinguish the spark of existence which you had so wantonly bestowed? I know not; despair had not yet taken possession of me; my feelings were those of rage and revenge. I could with pleasure have destroyed the cottage and its inhabitants, and have glutted myself with their shrieks and misery."

"And now, with the world before me, whither should I bend my steps? I resolved to fly far from the scene of my misfortunes; but to me, hated and despised, every country must be equally horrible. At length the thought of you crossed my mind. I learned from your papers that you were my father, my creator; and to whom could I apply with more fitness than to him who had given me life?"

"At this time a slight sleep relieved me from the pain of reflection, which was disturbed by the approach of a beautiful child, who came running into the recess I had chosen, with all the sportiveness of infancy. Suddenly, as I gazed on him, an idea seized me, that this little creature was unprejudiced, and had lived too short a time to have imbibed a horror of deformity. If, therefore, I could seize him, and educate him as my companion and friend, I should not be so desolate in this peopled earth.

"Urged by this impulse, I seized on the boy as he passed and drew him towards me. As soon as he beheld my form, he placed his hands before his eyes and uttered a shrill scream: I drew his hand forcibly from his face, and said, `Child, what is the meaning of this? I do not intend to hurt you; listen to me.'

"He struggled violently. `Let me go,' he cried; `monster! ugly wretch! you wish to eat me, and tear me to pieces--You are an ogre--Let me go, or I will tell my papa.'

"`Boy, you will never see your father again; you must come with me.'

"`Hideous monster! let me go. My papa is a Syndic--he is M. Frankenstein--he will punish you. You dare not keep me.'

"`Frankenstein! you belong then to my enemy--to him towards whom I have sworn eternal revenge; you shall be my first victim.'

"The child still struggled, and loaded me with epithets which carried despair to my heart; I grasped his throat to silence him, and in a moment he lay dead at my feet.

"I gazed on my victim, and my heart swelled with exultation and hellish triumph: clapping my hands, I exclaimed, `I, too, can create desolation; my enemy is not invulnerable; this death will carry despair to him, and a thousand other miseries shall torment and destroy him.'"

"As I fixed my eyes on the child, I saw something glittering on his breast. I took it; it was a portrait of a most lovely woman. In spite of my malignity, it softened and attracted me. For a few moments I gazed with delight on her dark eyes, fringed by deep lashes, and her lovely lips; but presently my rage returned: I remembered that I was for ever deprived of the delights that such beautiful creatures could bestow; and that she whose resemblance I contemplated would, in regarding me, have changed that air of divine benignity to one expressive of disgust and affright.

"Can you wonder that such thoughts transported me with rage? I only wonder that at that moment, instead of venting my sensations in exclamations and agony, I did not rush among mankind and perish in the attempt to destroy them."

In the Absence of Fathers: A Story of Elephants and Men

By [Fr. Gordon J. MacRae](#) June 20, 2012

Wade Horn, Ph.D., President of the National Fatherhood Initiative, had an intriguing article entitled “Of Elephants and Men” in a recent issue of *Fatherhood Today* magazine. I found Dr. Horn’s story about young elephants to be simply fascinating, and you will too. It was sent to me by a TSW reader who wanted to know if there is any connection between the absence of fathers and the shocking growth of the American prison population.

Some years ago, officials at the Kruger National Park and game reserve in South Africa were faced with a growing elephant problem. The population of African elephants, once endangered, had grown larger than the park could sustain. So measures had to be taken to thin the ranks. A plan was devised to relocate some of the elephants to other African game reserves. Being enormous creatures, elephants are not easily transported. So a special harness was created to air-lift the elephants and fly them out of the park using helicopters.

The helicopters were up to the task, but, as it turned out, the harness wasn’t. It could handle the juvenile and adult female elephants, but not the huge African bull elephants. A quick solution had to be found, so a decision was made to leave the much larger bulls at Kruger and relocate only some of the female elephants and juvenile males.

The problem was solved. The herd was thinned out, and all was well at Kruger National Park. Sometime later, however, a strange problem surfaced at South Africa’s other game reserve, Pilanesburg National Park, the younger elephants’ new home.

Rangers at Pilanesburg began finding the dead bodies of endangered white rhinoceros. At first, poachers were suspected, but the huge rhinos had not died of gunshot wounds, and their precious horns were left intact. The rhinos appeared to be killed violently, with deep puncture wounds. Not much in the wild can kill a rhino, so rangers set up hidden cameras throughout the park.

