

## *Fatherhood – The Unsung Voice of Masculinity: A Narrative Study*

A recent production of Robert Anderson's play *I Never Sang for My Father* concludes with the line: "When you say the word 'father' it matters".<sup>1</sup> The focus of the play centers on the turbulent relationship between a father and his young-adult son dramatizing the son's search for love and approbation from his father and the father's stubborn insistence on blind obedience. The conflict between the protagonists underscores the son's quest for an affectionate and meaningful relationship and the father's inability to abandon his overbearing patriarchal stand, thereby condemning both to an experience of mutual rejection and isolation. The father's death at the end of the play poignantly attests that it is too late to make amends. The name of the play serves as a metaphor for the son's lament regarding the loss of what could have been a caring relationship and the perpetual silence of the father, which intimates strong positive emotions that are never articulated. As Gene the son claims: "Death ends a life but it does not end a relationship."

The centrality of fatherhood in the play is echoed in a research study I conducted with six men in midlife. I highlight Moshe's narrative, one of the fathers who had participated in the study, in order to explore the perceptions and significance men attribute to their fathering experiences. I begin with a brief discussion of relevant theoretical approaches

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**Key words:** *Fatherhood, gender, masculinities, young adults, midlife.*

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1. The play was produced by the Steppenwolf Theatre Company, Chicago, Ill. 2004, directed by Anna D. Shapiro, featuring Kevin Anderson as the son and John Mahoney as the father.

and their importance in furthering our understanding of what is involved in fathering young-adults after military service in Israel. Moshe's narrative shows the connection between empathic fathering and the construction of masculine identity. The insights gained from his life-stories enlarge our understanding of the complexity of fathering in Israel and illuminate hidden aspects of masculine experience that are often left unspoken.

Psychological theories of human development beginning with Freud (1938), Erikson, (1968); Marcia et al., (1993), Levinson, (1978, 1996), are typically constructed in a way that treats the masculine paradigm as the norm. This approach tends to valorize autonomy as the preferred goal for raising male and female children. The ability to achieve autonomy is seen as a major task in the process of attaining self-differentiation that culminates in adulthood. Dependency is viewed in a negative light, and the failure to achieve independence is thus considered a flaw in the necessary process of forging an adult sense of identity.

Traditional patriarchal world-view considers parenting to be women's work and tends to be associated with mothering young children. In this context motherhood is perceived as central to the identity in women, whereas fatherhood is often considered secondary to the perception of male identity. Masculinity tends to be defined in professional and career terms that are expressed in the public domain, while feminine concerns with relationships and intimacy are relegated to the private, domestic sphere. This polarized view creates built-in tension between gender related modes of parenting as well as to what is deemed appropriate for male and female psychological development.

A major change in the discourse on the meaning of femininity, and by extension of masculinity, occurs in Carol Gilligan's seminal work *In a Different Voice* (1982). Gilligan creates a new direction in the conceptualization of feminine notions of moral development. Instead of stressing detachment and autonomy she emphasizes the importance of mutuality and connection, claiming that the process of constructing an adult sense of self must be seen in "relational" terms. Gilligan challenges the notion of

autonomy as the goal to strive for in human development. She stresses the psychological and ethical importance of connection suggesting in a revolutionary move that such an approach is applicable to men as well, thus broadening the perception of masculine functioning in the familial sphere. She criticizes Freud's psychoanalytic perceptions of femininity that often misunderstood the experience of women, as well as his limited view of masculinity:

*...Women not only define themselves in the context of human relationships but also judge themselves in terms of their ability to care... But while women have thus taken care of men, men have, in their theories of psychological development...tended to devalue that care. When the focus on individuation and individual achievement is equated with personal autonomy, concern with relationship appears as a weakness in women rather than as a human strength (Gilligan, 1982, 16-17) .*

