

CHAPTER 1

Congruence & Property Similarities

*"The imprint of the father remains
forever on the life of a child."*

- Roy Lessin

A Letter To My Dad

Date: January 23, 2016

Dear Lewis:

I pretty much hate you for everything. How are you going to have a kid and not even give him your last name? So what if we have the same first name. I am not a junior! Why did you do that? Why didn't you take me anywhere? Like for Christmas, first birthday that I can remember or life in general. You didn't think of it? It's not important to you? Did you ever think about me? Who you thought was going to teach me how to be a man? My mom? My grandma? My aunties? I guess you didn't even care! You weren't there, but yet you criticized me for who I was to other people. For a second, I almost felt sorry for you that you could not see the difference between me and all the other kids in the hood. I was focused. I

was serious about school. Serious about my future.

So guess what? Your focused son doesn't love you either! I had to learn everything that a man is supposed to do on my own. How could you not be there for me? I feel disposable like you just threw me away. Do you not see what everybody else sees in me? Why is it that teachers and other adults say that I'm great and everyone gives me a bunch of accolades, but you just ran away from me? You neglected me. You left me hanging. Did anyone ever tell you that my stepdad abused me from time-to-time because he didn't like the way I did things? Where were you to protect me? I wanted you to say that no matter what happens to me in life, that you were going to be there to pick me up.

I had to depend on the rest of your family to take care of me. I see how you took care of Desmond and the other girls. He ain't even your son! He's your girlfriend's son, but he gets to have you on his birthday and Christmas. Desmond gets to stay up and watch movies with you. He gets to do all the things that I saw my brother doing with his dad. I just don't feel good enough. I don't feel like you love me. Why? I'm short like you. I have your smile. I have your charisma. So, what's not to like about me? Why can't I have you?

Guess what? Things that you say get back to me. Interestingly enough, you brag to your friends about all of my accomplishments as if you assisted in helping me to be the person that I am. I would argue to say that your neglect actually took it away. There's no way that when I become a dad that I would

desert or make any of my kids feel that they are not a part of me, like I don't value them. It's scary because I went to other men in the community to really build me up. Some of them had done a really good job like my cousin Sean, Mr. Kabili and Alfonso. I needed you, but you were nowhere around.

I swear, if you died today, I would not even go to your funeral. You will be lucky if I didn't spit on your grave! As a matter of fact, why don't you die? What purpose do you serve? When I call you and ask for things, your response is that I only call when I need something, or you remind me that I get child support. The point is that at least I call you. That little \$50 a month does nothing for me. I have learned that I have to work to make it in this world. I also learned that I have to work even harder for you to notice me. Wow. Extremely disappointed.

Signed: Your Real Son, Lewis Spears Morrison

This letter was written *four* years after his passing. My therapist suggested that I write a letter to each of my parents and myself. No, I am not ashamed of going to a therapist. When I think about it, besides asking my wife Myriam to marry me, therapy is one of the best that decisions I have ever made. The letter came from the feeling that I was never good enough and it was from the heart after years of neglect. I struggled with low self-esteem for many years. Now, I can honestly say that this is not an issue for me, but like most of us, there are challenges to functioning productively each day. Even though my parents did

not validate me, and maybe your parents failed in this area as well, you should know that you are more than enough.

Thinking back, there were job opportunities that I passed up. I rehearsed a very short bio so that I did not have to reveal too much about me. I missed investment opportunities, networking opportunities and opportunities for personal growth. I was in the shadows watching my dad enjoying his own life with his girlfriend, their daughter and other two kids. He never reached out to help my mom when our lights were being cut off, which happened often or on those occasions where we regularly did without. My negative self-esteem was a byproduct of my environment. I was this hindrance in the middle of two men who were supposed to look out for me and teach me how to be a man. Instead, my dad wanted nothing to do with me and Kenny, my stepdad did not accept me for who I was.

