Dads, give your sons a Father’s Day present

By Neil Chethik

Each year as Father's Day approaches, I'm reminded of the most important

words my own father ever said to me. They didn't come in my childhood or

even in my college years. They came as I stood at the door of full

adulthood, on the occasion of the sudden death of my paternal grandfather.

With Grandpa's passing, my father joined 125 million other Americans who no

longer had living fathers. Yet, even in that sorrowful moment, my father

was able to offer me something that virtually all sons need from their

fathers, but too few ever receive.

The year was 1984. I was 27, between writing jobs, living a few blocks from

my grandfather's small Miami Beach apartment. It was the first time in my

life that Grandpa was close by, and along with meals of pot roast and

potatoes, I soaked up the stories of his harrowing childhood in Eastern

Europe, desperate emigration and eclectic life.

Then one day, a doctor phoned. My grandfather had died.

The next day, I picked my father up at the airport. We drove in silence to

the hospital to identify Grandpa's body, collect his watch and wallet and

make arrangements to ship his body north for burial at my grandmother's side.

Then my father turned the key to my grandfather's home, and we began

sorting the material remnants of the old man's life. We discovered curled

black-and-white photos, passbooks, matchbooks, coins, coupons and a pack of

stale generic cigarettes. Working in different rooms, we'd occasionally

exclaim about a special find. Mostly, we sorted in silence.

We kept at it until the sun's glow waned, then collapsed in my

grandfather's heavily pillowed living-room chairs, glasses of the old man's

scotch in hand. We shared memories for awhile, then became quiet. As the

room faded into near-total darkness, I heard a guttural groan. It took a

moment to realize what was happening. I had never before heard my father cry.

I knelt by his side. After a couple of minutes, he spoke. ''I am crying not

only for my father, but also for me,'' he said. ''His death means I'll

never hear the words I've always wanted to hear from him: That he was proud

of me, proud of the family I'd raised and the life I've lived.''

And then my father uttered those words that continue to resound 17 years

later. ''So that you never have to feel this way too,'' he told me, ''I

want to tell you now how proud I am of you, of the choices you've made, of

the life you've created.''

Father-son relationships are almost always a struggle. In a survey I

commissioned for my book about how sons cope with their fathers' deaths,

55% of sons reported having regrets about their relationships with their

dads. One in five remained angry with their fathers, sometimes decades

after the older men's deaths.

My father and I had our difficulties. Yet they began to dissolve in the

calm resonance of the blessing he offered me in my grandfather's apartment.

In the months afterward, I felt stronger, more confident, as I restarted my

career. It was as if my father represented not only himself but also the

larger world, and I'd been accepted into it.

I've met other men for whom a father's affirmation had a powerful impact.

One recalled being beaten by his father when he was a rebellious teenager.

Twenty years later, the father, visiting his son for the first time since

he left home, walked gape-mouthed through the million-dollar homes

appointed with oak staircases and cabinets crafted by the younger man. The

son recalled the awestruck look on his father's face and his subtle

apology: ''I've underestimated you.''

That was enough for the son. A son will forgive his father for almost

anything if the son can hear -- in whatever way, at whatever age -- his

dad's genuine affirmation. Similar words from our mothers don't have the

same effect. Mothers, who bring us into life as extensions of themselves,

tend to love us no matter what. Not so our fathers. Whether for biological,

cultural or other reasons, a father's love often must be earned.

So this Father's Day, as we fathers accept presents and phone calls from

our sons, let's give a gift so many of them desire from us, but will not

request. Simple words, expressed sincerely: ''Son, I'm proud of you.''

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author of FatherLoss.