It seems to me that "concern with relationship appears as weakness" in men as well. In Gilligan's scathing criticism of Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development (1985), she shows how he delegitimizes the importance that women attribute to "care and responsibility for others" by his demeaning interpretation of its significance as morally inferior. She emphasizes that women tend to see the world and behave in ways that take into consideration the needs of others first. This view is opposed to masculine morality which, according to Kohlberg, is motivated by the quest for personal "rights" and the pursuit of abstract "justice" disconnected from the concrete needs of others. Kohlberg considers this position to be the highest level in his scheme of moral development. Furthermore, he claims that this masculine approach is morally superior and that women's relational standpoint ranks lower in his scale of moral development. Gilligan, on her part, valorizes the attitude of "caring". She defines the conflict between

the "morality of rights" as "predicated on equality and centered on the understanding of fairness... While the ethics of rights is a manifestation of equal respect, balancing the claims of others and self, the ethics of responsibility rests on an understanding that gives rise to compassion and care" (Gilligan, 1982: 164-165). Thus, rather than finding "woman's ways of knowing" (Belenky et al. 1986) morally deficient, as Kohlberg asserts, she claims that it reflects "two different moral ideologies, since separation is justified by an ethics of rights while attachment is supported by an ethics of care" (Gilligan, 1982: 164-165), which she considers morally superior.

The issue of autonomy and separation becomes a vital concern for men in their fathering role, particularly during the young-adult developmental phase of their children. Researchers such as Popenoe (1996), Hawkins & Dollahite, (1997), and Lamb, (1997) challenged the premise that separation and autonomy from parents is a necessary part of young-adult's normative development. McAdams (2001) follows Erikson's (1985) theory of human development and emphasizes the notion of "generativity" in middle adulthood as expressed by empathic paternal functioning towards young-adult sons and daughters. It is in this context that one can view Gilligan's discussion of dependency versus autonomy and her consistent emphasis on caring. What is at stake here is her moral position that adults need to be responsible to others, stressing the inter-relatedness of human interaction. I will show the significance of this issue in my interpretation of Moshe's narrative.

While the feminist position on the importance of caring for others has been viewed as central to women's identity, the parallel notion that fatherhood is central to the identity of men is a relatively new idea. Theories dealing with varied perceptions of masculinities (Connell, 1995) also utilize feminist theories that promote the view that parenting is a joint endeavor, disconnected from gender and thus disconnected also from the reductive and essentialized notions of feminine and masculine construction of parental identities. This integrative vision creates a more complex construction of masculinity in which fathering and caring for one's offspring becomes central in men's

lives. It is important to stress, however, that this approach does not come at the expense of diminished autonomy. Rather, it offers a multilayered and seemingly paradoxical definition of fatherhood that is compellingly expressed in terms of men's masculine perception of self "in connection" with their young-adult sons and daughters.

Most theories dealing with fatherhood concentrate on fathering young children. These tend to be polarized in opposite directions; on the negative side, one finds "deadbeat Dads" who abuse or desert their children causing them physical and/or psychological harm: Faludi (1999) Osherson (1986; 1992) and Wallerstein and Blakeslee (2000) emphasize the destructive repercussions that result in negative and harmful fathering which extends well into adulthood. On the positive side, one finds "New Fathers" who chose to be "generative" and nurturing, devote substantial time and effort on behalf of their children, and view the experience of fatherhood as central to their male identity. Griswold, (1993) and Pleck (1993) emphasize the unique contribution of fathers to their offspring of all ages. The responsibility for parenting is thus currently perceived as a complementary task for both men and women, with fathering holding its own unique significance. This revised perception of parenting goes along with other changes that have occurred in the structure of contemporary families. I underscore the unique relationships that the Israeli fathers experience with their young-adult sons and daughters. I claim that the emotional and psychological significance of these experiences are sometimes silenced and often left unspoken due to the tendency to undermine and de-value nurturing and caring behaviors in men.