I fit Kenny's stereotype as this northerner kid reading all these books and instructing him how to pronounce words. He often shouted at me for being smart. It's funny, in the hood if you are not a hardcore knucklehead or troublemaker, you were not considered a *real* man. I wanted my dad Lewis to stand up for me to Kenny so badly, but he never did. I saw daily sacrifices from my mom and in my mind, that equated to me being of less value to him. **Lewis left me susceptible to any bad things that were happening to me, even in my own household.**

Mirror Mirror

When I was younger, the proximity of my apartment and my father Lewis' apartment puzzled me. *How could there be no real connection?* Lewis lived in the Lafayette PJ's, which were directly across the street from my family in Booker T. Any meetings that I had with him were merely coincidental. It was a bit weird running into him, yet, I didn't feel like I was missing out on anything since most of my friends were fatherless like me. Oftentimes I convinced myself that Lewis' absence came down to him assuming that Kenny would take care of me the same way he was taking care of his girlfriend's son. When I walked down the street, someone would shout, "That's your dad over there," pointing in his direction. If we were in the same grocery store, he would introduce me to a third party and say, "Yeah, this is my son." Everyone who knew my dad called me "Little Lewis." One evening I spent the night with him and his girlfriend and I felt so uncomfortable. I really liked his girlfriend, but staying under her roof with Lewis and three other kids was weird. I vowed to never sleep over again.

Lewis dressed homely and wore jeans, T-shirt and shoes. He was very plain and in the summer sported socks with sandals. He drove the short school buses, was a Teacher's Assistant, and worked with kids his entire life. *Hey, what about your kid across the street?* He took pride in his job and made about \$120 each week. Towards the end of high school, my accolades were recognized in the local newspapers. Articles were written about my memberships in various clubs and teachers and community leaders were saying great things about me. I was in

a chariot in a parade for winning an award. My aunt saw me and told Lewis about it. She said he smiled and seemed pleased. I guess in his eyes he knew he had an amazing son. Who knows, maybe he decided to fall back because he felt he could not compete with me? Now that I was coming into manhood, I thought this was the best time for him to just be there for me.

Then, the girlfriend whom I had come to know and love decided to move on after 12 years. My dad Lewis was unable to work because of a poor heart condition. He was in and out of the hospital so he had to stay home to collect disability and live that out to qualify for government assistance. He eventually lost his place and moved in with his brother who was a military veteran. His brother was dying and needed round the clock care. Lewis was there for his brother.

Lewis started inviting me to his talk of the town BBQ's. To give you a snapshot of the type of person my dad was, he gave an annual cookout in the Lafayette housing complex with free food and drink for everyone in attendance. People from different walks of life simply came by for a bite to eat. He was constantly open to friends, telling jokes and having fun. I wondered where I got my jovial side from, and it was evident that I retrieved that aspect of my personality from him. I loved seeing him interact with his friends, many of whom I perceived to be down on their luck, yet he treated each one with respect; even the skinny guy with a limp. Which is what everyone called him, as he was known by his deficiency. The skinny guy talked slowly and the aftermath of a

stroke caused him to walk with a limp. There was no stratification in how Lewis treated his friends. I learned from that very short, yet enlightening experience, that it was OK to love everyone and ultimately treat everyone the same despite their background.

After that cookout, I was able to walk in complete authority with my newfound self! My eventual relationship with my dad was vital for my optimal growth. It was the first time that I looked into a mirror and actually liked what I saw. We were finally forming a sincere relationship. Wow! I thought, *how could this amazingly friendly, well-respected man who was loved by his community, be able to take care in many aspects, his friends, but abandon his only biological son?* I began to create all types of excuses on his behalf. Even ones that villainized my mother, the one person who gave up her entire life to raise me, and I might add, she has done a great job! I couldn't fathom my dad just simply not wanting to be part of my life. Especially now that I was a college student.

I thought there had to be a legitimate reason why he didn't want to be around me. I never really put the responsibility on him because I imagined there was this justifiably, gargantuan reason that he was OK neglecting his responsibilities as a dad. As I stated earlier, I saw a mirror, and in there I projected his actions onto myself and tried to put myself in his shoes. That's when I realized that he did the best with what he knew how to do. We all did. I am sure that he could have done better. Yet given the tools, he had produced all

that he could. I saw that me judging him would not have changed a thing.

