

The life-changing gifts that children give their daddies

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There is an extraordinarily important gift embedded in the story of ABC newsman Bob Woodruff's roadside bombing survival in January 2006 and his family's ongoing recovery. The gift is the recognition that children have the power to affect their parents in very positive ways.

In the variety of media appearances surrounding the recent publication of Lee and Bob Woodruff's book, *In an Instant*, not enough attention has been paid to this gift. Written as a journal in two voices, the book is subtitled "a family's journey of love and healing." This journalistic pas de deux provides a candid and remarkable look

at the dynamic interdependency of families. Early into Bob's five-week coma, upon the counsel of an experienced neuropsychologist, to visit her father for the first time since his injury. As she talks soothingly to him, she gently kisses his cheek. Lee notes "a small tear was running down from the corner of his eye on the side where Cathryn was kissing him (defying all medical odds and explanations). He's crying — my only living proof that Bob was there — maybe that would have the power to heal him. Perhaps that kind of love would be strong enough to bring Bob back to us."

And Bob exclaims, almost immediately after suddenly and surprisingly awakening from his coma, "I need to see my kids!" He explains that

"my need to see them was visceral. My heart sped up. I took them in my arms in the biggest, most incredible hug I have ever known."

Research abounds to document the dramatic salutary outcomes in children's academic, emotional, and behavioral functioning when their fathers are positively involved in their children's lives and the negative consequences when fathers are physically or psychologically absent. Finding research that documents the important positive influences that children can have on parents is much more challenging — especially research to support the positive impact children can have on their fathers. That is one of the reasons I undertook qualitative research in three countries with dads,

granddads, and children. I've conducted hundreds of hours of one-on-one interviews concerning "daddyding."

I coined the term in 1994, to distinguish between the one-time biological act of fathering and the ongoing process that requires lifelong commitment. One hundred percent of the fathers and grandfathers I have interviewed have told me that being a dad enriches them. They tell me that being a dad:

- Reminds them of what is really important, of what needs are fundamental.
- Humanizes them by exposing them to a new, deeper kind of love.
- Positively diminishes their self-absorption.
- Broadens their way of looking at issues, situations, and possibilities.
- Teaches them the value of

vulnerability.

- Demonstrates the value of asking good questions.
- Helps them appreciate the responsibilities and obligations of power.
- Reminds them of the value of childlike qualities like playfulness, flexibility, and fills their lives with humor, imagination, enthusiasm, willingness to make mistakes, and a sense of wonder.
- Makes them laugh.
- Gives many of them greater appreciation for their parenting partner.

As a dad and granddad, I have learned what many dads I have interviewed shared: Being a parent teaches me to be strong and sensitive at the same time; it releases a tenderness that men don't much speak about; it takes love to a new level.

Bob and Lee Woodruff

understand that Bob's healing from his traumatic brain injury (like so many returning war veterans) will take a long time. Bob has said that the healing will never be 100 percent as he must relearn so many basic things. But, in this relearning there also is a wonderful opportunity to remember that miraculous tear that sprang from his daughter's tender kiss and the reciprocal opportunities parents and children have to strengthen and comfort each other.

If we each commit to seize these opportunities as often as possible, that would be the best gift of all.

Allan Shedlin is a former teacher, school principal, parenting coach, and researcher. Widely published in the popular and professional press, he has consulted, written and spoken extensively on the topic of fatherhood, including at the White House, as well as on radio and TV. As the founder of the **DADvocacy Consulting Group** and **REEL FATHERS** as well as the founding executive director of the National Elementary School Center, he believes strongly that fathers are important to kids, kids are important to dads and families and communities are better off when fathers and children are positively engaged in each other's lives.

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