The result was shocking. The culprits turned out to be marauding bands of aggressive juvenile male elephants, the very elephants relocated from Kruger National Park a few years earlier. The young males were caught on camera chasing down the rhinos, knocking them over, and stomping and goring them to death with their tusks. The juvenile elephants were terrorizing other animals in the park as well. Such behavior was very rare among elephants. Something had gone terribly wrong.

Some of the park rangers settled on a theory. What had been missing from the relocated herd was the presence of the large dominant bulls that remained at Kruger. In natural circumstances, the adult bulls provide modeling behaviors for younger elephants, keeping them in line.

Juvenile male elephants, Dr. Horn pointed out, experience “musth,” a state of frenzy triggered by mating season and increases in testosterone. Normally, dominant bulls manage and contain the testosterone-induced frenzy in the younger males. Left without elephant modeling, the rangers

theorized, the younger elephants were missing the civilizing influence of their elders as nature and pachyderm protocol intended.

To test the theory, the rangers constructed a bigger and stronger harness, then flew in some of the older bulls left behind at Kruger. Within weeks, the bizarre and violent behavior of the juvenile elephants stopped completely. The older bulls let them know that their behaviors were not elephant-like at all. In a short time, the younger elephants were following the older and more dominant bulls around while learning how to be elephants.

MARAUDING IN CENTRAL PARK

In his terrific article, "Of Elephants and Men," Dr. Wade Horn went on to write of a story very similar to that of the elephants, though it happened not in Africa, but in New York's Central Park. The story involved young men, not young elephants, but the details were eerily close. Groups of young men were caught on camera sexually harassing and robbing women and victimizing others in the park. Their herd mentality created a sort of frenzy that was both brazen and contagious. In broad daylight, they seemed to compete with each other, even laughing and mugging for the cameras as they assaulted and robbed passersby. It was not, in any sense of the term, the behavior of civilized men.

Appalled by these assaults, citizens demanded a stronger and more aggressive police presence. Dr. Horn asked a more probing question. "Where have all the fathers gone?" Simply increasing the presence of police everywhere a crime is possible might assuage some political pressure, but it does little to identify and solve the real social problem behind the brazen Central Park assaults. It was the very same problem that victimized rhinos in that park in Africa. The majority of the young men hanging around committing those crimes in Central Park grew up in homes without fathers present.

That is not an excuse. It is a social problem that has a direct correlation with their criminal behavior. They were not acting like men because their only experience of modeling the behaviors of men had been taught by their peers and not by their fathers. Those who did have fathers had absent fathers, clearly preoccupied with something other than being role models for their sons. Wherever those fathers were, they were not in Central Park.

Dr. Horn pointed out that simply replacing fathers with more police isn't a solution. No matter how many police are hired and trained, they will quickly be outnumbered if they assume the task of both investigating crime and preventing crime. They will quickly be outnumbered because presently in our culture, two out of every five young men are raised in fatherless homes, and that disparity is growing faster as traditional family systems break down throughout the Western world.

Real men protect the vulnerable, not assault them. Growing up having learned that most basic tenet of manhood is the job of fathers, not the police. Dr. Horn cited a quote from a young Daniel Patrick Moynihan written some forty years ago:

“From the wild Irish slums of the 19th Century Eastern Seaboard to the riot-torn suburbs of Los Angeles, there is one unmistakable lesson in American history: A community that allows a large number of young men to grow up in broken homes, dominated by women, never acquiring any stable relationship to male authority, never acquiring any rational expectations for the future – that community asks for and gets chaos.”

Larry Elder: Dorner - Another Angry Fatherless Black Man With a Gun

My new book, "Dear Father, Dear Son," talks about the No. 1 social problem in America -- children growing up without fathers.

In 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote "The Negro Family: A Case for National Action." At the time, 25 percent of blacks were born outside of wedlock, a number that the future Democratic senator from New York said was catastrophic to the black community.

Moynihan wrote: "A community that allows a large number of young men to grow up in broken homes, dominated by women, never acquiring any stable relationship to male authority, never acquiring any rational expectations about the future -- that community asks for and gets chaos. Crime, violence, unrest, unrestrained lashing out at the whole social structure -- that is not only to be expected, it is very near to inevitable."

Today, 75 percent of black children enter a world without a father in the home.

