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In Popsicle Fish, Murphy reflects on lessons from his everyday experience with his young sons. There's a lot for fathers to take away from his essays. Several gave me goosebumps. All made me feel more human. The book reminded me that children are great teachers they can help us know ourselves and the most simple interactions with them can be profound. I remembered times of connection with my own children, and vowed to find ways to stay connected. For that, I thank Michael Murphy and his sons.

Fred P. Piercy, Ph.D.

Program Director at Purdue University

Department of Child Development and Family Studies

Popsicle Fish reaches deep down into the pockets of every parent's laughs and wishes, heartaches and hopes, and pulls out fistfuls of wisdom and love. Reading Popsicle Fish is like browsing through your family album, declaring, "Yes, I remember that!" and discovering that the father he discusses is you, the children in the stories are yours, and the message is for everybody. Like all family albums, you will hold onto this one forever.

Dr. Paul Coleman, Psy.D., Clinical Psychologist

Author of *The 30 Secrets of Happily Married Couples*

Popsicle Fish Tales of Fathering

By Michael J. Murphy, Ed.D.

Illustrations by Susanna Hepburn Kravitz

Foreword by Jack Canfield Co-Author of *Chicken Soup for the Soul*

HEALTH PRESS
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Photo by Robert R. Tucker.

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Illustrations by Susanna Hepburn Kravitz

They do not understand how that which separates unites with itself. It is a harmony of oppositions, as in the case of the bow and of the lyre.
Heracletus of Ephesus Circa 500 B.C.

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Acknowledgments

For a book such as this the list of those to whom to express gratitude must begin small and expand to include the whole universe, for the material that comprises it my perplexing, laughable and heartrending experiences as a father was itself first and foremost a grand gift from the gods to me.

The beautiful places we have lived deserve first mention, for they provided the context for it all: the wooded hills of Vermont and western Massachusetts, whose cold refreshing rivers and sharp winter winds kept my mind alert; the wide-rolling Texas plains, whose open skies bring into sharp relief even the most mundane events, will always seem like home to me; and the wind-blown shore of Cape Cod, with its strangely slanted orange afternoon light, strikes me silent so that at other moments I might have recourse to words.

The people I have met in these places clients encountered in the profoundest sincerity late at night in a hospital emergency room; colleagues who during moments of pure idealism have shared a common struggle to lend some note of peace or light to a community, and the many momentary mentors from Commerce, Texas, to North Adams, Massachusetts, who have done me the honor of sharing themselves with me have my deepest appreciation. You probably don't know who you are, but nonetheless I must let you know that you are remembered.

I owe to my mother and father the most powerful lessons in clear-eyed willingness to persevere; to my sisters and brothers the deep sense that balancing conflict is a unity that can be relied upon to appear at the most unexpected and important moments. You allowed me to be a little strange and to thrive nonetheless, and that tilting gave my vision

whatever new slant it might possess today.

I want to express my deep appreciation to my oldest son Benjamin for patiently providing me with the opportunity to learn what it means to be a father. His shining spirit is testament to his capacity to persevere, despite my bumbling efforts.

I want to thank Jack Canfield, whose sincerity and openness to my work played a large part in setting this whole process in motion, in ways that I will someday explain over the long-discussed cup of coffee.

The members of the Family Consultation Team, both past and present, have shared the magical chemistry that happens when caring is made real. Lois Callahan and Jo D. Pockette-Fralich have shared lessons of the heart and mind. And Garry McKeoner, MacKoulin addition to being one of the last pure appreciators is a most treasured friend.

Many thanks to Susanna Hepburn Kravitz, who as illustrator took the risk of leaping upon an already fast-moving train. Your openness is exceeded only by your talent, which I am pleased to play some small part in bringing to the world.

My deep appreciation as well goes out to Kathleen Schwartz of Health Press, whose care and sensitivity to my work has at times exceeded my own. Your competence and disciplined passion for service, as well as your willingness to take a flier on an unknown writer, should be a model for all in the publishing world.

My gratitude to my children will hopefully be amply communicated by this book itself. They have challenged me to experience them. This book is my reply.

Finally, my wife Miriam, through her great honesty and courage, has allowed me to see that the adventure of the family need not be limited by my paltry Irish imagination. There were moments when we only knew how good it was going to be by how bad it was. You made it all possible, and, to my great benefit, you didn't make it too easy.

