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Fathers are not the only male role models

By [David Beard](#) on Jun 19, 2015 at 2:26 p.m.

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I like to think that Father's Day is an opportunity to reflect on the web of men who helped me become a man, myself.

When I was four my father left me a fishing pole and a box of comic books, and then he left my family.

My dad was a "deadbeat," someone who paid neither alimony nor child support. In the 1970s, there were no fancy ways to track him down to force him to pay. My mother was traumatized. In the 1970s, to be divorced was still a Catholic family embarrassment. To be a single mom was an insurmountable challenge. For a few years, we subsisted on food stamps, welfare and government surplus cheese.

My grandmother, great-grandmother, great-aunt and great-grandfather joined my mother in the primary work of raising me. Surrounded by so much family, my sister and I barely knew what it meant to be without a father, at least until we were tweens.

Across the street from my middle school was a comic book shop. I started stopping by because I wanted to spend my allowance on comics. I kept coming back because the owner, a man with massive forearms, tattooed from his years in the Navy, welcomed me not just as a customer, but as a kid who needed somewhere to go.

You can't tell your mom that you didn't like last month's Spider-Man comic because she didn't read it. You can't tell your mom that you don't understand girls because, after all, she is one. But I could tell Ron. And Ron would laugh and agree that he didn't like that issue, either and that women puzzled him, too. And then we would talk about it until it made sense to me.

Ron owned a comic shop, and so he taught me the relationship between earning a living and doing what you loved. (I have a career doing what I love in part because of his model.) And in owning that comic shop, Ron was the center of hundreds of human relationships, people who came in to buy comics but hung around for hours to enjoy each other's company.

Among them were Mike, a man who took eight years to complete his college degree and enrolled in belly dancing every semester, teaching me about masculinity in ways I never imagined at the time. Among them were Diane and Wolf, her husband, and Larry, their best friend, who modeled for me both an incredibly happy marriage and friendship across genders. And among them was Steve, who brought his own kid in, first in a baby bjorn, then a stroller, then on his own two stumbling toddler feet, showing me how the dad-I-never-had could have made a kid part of their life.


It was in that comic shop that I learned that there were men everywhere who could teach me about the many facets of manhood. And from them, I learned more than I ever could from the man who left me a fishing pole. As I moved through high school and college, I found more of those men: teachers, community leaders, mentors.

I don't remember my father at all. About two years ago, I received an email from someone claiming to be my half-brother. He lived in Texas, which is where my father's family was from, so I don't doubt that his claim was true. He wanted to meet. I asked, politely, that we not meet. As far as I know I didn't have a father and so I couldn't have a half-brother.

What I had instead was so much better: a web of men who made me the man I am today.


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