



W14. Healing the Father's Heart: Addressing the Anger Within

Wednesday, June 5, 2019
4:15p.m. - 5:30 p.m.

Moderator:

- James Butler, Family Assistance Program Specialist, Office of Family Assistance, Washington, D.C.

Presenter:

- Kenneth Braswell, Executive Director, Fathers Incorporated, Dunwoody, Georgia

James Butler: Good afternoon. I am James Butler from the Office of Family Assistance and I am one of the programs specialists that works with the self-sufficiency branch, specifically working with TANF. I have the pleasure of presenting to most of you again, Mr. Kenneth Braswell for the session, Healing the Father's Heart: Addressing the Anger Within.

I think you have heard a lot about Ken during the session so far, but I'll read some brief things about him. He created Fathers Incorporated in 2004 and serves as the chief executive officer. He has provided capacity building services to thousands of organizations, working to ensure that fathers contribute to the healthy well-being of their children.

He was the Director of the New York State Fatherhood Initiative, overseeing more than \$11M in programs, conducting a comprehensive evaluation, and managing the New York State noncustodial earned income tax credit. He's also created three documentaries, Spit'in Anger, Dark Hearts, and A Queen's Discovery.

He's a speaker, trainer, media consultant on issues related to faith, family and fatherhood, and with a special focus on black men and boys. Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you once again, Mr. Kenneth Braswell.

Kenneth Braswell: I guess I'm the guy who's standing between you and dinner, or you and the pool, or you and the spa, or you and your family, or you and going home. Whatever those things are. I'm going to try to make this next hour impactful as well as informational. This is going to be a deep hour of conversation. This is the conversation that to this point in the summit, we haven't had a lot of time to really dig into.

My family and I moved to Atlanta, Georgia four and a half years ago, primarily because I got tired of shoveling snow. We had a winter with three snowstorms back to back to back, of 10





inches or more. I came home after the third one and was like, "We're out. I am too old to be shoveling snow." My children are going and the one that's in the house is not old enough to shovel snow. I'm not trying to invest in snow removal equipment. We just needed to get out. It was the right move. We are now enjoying three-digit degrees weather in Atlanta. I'd rather burn the hell up than freeze the hell down.

This past year our organization went through a strategic plan to change our narrative and mission. I have not memorized it yet, but our new mission is to engage, equip, and empower a community network of fathers and families by creating an environment of support, parental education, positive societal narratives, and a father focused blueprint to elevate the awareness of responsible fathers.

How many of you are practitioners? I would assume all of you? One of the things that we have to deal with when we're talking about fathers is the notion of father awareness; having a clear vision of fathers as a social group and an understanding of the different cohorts of fathers. We believe that fathers are monolithic, but they're not.

When we're doing this work and talking about fathers, we have to talk about them based on who they are. If you're talking about low income fathers, talk about low income fathers. If you're talking about rural fathers, talk about rural fathers. If you're talking about Latino fathers, talk specifically about the issues that Latino fathers are dealing with. Black fathers, white fathers, rich fathers, tall fathers, short fathers, fathers who ... You know where I'm going with this. It's critical that we have a father awareness. All of this work has to start with you talking about fathers. What do you know about fathers? These are just some of the things that we know to give you a base. As you know, the Ad Council is the lead contractor for the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, [and the Clearinghouse is] responsible for this summit. We work very closely with the Ad Council with respect to imaging. The fatherhood campaign is the number two campaign of the 69 campaigns that the Ad Council has historically done. Only to be surpassed by who? Smokey the Bear.

A couple of years ago we did a survey to really begin to start talking to fathers about their own thought process with respect to being fathers. We learned that 64% of dads say that the one thing that they're most looking forward to on Father's Day is spending time with their children and their families. They also understand the financial pressures that they're under being dads. Oftentimes when you talk to dads about being fathers, a lot of them will say, "I need some help. I need some advice. I need some understanding on how to be the best dad I can be." The challenge with that is they're not often in situations where they can ask for advice. Oftentimes they don't even know who to ask for advice. When I was interviewing Iyanla Vanzant she said to me that men don't have an acceptable language to express their emotional feelings as a man, as it relates





to love. Think about that. The language we use sometimes makes us feel vulnerable. We don't want to get so mushy. Why? Because that mushiness shows weakness.