Fathering taps a reserve of meaningful male experiences in the following ways: It reveals feelings and ideas that show that important aspects of masculinity are constructed in caring and empathic ways; it shows that this is an essential part of men's lives; and that their participation in the lives of their sons and daughters significantly contributes to their own well being, as it contributes significantly to their young-adult children's lives. As Popenoe (1996) claims, fathers have a special role in fostering the capacity for empathy in their offspring:

*We don't often think of fathers in connection with the teaching of empathy; it would seem to be more in the province of mothers. But involved fathers, it turns out, may be of special importance for the development of this character trait. A twenty-six-year longitudinal study examines the relationship between parental behavior in early childhood and 'empathic concern in adults'...The researcher's main finding was quite astonishing: The most important childhood factor of all is 'paternal involvement in child care'. Fathers who spent more time alone with their children...reared the most compassionate adults...It is not yet clear why fathers are so important (Popenoe, 1996, 148-159).*

The importance of empathy is dramatically revealed in the lives of all the fathers I interviewed. A close analysis of their life stories points to the uniqueness of the paternal voice of Israeli fathers and its significance in the lives of their sons and daughters. The research findings clearly show that the men regarded the opportunity to explore the nature and meaning of their paternal behaviors and attitudes as a positive and liberating experience. It provided them a safe framework, perhaps for the first time, to delve into events and experiences that they experienced as fathers in a conscious and detailed manner. As researcher I found that focusing in on life-stories dealing with the vicissitudes of the men's relationships with their sons and daughters touches an extremely sensitive cord that illuminates hidden dimensions of fatherhood, particularly the men's deep capacity for caring and empathy. This insight offers a moving perspective on the contemporary perceptions of masculinity as “generative” and nurturing as it is represented here by Moshe's narrative. Although I have no intention to offer a sweeping generalization from one person's life-history, I find that his unique voice reveals significant dimensions of fathering as he perceives it.

My analysis of Moshe's narrative is based on Carol Gilligan's four level "Listening Guide" (Taylor, McLean Gilligan and Sullivan, 1995) which focuses on the following dimensions: (1) the life-story as it develops within the mutual interaction between

interviewer and interviewee; (2) Attention to what is not said, focusing on cultural, social and ethnic dimensions and how they bear on the way the interviewees talk about themselves; (3) stories dealing with stress, loss and psychological risk; (4) conflicts and patterns of "resistance" to cultural expectations.

## **Moshe's Story**

Jerome Bruner, a leading theorist in qualitative research, frames life-stories in terms of the ability to structure and make sense out of one's life. In "life as narrative" he claims:

*"... the ways of telling and the ways of conceptualizing that go with them are so habitual that they finally become recipes for structuring experience itself, for laying down routs into memory, for not only guiding the life narrative into the present but directing it into the future. I have argued that a life as led is inseparable from the life as told – or more bluntly, a life is not 'how it was' but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold (Bruner, 1987, 31).*

I find Bruner's position fruitful in helping to frame the events that Moshe relates in ways that help him make sense of the shifting trajectory of his life through the stories he chooses to tell. Moshe is a successful professional in the private sector who also teaches part time at a major university. He lives and works in a city in the central region of Israel. He is in his late fifties, married, and a father of four young-adult children, two sons and two daughters, all of whom completed their term of required military service. The sons are still on call for reserve duty and serve in the same brigade in which their father had served for nearly thirty years. The daughters served in the education corps, teaching soldiers from culturally disadvantaged backgrounds. Moshe is a warm, friendly man. He approached the topic of fatherhood thoughtfully and with great seriousness, initiating process of introspection and self-examination. The following segments are

highlights that revolve around his experience as a father.<sup>2</sup>

I opened the interview with the question: What is it like to be a father of young-adult sons and daughters after their military service?"

*...To give them good advice, to offer them guidance in dealing with problems they are facing. To listen to their anxieties. Be their friend. To be an older friend, like a big brother. There is no longer a distance between father and son. It's not the way things used to be between myself and my father. Things were not on eye-level then. Today it is more at eye-level. It's good for me. I did not try any other way.*

The lack of distance, the informal "eye level" relationship with his children, and the ability to "listen" to their problems characterize Moshe's approach to fathering. The following themes emerged from the interview: autonomy versus dependency; concern for children's safety in young-adulthood; comparison between fathering sons versus the experience of fathering daughters; recollections of his relationship with his parents as a young-adult versus his relationship with his sons and daughters in the present. Moshe's story reveals a wealth of material regarding his life as a father and a son, illuminating his attitudes and perceptions of his relationship with his young-adult children and its significance in his life. Regarding his relationship with one son Moshe says:

*He knows he can depend on his mother and his father to give him a shoulder [to lean on]. Back him up. I tell him my honest opinion not because he is my son. He knows he can talk to me and that he has me to turn to. I have no doubt that this is a good thing. For them it is certainly good. It is also good for me. What do I need to be authoritarian for?.*

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2. The interview was meticulously transcribed in order to present his experiences faithfully. I have not changed the wording, although I did reorganize the quotes in accordance with the themes that emerged during the interview. I translated Moshe's story with great care for precision and accuracy of meaning, making every effort to retain the tone and nuances expressed in his feelings and thoughts).