Divorce is one thing, where, for the most part, fathers remain involved both financially and as a parent. When I pressed the point of murdering ex-cop Christopher Dorner's father, one local news source told me his father apparently died when Dorner was small. He was reportedly raised, along with his sister, by a single mom. Little else is known.

In the documentary "Resurrection," rapper Tupac Shakur, who was raised without a father, said: "I hate saying this cuz white people love hearing black people talking about this. I know f r a fact that had I had a father, I'd have some discipline. I'd have more confidence."

He said he started running with gangs because he wanted to belong, wanted structure and wanted protection -- none of which he found in his fatherless home. "Your mother cannot calm you down the way a man can," he said. "Your mother can't reassure you the way a man can. My mother couldn't show me where my manhood was. You need a man to teach you how to be a man."

Why is it when white murderers go on a rampage, the media quickly delve into the relationship or lack thereof with the killer's father? They want to know what went wrong with that relationship -- and when and how and why.

After Adam Lanza massacred 26 people and his mother in Newtown, Conn., NBC News reported: "A source close to the family said that in 2001, (father Peter) separated from Adam's mother, Nancy, but he still saw Adam every week. In 2009, the Lanzas officially divorced, when Adam was 17. ... But the source close to the Lanza family said that by 2010, Peter Lanza was dating a new woman, whom he later married, and Adam suddenly cut his dad off."

After Jared Lee Loughner murdered six and wounded 13 people in Tucson, Ariz., The Associated Press

wrote that Loughner's "relationship with his parents was strained." Newsweek quoted a Loughner neighbor who described the father as "very aggressive, very angry all the time about petty things -- like if the trash is out because the trash guys didn't pick it up, he yells at us for it."

After Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold killed 13 at Columbine High, one did not have to search long to read about their fathers. One such piece began: "The father of one of the boys was asked some years ago to jot down his life's goals in the memory book for his 20th high school reunion. His answer was succinct, straight forward and, it seemed, not unrealistically ambitious: 'Raise two good sons.'

"The other father prided himself on being his son's soul mate. They had just spent five days visiting the Arizona campus where the teenager planned to enroll in the fall, and recently discussed their shared opposition to a bill in the state legislature that would have made it easier to carry concealed weapons."

Five days after James Holmes killed 12 in the movie theater in Aurora, Colo., we learned from the Daily Mail all "about the glittering career of James Holmes' father, Robert, who has degrees from Stanford, UCLA and Berkeley and currently works as a senior scientist at FICO in San Diego." The article's headline was, "Did Colorado maniac snap after failing to meet expectations of brilliant academic father?"

But what about Christopher Dorner? The media seemingly imposed a no-fly zone of silence over even writing or talking about his father.

The Los Angeles Times, for example, wrote: "Dorner grew up in Southern California with his mother and at least one sister, according to public records and claims in (his) manifesto." Not one word about the father. We soon learn the mother's name and whereabouts. But the media are apparently incurious about Dorner's father. Why? Is it that the media expect a certain level of appropriate behavior from whites -- that when a white person commits a heinous act, we must necessarily explore what kind of relationship he had with his father?

But when it comes to black miscreants and their fathers ... crickets. Why? To ask raises uncomfortable questions about the perverse incentives of the welfare state, which hurt the very formation of stable, intact families -- the ones more likely to produce stable, non-paranoid children.

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Barack Obama: *Dreams from my father* (pages 26-27)

There was only one problem: my father was missing. He had left paradise, and nothing that my mother or grandparents told me could obviate that single, unassailable fact. Their stories didn't tell why he had left. They couldn't describe what it might have been like had he stayed. Like the janitor, Mr. Reed, or the black girl who churned up dust as she raced down a Texas road, my father became a prop in someone else's narrative. An attractive prop—the alien figure with the heart of gold, the mysterious stranger who saves the town and wins the girl—but a prop nonetheless.

I don't really blame my mother or grandparents for this. My father may have preferred the image they created for him—indeed, he may have been complicit in its creation. In an article published in the *Honolulu Star-Bulletin* upon his graduation, he appears guarded and responsible, the model student, ambassador for his continent. He mildly scolds the university for herding visiting students into dormitories and forcing them to attend programs designed to promote cultural understanding—a distraction, he says, from the practical training he seeks. Although he hasn't experienced any problems himself, he detects self-segregation and overt discrimination taking place between various ethnic groups and expresses wry amusement at the fact that "Caucasians" in Hawaii are occasionally at the receiving end of prejudice. But if his assessment is relatively clear-eyed, he is careful to end on a happy note: One thing other nations can learn from Hawaii, he says, is the willingness of races to work together toward common development, something he has found whites elsewhere too often unwilling to do.