About four years ago, I was at a maximum prison in Ohio. Those walls were so high it was scary. How many of you have gone and done ministry or work behind a wall? The most shocking thing is when you step through that first door and you hear that noise. And what goes through your mind when you hear that noise? Even if I wanted to leave right now, I can't.

Here are some of the current conversations as they relate to dads. Number one. In this country, fatherlessness has long since been viewed as one of the biggest contributors to many of our social ills. Meaning that if you look at the stats that are in our country today as it relates to our fathers, families, children, and our communities, you can find a thread of fatherlessness all the way through it. If you're talking about homeless children, 90% or 95% of homeless children come from a fatherless or father absent households. If you're talking about suicide, five times more children who commit suicide are from fatherless homes. Talk about poverty. Two out of three children whose fathers are not in their lives live in poverty. You can go down the line in the spectrum of social ills that our communities experience and you will see a thread of fatherhood statistics that follow it. What I really believe is, it's leading it. If we can get the fatherhood stuff out of the way, then the stuff in the background wouldn't be so detrimental to our communities.

The second thing is the current climate. Racial climate has all but suffocated the progress made on the image of fathers, particularly young African American fathers. We are struggling today with this imagery of young black fathers and who they are in the world, which is why I asked Bishop on the panel a very specific question, because you could have talked about all boys. As a father of a son, there is something that I labor with. How many of you have sons? Both men and women. There is something about specifically raising a black boy that causes you anxiety. There are things you believe you cannot protect them from, no matter how good of a parent you are. Bishop has four of them. I can't even imagine what that's going to feel like for him when his boys get to the age where they're out and he is sitting in the living room waiting for his four boys to come home. The only thing he can do at that point is hope that as a dad, he has given them all the information they need to make good decisions while they're out and make a safe path back to their house. That's the goal of all parents. I'm speaking specifically about this cohort because this cohort has to go through some things that many don't, in order to get back home.

I want to talk about the conversation of fatherhood and fatherlessness that is not confined to only black fathers. All absent father situations across the racial spectrum and social economic spectrum are rising; and we have to deal with the whole issue of fatherhood and father absence regardless of who we are. We know that some groups in the country are dealing with issues that others aren't. Think about this for a moment. Someone read that for me.



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Participant: The way you think and feel about dads is rooted in the foundation of what you know about dads.

Kenneth Braswell: Where have you learned the most lessons about dad from? From your father? What if you didn't have a father in your life?

Participant: Movies, television.

Kenneth Braswell: Movies. Coach. Television. Neighborhood.

Participant: Church.

Kenneth Braswell: Grandpa. Church. Media. Uncle. Right? The way we step into this work to do this work around fatherhood, we bring everything we've learned about fathers to that space. That's why this conversation today is so critical for practitioners. You think because you have a social work degree, business degree, psychology degree, therapist license, that somehow you are able to walk out the door and leave the issues that you have as a result of your father at home when you walk into the office. It cannot be done.

The critical work for us is to be able to recognize when pain has us harnessed. When pain has impacted us as it relates to fatherhood, and for so many of you ladies in the room, if you've had some level or measure of baby daddy drama, you're already struggling at work. You're on the ends, you don't know what's going to happen if you make one more mistake. And, on this particular day, the dad who's supposed to show up to pick up your children to take them to school is late. You're hot, he's hot, children are hot, and now you're on your way to work and in your mind you are hot because this man who was supposed to do what he said he was going to do, didn't. You walk into the office and the first client that walks in your door is a man who looks like who? He has on a white shirt. He had on a white shirt. Now not only do I hate men, I also hate white shirts, or whatever the recall is. Until you are able to release and unharness that anger as a result of that, you can't effectively deal with men walking in your door that day, particularly if that issue or that stuff is compounded and it's not only reminding you of that particular person, but it's reminding you of other men. It's reminding you of all the men that you dated that hurt you. It's reminding you that all the men that were supposed to be there and available in your life weren't. It reminds you of all the men that have disappointed you in your life, and that baggage builds and builds. When you're in a situation where your own dad is one of those men, it compounds it to the 10th power because every one of those men remind you of your own dad.





