

A Headless Family: Living without a Patriarch

Clarence Phun

Background

At about the age of 10, my parents divorced and my Mother held full custody of me and my two sisters. Since then, I have lived in a household that consisted of women (excluding myself). My Father visited and we still spent time as a family. However, at this point he no longer “led” the family, he could only advise externally.

He would make plans, bring us out, and assisted in providing for us, but that was it. Very often, in the short span of a family dinner, he would try to fulfill his role as a Father by teaching me life lessons that “I had to know”, but it usually resulted in plenty of yelling and talking down to me. He would often remind me that I needed to “man up” and take charge of the house, because I was the “man of the house”, and tried to “correct” me into doing things his way.

I hated Dad for trying to mold me into becoming like him. There was never any explanation, only reciting “I did it this way, so you have to too”. Why did I have to become a copy of him? Why am I wrong? Why do I have to become what I hate? I rejected his methods and only complied to humour him, so I could get away from him once he was happy.

Mother had similar messages for me, but she took a different approach. While there was still a fair share of yelling and discipline, she made sure that I understood what I need to do, and if mistakes were made, where I went wrong. Mother never pressured me into an absolute direction; she gave guidance when I needed it and often left me to my own devices to learn rather than follow. She was not afraid that I would fail, only that I was too scared to try. There were few moments where she had to pull the Mum card to rein her children in, but most of the time it was making sure we understood our mistakes and letting us find our own way.

Mum made life easier; she helped me understand why Dad behaved like that but still encouraged me to chase after what I wanted. I learned that it’s alright to fail, as long as I

tried, and that it all accumulates into a lifetime of experiences. I felt empowered by her, that I didn't have to be afraid of trying.

Masculine, Feminine

Mother created a sort of safe space for us to express ourselves. She encouraged us to share our feelings and to be open and honest. Everything can be talked about and discussed, as long as we are honest about everything. There was never shame in having feelings and my emotions were validated when I expressed them. Choices I made were not criticized or compared to (other than grades, typical of an Asian Mother), but she did work through them and explain her views on my choices. She would listen and understand my rationale and let me make the mistakes to grow.

She made sure to present herself as welcoming to our emotions and for us to be comfortable to speak to her anytime about how we feel. I was never made to believe that I was anything other than human for having feelings, which helped me understand the value of expressing myself.

I feel that the space Mum created contributed the most when it comes to being in tune with my emotions. Working out feelings and having them validated and explained helped me understand myself better; In the process of doing so, I like to believe that I developed a habit to not only navigate my own emotions but of others as well and created an open mind, that is more accepting and perceptive of others.

In the end, I feel that expressing and validating emotions, those of my own and others, are important to not only be inclusive and considerate but also to improve and grow.

I was never very athletic as a child and I didn't do very well in sports even though I still had some interest in it. Most of my time and attention was invested in the performing arts; Chinese Orchestra, Drama Club and even being the only male member of a Guzheng ensemble for some time.

There was never a time where I would be told that I shouldn't do something because it was "girly", even when I expressed my dislikes for more masculine hobbies, like sports or the uniform groups or when I show overt preferences for musicals and romance, rather than action and gore; Mother never told me "boys like this, not that".

The hobbies that I chose to invest time in, as well as the things that I enjoyed never had “masculine” or “feminine” tagged to them. I was only told that everyone has different preferences and was not aware that boys and girls had certain expectations of what they liked to do or how they behaved. I also never felt uncomfortable around being the other gender.

In a recent conversation with Mum, she admitted that she wasn't quite sure of my sexuality at the time. What she was sure of though was her support for me in my choices. I know that I only see success now because I had her blessings and I cannot express how much it means to me, even to this day.

Looking back, I think most of my preferences were influenced by how these activities could express emotion and was a way to channel my feelings. Sports felt violent and angry to me, and I wanted to avoid those negative emotions, they reminded me of Dad, who was the very definition of the aggressive masculine model and it led to me wanting to keep away. So yes, there was a conscious choice between “masculine” and “feminine”, but my decision was not influenced by those perceptions, I made the choice believing that I would not follow in the footsteps of Dad.