However, if I began to provide sympathy and compassion to understand where he was coming from, then I could ultimately get through the day. As I was learning more about the plight of the black man in America, knowing that it was not easy for him as he was struggling with his own insecurities, as well as psychological and physical ailments. In hindsight, what if your dad's sole purpose was just to bring you here? Now that you're here, it's up to you to make something of yourself, without his help, but with the help of others strategically placed in your life. I don't believe that my father had the skills to raise me to be the man that I am today. So I sleep better at night knowing that there was a purpose behind it all.

I had a hard time calling a man "Dad." I called my grandfather "granddaddy," and even questioned that title at some point because he used to beat on my grandma. I called my father "Lewis" because he wasn't always around. I called my stepdad "Kenny" because he didn't take responsibility for me. Neither of these men was worthy to be addressed as *my dad*. I realize that many people would say, "Lewis, at least you grew up with a stepdad in the house." Agreed. But since I wasn't his biological son, my stepdad Kenny could not validate me in my personality struggles which were difficult for me. Yet, when I got older and was around my dad, Lewis, I felt confident in being who I was because I saw myself in him and I saw him for who he was, nothing more,

nothing less.

360 Degree Turnaround

For my wedding in 2010, I said, to my dad “Dude you are wearing a tuxedo!” He came through for me. He rented a black tuxedo and looked really nice. I watched him beam with pride as he sat on the first-row corner seat. When I entered the sanctuary, he was the first person I saw on my right side. I was filled with excitement. After the pastor said, “I now pronounce you husband and wife,” I immediately gave him a high five. It was a moment where time stood still for me and I am grateful for that.

Without a doubt, I inherited my love of people from him. Despite not having a relationship with Lewis for my childhood and teenage years, I connected with my paternal bloodline through my older cousin Sean, my dad’s nephew, who worked in Marion’s Barber Shop, on Pacific Avenue. Sean always made sure that I had a fresh cut. He looked out for me and bought me things like shoes and clothes. He even paid for my Military Ball outfit. Sean was truly the first man to love me unconditionally. Other males in my family could not relate to me for the most part. I felt like I was always treated differently. They knew that I was different since I did not hang out and do the mischievous things that my other cousins did. Instead, I was comfortable sitting outside on the bench listening to adult conversations....

Breaking the Curse

“As a black man in America, I can relate to the demons, of not feeling good enough.”

My dad was the youngest boy of nine kids. His dad, my grandfather, died before I was born. I was told that my grandfather was a hard worker and lived around the projects. My father was probably influenced by his older brothers because they were the ones who were around him growing up. Mom told me that Lewis never talked about his father at all. He only spoke highly of his mother because as the youngest, she loved on him all the time.

Lewis had pacemaker surgery in 2002. Ten years later, there were fluids leaking from the hole the doctors left around the device. He went in to have the holes plugged and was under anesthesia. He never recovered. There are countless young men that I meet that say, “F... my dad! I don’t need him! He was never there for me!” I can’t convince them of their dad’s intentions or circumstances, but I always encourage them to look at the fact that they are here for a reason, and it’s up to them to make a difference and break the generational curse for their own families.

My dad passed away in 2012 at St. Michael’s Hospital in Newark, New Jersey. I remember the day before he went in for surgery, he called me and talked about wanting grandchildren. I was on my way to a party. Something told me to relax and talk to him. In our typical conversations, we laughed a lot. I was

not a sports fan and he loved the Dolphins. We talked about my wife Myriam and how snooty she is, which always made us crack up. We talked about mommy and how crazy she is. I ended the conversation with, "I love you." He responded, "love you too."