It is clear from the interview that his approach can be generalized to both sons. Moshe compares the open relationship he has with his sons and daughters to the relationship he had with his parents in the past. He shows that his relationship with his parents and especially with his father was one of mutual caring but also based on his desire to avoid burdening them with his problems.

*Life was tough enough then. Did they need to hear about my problems as well? For example, when I joined the paramilitary brigade, the "Nahal", I never told them that I became a paratrooper so as not to worry them. I did not tell them things that my own sons tell me. I was wounded. I was hospitalized for 20 days, [with my legs] full of shrapnel. Did my parents know that I was in the hospital? No, they did not. I didn't tell them. They thought I was on vacation... I was in the hospital for 20 days and did not let them know so that they wouldn't need to come to the hospital and worry that their son is wounded...In the final score, nothing serious happened to me. They took the shrapnel out. But things are different today. Now when a child is wounded, the whole family is with him in the hospital. (p. 8).*

As a son, Moshe takes on a parental role, making every effort not to worry his parents, preferring to put his own needs second. His relationship with his parents is described in protective terms. He does not share with them the nature of his activities in the army, the risks he takes, and ultimately not even the fact that he is wounded and hospitalized. Compared with the “eye-level” approach and camaraderie he describes regarding his relationship with his sons, Moshe's relationship with his parents depicts a sharply contrasting picture. His sons do not hesitate to "worry" him, and he, as a father, is fully aware of the dangers and risks they face. Moshe's familiarity with his sons' military life contributes to an open and easy-going relationship between them. The opposite is true for the kind of relationship he had experienced with his parents, which was marked by distance and a tendency to withhold vital information. This tendency creates a marked generational gap. It is important to note, however, that Moshe's attitude towards is

parents is based on a sense of responsibility and devotion to them and not out of disregard and callousness.

Moshe's story reveals subtle gender differences in the experience of fathering daughters compared with the experience of fathering sons.

*I don't think there's a difference. It is the same thing, only, see, my daughter will not come to me with just any problem. Because she knows what my attitude is towards, so called, petty problems... She knows that I look down on nonsense... like coming to me with a question, such as whether to buy this dress or that jacket, or whether to buy it this year or the next...She will turn to me...if she has a problem with money, or with job related problems. She did consult me on issues that came up during her army service such as if she had a confrontation with someone, [and asked] how to resolve the conflict. She will not turn to me with nonsense. She will never consult me on problems with her boyfriend. No. I hear about these things from her mother, if I hear about it at all. Sometimes they do not pass the information on to me. There is, so to speak, solidarity between women, really. [They] don't pass on information, as though I don't need to know. It hurts.*

*I feel that she has grown up somewhat over-protected. We should have let her do more on her own, so to speak, solve her own problems. It would have strengthened her coping abilities, not to have to come to her father for everything... It didn't happen like this, but I think it should have. But we are, as they say, Jewish parents. I think it is because she is a woman. After all, the male ego tends to protect the weaker sex, nu, they are only called the weaker sex... When she was in the army I was not worried about her safety. She was up in the north training new recruits. It was difficult but not dangerous.*

Moshe talks about his relationship with his daughters in ways that suggest ambivalence and considerable pain at having missed important aspects of their lives. Being a father bars him from the easy intimacy possible between mother and daughters, whereas he

does have such ease and intimacy with his sons. He frowns at one daughter's requests for help in matters that he deems petty and considers connected exclusively to female concerns. But, at the same time, he laments being left out of her emotional life, specifically regarding her relationship with her boyfriend.

