

# Father's Legacy

*Rev Dr John Clements*

Family life isn't what it used to be. Even the word "family" has acquired meanings it never had fifty years ago. Single parents are now widely acknowledged to constitute a family – as are co-habiting couples and absentee fathers. The list of potential reconfigurations is endless; but the central fact remains: we can no longer be certain what a person means when he says "my family".

In consequence, we have to be careful what we say in company. "What does your father do?", for instance, is no longer the uncontroversial question it once was. If an interviewer asks it of a job applicant, or a schoolteacher of a pupil, or an executive of a sales representative, the answers may be rather less predictable than they were fifty years ago.

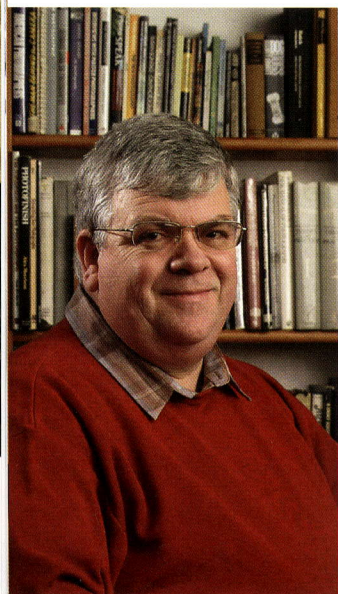
Let's consider how the youngest generation might reply, since they are the family-founders of the future. In any class of 30 pupils, about a third will be looked after by single parents. The absent father in these cases may have died in more or less tragic circumstances, such as illness, road accident, or violent attack; but a greater probability is that he has simply gone off with another lover.

So these particular children, when asked what their father does, can give only one answer. "I haven't got one", they would say – or, more likely these days, "I ain't got one." As families change, so does language.

Of the remaining two thirds of the class, a large proportion will have fathers whose absence is not due to extramarital activities but to the nature of their jobs – soldiers, long-distance lorry drivers, oilrig personnel, deep-sea fishermen.

Of fathers who actually live at home, some will be ultra-keen to climb the company ladder to success. A few may even run their own businesses. These dads, though notionally "present", will not be greatly in evidence. Often, they will treat the family house merely as a dormitory – leaving for work before the children are awake, and returning so late in the evening that a bedtime story is out of the question. Apart from the endless hours spent commuting, there is also overtime to be worked. And at the weekends...well, the football is on TV, and when that's finished there's always the local pub. Sunday, of course, is Reading Time: the papers are so massive they take all day to get through. Then, just before the sun goes down, the ritual car-washing ceremony has to be performed.

And the children witness all this, of course – but they are rarely involved in it.



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Let us not forget, either, those poor waifs whose fathers are the "bent pennies" of society, doing a lengthy spell in what the media euphemistically refer to as "secure accommodation".

So the proportion of pupils in that classroom who have the benefit of an adequate male role-model will amount, at best, to about five percent.

And even of those, how many could say that the paternal influence in their lives is a real man – a father who was not, in his own youth, sent away to the sterile environment of a boarding school, nor brought up by a hired nanny so that his own father might be free from the burden of parental responsibility? – And how many of those fathers had been the beneficiaries, when young, of a true male role-model worthy of admiration and imitation?

And, incidentally, how about you? What legacy were you given? What priceless birthright will you pass onto your children?

I return, then, to my initial statement: family life is just not what it used to be. Many single people may dream of the joy and fulfillment they will feel once they marry and produce children; but so few actually stay married, or provide any sort of meaningful influence in their children's lives.

Last century had seen two of the worst wars that the world had ever witnessed. A whole generation of men were slaughtered in the Great War of 1914 - 1918. What effect did this have? Well, it left the next generation of males with a big hole where their male-bonding capacity should have been! For a boy to learn how to be a husband and a father and a real man, he absolutely must have a role model.

When this fails to happen, girls also suffer – because they need their femininity confirmed, in a non-sexual way, by their fathers. And so their cry goes up from many a true-blooded woman, "Where can I find a real man? – A man who is truly excellent in conducting relationships? – A man who does not shy away from the arduous task of molding his character on the hard anvil of life?"

And we have to admit the basic good sense of these sentiments; for men do seem to be having a few problems with fatherhood these days. Why else are men's groups springing up everywhere we look?

Over the past decade, I have coached and mentored a large variety of clients – among them some outwardly-competent senior executives who, underneath all the bluff and back-slapping, are experiencing major problems with their family relationships. And when I trace the problem back, it almost invariably correlates with the legacy that the father handed down – or more often failed to hand down.





My own case history in this matter is rather a fortunate one. Of my generation, I belong to that small and happy group who had a real man as a father. He was not, of course, perfect in my eyes, nor had he any delusions of being so; he was purely and simply and moral and a conscientious man who sowed countless seeds of worth in my life. And I, as much to honour his memory as to advance my own career, continue to nurture them.

One of those seeds that took deep root in my consciousness was a story, which he recounted more than once, about one of his childhood heroes: a famous Indian mystic called Sadhu Sundar Singh, who lived at the turn of the century. Sundar wore the saffron robe that was the traditional garb of an Indian holy man; but, whereas other such orange-clad folk were Buddhists, Sundar Singh was in fact a Christian. Desirous of spreading his faith in a loving God, he regularly journeyed with his message of hope across the border into Tibet. On one occasion, when he was crossing the mountains in freezing weather, another traveler caught up with him. "May I accompany you through the pass?" the stranger asked. Sundar beamed. "Sir, you may! This journey is a lonely one, and your appearance as a companion can only be a gift from God!"