The next day he was gone. I knew that my mother hated him-even in death. At the funeral, she walked up to his casket, scoffed, and then held me as I sat on the front row of the church. At the burial site, my dad's brother's and sisters said, "Let's talk about the good times we had." My mother blurted out, "Pshhh! What good times?" At the end of the day, I will always be team mom, but I told her that I needed to have my own experiences with my dad, as she had her own. I gave myself permission to mourn. After all, it was not her dad, it was mine. I had to stand by my truth. The truth was that he was still my father and I didn't feel for him what she felt for him. I needed to experience that mourning in order to grow.

After his death, I realized that he did the best he could with what he was working with. My mom told me that he had a drug addiction and that she purposely did not want me exposed to that. As a kid, you can never see these things in a person you admire or want attention from. Thanks, mommy for always being "Mama Bear" even when I did not see the danger ahead.

To this day, I feel robbed of my full experience with my dad. I felt that we were on to something great and that he was taken prematurely. When my son AJ

was born, he did not see his granddad and I wanted that for him. Spending time with my grandkids is a real goal of mine. Sometimes I have thoughts of dying before reaching my fullest potential. Our last day is not up to us. That's why I go hard with everything and give 110% to whatever I do.

The X Factor:

Understanding the Congruence & Similarity of Properties

I often watch the Showtime Series, *Ray Donovan*. Ray is the male version of Scandal's infamous Olivia Pope. However, instead of a setting on Capitol Hill, *Ray Donovan* is set in Los Angeles' Hollywood elite. What often strikes me about this show is the father-son relationship Ray has with his dad. As a celebrity "fixer" Ray thinks he is better than his dad and despises his criminal behaviors. Ray believes he is helping people, while his dad is doing evil. Every time there were scenes between Ray and his dad on the show, I could not help but think of my relationship with my dad. All of my life I have been trying to move up into an elite circle, while my dad was doing things for the community. I sometimes looked down on him, when I should have been looking up to him for helping others.

I don't care how much you despise your parent. When they die, you feel like you've lost your best friend. I've experienced it personally, and I've witnessed it among my peers. Many of them had said in anger, "He wasn't

anybody to me. It's whatever!" But mourning brings several things to light. You might not handle your relationships well. You may want to do something drastic like leave your marriage. You may want to experience a life-change, such as cutting all your hair off. My friends experienced all of these things in spite of their initial feelings of numbness. Grief is inevitable, so it behooves us to build that relationship with our less-than-perfect parent. Anyone who talks to me about my dad always says, "He was a cool guy, really down-to-earth." I'm thankful for the privilege to have known him. I've been through a lot of counseling since his death. I can't help but remember him on his birthday, September 1st. On the first birthday after his death, I felt uneasy and agitated around that time. I didn't make the connection right away. My wife sent me a text on that day which said, "I know that you're going through something because of your father's death." Then it all made sense. Looking back, I am grateful for the adult to adult time that I got to spend with my dad. There were father-son moments that I experienced with him that will last a lifetime.

You + Forgiveness = The Answer

I've read many articles that say there is a fatherless crisis in America. Millions of kids are raised without fathers and in the black family, the percentages are higher. There is a lot of statistical data that shows the negative effects on children when fathers are absent from the home. These negative

effects take a toll on the family unit and society in general. For kids growing up without a father, they are more likely to be in poverty-stricken areas, more likely to have been abused, more likely to have behavioral challenges and end up in jail, more likely to abuse drugs and alcohol, more likely to commit crimes, and more likely to drop out of high school. Unfortunately, to add to the absent black father crisis, statistics show that black men incarcerated receive longer jail time for similar crimes committed by Caucasian males.

This past summer I took a group of young men to my Uncle Frank's cookout in Long Island. I rented a car for eight young men. Once we arrived, one of them got into the drivers' side and hit a parked car. I was embarrassed and annoyed at the same time. It was a dumb decision and he was a danger to himself and other people. I could not help but read him the riot act for two hours from Long Island to Jersey City. I told his dad and he agreed that his son should pay for the damage. I started to feel bad for him and he said, "Mr. Spears, I'm sorry, I don't want you to lose connection with me." At the end of the day, it is about mentoring and being there for kids. They yearn for someone to be in their corner. Although his dad in his life, he was willing to get into trouble with his dad and not me.

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