I've often told people, even in my own life, that even to this day, although I manage it much better, I have abandonment issues. Don't tell me you're going to do something and don't do it. I can hold high grudges for you for that, probably forgive you, but be hot. What it reminds me of is someone who said they were going to do something for me and didn't. It gives me anxiety about whether or not someone is trustworthy enough in my life to tell me the truth and that I can believe in them. Michael, stand up for a second. Michael's in a party and the party is going great. someone says, "Michael, what do you do for a living?"

Michael: I work with children.

Kenneth Braswell: What's the response?

Participant: Aww.

Kenneth Braswell: See how fast they come out with that? Because that's admirable work. What's your name?

Participant: Diane.

Kenneth Braswell: What do you do for a living?

Diane: I work with families and children.

Kenneth Braswell: What's the response?

Participants: Aww.

Kenneth Braswell: Mark works with fathers. Somebody says, "What do you do for a living?"

Mark: I work with fathers.

Kenneth Braswell: What's the response?

Participant: Fathers don't need to work.

Kenneth Braswell: Fathers don't need to work. What? You don't have anything better to do with your time? Why? Couldn't you use that money for to do something else with? Because the emotions associated with that brings you to this, the reason you feel that way about fathers is because when you don't have a good relationship, immediately when he says that, why are you





working with someone who makes you frustrated, who enrages you, who has not given you any love and doesn't empower you? I really have no feelings about that. I'm motivated by them, I'm confused, I'm emotional, and it's painful. It's a myriad of emotions, and you're confused because of the multiplicity of emotions, because one day you love them, the next day you hate them, because the father of your children didn't pick your children up on time. You're juggling all of these emotions. Think about this in the work that we're doing when it comes to this anger piece and you're dealing with fathers who are coming into your space. It's not the one emotion that you're dealing with. It's the complexity of emotions that you have in your psyche based on what you know, what you've been told and what you've experienced with fathers.

It is critical to understand this when you are working with fathers. It's also critical to understand this when you're in charge of employees and you have to figure out whether or not they're dealing with these issues. When you show up in a meeting and say, "You know what? I went to this awesome conference in Nashville and I got all this great information and I'm fired up. I really want to start a fatherhood program," and other people are like, "So when is lunch? When are we going to move on and do something else?" That's because nobody in your office wants to deal with that. Nobody wants to deal with all of those emotions every day that they walk into their building. That's why this work is not for the faint at heart.

This work is dealing with emotions everywhere you turn, policy, legislation, programming, training, and societal images. You're dealing with this and in order to get somebody to understand your point, you're navigating through this stuff so that you can pull them through without reacting to some emotion that they have based on something that they have not resolved yet, which is why I really love what the young lady said that was on the panel this morning from the DV space. When I first came into this space, when she talked about people protesting fatherhood events, DV was like, "Ooh." Even the first grants from the federal government made it mandatory that those grantees had to have a professional full-time DV person in the fatherhood programs. Their belief was, to her point, that we're trying to connect fathers back with families. What they really believed we were trying to do was connect abusive fathers with families and children. It took years for me in New York State to meet with the New York State Office of Domestic Violence, going back and forth trying to talk to them about what we were trying to do and showing them the outcomes of our program and what it is we were doing, before they began to loosen up a little. We got them to change the terminology in their brochures on their website, do training about male engagement in their offices, and train because what we were able to do was walk in there and say, "We get it. Why would I want my stepdad, who was an abusive person to my mom when I was growing up, in my mother's life, when I knew what kind of man he was? Why would I want to do that to someone else?" What you're not asking me right now is what is my own experience in that, because you're assuming that just because I'm a man, that abuse is something that I've never been associated with. I always tell people the story about one





time, my mother sent me to Auburn, New York. If you know New York, you know that it's out there. There's more snow in Auburn, New York than there is in Siberia. I believe it's because of the lake effect snow. It comes off Lake Erie, so they constantly have 20 feet of snow. My mother sends me up there from Brooklyn. I didn't know what I was doing, I must've been acting out. I get there, wake up the next morning, look out the window, and the snow is up to the window. I'm from Brooklyn. I'm like, "There can't possibly be any school today." I go in the kitchen, get some cereal, turn on the cartoons, and kick back. My stepfather comes downstairs and he's like, "What are you doing?" I'm like, "Eating cereal." He's like, "Why aren't you on the bus going to school?" I'm like, "Did you see the snow?" He's like, "There's school." I said, "There cannot be school." He was like, "There is school today." Sure enough, there was school. He made me walk a mile and a half to school, because I had not gotten on a bus. When I came back, I was hot like fire. Him and I got into an argument in the kitchen and that argument turned into a fight. There was a window behind me, and he had me in a choke. He had me in a headlock. He was choking me, and the window was behind me and my thought was to lunge back and throw him out the window, not realizing that if he went out, who else went out?

