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What my father, who seldom called, taught me about my calling

by Jamie Manson

Grace on the Margins

I can't remember a time when I looked forward to Father's Day. For most of my life, I had the dubious distinction of being the child of what some refer to as a "deadbeat dad."

Deadbeat dads were those fathers who failed to pay child support, and who often ran off to another state (Florida and Arizona seemed particularly popular) and didn't keep in contact with their kids.

My father fit that bill perfectly, though he wasn't always a deadbeat. My parents were divorced by the time I turned three. And from the age of three to thirteen, I saw him every other Sunday. In his Suzuki Samurai, he drove the crushing, costly commute from his home in New Jersey to my home in the center of Long Island, to spend a few hours with me, usually bringing me to the movies and then to dinner.

And then in the early 1990s, his company moved from Manhattan to Allentown, Pa. He and many other colleagues were given a small severance package and left behind. Soon after, for reasons I never fully understood, he left the Garden State and headed for the Valley of the Sun.

The Samurai died of exhaustion soon after its cross-country trek. And my father, apparently, was gradually absorbed into a pod of deadbeat dads that I've always suspected exists somewhere just outside of Phoenix.

In the first months after his move, he called weekly. In one conversation, when I was a high school freshman, he told me he had met a woman half his age with two young daughters and was hoping to marry her. After that, the calls came in less frequently, and then, for a number of years, didn't come at all. He resurfaced some time when I was a senior in high school, professing his continued love and desire for

a relationship.

This cycle of reaching out, disappearing for years, re-entering my life with newfound commitment, and then quickly vanishing again became a pattern that characterized the next twenty years of our relationship.

Like many people who grow up with an emotionally or physically absent parent, this experience led me to pursue unhealthy relationships for years. I gravitated toward emotionally and/or physically unavailable people. And each of these pursuits ended with the same drama, disappointment, shattered hopes, and mental anguish.

A very good therapist helped me see that the root of this behavior was grounded in my experience with my father. I set myself up by pursuing people who, like him, were unavailable in the hope that I could somehow undo the harm of his repeated rejection. Armed with this new self-awareness, I was finally able to stop the madness of running after harmful relationships and gradually reoriented my time and attention toward healthy, available people.

My capacity for building relationships was finally on the right track. Except for one. And it wasn't until years after those therapy sessions that I realized that these old wounds were affecting my pursuit of a relationship with the Catholic Church.

Around the time my father left for Arizona, I entered my first year in Catholic school. Though I had been in public school for the previous seven years of my life, I was quickly swept up in the mystery and meaning of Catholic liturgy. Priestly ministry and the sacraments fascinated me. Even at the age of fourteen, I felt irresistibly called to be a part of it all, to serve God in the church. I wanted to immerse myself in the life of my parish and learn from our priests.

I was rejected at every turn. Female altar servers weren't permitted. Young women weren't allowed to work the evening shift in the rectory, which involved taking phone calls and dispensing Mass cards. That job, apparently, was reserved for high school boys only.

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I even visited the diocesan office of vocations, and spoke to the director for nearly an hour. The priest I met with said little, yawned a few times, and, when I finally concluded my story, handed me a magazine with tear out postcards that I could send to different religious orders of women.

I was crushed, but what was I expecting? I wanted someone to help me discern what God was trying to tell me. But I was seeking answers and acceptance in a patriarchal institution that refuses to believe that God calls women to ordained ministry.

It took years before I was able to differentiate what was an authentic calling to ordained ministry, and what were my old demons compelling me to pursue a relationship with a "metafather" who was certain to reject me.

I had to undergo a long and sometimes uneasy discernment to figure out what was an authentic passion to serve God and what was my falling back into the drama of an old, self-destructive pattern.

Eventually I understood that, for me, there is a crucial difference between wanting to be ordained and *needing* to be ordained. I realized that my calling to ordained ministry was a valid invitation from God, but that I no longer needed the validation of a small, privileged caste of men for my vocation to be true

and real.

The cyclical relationship that my father and I shared for two decades came to a sudden end late last summer. My father was found deceased of an apparent heart attack in his apartment by some co-workers who were concerned when he hadn't shown up to work.

As his next of kin, I took care of all of his final arrangements and affairs. For the first time in a long time, I felt important to him. Slowly, I have been able to make peace with him in a way that was not possible while he was alive. I have been able to see how much his parents had damaged him, and that the pain he suffered as a child was far greater than what I experienced.

It is not quite so simple in my relationship with the institutional church. As long as the hierarchy continues to degrade women, shame gays and lesbians, and refuse to account for protecting sex abusers I cannot make peace with their grave acts of injustice. For that reason, I will continue to fight for the dignity and just treatment of all those marginalized by the institutional church.

I can, however, make peace with that part of myself that sought ordination out of a wounded need for the approval of men.

As those needs began to pass away, I began to see clearly that God offers innumerable opportunities to be a sacramental vessel in the world. And I opened myself up to experience God's ordination through the people who welcomed me and called me forward to share my gifts.

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her columns for *NCR* earned her a first prize Catholic Press Association award for Best Column/Regular Commentary in 2010.]

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