I discovered this article, folded away among my birth certificate and old vaccination forms, when I was in high school. It's a short piece, with a photograph of him. No mention is made of my mother or me, and I'm left to wonder whether the omission was intentional on my father's part, in anticipation of his long departure. Perhaps the reporter failed to ask personal questions, intimidated by my father's imperious manner; or perhaps it was an editorial decision, no part of the simple story that they were looking for. I wonder, too, whether the omission caused a fight between my parents.

I would not have known at the time, for I was too young to realize that I was supposed to have a live-in father, just as I was too young to know that I need a race. For an improbably short span it seems that my father fell under the same spell as my mother and her parents; and for the first six years of my life, even as that spell was broken and the worlds that they thought they'd left behind reclaimed each of them, I occupied the place where their dreams had been.

The Heart Grows Smarter
By DAVID BROOKS
Published: November 5, 2012

If you go back and read a bunch of biographies of people born 100 to 150 years ago, you notice a few things that were more common then than now.

First, many more families suffered the loss of a child, which had a devastating and historically underappreciated impact on their overall worldviews.

Second, and maybe related, many more children grew up in cold and emotionally distant homes, where fathers, in particular, barely knew their children and found it impossible to express their love for them.

It wasn't only parents who were emotionally diffident; it was the people who studied them. In 1938, a group of researchers began an intensive study of 268 students at Harvard University. The plan was to track them through their entire lives, measuring, testing and interviewing them every few years to see how lives develop.

In the 1930s and 1940s, the researchers didn't pay much attention to the men's relationships. Instead, following the intellectual fashions of the day, they paid a lot of attention to the men's physiognomy. Did they have a "masculine" body type? Did they show signs of vigorous genetic endowments?

But as this study — the Grant Study — progressed, the power of relationships became clear. The men who grew up in homes with warm parents were much more likely to become first lieutenants and majors in World War II. The men who grew up in cold, barren homes were much more likely to finish the war as privates.

Body type was useless as a predictor of how the men would fare in life. So was birth order or political affiliation. Even social class had a limited effect. But having a warm childhood was powerful. As George Vaillant, the study director, sums it up in "Triumphs of Experience," his most recent summary of the research, "It was the capacity for intimate relationships that predicted flourishing in all aspects of these men's lives."

Of the 31 men in the study incapable of establishing intimate bonds, only four are still alive. Of those who were better at forming relationships, more than a third are living.

It's not that the men who flourished had perfect childhoods. Rather, as Vaillant puts it, "What goes right is more important than what goes wrong." The positive effect of one loving relative, mentor or friend can overwhelm the negative effects of the bad things that happen.

In case after case, the magic formula is capacity for intimacy combined with persistence, discipline, order and dependability. The men who could be affectionate about people and organized about things had very enjoyable lives.

But a childhood does not totally determine a life. The beauty of the Grant Study is that, as Vaillant emphasizes, it has followed its subjects for nine decades. The big finding is that you can teach an old dog new tricks. The men kept changing all the way through, even in their 80s and 90s.

One man in the study paid his way through Harvard by working as a psychiatric attendant. He slept from 6 p.m. to midnight. Worked the night shift at a hospital, then biked to class by 8 in the morning. After college, he tried his hand at theater. He did not succeed, and, at age 40, he saw himself as “mediocre and without imagination.” His middle years were professionally and maritally unhappy.

But, as he got older, he became less emotionally inhibited. In old age, he became a successful actor, playing roles like King Lear. He got married at 78. By 86, the only medicine he was taking was Viagra. He lived to 96.

Another subject grew up feeling that he “didn’t know either parent very well.” At 19, he wrote, “I don’t find it easy to make friends.” At 39, he wrote, “I feel lonely, rootless and disoriented.” At 50, he had basically given up trying to socialize and was trapped in an unhappy marriage.

But, as he aged, he changed. He became the president of his nursing home. He had girlfriends after the death of his first wife and then remarried. He didn’t turn into a social butterfly, but life was better.

