

Sal's Story

How one father dealt with his fear and anger

“Between the ages of 15 and 22, my daughter went through a very difficult time. It was, without question, the most difficult thing my wife and I had faced in raising our children. It was every father’s nightmare ... and was creating enormous strain and tension in our household, our marriage, and in my heart.

Over time, in trying my best to deal with all the problems and issues, and not succeeding at all, I found I was very angry. I’m talking about anger I had seldom experienced with the exception of a “flare up” or two which soon “cooled off” and my temperament returned to normal, whatever that is. This was different. It was unrelenting. There seemed to be no relief at all, which only made the anger worse. I became afraid of my own thoughts and the possibility of what I might actually do, should I lose control, which seemed to be a growing possibility.

It was clear my daughter had some problems, serious ones, but what was also becoming clear, is that I had some problems... and they were serious as well. Through a long night of struggle and prayer... one of the richest times of conversation I have ever had with God... I became convinced that my daughter was acting like a 15 year old... and so was I. I needed to change. I needed to take my eyes off her, and pay attention to my own life, my own heart.

Over time I began to realize my anger was fear based. My fear was raging out of control, and so my anger was raging out of control. The fear I faced was not complicated, it was based on two objects. The first was that I believed my daughter was going to die if she continued on the path she was walking; that simple. I believed it ... was certain of it. This is one of the greatest fears a parent can face, and will lead to much anger and extreme behavior. I had to face this fear head-on and understand that I could not control my daughter’s life, or keep her alive if she chose otherwise. I was not in control of my own life, much less hers. I had to give her to God, and let her live her life, with the trust that God alone could save her.

Something helped me to face this fear ... I imagined the worst scenario I could think of: she died, and I was at her funeral. I was able to vividly imagine this, even feeling the horribly painful emotions of that moment. I saw myself approach her coffin and looking down on her body. I then spoke to her, ‘I miss you so much, and I love you more than you could ever know.’ I reached a sort of imaginary closure with this possibility.

Within days, I found the opportunity to reveal this to my living daughter. I told her, ‘I am afraid that you are going to die, and it is just so hard for me to watch, I can’t stand it. But I know that your life is yours to live, it is not mine to control. I want you to know that I have come to grips with this possibility (I explained the imagined funeral), and I also want you to know that I love you more than you can imagine, and I always will. Nothing you ever do will stop me from loving you; of this I am now certain’.

The other object of my fear was actually harder to uncover, and far more “ugly”. To fear for my daughter’s life was noble ... what “good” father would not fear this? But the ugly truth is I also feared for myself, for the experience of pain I would feel, for the embarrassment of being revealed as a lousy dad, a lousy husband, a lousy man, a lousy Christian. The fear that everyone would now know the ugly truth of my failure. This fear is so enormously selfish that it was painful to even recognize and admit the truth of it. How could I think this way? What sort of selfish heart is this? Why was I so afraid of being revealed and possibly being rejected? This was a hard glimpse into a dark place in my heart.

Again, I had to face this fear head on. I had to prayerfully admit and confess that I was not a good dad, but a man who had a ton of issues and had made a ton of mistakes. I turned to God for forgiveness and accepted that other people, some quite close to me and some who's opinions mattered a great deal to me, may well reject the “real” me. I had to come out of hiding and face the reality of my life and my situation. I had to learn how to love my daughter without regard for my image, my hopes, my dreams and my expectations. I had to love her unconditionally, as God loves me. I am who I am, and that is not a pretty picture on many days, but with the help, love, and acceptance of God ... I am going to love my daughter ... no matter what. If some don’t accept me, or like me, or believe I am acting like a “good” father would act ... I’m OK with that. Before God, I have only one job to do with my daughter and that is to love her, starting now.

In facing my fears directly, and letting God show me how to deal with them, I found an amazing thing ... my raging anger went away. Love had room to grow, and it did. I also found the freedom to be real, to share openly with others, and to let others think as they will. I am not in control of anyone else ... Thank God”.