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# Naming the Sins of our Fathers

By Silas Nyanchwani



On June 8, 2015, I stood in a labour ward waiting for our bundle of joy. When she arrived, shortly after 10.30 a.m., I was beside myself with joy, totally overwhelmed.

Those of a religious disposition know the kind of emotions one goes through when God answers prayers. For the longest time, I prayed to God for a daughter to name after my late mother. The first glance at her, revealed a double stroke of luck; she was not only a girl, but she took after my mother.

I stood in the corridors overjoyed, painfully aware that in under two months I would leave the young one to go for my graduate studies in the United States. I was torn. I wanted to spend every waking moments with the girl for two reasons: Biologically she is my daughter and culturally, she is my mother too. Secondly, I never had a father, and to me, this was a divine chance to try and be the best father she would ever want. Sure, against my will, going for grad school proved to be most stressful experience, I was so depressed in New York Streets that I barely coped with the class room pressure. Upon graduation, I boarded the next plane home and spent the next 10 months bonding with my little girl. It was the most fulfilling thing in the world.

Kids are so sweet. Makes me wonder why men run away from them.

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I have never seen my father. I do not know if he knows that I exist. I do not know if he is still around

or he died a long time ago. Whether he is still in active employment or long retired. I do not know if I have other stepbrothers and sisters, and God-forbid, if our paths have ever crossed, without recognising our common bond.

As a reckless teenager, I once angered and offended one of my guardian aunts. Minutes later she fished some photo of the purported father for a reason I have never known. He was tall, wearing those greenish-blueish suits. I do not remember the face, for I was angry and teary, but I remember a benign smile that revealed nothing.

I have managed to numb any feelings towards the old man. I decided to live with the fact that I will never know my paternal heritage. Whether they had murderers in the family, a history of suicide, or any genetical disorder that shows up every third generation, that I somehow escaped, but may recur in my children or grand-children is something time will tell.

If not for that photo, I will never have bothered with the thought of my father. But that photograph planted an element of doubt, and every other day I dream of some demon possessing me to pay for a want-ad in a newspaper or embarking on search for him.

Indeed, those wakeful nights, when my insomnia gets in the way, which is far too often, I do think about him.

Why did he leave? I want to assume that I tick all the boxes. I am everything an African father would have been proud of: My report form was always impressive, I made it to the best university in Kenya and a top Ivy League university in America. I married in good time and there is a granddaughter to parade. Stuff that most parents cherish. Why did he leave?

In those idle moments, like when stuck in Mombasa Road traffic with a dead phone, I imagine tracking him down to a village, maybe he is in a drinking den, maybe he found Jesus and is now a church elder...Or he died long time ago, and in that eventuality, I will have closure. Chances of making that resolve are closer to nil and zero.

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My father was a baby boomer. Kenyan baby boomers, have been a spectacular failure. Certainly, there are decent and noble men from that generation, but if they were a class, they would be D-grade. And this is not because my father took off.

Despite the gift of formal education, exposure, travel, and interactions with the outside world beyond their ethnic enclosures, the men from this generation have been underwhelming. Nobody summed up who they are better than Laureen Wesonga, a Chevening Scholar,

*"I call them(the) independence generation, they are petty, they are greedy, they are insecure. Woe unto you if you are younger, smarter (and female), am like who traumatized this lot? And it doesn't help that they are running the country at the moment. That's why our country is an orgy of pettiness, incompetence, general mediocrity. That's why there is a hostility to intellectual investment and output."*

My father's generation has contributed virtually nothing meaningful to the country, whether politically, intellectually or economically, other than pillage, obnoxious if primitively grabbing and accumulation of wealth. Young people now have arrested development because the elders ate the food even made for babies.

Most of them still hold positions of power and influence in various institutions, which they run like

their personal fiefdoms, giving young people no chance whatsoever to prosper. It is this generation that imposes a fine Sh 5,000 to graduate job seekers who are yet to start their Higher Education Loans Board payments. It is the generation that requires young job seekers to spend KSh 5,000 in useless paper work as a prerequisite when seeking government employment. The generation that is likely to deny a woman a job or a promotion because she said NO to their advances, and just as quick to unethically promote an undeserving one who cooperated. And this is the same attitude they approach fatherhood. Some were reckless drunks. Some married two or three wives when they could not sustain the one.

Amoral. Unethical. Disgusting.

In the circa 1980s, men could scatter their wild oats and disappear. Today, you will not run away from Child Support, however far or fast you run. Courts, tabloids, bloggers and social media will hold you accountable. Absentee fathers live in mortal fear of the law catching up with them.

Some of us were unlucky to have grown up without our fathers, even though we turned up fine. Or did we?

What was worse, was having a father who was absent emotionally. As a bare minimum, children expected of their fathers: the provision of the basic life needs like school fees, being present and the occasional pat on the shoulder. Visiting us in school, buying a gift was more than enough. All we needed.

The generation of our fathers came in three shades: The loving, generous and kind (a few and far between). Secondly, were the patriarchal tyrants who respected neither their wives nor their children (their daughters eloped at the earliest opportunity, if only to be safe and sons ran away from to the nearby town for menial jobs) And thirdly, were the colourless and incompetent, who left their wives to do all the parenting (quite a pathetic lot, mostly married a second wife, or kept a mistress abandoning their first family).

There is nothing to say about cool and responsible fathers.

But the latter two, let's unpack them.

I have talked to a good number of friends on how the relationship with their fathers is shaping or has shaped their attitude to life and especially towards parenting.

