

THE COMPASS FATHER



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Fathers, don't exasperate your children...[but] take them by the hand and lead them in the way of the Master.

- Ephesians 6:4 MSG

Determining to Be a Dad Who Gives Good Direction



Of the 70 million people who pass through Chicago O'Hare Airport every year, probably not many know that a father/son relationship indirectly led to the naming of America's second busiest airport.

Chicago was at one time a city virtually owned by the notorious gangster Al Capone. Making his fortune from numerous unsavory activities, "Scarface" managed to maintain his lucrative criminal empire by relying on the legal maneuverings of his lawyer, Edgar Joseph O'Hare. It was his skill that kept Capone out of jail, and for services rendered he became a lawyer who lived well on his ill-gotten gains. Residing in a mansion and grounds big enough to fill an entire city block, the man known as "Easy Eddie" seemingly had everything money could buy – except for one thing.

Although hardened by years of criminal activity, Eddie had a soft spot for his son, Butch. In monetary terms Butch wanted for nothing, but his father was desperate to leave him a legacy of

which he would be proud. To possess moral values, to invest in integrity, and serve others without thought of personal gain were all things Easy Eddie wanted desperately to pass on to Butch.

In order to guide his son in the right direction, Eddie took some drastic steps to rectify his previous misdemeanors. Turning state's evidence, it was his information that allowed the authorities to jail Al Capone for tax evasion, a choice that probably cost Butch's dad his life. Gunned down in a gangland style murder, Eddie's 180 degree decision may have been the turning point that forever changed his family's fortunes. Not that Chicago's O'Hare International Airport is named after the somewhat dubious activities of "Easy Eddie," but rather the heroic acts of his son—World War II fighter pilot Lt. Com. Edward Henry "Butch" O'Hare.

Assigned to protect the aircraft carrier USS Lexington, Lt. Com. O'Hare had been sent on a mission with other Wildcat fighters to intercept nine incoming Japanese bombers. Along with his wingman, Butch was the first to spot the planes. While the rest of the Wildcats were too far away to be of any assistance, the two pilots decided to engage the enemy alone. However, O'Hare's wingman's gun jammed leaving him no option but to go it alone.

Without a moment's hesitation, Butch flew his plane at full throttle into the V formation of oncoming Japanese bombers in what his citation later read as, "One of the most daring, if not the most daring, single action in the history of aviation." Downing five enemy planes and damaging another, Lt. Com. O'Hare

displayed a level of personal sacrifice, honor and gallantry that earned him the Congressional Medal of Honor and the respect of a whole nation.

Butch O'Hare took his bearings from a father who seemingly tried to redirect his own misguided life so as to point his son in the right direction. Edgar O'Hare's task of "compassing" changed the course of his son's life.

Being a dad is more than mowing the lawn, paying bills, taking out the trash, kicking a ball, or monopolizing the remote. Yet, exactly how does an imperfect father direct his children, while at the same time valuing their growing desire to make choices? How do we govern, as well as guide, and lead those we love without their losing sight of their unique reason for being? I believe the answer lies in a dad's ability to "compass" his kids in the right direction.

Fixed Point of Reference

Much like the instrument from which he gets his name, the *Compass Father* has the inherent ability to give each of his children godly direction by being a standard from whom others can take a reliable bearing. In an ever-changing world, children need solid benchmarks from which they can take a bearing in all things moral, social, emotional and spiritual. The consistency of the *Compass Father* is the fixed point of reference that enables his kids to take those reliable readings – an ability that, although humanly inherent, is most certainly divinely inspired.

Becoming a dad for the first time can make a man feel ill-

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prepared, ill-informed, ill-equipped and ill-suited for the task that childbirth springs on him. With the arrival of a new baby, life takes on a more serious and reflective nature. When an Old Testament pensioner named Enoch fathered his firstborn, the Bible is quick to tell us that he “walked with God.”¹ The miracle of birth awakens a man to the reality that he needs the daily companionship of Father/God.

