

Howard Dully's Dad

Howard Dully was a pretty normal kid – that is to say, he was a handful. He was big and active and hungry all the time, he loved his brothers and was jealous of them, and he didn't respond well to his stepmom, who was a tough disciplinarian. In other words, he resembled a lot of other twelve-year-old boys.

His father, who had pulled himself up from an impoverished childhood to a barely solvent adulthood, worked day and night to support the family. When his first wife had died, he couldn't quite break the news to the boys, so four-year-old Howard feared that his mother had simply left them.

Sometimes, to entertain himself when he was little, he would pull out all her pots and pans and see if he could stack them again beneath the sink.

As Howard grew, and as his dad took on a second job (and then a third, and a fourth), they less they saw of each other. And when Mr. Dully remarried, their relationship didn't get any easier, for this woman didn't like Howard at all. She complained about the boy to anyone who would listen. He was unclean, he played with his food, he was moody and defiant. She was absolutely certain that Howard needed strong measures.

A doctor had just moved to their town in California from the East, where his methods had fallen out of favor. In fact, his methods had been banned in most parts of the world; but this doctor assured Howard's stepmother that he could fix the boy's behavior.

She told him that Howard didn't like going to bed, that he frowned if the TV program wasn't what he liked, that he daydreamed, and when asked about it said, "I don't know," that he hated to wash. When those stories didn't warrant the doctor's work, she made up some that were more serious.

And Howard's father? Mr. Dully just wanted a normal boy and a quiet house.

So on the boy's twelfth birthday, they made a decision that would greatly change his life, without telling him about it. They took him to the hospital "just for a checkup," they said, where he had a lobotomy. He was one of the youngest persons ever to receive one.

By the grace of God, he survived it, but as one might have guessed, it didn't help at all. It just left him completely estranged and confused. Within a year, they sent him to a foster home, the next step on a long way down.

Now, Howard Dully's dad never intended for him to spend the next thirty-odd years in and out of institutions, unable to think straight, feeling like a freak, drinking himself numb. No parent would wish such a life for a child. All his dad wanted was for Howard to be a normal kid. Well, there are no normal kids...and sometimes that kind of wish can have unsought consequences.

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Many of us are here because we love our kids. We want them to have the best foundation for life, so for their sakes as well as ours, we bring them to church.

If you love your kids, would you raise your hand? I bet they have no idea how

much we love them. Sometimes they test us, saying, “You don’t love me!” But even in the moment, they know how ridiculous that is.

And Jesus knew how important those relationships are to us. When he was talking about the love of God, he asked, “If your child asks for a fish, would you give a serpent?” Of course not.

Yet sometimes the things we do for our kids turn out painfully, despite our best intentions. That can happen in a high-pressure environment like our town; kids who are a little different test whether we will accept them as they are.

It’s hard for some parents to know what to make of a child who’s moody, awkward, average, plain....If only we could reach into their brains...make a little change here or there...

So we may enroll our kids in test-prep courses and travel teams, hoping to give them a leg up in a competitive world – never intending for their fragile self-esteem to be crushed by expectations. We may want to be our kids’ best friends, and give them a long leash at a time they most need a short one. Or we may keep them on such a short leash that they’re forever gasping for air.

Many of us come to Darien because it seems a good place for children. But there are enormous local pressures, and the biggest pressure of all is to be normal, whatever that means.

Well, all parents make mistakes. And yet we all do plenty of things right. So if we know how to give good things to our children, imagine how much more God has to show us about love.

God accepts us as we are, with all of our bad habits, secret struggles, and mood swings. In a judgmental world, there is someone who withholds judgment and says, through the prophet Jeremiah, “I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.” (*Jer 31:3*) And through Isaiah: “See, I have written your name in the palms of my hands.” (*Is 49:16*)

It is this very acceptance that transforms us. When we know that we are loved, we’re really ready for change. That’s true for all of us, adults as well as children. God’s love challenges all the other messages that say we have to improve our backstroke, our buck teeth, our bottom line.

It’s true, it’s true, thank God it’s true...For all the imperfect parents who worry about their imperfect children, there is a God who loves unconditionally, and that’s how we put our lives together.

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When Howard Dully was past fifty, he finally started to put his life together. With the help of a loving wife, he cut out the bad habits, stopped making excuses, got a college degree and a good job, and tried to help his own kids avoid the mistakes he’d made.

About that same time, some radio producers were doing a story on lobotomies, and they learned about him from his doctor’s old files. Howard had never told anyone before. Now they were asking him to come on National Public Radio and talk about it.

This was the chance to find answers to questions that had haunted him for forty years. He had always wondered what he had done to deserve this terrible operation.

Now, as he read through those files, and saw what his stepmother had said, he realized that he had done nothing terrible; that he had been a pretty normal kid – if there are normal kids. For the first time in his life, he could accept himself.

That set him off on the next leg of his emotional journey – coming to terms with his father.

It turned out that Howard Dully's dad had not had the easiest boyhood, either. Howard learned that his dad had been born in the worst poverty; he had lost his own father at the age of three, and his mother had been unable to keep the house, so he had been sent off to one foster family after another, six homes in all. Then he had gone off to the Second World War, and came home a changed man.

He married a beautiful girl, and had three sons with her; but he suffered a stroke, and then she died. He lost his house and almost lost his kids before making the disastrous choice to marry Howard's stepmother.

None of this excused or explained Howard's lobotomy. But it helped Howard to accept his father for who he was. And when they talked on national radio, father and son, reconciled after years of estrangement, it was one a powerfully emotional moment. "Talking with my father about my lobotomy," he said, "is the happiest day of my life."

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Howard Dully had another dad. This is, quite literally, the God's truth.

On the back cover of his autobiography, there's a photo of him as a boy, folding his hands in prayer below a crucifix. In those days, one of the rare places where he found acceptance and happiness was in church. Saying the prayers gave him calm.

And over the course of fifty years, what Jesus said came true:

"Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened. If there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake? If you, then, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!"
(Matthew 7:7-11)

Such a Father can love any child, and *make that child feel loved*, which is another thing entirely. And that can transform a life. Maybe, when the story is told, we all have Howard Dully's dad.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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