The men of the Grant Study frequently became more emotionally attuned as they aged, more adept at recognizing and expressing emotion. Part of the explanation is biological. People, especially men, become more aware of their emotions as they get older.

Part of this is probably historical. Over the past half-century or so, American culture has become more attuned to the power of relationships. Masculinity has changed, at least a bit.

The so-called Flynn Effect describes the rise in measured I.Q. scores over the decades. Perhaps we could invent something called the Grant Effect, on the improvement of mass emotional intelligence over the decades. This gradual change might be one of the greatest contributors to progress and well-being that we’ve experienced in our lifetimes.

A version of this op-ed appeared in print on November 6, 2012, on page A29 of the New York edition with the headline: The Heart Grows Smarter.

Leonard Pitt interview NPR Fathers

ED GORDON, host:

I'm Ed Gordon, and this is NEWS AND NOTES.

This Sunday is Father's Day, but not everyone will be celebrating. People who have absent fathers or abusive fathers may see the holiday as a painful reminder of a troubled present or past.

Pulitzer Prize winning columnist Leonard Pitts grew up with a disappearing, alcoholic father, but he's gone on to be a role model for his own children. So, what makes the son of an absent or abusive father into a good dad himself? That's the theme of Leonard's book, *Becoming Dad: Black Men and the Journey to Fatherhood*.

Pitts spoke with NPR's Farai Chideya.

FARAI CHIDEYA reporting:

Tell us first about your father. Was he ever kind to you?

Mr. LEONARD PITT (Author, *Becoming Dad*): Few and far between, I guess were his kindnesses. And not - I don't remember kindnesses specifically to me, but there were times when he would come in when he was not drunk, and he was not in a mood. And the house would be a lot lighter than it would otherwise be. He would be - he would be very fun to be around. He'd be, you know, laughing and cracking jokes. And, you know, he'd make you laugh. So, in that regard, yeah.

CHIDEYA: Did you ever want to kill him?

Mr. PITTS: Yeah. I remember probably the last major fight that, you know, went on in the house was the one where he - it's detailed in the book - the one where he pulled a gun for the second time - a rifle for the second time, and where I wound up with a cut across my face. And I remember jumping on his back and pounding the side of his head. And I really wanted to, you know, at that point, I really wanted to take him out.

I was a little older then, you know, and I think, you know, as you get older, you've got all these pent up resentments and emotions and you're older now; you can do something about it. So, you know, yeah, I think at that point, I would like to have done that, in that moment.

CHIDEYA: So how did you heal those wounds when you became a father and were you afraid to be a father?

Mr. PITTS: I think I was afraid to be a father, but the thing is that I was a father before I had a choice in the matter, really. I fell in love with a woman who already had two kids. As for healing, I think writing the book was my way of healing, to tell you the truth. I don't even think that I'd realized that there was something that needed to be healed until I got into writing the

book and dealt with a lot of these men and their unresolved feelings towards their father and the realization that I had a lot of those same feelings and needed to do something about it, or else see it carried forward into the next generation, which I did not want to do.

CHIDEYA: You profile a series of men who had absent or abusive fathers, some of whom went on to abuse other people in their lives...

Mr. PITTS: Mm-hmm.

CHIDEYA: ...some of whom became exemplary fathers like yourself...

Mr. PITTS: Right.

CHIDEYA: Give us an example of just two of the men that you spoke with.

Mr. PITTS: Oh, my goodness! There was a gentleman that I met in Yonkers. This guy, in another life, you know, could have been president of the United States or could have been chairman of the Federal Reserve or something, because he just had this magnetism about him. And yet, the fact that his father - I believe his father was abusive, if I'm recalling the story correctly. And, you know, the life that he had lived with his father just sort of sent him on this downward spiral of drugs and of misdeeds.

And he had wound up abusing the woman who he said was, you know, life and breath to him. And he was in recovery when we met and was trying to salvage his life. But I just looked at this guy and then, it's like, what could you have been, had your life not taken, you know, this detour?

There's another gentleman that I interviewed - a guy named David - who, at first, assured me that he didn't want his father's approval, you know, it didn't matter that his father had ignored him and mistreated him. And, you know, we sort of left the interview there. And then, at the end, as I'm walking out, he says - he whispers almost to himself - even now, I want his approval, even now. And it's sort of like, you get this sense of, you know, of how he has lied to himself about this so much and for so long that I don't think even he realized how much he was hurt by the fact that his father had not been there for him.