Foreword

As Mark Victor Hansen and I were compiling the stories for our book *Chicken Soup for the Soul*, we were delighted to discover and include a wonderful piece by Michael Murphy. I had never met Michael Murphy except through his writings in the *Family Therapy Networker* magazine but over the years of reading his articles I had fallen in love with him. Not romantically, of course, but as a fellow sensitive and loving father who thinks deeply and reflectively about himself and his role as a father. He is, as I told my wife, "a good man!"

He is a man with a big dream, a big heart, and a desire to truly make a difference. His rich background as a marriage and family therapist, forensic psychologist, lecturer, men's group facilitator, author, and father has enabled him to intimately see and share in the challenges facing all families today. He has seen the ravages of child abuse and other violence, and he sees a country that is in dire need of fathering.

I always feel moved, warm, more full, and more at peace with myself and my humanity whenever I finish one of Michael's stories. Playing a part in bringing Michael's writings to an audience of more than four million people has brought me great joy. Many, many people have commented to me about how much they were touched by Michael's story. Now I am excited to have the honor of introducing Michael's first book, *Popsicle Fish: Tales of Fathering*.

Popsicle Fish makes a radical contribution in acknowledging the differences between fathering and mothering. Michael's long overdue message is that it's okay for fathers to parent differently than mothers. What fathers and mothers bring to parenting are essential to a child's development, and this book can serve as a wonderful bridge between the sexes and the generations. It provides a window through which

both women and men can explore and develop a deep respect for the masculine art of fathering.

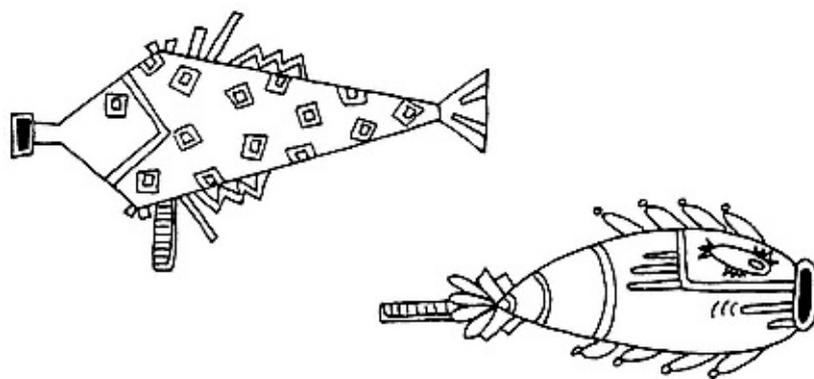
Through *Popsicle Fish* Michael redefines fatherhood, not in terms of money, political power, or social dominance but rather in terms of our humanity. Insofar as fathering is a vital aspect of one's manhood, this book is an essential step in the process of redefining the term "male power."

Working with men incarcerated for crimes of violence, Michael has seen an army of unfathered and undeveloped young men. Because of this experience he offers *Popsicle Fish* as a loving yet powerful message that fathering is a unique and essential masculine task. Unique as every father's relationship with his child is unique; and essential because it brings out in each child what no other relationship can.

The intensity and depth of Michael's professional and personal experience have made these pages a delightful reading treasure. You are bound to find yourself experiencing the full spectrum of your emotions, from laughter to tears. Michael's prose is gracefully guided by his sensitivity to language, rhythm, and humanity. His ability to disclose his own vulnerabilities and allow difficult and profound questions to remain illuminated but unanswered will no doubt touch your heart as it has touched mine many times.

As you prepare to read this magical journey into fatherhood, let me offer you this last piece of advice: One must digest *Popsicle Fish* even more slowly than one digests *Chicken Soup*. After all, chicken soup is a well-known soother for an upset system, but *Popsicle Fish*, well. . . . As I urge my readers, don't hurry through this book. Take the time to savor each story and reflect deeply upon the meaning it has for you as a parent. Take the time to engage each and every story with your whole being. Remember to listen to the words with your heart as well as your mind. You are in for a wonderful treat. Enjoy it.

JACK CANFIELD
CO-AUTHOR, CHICKEN SOUP FOR THE SOUL



Introduction

Just the other day four-year-old Aaron was talking about some topic of great meaning to him the names of the cartoon heroes of the moment or their complex powers when I was suddenly moved to squeeze him in my arms and tell him how much I love him. As I released him, he turned his small face up toward mine and spoke with great seriousness.

"Dad," he said. "You love me even when you get mad at me and yell at me, don't you?"