In his foreword for a book on fatherhood, Rabbi Harold Kushner described what fatherhood means to a dad: “To father a child is, in a way, to partake of the divine, to bring a new soul into the world even as God did in the first days of Creation, to cheat mortality by seeing to it that your name and your values, as well as your DNA, will survive your limited time on earth.”² Yet, it leaves most men feeling vulnerable.

Our children’s birth awakens us to the reality that in order to give directions we first must take directions, that as fathers we too need a fixed point of reference in our own lives, something or someone we can trust to be reliable, no matter what is going on around us. A defining moment in a man’s life, fatherhood is an “Enoch Experience” that should birth a sincere desire to have God join us on our daily journey into parenting.

As “the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change,”³ God alone is the fixed point of reference we can trust, no matter how difficult the terrain or how bad the environment. While new birth might awaken us to our own mortality, it also opens our eyes to the need for spiritual intimacy, to enter into and enjoy a relationship with God the Father,⁴ whose

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directional advice for dads is invaluable in what is, undoubtedly, the world's most difficult job.

Society doesn't need more fathers whose parenting job description is "do as I say, not as I do," dads who merely point in a certain direction and expect their children to magically obey their orders. We need guys who will lovingly take their children by the hand and lead them in the ways of God.

Just two days into the Apollo 13 mission and about 200,000 miles from earth, the vessel's number two oxygen tank exploded, ripping a hole in the service module, threatening the survival of the whole crew. That's when the Apollo 13 commander Jim Lovell uttered those five infamous words: "Houston, we've had a problem."⁵ The thought of losing an American anywhere in the world was unacceptable; losing one in space was inconceivable. While the successful mission to recover those astronauts was a credit to human endurance and man's ingenuity in the face of appalling odds, Western civilization is now facing a far greater crisis.

A post-Christian culture has removed the fixed points of reference, the benchmarks by which the founding fathers established our civilization, leaving us a generation lost in its own uncertainty. So how do we retrieve a generation lost through the destructive force of liberal thinking?

Ask a parent to describe the flood of emotion that sweeps over them when they first realize they've lost track of their child in a busy store and few will be able to adequately explain the feelings of unadulterated panic, followed by guilt, fear and anger. With

emotions off the chart, horror soon turns to hysteria as a volcanic voice begins to erupt deep inside that wants so desperately to cry out, “Close the doors! Don’t let anyone leave! I’ve lost my child.”

If there was ever a moment in history when children need to catch sight of a fixed point of reference, it’s now; but in a world without signposts, Western civilization is fast losing track of its most valuable “commodity” – its children

Putting Back the Signposts

As the European nations fell like dominoes under the might of the German war machine, England braced itself for invasion. World War II was at its height and Great Britain feared the worst. In a defensive move aimed at eradicating all forms of navigational advantage to an invading army, the government of the day ordered that all road signs be removed. Because they provided such vital pieces of information as destination, direction and distance of local towns and cities throughout the United Kingdom, the order was to dismantle all the signposts for the duration of the war. Removing these directional signs, the government hoped to significantly slow Hitler’s progress during the early days of his threatened occupation.

By divorcing from the Judeo-Christian belief system, modern man has removed the signposts that are the navigational markers of *absolute truth*, *ethical right*, *delegated authority*, *long-term commitment*, *ownership* and *personal morality*. Confused by the mixture of syncretism, the maze of relativism and the madness

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of pluralism, a post-Christian culture has exploded in the face of our children, leaving the twenty-first century fumbling to find its way in a fog of varying beliefs.

As a result of breaking free from biblical absolutes, mankind has created a perfect storm in which their offspring find themselves floating directionless in a sea of adolescence. Sailing rudderless, young people lack the necessary steering mechanism to cope with the winds of change and avoid either the shallows or those submerged obstacles that threaten to run them aground or shipwreck their lives. Tossed about by the winds of change and the waves of adversity, adults and adolescents alike are being shipwrecked on the shores of physical, emotional, financial and spiritual ruin at a rate that is fast outstripping our human resources.