CHIDEYA: This book focuses on African-American men. And you have pictures and descriptions, and interviews with people...

Mr. PITTS: Mm-hmm.

CHIDEYA: ...from many different walks of life. What are the special challenges that face African-American men and African-American fathers?

Mr. PITTS: The challenges that face us as African-American men and as fathers are multifold. And I guess they all, you know, many of them spring from the same place that a lot of other African-American woes spring. It's, you know, from racism in the society. But then I think what's happened is that we, you know, our families have sort of mutated in response to this to

where it has become the norm that dad is not home; it's not an exception. What's an exception, what's "weird," and several people in the book reference this, is when dad is home. When mom and dad are married with children, I think that's regarded as outside the norm, as something that's weird.

I think the challenge that we face as African-American men is to reclaim our place in our families and in our communities. The challenges that we face is to understand that our value to our communities and our homes goes beyond the monetary, which is where everybody always stops, you know. But that we as men bring something special to a household that cannot, by and large, be duplicated by women.

CHIDEYA: Can you tell us about Mark(ph) and Germaine(ph), both of whom ended up dealing with unexpected pregnancies when they were teenagers...

Mr. PITTS: Yeah.

CHIDEYA: ...and you talked to these two young guys.

Mr. PITTS: Yeah, I interviewed them. I had not planned it that way, but they basically book-ended one another. Germaine was a kid who grew up with, you know, essentially no father and with a mom, who, you know, was rather abusive, as well. And he, you know, was in and out of trouble and suddenly he's expecting a child. And he's saying that, I don't know, you know, I don't know what kind of father I'm going to be. I want to do better, but I don't know.

Germaine was a teenage father, also from a stable, you know, two-parent home in Los Angeles. And he faced, you know, fatherhood with a lot more confidence, with a lot more of a sense of, you know, knowing the territory, knowing the lay of the land and knowing that this was something that he could do.

What was really troubling to me was that after - toward the end of working on the book and after the respective children had been born, I went looking for both of them to find out, you know, how things were going. And Germaine, you know, was good and was progressing along and was upbeat. And Mark, I couldn't even find. It really spoke to me of the power of, you know, being raised in a stable environment versus, you know, sort of raising yourself on the streets.

CHIDEYA: At the same time, though, you come from a household where you had to deal with this abuse...

Mr. PITTS: Mm-hmm. Right.

CHIDEYA: Not absence, but abuse, and you became a good father. So what gives people like yourself the ability to transcend that?

Mr. PITTS: I tell people I was fortunate enough to have been raised by Wonder Woman. And I know that every boy idolizes his mom, but my mom was really something else. And I think the determining factor was that she had a way of instilling in us this fact, this idea that she had

expectations of her children. There were certain things that you just did not do if you were Agnes Pitts' son or daughter.

CHIDEYA: Can you give us a Father's Day message for anyone who may have had a difficult father or an absent father; maybe someone who is a young father who's looking for inspiration.

Mr. PITTS: I think that as the children of father's who are either absent or abusive, there's - we are one of two things: we are either a reflection or a rejection of dad. And I would encourage, particularly that young father, if your dad was not the father that you wanted him to be, then you obviously got to be a constant rejection of him. But the thing that you have to remember is that you are not there to be to that child the father that you didn't have. You're there to be the father that that child needs and wants.

CHIDEYA: Leonard, happy Father's Day.

Mr. PITTS: And happy Father's Day to you, too. Thank you very much.

CHIDEYA: Leonard Pitts Jr. won the Pulitzer Prize in 2004 for his syndicated column. His book is *Becoming Dad: Black Men and the Journey to Fatherhood*.

GORDON: That was NPR's Farai Chideya.

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I don't have any tattoos. I haven't developed a drug addiction. I'm in a stable relationship with a wonderful man. I've always been a straight-A student. Rather disappointingly, as I enter my mid-20s, I have come to realize that—at least on the surface—I am a daughter that most parents would agree has rather avoided the classic pitfalls that might cause them sleepless nights. And, while recognizing that I am extremely lucky, this list of somewhat dubious accomplishments (if being too squeamish to get a tattoo might be called that) also makes me rather cross. Because I've never understood why my father might not want to know me.

