

duluthday (<https://www.perfectduluthday.com>)

BLOG
([HTTPS://WWW.PERFECTDUL](https://www.perfectduluthday.com))

CALENDAR
([HTTPS://WWW.PERFECTDUL](https://www.perfectduluthday.com)
EVENTS/)

INFO
([HTTPS://WWW.PERFECTDUL](https://www.perfectduluthday.com))

LOGIN & POST



{?utm_source=pdd-banner&utm_medium=website&utm_campaign=banner-click}

Fathers, Sons and the Use of Force (<https://www.perfectduluthday.com/2016/06/18/126854/>)

David Beard (<https://www.perfectduluthday.com/author/rhetoricguygmailcom/>) Jun 18, 2016 (<https://www.perfectduluthday.com/2016/06/18/126854/>)
2 Comments (<https://www.perfectduluthday.com/2016/06/18/126854/#comments>) Share



(https://2b9sqw2iiqxr36ntqa1exnal-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/DavidBeard_SE.jpg) I have no memories of my father or the life my mother, sister, father and I lived until age four. Our home was in the middle of the city, but it was so old, it used to be the center of a farm. The garage had lived a former life as a barn, with hay lofts refitted for storing unused garden tools.

I don't remember my parents' divorce. In kindergarten, I understood that my mother filed, and that my grandparents moved in with us, because my mother was afraid that he would hurt her. By middle school, I understood the kind of hurt she feared.

My father is my paradigm case of what it means for a man to use force.

SATURDAY
essay

I've been thinking about the **use of force** (<http://www.perfectduluthday.com/2016/05/14/archetypes-wrestling-reflections-saturdays-match/>). And every June, I think hard about fatherhood (<http://www.duluthbudgeteer.com/opinion/columnists/3770179-fathers-are-not-only-male-role-models>). The thinking is coming together this year.

Christian thinker and philosopher **Simone Weil** (<http://people.virginia.edu/~jdk3t/WeilTheIliad.pdf>) describes force as something that "turns anybody who is subjected to it into a thing." She is writing about Homer's *Iliad*, a poem about war, the force that turns men into corpses. But she goes beyond war to talk about the threat of force as well.

Weil is so very poetic. The threat of force has ...

... the ability to turn a human being into a thing while he is still alive. He is alive; he has a soul; and yet — he is a thing ... For the soul, what an extraordinary house it finds itself in! Who can say what it costs it, moment by moment, to accommodate itself to this residence, how much writhing and bending, folding and pleating are required of it? ... There is not a single element of its nature to which violence is not done.

I think about my mother and the strength it took, in the 1970s, to divorce: to say "no more" to the writhing, bending, folding and pleating of her soul. Even as a child, I had no patience for people who insisted that my mother was still married because the Catholic Church did not recognize divorce. In Weil's terms, they would trade the violence to her soul to preserve their religious beliefs.

For most of my life, force was something I saw only in men. I'm still not used to seeing it in children.

* * *

Summertime and ice cream. I was sitting outside a Dairy Queen, sipping my melting milkshake, as a family sat down at the table next to me. The mother passed her child his sandwich, pop and fries, but not his ice cream, so the boy wasn't happy. He wanted his ice cream. "I'm trying my hardest not to hit you," the boy exclaimed.

The mother refused, and he apologized, a child's apology to avoid punishment, and his mother passed his ice cream. I tried to look away, not to look at the boy; I was dumbstruck.

What did my father look like as a ten-year-old boy?

* * *

In the *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21646570>) Silverman, Falb and McCauley found that about one in six men surveyed admitted abusing women. "Among those ... 38% said they had frequently bullied others in school... (F)requent bullying as a child was linked to nearly a four-fold increase in a man's risk for partner abuse." If you are willing to use force to resolve conflicts on the playground, you are nearly four times more likely to use force on your partner as an adult.

Was my father a bully as a child?

* * *

Most childhood threats against their parents aren't about being a bully, or even about ice cream. They are about the childhood search for security.

Psychotherapist Sean Grover (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sean-grover/bullied-parent_b_7818268.html) notes that children "will threaten, blackmail, and terrorize [parents] until [they] give in (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/singletons/201509/the-3-types-parents-who-get-bullied-their-own-children>)," or until they find the boundaries they seek. Dennis Rosen claimed in *Psychology Today* that "children need to have limits and boundaries set for them by their parents ... [which] heightens a sense of security (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/sleeping-angels/201310/limit-setting-and-better-behavior-in-kids>)." Rosen found that children with earlier bedtimes feel that their parents love them more than children whose parents set no bedtime. Children crave boundaries.

The men in my family would have set the boundary quickly and easily — by leaning across the table and announcing that anyone who wants to punch their mother is "cruising for a bruising." (Somehow, it was acceptable to threaten a child so long as the threat rhymed.) Part of me wanted to follow their example, to intervene in that way.

But Weil teaches me that the threat of force damages both parties:

Force is as pitiless to the man who possesses it, or thinks he does, as it is to its victims ... Those who use it and those who endure it are turned to stone.

Responding to a child's threats of force with more threats of force turns me into my father. It hurts both me and the child, locks both of our souls, writhing, inside stone.

* * *

I've been struggling with how to show young boys that boundaries are built from respect for the other person (and for myself) as a subject.

We live within boundaries not because we fear the force that will be exercised if we cross them, but because we recognize that people have needs and fears and desires and dreams and rights and value simply because they are people. We include ourselves as we say that — we have needs and fears and desires and dreams and rights and value, too.

It's a struggle because the use of force is seductive; it offers faster gratification. It is easier to see the effect of taking a hatchet to a tree than it is to see the effect of fertilizing a garden. The fertilizing enriches all of the plants in the whole garden, the whole community. It takes time, but the yield is so much more rich.

It is time for me to take the tools that my father never used, stored in the hay loft of my childhood, and learn to use them. It is time to tend the gardens that he did not.