In the aftermath of the sixties, Western humanity ran amuck in the candy store of liberal thinking. Momentarily enjoying a sugar-rush of freedom, the West thought itself free of those moral moorings imposed on them by previous generations. Yet, although liberal thinkers would argue otherwise, humanity needs signposts, fixed points of reference from which an emerging generation can find their bearings and recalibrate their belief system to the benchmark of biblical truth.

No matter how challenging the crisis, the way back for civilization is in the hands of *Compassing Fathers*—those who are willing to monitor and model the borders and boundaries and become major players in their children’s directional journey in life.

Drawing a “Line in the Sand”

Children seem to always test the borders and boundaries to see if their parents’ will-power is still plugged in sufficiently to say no. All kids need parameters, directives, perspective and horizons – borders and boundaries – that will both govern and guide them. Psychologists and boundary experts Henry Cloud and John Townsend wonderfully described it in their book *Boundaries*: “Just as homeowners set physical property lines around their land, we need to set mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual boundaries for our lives to help us distinguish what is our responsibility and what is not. The inability to set appropriate boundaries at appropriate times with the appropriate people can be very destructive.”⁶

In a later publication called *Boundaries with Kids*, the two authors noted that “adults with boundary problems had not developed those problems as grown-ups. They had learned patterns early in life and then continued those out-of-control patterns in their adult lives, where the stakes were higher.”⁷ To avoid this happening in our own children’s lives, our responsibility as fathers is two-fold: to set *borders* our kids are encouraged to reach out to, and to establish the *boundaries* they should not cross or try to remove.

When the children of Israel first entered the Promised Land, God had them subdivide the territory into tribal lots. In the process, families would set up markers, property lines, landmarks that would identify what was legally theirs and which no one was permitted to remove.⁸ These *borders* clearly defined the extent that each family member was encouraged to “reach to.”⁹

Imagine Jewish fathers periodically walking the property line

with their children, pointing out the landmarks in order to inspire them to go the distance, to reach for everything that was within their grasp and reap the benefits from all that God had made available to them. This act of compassing is no less important today. The modern-day *Compass Father* lovingly exercises his divinely delegated authority ultimately to release and not restrict his children. He points out the borders of personal possibility beckoning to them to break free from small-mindedness and progressively reach out to the furthest extent of their individual potential in life.¹⁰

While the “landmarks” *inspire* our children, “lines in the sand” will *instruct* them. Show me a child who learned to accept boundaries and I’ll show you an adult who is able to handle responsibility, liberty and authority. When we allow the winds of change to obliterate the behavioral lines in the sand, we give our children permission to run free in the candy store. And while today’s obnoxious behavior in a young child might seem humorous to some, the same liberty to say and do as we please as adults is horrific.

Children need to understand that no means no¹¹ and that living life with borders and boundaries is important. This is a basic ingredient of the *Compass Father* – to verbally and visually demonstrate what is and isn’t acceptable behavior (by establishing fixed points of reference). If, as so often happens, a child stops reaching out to the borders of their personal potential or oversteps those parental boundaries, the *Compass Father* lovingly seeks to either inspire or instruct his children to help them recalibrate

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their inner compass.

The task of compassing is wonderful in theory; it's the practice we find challenging! How does an imperfect father bring challenge and correction while appreciating his children's growing ability to make their own choices? To monitor a child's direction while allowing his or her own unique personality to be developed is extremely difficult. Yet a small adjustment now can save them from those major adjustments later in life. For instance, lack of respect, loss of self-control, and the inability to listen or follow through on a given task presently might seem insignificant, but the absence of such things in later life will prove disastrous.

When children lack a fixed point of reference, they struggle. They need a road map to guide them through uncharted territory, and someone who can help them to know how and when to engage such emotions as love, desire, hate, anger and passion; how and when to face issues of purity, honesty, integrity and fairness; how and when to engage or disengage people, objects and events in a godly way.