Now, it's not that I'm perfect. In fact, I'm a long way from it. But he doesn't know me well enough to *know* that I'm not perfect. He's only ever heard the positive headlines, never witnessed the tantrums and trauma behind them. Despite doing everything in a rather boring, conventionally "correct" way, and never having given him an excuse to intermittently exclude me from his life, he's never wanted to feature more than passingly in mine. I neither deserve nor want pity, as I have a wealth of loving relationships that more than compensate for his absence. But, over the last year or so, I've become increasingly reflective on what our cultural take on fathers is.

If the importance of fathers is emotional as well as financial, as the late 20th century psychological literature has affirmed, what discourse is in place for those who are missing one? And if that discourse seems to rest on our overwhelming sense of loss or inability to form healthy relationships with men, what is in place for those who have defied this?

Our conception of fatherless daughters derives almost entirely from psychoanalytic theory. The narrative that fatherless daughters are damaged isn't a useful one. It provides too easy a get-out for those who want to ignore the fact that the most important factors to allow lone parents and their children to flourish are social and economic support.

But the cultural vision of the father-role has failed to evolve in any positive way since the mid-20th century. The surviving trope is largely redundant, just as the image of the fatherless daughter is negative and largely false. Of course, experiences of fatherlessness are stunningly varied. I'm not claiming that all children who have grown up without a father figure emerge unscathed. Rather that having one image of fatherlessness isn't useful, and our weak but pervasive image of fatherhood contributes to this.

Modern families are increasingly complex entities, and—despite the complications and tensions arising from this—are stronger and more beautiful for it. It seems to me that the traditional meanings attached to "fatherhood" have failed to keep up with the shape of our families. We are slowly coming to recognize the multiple ways that families might be healthy and loving, and are reinterpreting the traditional "nuclear" family into something more diverse and accepting. Is it time to re-examine what our images are of fatherlessness?

I suspect that my feelings toward my father's absence have been more stimulated by the cultural perception of the essentialness of paternal love than by any tangible privation. We've certainly changed our understanding of lone mothers. Might it be time to formulate a new and more

nuanced understanding of what it means to be the *child* of a single mother? There are many of us around, quietly going about our daily lives, without ever having been taken to play football in the park (my mother was more one for taking me swimming; again, not exactly a deprivation), trying to avoid the look of "Oh, you must be unable to form meaningful relationships with men/have abandonment issues/have a difficult relationship with your mother."

No really, I'm fine. I just want to know why he doesn't want to know me. And why I still care.

Let's acknowledge that all children should grow up in a loving and supportive environment, and that this can take many shapes and forms. Let's recognize that the heteronormative model of two-parent families isn't the only valid space to raise healthy and emotionally nourished children. Let's decide to evolve our ideas of what parenting means and how to do it well. Since fathers don't have to be biologically related to the children they're raising to be wonderful parental figures, and the embodiment of "traditional" fatherly attributes doesn't have to be male, what does being a dad actually mean?

It's not enough to rest on the tired trope of fathers-are-important-because-children-need-*men*. And nothing creeps me out more than the father-as-protector cliché (I learned to get up and brush myself off after falling over just fine, thanks). Fatherhood isn't about personifying gendered qualities or attributes. Fathers don't have a distinct role to play purely by virtue of their role in the procreative act, and certainly not a uniform one.

The fact is that there are many ways of being a good father, and it's about being a good role model of a *person*, not of a particular gender. I want my (future) children to have a relationship with their (future) father not because he's a man, but because he's another person to love and learn from, and he'll have qualities as an *individual*, not a gender stereotype. Parenthood for men should be an experience culturally articulated in all of its glorious modern messiness.

I think it's because there is no conversation about what fatherhood *means* that my father was able to "opt out." There is indeed a stigma around being an absent father. But this stigma doesn't do anything to help men who just don't know *how* to go about being a father. Perhaps he thinks the stigma of not getting involved at all is preferable to trying and failing.

Can we seek to understand what it means to be a father without prescribing the right way to be one? If we created a space to talk about fatherhood (a conversation that *must* engage women and children), we might be able to persuade more men that being a father isn't an "all in" or "all out" experience, and that positive fatherhood comes in many forms.

I don't want my father to be a 1950s stereotype, as he's clearly not cut out for that. But I do want him to know me.

Sarah Laing is studying for a PhD in London having graduated from Oxford University in the summer. She writes on women, masculinity, and mental health. She lives with her partner but regularly visits her lovely cat and terrifying mother.