

## **The Woodruff Child Effect**

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By Allan Shedlin

There is an extraordinarily important gift embedded in the death-cheating story of ABC newsman Bob Woodruff's roadside bombing survival in January 2006, and his family's ongoing recovery. The gift is the recognition that children have the power to impact their parents in very positive ways.

In the variety of media appearances surrounding the recent publication of Lee and Bob Woodruff's book, *In an Instant*, not enough attention has been paid to this embedded gift. Written as a journal in two voices, the book is sub-titled a "family's journey of love and healing." This journalistic pas de deux provides a candid and remarkable look at the dynamic interdependability of families. It illustrates that by calling attention to the reciprocal opportunities parents and children provide for strength and comfort, family bonds can be deepened and family functioning and interconnectedness can be improved.

In their book, and the various interview appearances that have accompanied its release, both Bob and Lee Woodruff speak about the "indelible connection" to their children; that the children were "the source of [their] strength;" and Lee poignantly notes that eldest daughter, Cathryn, "resides firmly in every chamber of Bob's heart." Bob says the photos of his four children posted on walls surrounding his hospital bed, "brought me more than happiness; they gave me a powerful will to recover."

The gift of recognizing the powerful positive impact children can have on their parents, we might call the *Woodruff Child Effect*, because it is so often described by the Woodruffs in respective journal entries. Early into Bob's five week deep coma, upon the counsel of an experienced neuropsychologist, 12 year-old Cathryn is allowed to visit her father for the first time since his horrible accident. As she talks soothingly to him she gently kisses his cheek and Lee notes "A small tear was running down from the corner of his eye on the side where Cathryn was kissing him [defying all medical odds and explanations]...he's crying...my only living proof that Bob was there...Maybe that would have the power to heal him...perhaps that kind of love would be strong enough to bring Bob back to us."

And Bob exclaims, almost immediately after suddenly and surprisingly awakening from his coma, "I need to see my kids!" He explains that "My need to see them was visceral...my heart sped up...I took them in my arms in the biggest, most incredible hug I have ever known."

Two of the Woodruff children are old enough to read the book and see in print how important they were to their father's recovery and their mom's ongoing healing – this knowledge can be empowering, as well as soothing. Such knowledge and gratification can have a strong beneficial effect on the children's development, as well as ongoing family dynamics. Talking about this as a family also is important. If more families seized

opportunities to acknowledge and discuss the ways they can support each other, it would provide a powerful source for family strengthening.

While there are volumes of data to support the positive impact parents can have on their children's lives, there is little discussion and insufficient attention paid to the positive impact children can have on their parents. Research studies abound that document the dramatic salutary outcomes in children's academic, emotional, and behavioral functioning when their fathers are positively involved in their children's lives and the negative consequences when fathers are physically or psychologically absent.

Finding research that documents the important positive influences that children can have on parents is much more challenging – especially research to support the positive impact children can have on their fathers. That is one of the reasons I undertook qualitative research in three countries with dads, granddads, and children. I've conducted hundreds of hours of one-on-one interviews concerning *daddying*. I coined the term in 1994, to distinguish between the one-time biological *act* of fathering and the ongoing *process* of daddying, which requires lifelong commitment.

One hundred percent of the fathers and grandfathers I have interviewed have told me that being a dad enriches them. They tell me that being a dad:

- Reminds them of what is *really* important, of what needs are fundamental
- Humanizes them by exposing them to a new, deeper kind of love
- Positively diminishes their self-absorption
- Broadens their way of looking at issues, situations, and possibilities
- Teaches them the value of vulnerability
- Demonstrates the value of asking good questions
- Helps them appreciate the responsibilities and obligations of power
- Reminds them of the value of childlike qualities like playfulness, flexibility, and fills their lives with humor, imagination, enthusiasm, willingness to make mistakes, and a sense of wonder
- Makes them laugh, and
- Gives many of them greater appreciation for their parenting partner.

As a dad and granddad, I have learned what many dads I have interviewed shared: being a parent teaches me to be strong and sensitive at the same time; it releases a tenderness that men don't much speak about; it takes love to a new level. Bob and Lee Woodruff understand that Bob's healing from his traumatic brain injury (like so many returning war veterans) will be ongoing and take a long time. Bob has said that the healing will never be 100 percent as he must relearn so many basic things. But, in this relearning there also is a wonderful opportunity to remember that miraculous tear which sprung from his daughter's tender kiss and the reciprocal opportunities parents and children have to strengthen and comfort each other. If we each commit to seize these opportunities as often as possible, that would be the best gift of all.