One thing Mother always made sure to engrain into me was to “respect girls”. Not just for the sake of my sisters nor was it for anyone else. It was a lesson to protect myself as well because she also understood how vulnerable boys could be. It was not as simple as “treating a woman right”, it was a responsibility that I would have to bear to myself and my family. I was surrounded by ladies in my life, my sisters and my mum, and even my relatives outnumbered men at a ratio of approximately one to five. Failing to respect any woman, is as good as failing to care for my family and I took the lesson to heart.

Mum taught me was to treat people right and I feel that understanding the feelings of others develops a strong foundation for any kind of relationship. As a result, I am often the

“counsellor” within my social circles because of how intimate conversations with me can become. I believe that the many intimate talks with different people around me helped me become much more accepting and open-minded by allowing me to understand all the perspectives that I come across.

Destined Role

Despite being raised without much influence from gender norms, I was haunted by a constant; “You are the only man in the family, you will have to take care of everyone”. This was stacked on top of being the eldest child, and the expectations for me are as tall as Everest. The model I was to take after was Father, but I could never see him as someone I would want to become.

Mother had to struggle a lot to give us a comfortable life and Father, while he did provide a fair amount for us that helped us immensely, had plenty of medical bills to cover on his own. One of my goals in life had been very apparent early in my childhood – I had to take over as the head of the house, to see my sisters through their education, and to give my mother a comfortable life.

Mum did try her best to be there for us, but she was busy juggling work and home. I felt compelled to ease her burdens and tried my best to behave. I accepted that I had to be mature and independent enough so that she didn’t have to worry about me and I carried this burden willingly.

At the time, I felt like it was the right thing to do to help Mum out, no son could watch their mother’s pleas and blatantly ignore it, so I chose to step up and work towards my destined place.

Becoming the Patriarch of my family was carved deeply into my bones and the title of “eldest son” was awarded at birth, engraved into my identity. The fact that I was the only male bearing the family name (Father was also an only son with four sisters) made it doubly so.

My sisters never had to bear these burdens, and the green monster of envy surfaced many times in my childhood. I was somewhat successful academically and unanimously better behaved as a child; this created an ego that often talked down to my second sister. The one thing I picked up from Father, a form of pure aggressive toxic masculinity, was an ego that made me feel like I was the

chosen one – an ugly narcissist inside of me that was borne of burning jealousy and probably a superiority complex.

It felt like a prison, having expectations set so high with no room for failure. I had a lot of resentment for these expectations that felt like a slave's brand. I could not decline my "destiny" and had to embrace the lemons that life so cruelly shoved in my face.

As it turns out, telling a child that the family's future is in their hands is no small matter, and egging them on can lead to an egomaniac. I deeply regret my actions, and there is cataclysmic aftermath imprinted on my sister because of my behaviour. It was a painful experience when Mum talked to me about it and I came to the realization that I had become what I was trying to avoid. Since then I have become very mindful of this, but during arguments, these things still slip out. There is a gulf between me and my sister because of this and I suspect that my childish behaviour has left irreparable consequences.

Over the years, I have been told by close friends that my ego can be quite problematic, even though I try to present myself as friendly and welcoming. According to them my choice of words, tone, and body language often project myself as being very egoistic and it is not my intention. I try to consciously correct this behaviour, but because it was developed early in my childhood, these mannerisms are difficult to shed.

The only gendered role that existed in my household didn't quite exist. I felt like I was constant priming and prepared for an eventual role that I had to take up and there are lasting and visible effects on me. It was, and still is, stressful for me when I realized this had happened. I am still working on it and trying to slowly correct my ways.