And so they trekked and talked together, discussing the potential perils of the mountain crossing: thieves, wild animals, and the changeable nature of the physical environment. As if to echo their words, a frightful squall blew up. Both men pulled their cloaks tighter against the biting wind and drizzle.

The weather deteriorated rapidly. Snow fell; a gale whipped up; and soon a blinding blizzard was battering the travelers. As they groped their way determinedly along the isolated mountain path, the cold seemed to penetrate to their very souls.

Silent now, they trudged through the snow, fighting for every step, each man absorbed in his own thoughts as if to distract the mind from the hostile elements. Then, at the same moment, both stopped, ears straining. A thin moaning sound could be heard just ahead. Between the eye-stinging gusts of sleet, Sundar discerned a human form lying on a ledge below the narrow pathway. Slithering down the slope, he placed a finger on the man's neck. There was a pulse!

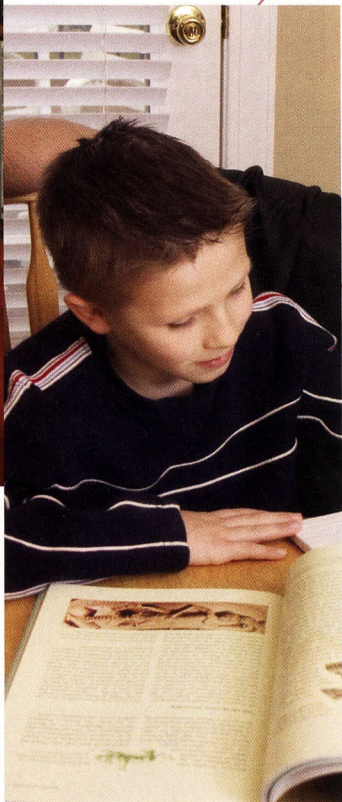
Heartened, he beckoned to his companion. The other shook his head. Sundar was perplexed. Here was a person needing help, yet the traveler was refusing to give it. Distressed but undaunted, Sundar began to half-lift, half-drag the snow-covered body back up the slope. With a final monumental heave – but no help – he pulled the frozen body back onto the main pathway.

Panting, Sundar quizzed his comrade about the unholy indifference he had shown towards a victim of circumstance. The traveler shrugged. "Sad though it is, we have to leave him. If we stop any longer, this weather will finish us the same way it has finished him."

"But he's still alive!" roared Sundar.

"Not for much longer, I fear. We both have a destination to reach, my friend. I intend to reach mine. If you hamper yourself with that man, whom God has seen fit to abandon on the mountain, then you will surely die here with him."

"God hasn't abandoned him!" raged Sundar. "He's sent us this way to save the man!"





But his words were carried away by the wind. The erstwhile companion had vanished into the blizzard.

Sundar paused a short while to recover from his exertions. Then, lifting the frozen man onto his back, he set off along the trail. The wind had surged into a tempest; walking with a man on one's back in such conditions was a superhuman feat. Yet Sundar trudged on, determined that the traveler's negative words would never be justified. He would persevere; he would overcome; he would survive!

Measureless hours passed, and Sundar trudged and trudged with his human payload. Skirting a snowdrift, he saw another human form sitting against a rock, ashen white and perfectly still.

Sundar called out, but the figure neither answered nor stirred. Approaching, Sundar touched him. The body fell over. This poor man was his former companion, who had ploughed on alone to his own destination but never reached it. Instead, his selfishness had led him into the jaws of death.

An even greater irony was in store. Just a short distance ahead, a Tibetan village hove into view. Sundar was known here, for it was his regular stopping-place for food and sleep. When the villagers saw the man on his back, they went wild with joy – for it was a Tibetan holy man that Sundar had saved!

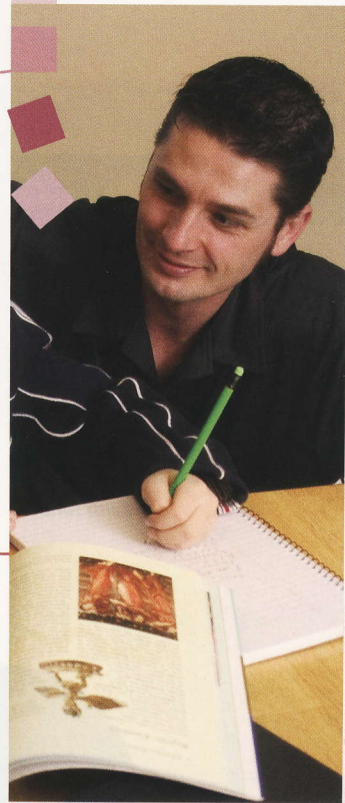
That day, Sundar was treated like a king. And as he partook of the villagers' hospitality, he reflected that both he and his new companion had survived only because they stuck together: the closeness of their bodies had generated a life-giving warmth that neither man could have produced alone. And this reminded him of a passage from the Bible: "The man who tries to save his life will lose it; but the man who risks his life for another will gain it."

Sundar's survival, then, was a natural consequence of his selfless act. It was his legacy from God.

What about you? Do you act in the ways that God prescribes, so that he may bequeath to you the many legacies that are your birthright?

And what legacy have you made provision to bestow, in your turn, upon your benefactors and your dependants? What mark will you leave for posterity to recognize that you existed?

If you have no immediate answer, perhaps you need to ponder the implications of Sadhu Sundar Singh's actions – and decide where the parallel lies with your own life.



**To gain true fulfillment,  
you need to provide true fulfillment.**

*Rev Dr John Clements is an international speaker and has authored several books, including Excellence Becomes You: Proven Principles To Raise Your Life From Mediocrity To Excellence. Make Your Walls Tumble: How To Change Your Impossible To Merely Difficult, Then Achieve Success.*

