

MICHAEL STAHL

Longing for a Father

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Dedicated to all fathers and sons,
to my father and my children,
and the Father of all fathers.

Preface

This book is about a part of my eventful life. Stories full of pain and grief, but also full of trust and devotion. This is also the story of a father about his father. Written for fathers and sons. In a world where more and more kids are growing up without fathers, or with fathers who do not have much time, it is difficult to talk about the best and most loving Father of all fathers. But I will dare to talk about God as a Father.

It is a love story!

In the First Commandment of the Bible, God introduces himself to us, saying, "*I am the Lord, your God*" (Exodus 20:2). I emphasize the words "I AM YOUR".

That is nothing less than a declaration of love! If you have ever fallen in love, you know what I mean. We often close a love letter with "(I AM) YOURS."

This book tells about a loving Father. Whoever discovers this Father for himself, will find his roots, his identity, and the true meaning of life. Join me on my journey and find meaning for your life.

Fathers must never forget that they are also sons—sons of their earthly fathers. If we want our own children to be good and strong, we should ask ourselves, are we also good children to our parents? Are we children who honor our father and mother, love them, and tell them we love them over and over again?

This book is a challenge. Look at the wounds that have been 'beaten' into you. There is a time for healing. What is good must prevail in this world again.

For that to happen, however, we have to change ourselves. We should know ourselves well. Who are we? Where do we come from? What is the meaning of life? And where will we go one day? We men always ask ourselves the same questions: Am I a real man? What is it that makes me a man? What about our longings and dreams? Are we good sons and good fathers ourselves?

Questions and more questions, which can only be answered by the one who created us. Longings that can only be fulfilled by the one who put them into our hearts. We often hear of 'burn out.' That means there once was a fire burning. The question is, who started the fire in the first place? And how do we keep it burning, or how do we reignite it?

Join me on my journey to my first hero, my own father. Walk along with me for a while through the dark valleys. Come with me to the place where I failed as a father. Hear about the miracles I was allowed to experience, and draw richly from the treasure contained therein for you.

Trust, even if it is hard for you. The fact that you are reading this book is no coincidence. It came into your hands because you are infinitely precious in the eyes of God the Father. I am sure that he wants to tell you something through these stories. Open the ears and eyes of your heart. It could be that even today your whole life will be changed. It is up to you and it is within you. You have the gift to be able to change the world.

Michael Stahl

1 A Day Like Christmas

It was a rainy, late summer morning in the late seventies, my birthday. I was standing dreamily at the window of our little old house and was looking out onto the street.

I felt as if Heaven was crying along with my soul. Birthdays are always something special, just a little like Christmas. Days on which you might think you'd be treated specially. The world around you treats you differently, as if you were more valuable. Things often turn out differently than you'd have thought or wished it would. I wasn't expecting a cake with candles to blow out, or a festively decorated room. No, just a smile, a gesture, a soft touch or a nice word, especially from the most important man in my life, my father, and hero. Lost in my thoughts, I was staring out of the window. Life out there seemed sad and gloomy to me. What would the day be like?

A party, a very special day, the day of days for millions of children.

Excitement welled up in me. My thoughts circled insecurely till the door of the living room opened and ripped me out of my dreams. There he stood, just a few steps away from me, my father.

His face was firm, striking—void of any emotion. I sensed it was not a special day for him, not a party day, not a reason to celebrate, no feeling of Christmas. Our eyes met. With the confidence of a ‘birthday boy’—a boy who is under special protection because of that day—I went towards him, this big strong man, and dared to ask, “Dad, what do I get for my birthday today?” We faced each other, father and son. You could have heard a pin drop. Seconds became an eternity. I could have asked anything, just not that question, on that day, at that time, at that place. Overwhelming and powerful, he stood across from me. I was completely at the mercy of his answer and everything that was now going to happen.

I knew right then that I would not get a present, wrestle with the wrapping paper, or cut a ribbon. I knew that I would get something very different than what I had wished and longed for.

The world seemed to stand still, as if it had stopped breathing, as if the whole universe was waiting spell-bound for what was going to happen.

My father looked firmly into my eyes. His face was full of contempt. It appeared to me as if he were taking a breath. But no, that’s not what it was.

He spit right in my face. His saliva ran down my face. In my deepest grief, I heard his voice,

“Is that enough? Do you want more of it?” Then he left the room.

