

There's no such thing as a perfect father

By Grant Feller



As men, we like to think that we're expert at most things, but the one talent we all share is an extraordinary capacity for self-delusion.

The Adonis in the mirror, the double-handed backhand that not even Djokovic could have returned, the bookshelf we built that isn't at all wonky. And, of course, how wonderful we think we are as dads.

The reality, of course, is very different, something I suspect musician Phil Collins has been reflecting on these past days. That is if he read the "open letter" his 27-year-old daughter Lily has written in her new book *Unfiltered: No Shame, No Regrets*. It features personal essays that cover her struggle with anorexia, bulimia and, crucially, her relationship with her father.

In it, the actress has expressed not only sadness for how her father behaved when she was growing up, but also the hope that they could repair any damage. She writes: "I forgive you for not always being there when I needed [you] and for not being the dad I expected. I

forgive the mistakes you made. And although it may seem like it's too late, it's not. There's still so much time to move forward."

Regrets, I've had a few

Indeed there is. Phil is only 66, after all. Perhaps, as the prospect of grandfatherhood dawns, he'll reflect on whether the family sacrifices he made for his career were worth it. What I do know is that Phil will be full of regret for the things he didn't do.

I've been spending a lot of time with my 90-year-old father since he became a widower 18 months ago, and the conversations invariably turn to an assessment of the kind of father he was. He wants to know, whereas I think it's too late. And of course I sugar-coat it all and don't berate him for anything – an almost-permanent absence while he built a business to provide for his family, an inability to emote unless enraged, a complete lack of interest in my school and social life, and a disdain for what we might now call "soft" parenting – storytime, kicking a ball about, that kind of thing.

We're engaged in a strange dual catharsis where he wants to remember and explain episodes that I'd prefer to stay hidden, feelings of regret that we both nervously dance around. I don't berate him because – well, he doesn't really want to know what I think. Rather, he's trying to explain why he was that kind of dad and, in his own peculiar way, apologise.

Not that I want him to – there's no point in wasting these last precious years on guilt. We're all built with a different design, we're all different kinds of fathers. And not one of us is perfect. How stupefyingly boring it would be if we were.

No apology required

Unlike Lily, I don't deign to offer forgiveness. No apology is required. But these conversations have prompted me to reassess the kind of father I am – or have been. For the first 14 years of my daughter's life, and the first 12 of my son, I was hardly ever there, willingly tethered to my desk in a series of newspaper offices that demanded complete dedication and familial sacrifice.

Like all addictions, it brought both inspiring highs and crushing lows, during which the spectre of fatherhood was absent. It always felt as though two sides struggled for dominance and only one could ever win. Then, four years ago, I was made redundant, started a business from home and became a "proper" dad – picking up from school, making meals, wiping away teenage tears and helping with the homework – winging it until their far-more-able mother returned from work.

That life reinvention gave me a chance to reflect on what I had got wrong, or at least what I think I got wrong, when I worked 12-hour days six times a week. Maybe Amy and Joel didn't

even notice. Maybe they're scarred for life. Or maybe I just didn't want to wait until it's too late to say sorry...

1. For not being there

For missing that note-perfect school solo, Amy, when I refused to stand up to the bully of a boss who declared: "I never saw my 12-year-old daughter sing a solo so I don't see why you should."

I've got the video but it'll never be the same. It will always feel like a missing piece of the paternal jigsaw. And, Joel, when you scored that last-minute winning goal for the school in that semi-final with your weaker left foot, having dribbled past three players, and watched it curl into the top corner, I'm sorry that I didn't come because I wanted to play with my own mates instead.

I still twinge when my mind's eye recalls the disguised disappointment on your face.

2. For spending my weekends working

Remember galloping down stairs on a weekend morning to cook pancakes and watch cartoons? Well, I don't. Rather, I remember the wasted hours – and they really were wasted – replying to work messages on a Saturday, reading mounds of papers and preparing for Sunday shifts, coming home to eat the leftovers of a roast that you three shared.

Now I realise that the thing I thought was important was utterly meaningless in comparison. I got my hands dirty with ink when they should have been smothered in pancake batter.

3. For putting the fear of god into you

I should have told you long ago but exam grades are not as important as my brutal post-school report assessments may have suggested.

I'd rather you had confidence, a smile on your face and an ability to argue your way out of a paper bag. So remember when I screamed at you that you'd be an utter failure in life if you didn't learn the difference between wave refraction and longshore drift and get an A+ in geography? I might have been exaggerating.

4. For forcing you to inherit my tastes

Dads can be a little too insistent on passing on their cultural biases but I like to think they didn't do you too much harm. Joel's LP selection has a smattering of Bowie, Otis Redding and Jeff Buckley (thankfully no Phil Collins), while Amy glories in being known as Ms Motown.

But it was unforgiveable when I snapped that Steps CD in half in a pathetic rage. Sorry. And perhaps I was a little too hard in my insistence that you come to understand the nature of

friendship, authoritarianism and personal dignity as depicted in Sam Peckinpah westerns. Really sorry about that.

Plus, I'm sorry for insisting we watch Field of Dreams en famille every time it's on television – maybe you'll understand why one day.

5. For bringing my work mood home

I could have read you a night-time story instead of stewing in my post-work hangover. I could have lain beside you and chatted about the new playground game you'd invented instead of wanting to veg out in front of some rubbish on TV. I could have listened to your problems instead of shouting them away and telling you to go to bed because it was late and I just wanted some peace and quiet. I could have been nice because you had nothing to do with the hideous day I'd just had. And I could have said sorry afterwards but I never had the patience to do so.

I wish I had appreciated more that you were the antidote-in-waiting and that you had stayed awake way past your bedtime not to be naughty but just to see me. In the grand scheme of things, all of these mea culpas are pretty trivial. Despite the hiccups, things have generally worked out. Plus, I did change nappies and do the 3am feed; I dressed up as a clown for birthdays and invented bedtime fantasies in which the children starred.

But, yes, like Phil, I made mistakes. I don't want to wallow in needless soul-searching because I also know that I'm a better person for not making every sacrifice to satisfy the incessant demands of my children – and maybe they are better for it, too.

Perhaps the best dads are the ones who know that saying sorry isn't necessary, and the best children are the ones who know that no forgiveness is needed because we accept our parents for who they are. Gloriously flawed.

Source: <http://www.executivestyle.com.au/five-things-i-regret-the-most-about-being-a-disappointing-dad-guxcbs#ixzz4bX3XBgrR>