Take sex, for example. The reason why sex has become a moral dilemma among so many young people is that parents have not instructed them in how to handle the power and potential of this God-given gift. Leaving our children prey to movies, magazines, the Internet and misinformed friends is not how they should find their way through the moral maze of all things sexual. Some mothers wrongly teach their daughters that sex is a moral duty they have to perform, while a number of fathers somehow convey a warped view of the opposite sex. Godly parents should help

their children not only celebrate their sexuality, but understand the biblical basis for enjoyable sex within the confines (or borders and boundaries) of the marriage vow between a man and a woman.

We all possess an inner compass, a conscience, a God-given early warning system that enables us to make choices. Dulled and deadened by man's continual disobedience, each of us needs to have our system recalibrated by surrendering our lives to God's Son Jesus. Asking for His forgiveness will bring about a faith-encounter that not only regenerates our spiritually dead state, but realigns our inner compass and resensitizes us to His ways.

When God Goes Walkabout

During adolescence, Australian Aboriginal men undergo a journey commonly known as *Walkabout*. It's a period of time when they live in the wilderness so as to learn the ways of their forefathers. Although folklore can trace these rituals back thousands of years, the Judeo-Christian God was going "Walkabout" with His kids long before the Aborigines.

At the dawn of history, the Old Testament patriarch Enoch went on a Walkabout with his heavenly Father that lasted at least 300 years.¹² But, perhaps the most famous biblical Walkabout of all time was the forty-year journey God undertook with the nation of Israel. Like a father guides his kids,¹³ Jehovah journeyed the children of Israel from the POW camps of Egypt to the Promised Land of Canaan. As a rite of passage from slavery to sonship, God took the opportunity to "discipline" or "instruct"¹⁴ His children to enable them to reach their full potential in life.

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Although seldom mentioned in the Old Testament,¹⁵ the fatherhood of God is clearly seen in His relationship with the nation of Israel.¹⁶ Transitioning His children from who they were to who they would yet become, the New Testament reminds us that “these things happened to them as an example, [and... are] written down for our instruction.”¹⁷ The wilderness experience illustrates God’s way for fathers to compass our children towards their destiny in life: *personally, lovingly and redemptively.*

Personally.

Personal involvement is imperative in this age of electronic surrogacy. The average British child spends around five hours a day watching television, playing computer games or surfing the Internet. Those things aren’t any better in America, for “adolescent boys (7–12 grade) are using electronic media the same amount as they would be working a full time job (44.5 hours a week, 6.5 hours every day).”¹⁸

The statistics are scary, and one might be tempted to ask, “Whatever happened to interpersonal relationships in which parents spend time communicating face to face with their kids?” The fact is Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, texting and various forms of instant messaging have the potential to produce a generation that, although technically skilled, is socially inept.

When young people are more likely to relationally connect through one of those technologies than face to face, we have not only dehumanized true community, we have undermined personal relationships. As Life Coach David Bartholomew warns,

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“Many of the activities boys engage in today don’t contribute to social skills, personal interaction, work ethic, motivation or future success. For hours and hours a day, boys are well entertained, but they are not well trained for life.”¹⁹

The *wilderness* environment in which God chose to go Walkabout with His children comes from a Hebrew word that means “mouth” or “speech.”²⁰ Basically, it could be translated as an ongoing conversation. Rather than parenting by proxy, God the Father got up close and personal with His kids, as together they embarked on a forty-year “conversation” aimed at changing their beliefs and their behavior, and ultimately what they would become in this world.

Although being a “distant dad” is for some unavoidable, when Father/God took His children on that conversational camping trip lasting forty years He as good as said, “If you’re going to live in tents, I want you to build Me a tent, so I can be where you are and journey with you personally.”²¹ None of this “kids in a tent, dad in a hotel” stuff; Father/God made Himself accessible and became purposely involved in His children’s everyday lives, so as to guide them to their destiny.

When we as fathers inadvertently allow people, objects and events to guide our children, we take our hands off the tiller and leave them to the mercy of the prevailing wind that will eventually run them aground or shipwreck them.

