

Father's Day

Written by Garry Lee Wright
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Of all the holidays generally recognized in North America, Father's Day has the most potential for confusion and complication, if not outright concussion. Thanksgiving, by contrast, is a snap. Everyone in America sits down to the same exact meal, then nods off as the L-tryptophan kicks in and the Lions game lurches toward halftime. You couldn't get better synchronization out of the June Taylor Dancers.

Other holidays, from Halloween to Valentine's Day to Christmas, also have safely predictable parameters. Once you've learned how to trick-or-treat, scheduled an annual transaction involving flowers, and bought a Santa tie or sweater with reindeer on it, you're set for life.

But in all these celebrations the star of the show is really the holiday itself. Not so with Father's Day, where the guest of honor might be a hero or a villain, noticeably present or painfully absent, a source of wisdom remembered or insanity not easily forgotten.

Mother's Day doesn't even play in the same division. The idea of motherhood is so fundamentally biological, so easy to understand, so pure and revered, that honoring Mom is as natural as childbirth itself. Fatherhood, on the other hand, can mean just about anything, and half the possibilities involve a lawyer.

Moms intuitively understand milk, cookies, and band-aids, but maternal instinct has no paternal equivalent; in most species, males are merely expected to impregnate the female, swallow an insect, and die. As a new biography of Dr. Spock points out, one of the pediatrician's groundbreaking suggestions was that fathers actually assist in the duties of child-rearing. Until that time, a dad's primary role in the home was to page through his newspaper, fill the room with second-hand smoke, and shout, "Can't you keep that little bastard quiet?"

Lacking direction about what constitutes a proper father, many Americans turned to TV. Predictably, those dads were as far from real life as they were from the actors who played them: *I Love Lucy's* lovable Ricky Riccardo (Desi Arnaz, an alcoholic and notorious philanderer), *Father Knows Best's* cheerful Robert Young (chronic depressive), *The Brady Bunch*

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's dad (Robert Reed, who was actually – oh, forget it). Not to mention

The Rockford Files

' Noah Beery, who never objected to being called "Rocky," and even let Jimmy borrow his truck.

That show was canceled before my own father died and after I became a father myself – for men, a fundamental change in the meaning of Father's Day – and I'm still surprised, saddened, and grateful to find that I'm much better at being a father than I ever was at being a son.

Plus, you get all those gifts. Which are a challenge for my kids because I don't play golf, hunt, or regularly use power tools. I do like to read books, however, so I hope they saw that display table of "books for dads" down at the local mall's bookstore, with its really impressive selection of books about golf, hunting, and using power tools.

The best present I ever got was a baseball glove, and the worst one was even better because my daughter made it herself. But nothing matches those gift-suggestion stories in the media, which get more desperate every year concocting ideas for the dad who has everything except testosterone. This year's best was about selecting an executive pocket knife, which I imagined in somebody's board room: "Bring up that earnings report one more time, Phil, and your aorta's going to be lying there next to the overhead projector."

Happy Father's Day, I hope, and feel free to call me Rocky.

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