Participant: You'd go out too.

Kenneth Braswell: God takes care of children. I lunge back and I slip, and both of us hit the floor. I said to him at that moment, "You will not beat me like you beat my mother." It was a reactionary callback to how I remember him when I was an eight-year-old boy on the backhand side of a door, listening to him beat my mother and being powerless to do anything about it. But, now I'm 16 and still couldn't do anything about it. At least I was a little older to attempt it. What I remembered about that is something that has now infused into my work; and what I say to men is that you are today what the little boy in you has experienced, that will speak to you today.

Want me to say that again? You are today what the little boy in you has experienced, that will speak to you today. That little boy is always speaking to you because as a powerless little boy, he has to speak to the man in you, because the little boy never forgets. He's always speaking to you. So, whenever he speaks to you, whether it is negative or positive, whether it is what they've been told, what they've learned, or what they've not learned, we listen to the little boy because we have an intimacy with him, because he is us. It's mindful to note that when you're dealing with fathers and with the anger, that's what you're dealing with.

Now on the flip side, the love side, you're dealing with the same thing; when they have ultimate love for their dads, ultimate love for their men, and they had a great father in their lives. When you're talking to them, they will tell you the "I love James' Story." We aren't going to let him tell it today because we won't have time; but I'll tell you the abbreviated version for him. James grew up with his dad, and his granddad within three blocks of his house. He was father full, not father





absent, and not fatherless. He had no choice but to be brought up and influenced by powerful, respectful, healthy, sober-minded men. Now I'm watching how his sons have benefited from four generations of strong men.

I remember James asking me, "I don't know where I fit in this work," because he thought his story didn't fit in this work. I'm like, "Are you kidding me? You have to tell that story because your story is why we're here. That story confirms I'm missing what you had." I'm missing what he had and I'm envious, jealous, and angry and upset at what he had. All of those emotions move me forward and make me respond in a particular way. Conversational foundation for parenting. I have a program called Standing in the Gap: Single Mothers Raising Boys. What I believe is that single moms only have one perspective of being a single mom. That's from her own lens. I too have a perspective, because I was raised by a single mother. I can tell you about being a little boy and how I manipulated her, controlled her, moved her, and how my attitudes shift about her as my mom when I stopped seeing her as a mom and just another woman.

I could tell you some things about me as a little boy from that perspective that can help you in raising men. I have five foundational things that I think helps us in getting rid of some of the emotion and staying focused on the reality of what we're dealing with. The term single mom is not a denotement of parenting status. The term single mom, by the census, denotes marital status. When you hear the term, it only says that you are single. It does not speak to dad, which means that for every single mom, there is a dad ... dads are not missing. We haven't defined them, and we've mis-defined them. They don't think of themselves as single dads based on marital status. They think of themselves as absent dads. No, you're a single dad. If there's a single mom, you're a single dad. My wife and I have been married since we had our son. I am a married dad; but I also have children with women that I'm not married to, which also makes me a single dad. I'm both.

Participant: Pick a side.

Kenneth Braswell: Pick a side or own up to whatever it is. Right? It only denotes my marital status. So, in conversation, once I get you to say and agree with that, then we can move forward. Every child has a father. True or false?

Participant: True.

Kenneth Braswell: True, biologically every child has a father. If they state fathers don't exist, that's a lie. The question isn't if they have a father. The question is, where are their fathers? If you ask the question where, if you're really committed to this work, you're going to do the things you need in order to find him, which means in your intake, when you're working with moms,





you're going to ask her. It's amazing that you all overlooked that little small little nuance in TANF and child support. One of the most important questions that they ask mom is where is he? They ask that because they want to get reimbursed. You have to look at it from this vantage point when you're talking about that, so you know, so that you can debunk the myth that we don't exist. You don't even allow that conversation to take place. Moms and dads love equally, however, love differently.