Discerning the correct answer to this question was not a difficult task, though it was hard to withstand the way my heart reached out to this little person who had given me a great gift the gift of sharing with perfect honesty how much it meant to him to mean something to me.

It wasn't always this way. As a guy who grew up as guys do in our culture I learned to act as if I didn't have an emotional life. Men, I thought, were meant to do things, and emotions interfere with accomplishment. As a being who was young, inadequate, and male, I yearned to be free of feelings. Feelings were for women, and that was the reason why for the longest time I could only feel complete when I was with one.

But young children in their beauty and innocence insist that their fathers have an emotional life, for how else is a father to know his child, and a child his father? Young children will wail their grief, roar their humor, screech their joy. They relate to their world with perfect immediacy, openness, and clarity. Has anyone ever known a greater passion than that of a six-year-old who believes he has been subjected to an injustice? And a man, if he is to be a father, must *know* his children in these moments of passion; he must *be there* to communicate to his children that it is all right to do things *and* to have feelings about things.

None of us reading the lists of horrors in the daily papers need to be reminded that the consequences of father-failure are drastic. Each week, together with the three other clinicians who comprise the Family Consultation Team, I strive to help families for whom conflict and numbness have occluded the channels of compassionate feeling. We find that in families fueled by anger, the father is frequently either abusive or absent or virtually absent. He is propelled by impulses that snap the ever-more-tenuous fathering bond, and he leaves a child with a space where there should be the image of a loving and honorable man.

When I work in the courts and jails and prisons of our communities I consistently ask my clients nearly always young men who comes to mind when I say the word "father," and with equal consistency they offer the same response: a blank stare, a shake of the head, and the monotonous statement "No one." Boys who have not stood beside a loving man for long periods have a way of finding their way into our courts and jails and prisons, where their screams of violence and rage reverberate in the empty fathering space.

This book is lovingly offered in the awareness that many American men have fallen into a terrifying isolation in which individual self-interest has taken precedence over the needs of others, even those others who comprise one's own family. Many men have come to believe, as men have long believed, that our own choices of vocation or role or identity have necessary implications for those around us, and this dependency has contributed to the excessive control of others which has, in turn, marked the first step toward family dissolution.

When this tide of isolation is turned, it will be due to the commitment of millions of individual fathers to the common good. This commitment will take the form of countless small decisions to hold a child, to change a diaper, to patiently offer a finger as a child learns to walk, to be present in the development of the family in a thousand small ways that demonstrate to young life that it is not alone.

Many forces have coalesced to render millions of American children bereft of fathering love. As a nation we are now faced with accepting a future in which fatherlessness is the norm or confronting fathers with a

challenge to return to the family and all its stressors, conflicts, and joys. This book offers a modest invitation to the joys that follow when the diverse obligations of fathering love are accepted.

When the agony that accompanies our problems with violence begins to ease it will be because men have chosen to lovingly involve themselves with their children from the very beginning. Far from the media-promulgated image of the deadbeat dad, my wife and I in our fathering workshops again and again discover men who are yearning for this connection, for commitment, and for change. Against all expectation men hold within themselves the potential to do for their own what was never done for them. At some point they show up, they come to learn, these men who would be fathers.

And young children are great teachers; the best teachers because they clearly share the urgency life's lessons hold for them. As we carry them on our shoulders and bounce them on our knees, in another sense we sit at their feet, learning about spontaneity even as we teach them self-control; learning about joy even as we teach them about understanding; learning about love even as we teach them about responsibility.

So these small stories about fathering my two younger sons, Isaac and Aaron, are offered in the large hope that they will help some men enjoy their offspring, as my children have happily invited me to help myself to their joy in being alive. As men are involved with children, that diverse involvement will take the form of countless small stories, each, as with childhood itself, with its own poignant beginning, middle, and end.

As I answered Aaron's profound question with all the awareness of my frailty and love, I knew that my life is larger for having given to him that generous, generative miracle our children ask us to share each day of our lives.

One supplemental note: There is an important reason why none of the following stories describe heartfelt interactions between a father and his daughter. Fate has chosen to grace me with three sons. I believe that most of the meaning of these stories can be generalized to children

of both genders; the closeness, warmth, and stunning creativity of children are not monopolized by either sex nor are the challenges to fathers. The message is the same: If fathering love is risked, the daily struggles of life are suffused with joy.

One last note: These stories are arranged for thematic effect. The author begs the reader's understanding regarding any confusion resulting from the children's ages in various stories.