Nevertheless, Moshe has a far greater knowledge of her life than his parents had regarding his own. He places great emphasis on the importance of raising daughters to become independent adults, and claims that he should have encouraged this aspect more in their upbringing. It seems that Moshe feels he may have been over-protective. It is important to note that he values independence but seems uncertain how to promote this in his daughters. There is no parallel ambivalence or confusion regarding the fostering of autonomy in his sons. In terms of his relationship with his sons Moshe says:

*Yes, the boys are tougher. They solve their own problems. They know that they are more independent and that they don't need to come to their father for everything. We can also laugh together about things... They went through the army in the same format that I had. They also served in a combat unit...This experience leaves its imprint for life. So we have a common language in this regard. I will not start talking about the army with my daughters... With my sons we have more of a common language. We have a common world.*

The natural camaraderie he experiences with his sons is based, among other things, on their ability to share army stories and the intimate knowledge he has regarding the intensity and the dangers involved in military operations. This is not true in terms of his perceptions of his daughters' military experience. He perceives their service as being "maybe difficult but not dangerous". The literal risk to life is the key to his expression of concern and worry. It makes perfect sense. But, at the same time, Moshe does not dwell on the specific hardships encountered by his daughters in their military service, not even in terms of their leaving home for the first time.

I asked him whether his army experience contributed to bringing him closer to his sons.  
Moshe replied:

*No. The closeness exists regardless. See, you can't compare the two kinds of military services. My sons served in Lebanon...I remember one particular battle in which my son participated...Some of his buddies were killed there. And we met with him, my wife and I, at the cemetery. Do you understand what I'm saying? He was still in his soiled battle fatigues. There was a period when I had two sons in Lebanon. So you can't compare their service with that of my daughters.*

...

*As far as the boys are concerned, I must say, I had the constant feeling in the back of my head... a pervasive feeling all the time [that] ...heaven forbid, nothing should go wrong. While taking a walk in the neighborhood, I hear on the news that several soldiers were killed in Lebanon... They were from my son's unit. It was not, listen, it was not an easy period, when they were both up there together for a period of six months - in the same squadron. I think that was enough! When they came home they slept all the time. They didn't talk, they were so tired.*

...

*Chava: How did you live with this?*

*Moshe: What can you do? Can you say: "don't take my child"? Or, can I say to my son: "Listen, get married, get a job"? It's his life...You see. When they are young you spread your wings to shelter them. You worry about them and you take care of them. When they grow older, you worry that they do no get into accidents.*

*There is always worry in being a father. I wish we could stop worrying. What does worrying help? Worrying is not constructive... So my son gets married. How will he manage? Will he find the right woman? You worry that he will not get involved with some nasty woman...The wise thing is to minimize the worry, but the worry is always there.*

The anguish Moshe goes through during his sons' tour of duty in Lebanon is poignantly expressed. His use of the wing metaphor "When they are young you spread your wings

to shelter them”, evokes a maternal image. He talks about his worry for their welfare, safety and happiness. It is no coincidence that this revelation comes after sharing the story about his sons’ combat experiences and their meeting at the cemetery. Moshe feels free to talk openly about such feelings in the context of his "worry" and fear for his sons’ safety in the face of their confrontation with death.

Indeed, this tendency seemed to characterize the life stories of all the fathers I interviewed. They tended to disclose memories and allude to events that posed risk and bodily harm to their children with great sensibility, revealing tenderness and profound concern and love. This tendency is underscored in numerous interviews conducted with fathers on Israeli television and radio programs, especially on Memorial Day for fallen soldiers. On this occasion, fathers are willing to express their grief in public. It seems to me that men feel that they have permission to speak out under conditions approved by Israeli society specifically for bereaved parents and limited to situations related to loss and trauma. Under ordinary circumstances, such an outpouring of paternal feelings would be considered unseemly.