There I stood, my soul pierced by a spear of disdain and malice.

I felt no hate or rage, I was simply broken and defenseless.

My tears mingled with my father's saliva.

At the age of five, I had become aware of God through an 8 x 10 inch picture of Jesus. At that time, I had asked myself why this Jesus in the picture was looking at me with so much love, and why he had holes in his hands. The more I found out about this Jesus, the more I loved and trusted him. I started to pray, to tell him everything, and to trust in him.

I stood at the window again looking up to the sky, showing him my pain. I didn't wipe the spit off. God himself should see what had happened to me. Jesus was spit at too. I felt very close to him then. I never read in his Word that he wiped the spit off. Spitting at someone is an act that originates from the deepest contempt. This deepest contempt he carried up to Calvary. So I also took the contempt I suffered to him.

He sympathized with me. The same thing had happened to him. That's what I thought and felt in that moment.

The more I cried, the more the spit of contempt from my father was washed from my face by the tears. Now I cried with all of Heaven.

I felt I was not alone. God himself was grieving with me. I blamed myself, wondering if this escalation was my fault, as so often. I had made my dad angry, and it was my fault that he maybe felt guilty.

Actually, I wanted to make him proud of me. Once again I had failed; I was not good enough. But a feeling of warmth and sympathy intermingled with the weeping, grief and self-accusation. I felt God was by my side and was weeping with me.

I looked out of the window. Endless tears ran down my face, dropping to the floor like water out of a leaking faucet.

The song, *Adieu mein kleiner Gardeoffizier* ('Good-bye My Little Guard Officer'), was playing on our ancient radio.

This song became a synonym to me for contempt and grief, but also for being close to God. My father was my first hero, the love of my life. No matter what he did or didn't do, he could be sure of my love.

2 The Dream

Totally exhausted, I woke up. My heart was agitated; there was chaos in my soul. My thoughts were erratic. I had had a bad dream, or was it not a dream, but rather a message, a request from the one who always wants the best for us?

I had dreamed that my father had died. I knew immediately that my thoughts, my actions, and many other things weren't as they should have been.

All those years, I had treated my father like a good Christian would, or so I thought. I had never written him off, although I had been furious with him so often and had often been ashamed of him. Over and over again, I had tried to keep peace with him.

I knew that morning that I had to do something I should have done a long time ago: seek true peace with him.

I thought I had accomplished quite a bit in my life. Though I was married for the second time, I also had a wonderful son, Manuel, from my first marriage. I was my own boss and reasonably successful. But what I hadn't been able to achieve by that time was to be reconciled to my father.

This dream shook me; this dream tugged at me.

I got ready right away knowing what I had to do: visit my father and make peace with him before the day came when I would no longer be able to do it.

My father had never worked as far back as I could remember. I was constantly tormented in school because of that and was ridiculed by my classmates, even later as an adult.

One day during my apprenticeship, I was sent to get something from a shop. When I got in line at the counter, an older lady in front of me was talking excitedly with one of the sales clerks about another man. Suddenly, I realized who they were talking about. They were badmouthing my father, who was standing outside the shop window. With disgust, the clerk labeled my father a drunk and a scumbag. The woman agreed, and both of them complained further that they had to support such scum with their taxes. I felt shocked, unable to react, I wished the ground would swallow me up, or that I were somewhere far away, but I was here and had to listen to such terrible things about my father. I stood as if paralyzed.

The clerk looked straight at me while he was pointing at my father, still standing in front of the window, and asked, "Do you know that man, too?"

I swallowed hard. What should I answer? How should I react? What would be the right thing to do now?

Blushing conspicuously and with a trembling voice, I said, "No, I don't know that man."

I could hardly believe what I had just said. Instantly, I remembered Peter, who denied his Lord three times

and claimed not to know Jesus and never to have met him before.

Deep in the innermost part of my heart, I heard a rooster crow.

Jesus said to Peter at the Lord's Supper that Peter would deny him three times before the rooster crowed. That's exactly how I felt. Caught—having denied my own flesh and blood, my own father.

We can never undo what we have done. And we can't take back our failure.

And now I had dreamed that I had lost my father. I set out to find him. Normally, he was always on the go, but that morning, I drove for just a few seconds and there he was on the side of the street. So he was still alive. I found him and looked for forgiveness and peace.