The way you love your children isn't more important than how I love my children, it's just different. My youngest daughter from birth up slept on my chest. She's now 20 years old and when she stands next to me in an intimate space, what do you think my daughter does? She lays her head on my chest. My son is 10 years old. My wife would tell you from the time he was a baby I always rubbed his head all the way up. I rub his head whatever he's doing. When I leave, I rub his head, and I kiss him on the forehead. I'm always touching the top of his head. At a basketball game, if we're standing together and my hands are sitting like this, what do you think my son does? Puts my hand on his head. That's his connection to me. The relationship with his mom is like lioness and cub. I can't handle that. All that climbing all over you for no reason and falling off, pushing. I can't. You go do that with her. We have a different love relationship.

Participant: I'm adopted and to this day at 45 years old, I don't know who my biological parents are. My parents raised me with my adoptive father's name, and they were good to me, But there's not a day that goes by that I don't think about where they are, who they are, and what type of people they are. It never leaves. And only other adopted children understand that. It's a yearning that never leaves. I don't care if they're crack addicts, drug dealers or whatever, I just want to sit down and have a conversation.

Kenneth Braswell: Thank you for verifying what I know to be true from just talking to people. I will take that a little further which is, no matter how great your mentorship organization is, no matter how nice and good the new partner is in your life, no matter how much your child admires him, they will ultimately want to know, where's daddy? To your point. If he's a crackhead in jail, deceased, whatever. Where is my daddy, who is he, and what did my daddy have that has contributed to my not understanding why I do the things I do because it doesn't show up in my mom?

Why are all the men in my mom's family six foot seven, yet I'm five foot three and can't shoot or dance. My son right now is 10 and he's just growing. I'm looking at him like, I know that's not my side of the family because I'm the tallest one. My grandfather was short, my mother's shorter than me. My wife's brothers are 6'6, 6'7, 6'9, and bouncer built. On the basketball court I know where he's going, because I can see it. That's because I know what my family is about. It's critical to understand that.





The last one is this. A dad can be the best dad in the world, but he can't be a mom. A mom can be the best mom in the world, but she can't be a dad. You always have to flip the script and show the other side because on Mother's Day, how many memes do you see? Happy Father's Day to the single moms. That's an outright lie and misconception. I understand why they do it. They want to feel powerful; but, it is also painful because the reason they're doing it is because of the pain that they're experiencing that they haven't resolved yet. When I see that, I don't see it as a celebration, I see it as they have some things they need to deal with. This isn't about their empowerment, it's about his un-empowerment. For them to say I'm a dad, takes away who he is in my head.

You have to think about these things when you're working with families, moms and dads. Where are they in their mental space with respect to the unresolved pain and anger as a result of the relationships that they've been in, in their life. Are you good with this?

Participants: Yes

Kenneth Braswell: You can use this. Quote me the first couple of times and then take it and do as you will. If you get caught up in it, stick with it. Don't let people play words with you. There's no scenario that changes anything. In our Standing in the Gap class, if we can't agree with these five things, then you need to go, because I can't help you, at least not today, because in order for me to take you to the next step, you have to understand this one. Part of why you're struggling is because you're struggling with accepting this. That's hard, but you have to be hard with some people, especially when children are at stake.

In general, there is anger associated with the word father. True or false?

Participants: True.

Kenneth Braswell: Who said false, anyone?

Participant: Depends.

Kenneth Braswell: Value voting says depends is not a word we use. It's either true or false. I'm going to have to work with you. You have to press them because value statements speak to morals and values. If you tell me definitively whether you believe that is true or false, I can tell where your learning is from. But if you tell me it depends, it means you're running from the base that taught you what you believe, because you're trying to come up with an excuse to validate what you believe to be true.





Participant: What's the answer? Is it true or false?

Kenneth Braswell: It's your answer. It's what you've been taught. Here's another value statement. All men should pay for the first date.

Participant: True.

Participant: False.

It's not a right or wrong. It's what you believe. If she says to me, "That's true," that tells me something about how she's been raised and what she expects. That she's not too woman enough to let a man pay for her dinner. She's still empowered and still a woman. She still sings I'm Every Woman. When she walks out the door, she still expects you to open the door. It's not based on true or false, it's based on what you've been taught that tells me something about you. And the last one, absent father children should just get over it. True or false?

Participants: False.