It is surprising how dissatisfied most people are towards their fathers (I have two rare cases where people are dissatisfied with their mothers, but that is for another day). I know a few who have had to physically confront their fathers for continuously being abusive, disrespectful and violent towards their mothers. They drew the line, curses notwithstanding, and held their old men by the collars and gave them a piece of their mind.

There are fathers who did bad things because of ignorance. But more annoyingly were those who knew better but still run away, or those who stayed, but were abusive and the only memories we can conjure of them are the dark days they put us through. Most of my peers never quite forgave their fathers or are very ambivalent towards them.

Women who grew up with abusive fathers are very skeptical of men and can be unduly cautious. Men, either chose to be the exact opposite of their fathers, or the trauma of the abuse leads them into alcoholism, violent behaviour and seeking cheap sex to fill the void left by the father's folly.

But to decide to chart a different path from your father's requires a higher cognitive ability to

forgive the old man and to learn from his wrongs.

My peers, those with a basic university degree and those who aspire to a quiet middle-class life are doing things differently: Most are opposed to violence against women. Most love their children and lately, the sex of the child is not an issue, unlike in the past where giving birth to a daughter was deemed a sign of weakness in some cultures, like where I come from.

Certainly, my generation has been gifted with hindsight, unlike our fathers who grew up under the worst possible circumstances. Women of our generation are enlightened, know better and hardly want to settle for less. We are almost equal and many actually bring the bacon home.

Most women I have spoken to who grew up with abusive fathers always sympathise with what their mothers had to go through. And want to lead different lives: they are assertive, ambitious, keen to have their money and property, just in case a man goes beast mode on them. They expect us men to provide in the traditional sense, but they are not entirely dependent on men. They have backups in chamas, in churches as well as private and secret investments. Their ability to pull resources quickly, means they acquire a head start over their male counterparts.

Women learnt from the tribulations of their mothers and took charge of their lives. Many men never received guidance or the security of inheritance from our fathers and we stumble and falter a lot. We have hardly any role models to look up. Religious leaders lost their moral voice. Politicians have nothing to teach us, but to steal, grab and be stupid, generally.

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Our fathers were born somewhere between the Second World War and during the struggle for independence from the British colonialist. They were too young to be victims of the British brutality but growing up with absentee parents took its toll on them. They went to school in the independent Kenya. School was designed to prime them up to work in factories and the corporate sector, a drastic change from the agrarian way of life, that they grew up under.

They grew up knowing that the place of women was in the kitchen. They grew up knowing that children were merely a source of labour.

After the independence of Kenya, the world was gripped in a meaningless Cold War that consumed another 30 years of neo colonialism with different actors. The Cold War period gave birth mediocre and cognitively challenged dictators, propped up to oversee several countries. They suppressed freedoms, especially academic freedom. Anyone who subscribed to a contra ideology to that of the paymasters' paid the ultimate price. In late 70s and early 1980s, a collective of university intellectuals were forced into exile. They included reputable scholars like Ngugi wa Thiong'o (ironically settling in the Capitalist West, when he was accused of being a socialist), Micere-Mugo, Korwa Adar, James Ogude, Nixon Kariithi, Job Kibii among others. They left a huge intellectual gap that was filled with cowardly conformists.

So, our fathers grew up suppressed and repressed. By the time they were coming of age, President Moi had taken over and an attempted coup had turned him into him a dictator who ushered in a totalitarian chapter. The impact of living in a one-party regime turned our fathers into cowardly, insular and extremely selfish individuals with self-enrichment as the only goal. They have a zero sense of accountability and responsibility whatsoever. They are guided by base instincts, hardly proactive but very reactive to any perceived threat to their dominance. They want to grab all the land, even riparian zones. They have mismanaged public institutions raiding coffers and channeling the loot to private facilities they own, to profit from the provision of essential services such as

education, health and security. They lack is a sense of the future, which defies logic.

Why do they steal so much?

Why the common excuse of “ni watoto tunatafutia.”( I steal for my children)?

I am not mad at the generation. For they are blind and severely handicapped due to the circumstances they grew up under. But I still harbour some resentment. They fouled and soiled their children who inherited the bad habit of greed and cast aside the brilliant ideas capable of transforming Kenya.

Their time at the top of the food chain has been nothing but disastrous and the ramifications will affect us, at least for the next three decades. Think of the foreign debt, the unprecedented level of corruption that make the Moi and the Kibaki regime seem incompetent in their corruption. Look at what they are doing to higher education (lecturers have been on strike for 10 months in the last one year). The health sector is in shambles. The main referral public hospital Kenyatta is always in the news for all wrong reasons. Hospitals in the rural parts of Kenya no longer stock basic medical supplies like anti-venom. The agriculture sector has no remedy in sight for the armyworm invasion ravaging maize fields around the country. Farmers no longer receive subsidized fertilizers yet well-connected individuals can always import maize from Mexico overnight. Need I mention the pain and agony of sugar cane farmers.

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I see young people embracing their responsibilities differently. Men from the 1980s, aided by the power of social media to reunite friends are forming high school WhatsApp groups and visiting their former schools, organizing to donate books, build facilities and give back in whatever way they can.

We understand the importance of philanthropy and the value of altruism. We recognize there is something bigger than ourselves, or our families. The need to leave the world, a better place. We are planting trees where the baby boomers cut them down for development or settlement.

We question things. We do not blindly support regimes. When we think our political leader has erred we tell him off, such as we did with Raila Odinga recently. His latest handshake moment has met a lot of hostility. When Moses Kuria's loose mouth utters something vile, we clap back.

Where the baby boomers and Gen Xers choose silence, we raise our voice, even as police brutality has become increasingly sanctioned. I remain hopeful that our generations and young people will get it right as the baby boomers and Gen Xers age and leave us alone.

Good riddance.

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