The Art of Performance

I never really had any impressionable memory of Father; most of them are moments of him yelling and trying to discipline me. It isn't a stretch to say that I didn't know how to "act like a normal boy" nor was I aware of the social expectations for someone my age. For the early years of my childhood, I behaved in public as what was expected of me at home, to be obedient and well-mannered. I never questioned authority and the notion of being a "good boy" at home was directly translated into my public self.

This was reinforced by many teachers and authority figures and statements like "you're very well behaved for a boy, just like the girls" were often told to me. I didn't quite understand the implications of those statements but over time, I found myself ostracized by my peers. Teachers treated me favourably with high praise, but I wouldn't say I was especially well behaved. I only presented a public self that I felt was the most appropriate, relative to what I was taught at home. I was later told that compared to the rowdy and rude behaviour that is expected, my conduct was completely out of the norm. The girls were already expected to be polite and well-mannered, so it didn't matter that I was behaving the same as them; I was already an irregular. Many adults took notice and it didn't rub well on any of my peers that I had special attention.

There was plenty of suffering in being different, eventually, I felt very alone in school and I was sent for counseling to address my feelings. There were many points where I felt like I should stop being myself and started pretending to be like the other boys. Being alone and feeling like an outcast for just being me didn't feel like it was worth it.

I wasn't faking it for any extra praises; I only wanted to make Mum proud that I could behave in school as well. Mum was definitely pleased, but at the time I know I did ask myself if the pride she felt was worth being left out for.

Being alone had its perks; I could observe others without much disturbance. I would often watch my peers and studied how they acted in front of each other and when they were in their private groups. I took reference from how the adults around me carried themselves and even from television shows that I watched. I did my best to study up on the appropriate behaviour for different situations.

I searched for a win-win performance that would win me friends while maintaining the pride Mother had for her son. My answer was found during a Parent-Teacher meeting; in the presence of their parents, my peers were absolute angels. The feedback from the teachers also rarely went beyond slight admonishment. The solution was to put on a performance and for my peers, it was for their parents; my audience would be the people around me instead.

I felt a strong need to fit in, to ensure that I was no longer the outcast. While I did not abandon the lesson I learned from home, I did alter my outward behaviour to better suit the different social groups that I came into contact with. I don't regret my actions, because, in the end, it aided me in better understanding the differences between people and how I could better engage and interact with others. I kept my true self a little more private, but there were still manifestations in the public self that I had built.

My peers were more tolerant when I started behaving this way. When I refuse to participate there was a better acceptance that I was personally uncomfortable and not that I was trying to be different. The special attention started going away because I was seen to be part of the typical group of boys, but there was still an acknowledgment that my behaviour was never "bad". I felt more comfortable in public behaving this way, rather than being alienated for being myself. In the end, I had to put on a performance to better suit the expectations others had for me, but I didn't feel any loss. I accepted that I had to adjust my behaviour to accommodate others, but at the same time, I also knew that if I were ever forced to go beyond my comfort zone, then I would have to reconsider the people I have around me.

In the end

I strongly believe that I am not influenced by conventional gender expectations, except for my public self and even then, I place my own comfort and values about all else. Mum did not deliberately raise me while avoiding the topic of gender; it was made very apparent to me. Instead, she taught me to respect the differences of each individual. Over time, I have developed and applied my own understandings to my position in life, while making sure to remember her teachings.

I express myself while balancing meeting social norms and being respectful of others. This is what I feel to be the best for myself and the people around me, and that's okay. I live, being fully aware of gender, while being understanding and respectful.

If I had to choose, I would prefer to repeat this process all over again because I am comfortable with being myself and being around others, no matter who they choose to be. There will always need to be adjustments to fit in a little better and I don't deny that at times you have to put on a little bit of a performance to make things easier. However, as we progress, I feel what we have to teach the next generation is the importance of creating a safe space. Not just to be themselves, but to talk and communicate respectfully so we can all make adjustments.

Perhaps I look at things through rose-tinted glasses or maybe I'm more tolerant than the average person. But I do believe that if we started treating others as people first, before looking at gender, things would be better.

Supporting Readings

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