Kenneth Braswell: Who says true? Nobody? Good. There cannot be any depends. You cannot just get over traumatic pain. There's a process to acknowledging it, naming it, dealing with it, and getting past it, but not get over it. It always feeds you in terms of your experience for things that you've run into deeper in life. I want you to watch this five-minute video. and then we're going to talk about it

Speaker 1: And I'm angry about that.

Speaker 2: It's one thing to be angry about losing your father due to illness, mortality, but it's a whole other thing. It takes it to another level when that father is present somewhere else, but not in the life of that child.

Speaker 1: I wish I could get him for five minutes in a room so I could express to him exactly how angry I am about what he did to me.

Speaker 2: Their egos can't deal with the fact that they've been abandoned.

Speaker 1: Because I didn't deserve that.





Speaker 3: It's when we do not deal with the unresolved pain, wounds, scars, and trauma of our childhoods, that it's going to come out in an unhealthy way.

Speaker 4: It really hurts to see that, you know, he spends more time with other children more than me because I am also one of his sons.

Speaker 1: And I don't want to admit that all the time.

Kenneth Braswell: I think when the father absence leaves that void, you know there should be a male presence in your life. And if you don't have that, then whether it's a sibling or other people in the community, it's this ideal thing that's in place with us as a community, as a nation, as a family that there's a mother and father. I think children even expect if I have a dad, this is what dads do. You look at children's narratives of fathers.

Children are really idealistic about what dads should be doing and how fathers are different than mothers early on. I think children have an expectation of having a dad and that's what dads do, whether it's a superhero or whatever that dad is. When it's not there, then there is this void because children expect to have a mother and a father.

Speaker 5: Really, for lack of a better word, I wouldn't say he hates his father, but he's more like, he wants to beat him up. It's like he has that type of anger like I just want to punch you in your face and then maybe give you a hug after that.

Speaker 6: What would that be?

Speaker 7: There's no words, no nothing. Not saying hello, hi. Nothing. Just smacking you.

Speaker 8: There's been times where he has reached out to his dad recently and it's been like, now I'm shot down, but you don't know me. But now I'm reaching out to you, giving you a chance to get to know me and don't even take that opportunity. And I feel that I don't get a chance to reach out to my dad because he's dead. And even when he reaches out to him, it's like nothing. I felt like we were in the same boat.

Speaker 9: The anger that a young man feels that the absence of his father is real. It's not a perception at all. And it's really in the spiritual paradigm of healing. We come from love and when we don't get the love we think we deserve, we become angry, and angry because the ego that drives us. But right beneath the anger is the hurt. But the hurt is what makes us vulnerable. So rather than go there and feel bad, we stay stuck in the anger. But if we could just go through the hurt, we'd fall back into love. So very often the young men, the fatherless sons won't give





themselves permission to acknowledge, to feel, to experience, to sit in the hurt when the truth is, they need to do that. But because of the fear of being vulnerable or the fear of looking weak or just not having the language or the skills to process the emotion, they stay stuck in the anger, and that anger just begins to expand.

Kenneth Braswell: Thoughts? That's a five-minute clip from a 60-minute documentary that we did, and that's just a small piece, it goes deep, deep, deep into it.

Participant: Anger is a defense mechanism. It's on the screen, but it's really not. They hide away from what they really want to discuss, what they're really feeling. They use defense to back up off me. I don't want you to impress me. I don't want you to determine what's causing the hurt inside.

Participant: I think about what was said, about not having the language to express what was going on because as she said, do you want to be in that vulnerable state?

Kenneth Braswell: This is a hard workshop to do in 60 minutes because there's so much to unpack.

Participant: If you work with young men, the main thing I've seen in terms of dealing with their anger, they try to mask that pain.

Kenneth Braswell: Absolutely.

Participant: Anger is a covered emotion, vulnerability and fear. Anger can't find or expend itself.

Kenneth Braswell: One of the other spaces that I go in, in this conversation is the difference between how boys and men harness that anger and how women and girls harness that anger and the results associated with that.

Participant: I just wanted to add on to what you just said. In my teenage years with my father being absent, I saw myself with more anger and it being expressed verbally, but in adulthood when I heard his story, I realized that he wasn't a father in my life because of something that was inherently wrong with me. He just wasn't a man at all. Once I was able to realize he wasn't that same type of man for all 11 of his other children as well, I began to realize that he just didn't have the capacity in him to be that dad. It freed me from the anger. It wasn't because I was flawed. It was more of he wasn't able to just do it.