Regarding his daily coping with the duties of parenting and the inevitable conflicts between commitment to his career and home life Moshe says:

*My wife functioned both as mother and father in many ways when they were small, because at that time I worked harder. This is one of the experiences I missed, I think, that I did not see them enough as they were growing up. I do not have memories...of their development as children. I think of this as a sorely missed opportunity. It is part of parenting, part of the nice experience of parenting...I tell you, I did not feel my older children growing up as I did with my youngest daughter. But as far as my children's childhood is concerned... that vanished, as though it had happened under some cloud, except for the trips we took together, which I remember fondly. But [memories] of daily events, that's all gone, as though it had been obliterated by some cloud, as*

*though my head was not in it. I don't think I was a bad father, and I am saying no such thing, I am only saying that...*

*Chava: There is some feeling of frustration?*

*Moshe: Yes.*

*Chava: If you were to give your sons advice regarding this issue today, what would you say?*

*Moshe: Do not become slaves to your job. Let them work less and also contribute, follow the children's growth. Why not? The whole burden fell to my wife... Marriage is a business. It is based on a contract. One person gives this, the other gives that and you reach a synthesis. No? Look, basically you wish to raise children who will become good people (mentches), right? In order for them to become a "mentch" you have to invest in them, educate them, raise them... The burden fell mostly to my wife.*

*Chava: So when did the switch occur?*

*Moshe: When I got smart. And one bright day I made a decision. It didn't happen one day. It was a gradual process. I decided to put a limit on my work hours, and decided not to work in the evenings. This way I could have more time for myself, not only for the family. And I saw that nothing bad happened...It was a change in my priorities. I came to the conclusion that, after all, you work from morning till night, and you don't have time for yourself and your family...what do you gain from this? This change had nothing to do with my eldest son's induction into the army. It was my work. You must understand that prior to this change I would come home around seven thirty, eight o'clock every night. And in our line of work you talk all day. And after work I couldn't talk for 2 or 3 hours. You just can't talk all the time...What kind of life is this? Not to be able to laugh a little, talk with my wife, with the children? It is a though I decided: "this is it!" From now on we change our life style. It was a good thing for everybody. It is important that it came relatively early. There are those who don't grasp this till a much later age.*

The "cloud" that Moshe mentions is a product of a gradual process of self-examination and personal reassessment in which he has been quietly engaged for the past ten years. He is not willing to accept the easy way out by making excuses for himself in terms of the need to build up his career and provide financial support for his growing family. Nor is it an expression of guilt. What makes Moshe's statements poignant is the powerful reference to missed opportunities: his absence from daily events in his children's lives that no level of economic success can replace or justify. He knows he had missed much in his children's growing up years, and that he cannot turn the clock back in order to regain the considerable quality time he had lost. This painful realization leads to a decision to make a substantive change his life. Moshe cuts down on his work hours, perhaps taking a cut in his earnings, so as to have more free time for himself and his family. He understands that he values his family as an entity and that it needs to be nurtured. It is also significant that he now views his parenting role as a joint endeavor to be shared with his wife, for the benefit of all concerned.

*It is in the genes, in our genes, I think. Don't you think so? This whole subject of the family...I think it is in the genes. It goes on from generation to generation and from one family to the other...The notion that the family as an institution conveys a sacred value is passed on to the children, and they absorb it from home.*

It is significant to note that in Israeli society, both religious and secular, the family is a central foundation in one's life, and its existence is considered to be a value in and of itself. This pattern, once again, seems to contradict the expectation that disconnection from one's family of origin is a necessary developmental task in the process of attaining a "good enough" state of adulthood.

In conclusion, I claim that the binary approach of what is considered appropriate for feminine and masculine functioning is undergoing great changes. One can be fatherly at any age without necessarily being a biological parent. Paternity may be considered in

maternal terms without losing the integrity of masculinity, just as women are no less feminine when they function autonomously. In contemporary parental discourse, it is possible to integrate opposite characteristics embedded in the social construction of gender, and claim for oneself attributes that were considered in the past to belong solely to one sex or another, with no sense of diminishment to either. This process adds to the depth and complexity of the human spirit in unanticipated but also liberating ways. Currently it is possible to widen the definition of fathering beyond the narrow confines of either feminine or masculine domains and enter the realm of ethical and spiritual endeavors where relationships based on mutuality and empathy play an important role. The ability to provide emotional support and nurture children of all ages is perhaps the unsung voice of masculinity.

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