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Opening Extract from...

Dad, You Suck

Written by Tim Dowling

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DAD YOU SUCK

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To my sons, Barnaby, Johnnie and Will
– if you're reading this, call me.

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INTRODUCTION

I am sitting at a boardroom table in the offices of a PR company, interviewing an ex-*Apprentice* contestant called Raef. Though he was booted off the show in week nine, after Alan Sugar dismissed him as 'a lot of hot air', Raef remains possessed of an unshakeable self-belief. I find this irritating, and I have to keep reminding myself that it's not Raef's fault he believes in himself. It's probably something to do with the way he was raised.

Raef is in the middle of a digressive burst of false modesty, which, I think to myself, is probably the only kind of modesty he has ever known. As he speaks I flip through my reporter's notepad, looking for a question I may have scribbled down earlier and forgotten about, a question searching and incisive enough to pierce Raef's shiny carapace of confidence. Instead, I find a page on which one of my children has written 'DAD YOU SUCK' in large block capitals, using a marker pen.

When I get home an hour later, there is a new Personal Power newsletter in my email inbox. I've been receiving these regular motivational updates from an internet life

coach ever since I signed up for an online course while writing a newspaper feature about life coaching. This was months ago, but I don't know how to make the emails stop. These days I rarely read beyond the subject line, which usually says something like, 'Hi Tim – Self-Confidence Is A Magic Key' or, 'Hi Tim – Happiness Is All Around You If You Look'.

This latest newsletter is headed, 'Hi Tim – How Would It Feel If You Knew Why You Were Here?' and goes on to detail a prolonged exercise in soul-searching that is supposed to end with you receiving a short, secret phrase that sums up your reason for being on earth. I think about my life's true purpose for a bit, but I can't come up with a secret phrase better than 'DAD YOU SUCK'.

That evening my wife comes home from her bookshop and immediately launches into a tireless inventory of my failings. This has become a weekly event, which coincides with the shop's late opening – my wife has spent many hours being polite to people, and she has already said all the nice things she is going to say today. I get whatever's left. My oldest son knows it's Thursday again, and he has come down to watch.

'You didn't slice the bread,' she says, peering into the bread bin.

'The slicing machine was broken,' I lie. I have developed a dread of the bread slicer at the supermarket, the repeated operation of which only serves to underscore the grinding futility of existence. Also, it strikes me as vaguely unhygienic.

'No, it wasn't,' my wife says, turning to the child. 'Your father is hopeless.'

At this point it dawns on me that it is my wife's life purpose to drain my self-esteem at every opportunity. Instantly, I feel lighter. My shoulders drop back, as if I were spreading invisible wings. My wife seems to notice the change. She is staring at me intently.

'Your hair's looking a bit thin at the front,' she says. She turns to the boy. 'Your father is losing his hair, I'm afraid.'

'I'm married,' I say. 'I no longer need hair.'

'He has to say that because he's going bald.'

'She's just trying to flatten my self-esteem,' I tell the boy. 'She can't help it. It's her life's purpose.'

'She's like a self-esteem roller,' he says.

'That's very good,' I say. 'I can use that.'

My wife glares at both of us.

'No, you cannot use it,' she says. 'I'm not allowing it. You cannot write that I am like a self-esteem roller.'

'Yes I can,' I say. 'I can use it if I want.' I look at the boy. 'Can't I?' He thinks for a minute.

'Five pounds,' he says finally.

'Done,' I say.

People occasionally ask me if I find writing about my children in a weekly newspaper column ethically challenging. The truth is, I never really thought about it until people started asking, and by then it was too late to stop. I had never intended to write about my children – the column was always meant to be about me – but I soon found that it was almost impossible to keep them out of the narrative, because they talk all the time. They interject, they interrupt, they ask impertinent and largely irrelevant questions, and

they repeat stupid things I've said in what they think is an amusing approximation of my voice.

A domestic scene from which all childish input has been artificially excised, for reasons of privacy or ethics or being a good father or whatever, immediately loses its claim to veracity. Consider this brief dialogue between a husband and wife:

Wife: You're having supper with your family. Are you ever going to say anything?
Husband: No. Can someone pass the salad?
Wife: Oh my God. I can't live like this.

All very kitchen sink, but I think you'll agree something is missing. Now read it again, with the omitted dialogue restored:

Wife: You're at supper with your family. Are you ever going to say anything?
Youngest child: Can I get down?
Husband: No. Can someone pass the salad?
Middle child: You're the salad.
Wife: Oh my God. I can't live like this.

As the above scene illustrates, the real problem with writing about children is not a question of privacy, but one of passivity. The writer is meant to be a neutral observer of existence, a position not exactly compatible with fatherhood, which is generally considered a more hands-on business. My wife thinks I should do more about my children's mealtime behaviour than find it column-worthy.

I accept that writing about children has its grey areas. Perhaps, in assuming the role of narrator, I am altering my relationship with my sons in ways I don't understand. It's conceivable that by writing about my family I am experiencing fatherhood at one remove, like someone who films his life on his phone. It could be that instead of prioritizing my children's happiness, I am simply prioritizing my version of events.

Like anyone else, children have a right to ownership of their lives and may object to being traduced in print on a weekly basis, although in my experience it's rarely a problem that £5 won't fix. By a longstanding tradition begun on that evening when my wife came home from her bookshop, that is the fee payable to my children when I quote them directly, although it is their obligation to spot the quotation and claim the money. Since this would require them to read my column on a regular basis, it means that in practice I hardly ever have to shell out.

For me the hardest task of fatherhood was always the oppressive obligation to lead by example. Nothing worries me more than the possibility that my sons are using me as some kind of role model. As it is they've been present on countless occasions when I have, as we say in my homeland, completely lost my shit. During these stressful moments I have often wished to turn to them as a judge might to a jury and say, 'Please strike the next few minutes from the record', but then, within the week, I will have committed my less than exemplary behaviour to print. Indeed, many of those instances are chronicled in the pages ahead. It's not because I'm any less ashamed now; it's because if I left them out there wouldn't be enough for a book.

Perhaps this is my life's true purpose: maybe I'm here to teach my sons that self-esteem comes and goes – it can get rolled right out of you at short notice – but that you still can get by in life without any, as long as you don't want to be a contestant on *The Apprentice*. That, at least, is my experience. And for what it's worth, my example.

TD