Kenneth Braswell: It's interesting, I wish we had more time. I would tell you my story with respect to my father and my mom in association and what I've learned through this project. But one of the things I will say is that she has been speaking out since I've created this documentary. One of the things that she said to me about my father when she did become comfortable in talking to me about him was, "I'm sorry, because I did not know how much not having him in your life impacted you." So, she admitted that she just didn't know. So how can I be mad at that. My wife will tell you it impacted our relationship for about two years when she told me that, because what I learned is that it was intentional, because when she became pregnant, my father did want to marry her, and she said no because her father told her that she could raise me by herself. She moved from North Carolina to New York City with me and disconnected from my father at a time that you couldn't pick this up and go on Facebook and find my mom. We're talking 1963. She's told me a lot of things, but the third most significant thing she said to me was, "I never want you to be angry at a story you don't know." Part of what she's doing now is telling me the story. I forgive and release. I've forgiven and released some years ago. What she was saying was, "Who are you mad at? You don't even know the story." Now, the fault is, I didn't tell you the story, but the reality is you don't know the story. You can't be mad at a story you don't know if you've never spoken to him, never asked him the question, never found out why he did what he did, which oftentimes he did only what he was taught to do and what he believed he was able to do. I don't know if you saw the Will Smith Fresh Prince episode when his father showed up. In the first half of that clip, he says to Phil, "Oh, you're a better man than me." And he says, "Stop. Don't give me the BS. I stayed with my kids."

You can't compare your walk to someone else's walk. While you might have the stamina, because you also have the support mechanism to make a statement that I stood in, your situation may not be my situation. That emotion piece really makes that muddy because until we can accept that, we first have to accept that I have to forgive this man, because...I forgot...Someone said not forgiving somebody is like-

Participant: Not forgiving somebody is like drinking poison and expecting them to die.

Kenneth Braswell: That's what unforgiveness is and so you have to forgive people. That's a lesson that's hard for all of us to like, particularly forgiving someone we wholeheartedly believe deep in our hearts should have been there for us no matter what. The crazy thing about it is that the pain and anger isn't just relegated to absent dads, but men and women that I know who did not have their mothers in their lives, it is just as intense.

How many of you know who Eminem is? Listen to Eminem's songs? He's got some venom for his dad; but when he's talking about his mother, it is heart-wrenching when he talks about how his mother, and his mother was there. His father wasn't, but his mother was.





We're talking about fatherhood. It's parental absence. It unfortunately tends to happen more with dads, so that's the conversation we're having today. One of the things we have to give thought to is, who are we talking about? These are the images of what many of us grew up seeing as dads and all of them had different qualities. They all weren't perfect, but they had different qualities that we admired, and it's become somewhat of the template of what we believed the dad was supposed to be. We watched these shows growing up and said, "Oh, my father was James Evans." That was my hero. James Evans lived in the projects, we lived in the projects. He was poor. I was poor. He had a super that came down, we had a super. Everything that was his life was my life. I resonated with that.

One of the things I always tell people to consider is that you have to be able to, for the sake of the rose, water the thorn, because while these characters may not be the dads that you want to model after, you cannot ignore the elements and qualities that they have as fathers to their children. You always have to leave a glimmer of redemption. There might not be as much redemption, but you have to leave a glimmer because everyone can turn around, and you never know when that might happen. I have story, after story, after story of people who have fathers who have come back into the lives of their children when they were 55, 60, sick and have no one else to care for them but this child they abandoned. That child says, "He's my daddy. I got to take care of him." That is because a child will always give their parent a level of redemption. As practitioners and people who are doing this work, we can't do this work without also leaving levels of redemption for people to come into what it is we expect them to be responsible for; their children. So, characters like Homer Simpson crack me up. Someone said today he had Homer Simpson. He said, "This is not the father that we aspire to be." I said, "That's not necessarily true." When the Simpsons first came on 30 years ago, we were like, "He is off the hook. Bart is off the hook. The family's off the hook. Everybody's off the hook." But, over that 30 years, the qualities of Homer Simpson have emerged beyond the buffoonery. Those things have emerged over time as we've watched him in his relationship with his daughter, wife, and son.