I stopped right in the middle of the busy street, rolled down my window and yelled, "Dad, I do like you!"

As he couldn't hear well, he asked what I had said and I yelled a second time, "I do like you!" Puzzled, he just looked at me. Before we could go on talking, we were interrupted by loud honking from the cars behind me. So I drove on.

No, that was not enough, my heart was completely messed up. I felt that was not enough. I had never read in the Bible that we should *like* each other.

No, Jesus' last wish was, "*Love one another, as I have loved you*" (John 15:12).

We shouldn't just like one another, but love one another.

I prayed and told God that I knew what his desire was and what he wanted me to do. I said, "OK, God, I will go to my father. The problem is I have three appointments today that I can't miss, and I have to keep my word. If one of them is cancelled, then I'll go."

I thought I could make a deal with God because the truth was that I didn't want to go to my father. I thought the 'I like you' would be enough. But God wanted more, because he knows me and knows what is good for me.

Somehow I didn't want to make myself vulnerable or to humble myself before my father. Especially because he was the one who had wronged me so much, and he could just as well have come and said something nice to me.

The ringing of my cell phone ripped me away from my thoughts. I answered. It was a man telling me he had to cancel the appointment today at 2 o'clock and would need to make arrangements for a new one.

Now I knew I didn't have to negotiate deals with God; he had a fixed plan. From this moment on, I trusted him completely.

I drove to the bar above which my father rented a small, modest room.

I walked up the steps to the second floor and stood in front of his little room, number five. My heart was pounding. It was full of love. Now I knew everything was going to work out because God was with me.

Thirty-seven years without true peace—but with God at my side, my faithful friend, companion, and protector, the Father of all fathers, I knew that a new life would soon begin.

I was ready to give everything and knew that I would get even more.

I knocked on the door and entered the meager room.

There he stood in front of me. We faced each other just like 30 years ago. But this time I didn't ask for a present, but brought the biggest present, which I had always been carrying inside me—love for my father.

He wasn't as overwhelming any more. Weak and fragile, he stood in front of me, his look and posture insecure. He waited for what would come now. I'll never forget this moment. I felt how God was leading me and gently pushing me, how he was with me and was longing for reconciliation. I said two things to my father, "Dad, I love you," and, "Please forgive me."

Divine silence surrounded us and spread out in the room.

My father looked at me for several seconds totally amazed. I felt his thoughts, "What? He is coming to me? I beat him up and kicked him, I spit on him, and now he is asking me for forgiveness?"

In the midst of his astonishment, I said, "Dad, don't wonder why I'm apologizing. With every day you didn't satisfy my desires, I moved further away from you. I shouldn't have moved further away, but closer to you. My whole life long, I have felt ashamed of you and have wanted to change you. But I have learned one thing—I can only change one person and that's me. Even if you have made thousands of mistakes and I have only made one, I ask you: please forgive me this one mistake."

My father looked at me. No rage, no contempt. Instead of that, a warmth spread in his heart and eyes.

He came closer to me, hugged me and did what I had longed for 30 years ago. He held me close and whispered in my ear, "I love you."

Through this dream, my humility and my decision to look for peace, the Almighty God, the Creator of Heaven and Earth, came into this poor, shabby little room. The peace of God filled this small room. Heaven itself came down to us.

The love of God was in us and around us. Arm in arm, united—that's how fathers and sons should live and stay together.

For that to happen, however, we need people who listen to God's word, who trust him, and who will dare to do crazy and bold things with the certainty that God will not leave them all alone.

My father became a new man that day. It was as if he were born anew. A friendship started. He became the guest of honor in our house.

In June 2009, my daughter was born. He held her in his arms and wept. He sensed that home is not a place marked on a map, but a place where you are with the people who love you.

He became the best grandpa you could wish for and gave his all. He learned that the more he gave out of love, the more he got back.

We prayed the Lord's prayer together over and over again.

The love of our God lives in us and through us. I learned that there is only one person I can change, and that's me. Only when I had changed did he change.

I would like to ask you, when you last told your father that you loved him? If you don't have a father, ask God to be your father. He will care for you. If you live in strife, hatred, or even indifference, go the way I went, yet today. But don't go alone, take God, your Heavenly DAD, with you.

Experience the miracle I experienced. Don't wait for the miracle, but be a miracle yourself. God loves you and you are never alone.