Lovingly.

When God went Walkabout with His children, He showed

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incredible *loving-kindness* and commitment to a group of kids who, at times, were the most rude, unruly and disrespectful bunch of “brats” you could ever have the misfortune to parent. Yet, refusing to renege on His commitment,²² Father/God exercised a covenant love, a strong binding agreement that tied Him in to the task of bringing the best out of them no matter what. As someone once said, “Becoming a dad is a bit like becoming a monk. It takes a lot of devotion.”²³

Throughout the wilderness experience, God enveloped His children in what the Bible calls “lovingkindness,”²⁴ a demonstrative love that’s willing to do whatever it takes to provide life’s basic needs²⁵ and protect from destructive forces.²⁶ It’s the kind of love the apostle Paul describes in his letter to the church at Corinth.

Love never gives up. Love cares more for others than for self. Love doesn’t want what it doesn’t have. Love doesn’t strut, doesn’t have a swelled head, doesn’t force itself on others, isn’t always “me first,” doesn’t fly off the handle, doesn’t keep score of the sins of others, doesn’t revel when others grovel, takes pleasure in the flowering of truth, puts up with anything, trusts God always, always looks for the best, never looks back, but keeps going to the end.²⁷

Obviously what Paul talked about here is not a natural love common to man. It’s unconditional love that we can’t help but exhibit when we have a relationship with our heavenly Father, for as the apostle John told us, “God is love.”²⁸

Redemptively.

Everything Father/God did during His conversational Walkabout with the children of Israel revolved around a *redemptive attitude*. His intent was to buy back what had been lost to Egyptian thinking and enable His kids to become all He had in mind for them to be. Counteracting years of Egyptian culture, the Father compassed his children toward their predetermined destiny. Beginning with a redemptive act to get them out of Egypt, God parented His children in such a way as to get Egypt out of them, an exercise that at times made Him unpopular.

Nowadays, for fathers to get “Egypt” out of their kids means to get worldly ways and ideals out of them. Maybe this is what Paul was referring to when he wrote, “Have you forgotten how good parents treat children, and that God regards you as his children?... God is educating you; that’s why you must never drop out. He’s treating you as dear children. This trouble you’re in isn’t punishment; it’s training, the normal experience of children. Only irresponsible parents leave children to fend for themselves.... We respect our own parents for training and not spoiling us, so why not embrace God’s training so we can truly live?”²⁹

For a loving parent to make small compass corrections to a child’s behavior now is far better than having other people trying to make major adjustments in the future.

When parents choose popularity over principle, problems soon begin to emerge. Compassing a child involves directing and correcting on a chosen route. Through his *personal involvement*,

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loving-kindness and *redemptive attitude*, a *Compass Father* directs his children towards “True North,” saving them from themselves and a secular culture set on warping their young minds.

God’s True North

I have taught for many years in Bible colleges and local churches. When starting a new course on the subject of *Attitudes*, I will normally ask the class to join me in a simple exercise. Having everyone stand, I ask that they close their eyes and, on the count of three, point to what they believe is north. Generally all points of the globe are covered by people whose fingers are aimed toward every conceivable direction of the compass. One “directionally challenged” person’s finger invariably points to the ceiling, much to the amusement of the class members who by now are seeing the various opinions as to which direction is north. At this moment in the exercise we consult a compass and congratulate those whose sense of direction is proven correct.

Without a compass, there could never be an agreement on who was right, for if we are to truly know what is north we need a fixed point of reference. To date, no one in my classes has asked if I required *Magnetic North* or *True North*, but there is a difference. The Magnetic North is not at the North Pole, the absolute geographic northern spot on this planet. The fact is, while the compass points to Magnetic North, if we were to follow it to its ultimate northern point we would be 1,500 miles away from absolute north or True North. Navigators have to make constant adjustments so as to align themselves to True North and arrive

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safely at their preferred destination. In terms of fathering, then, the question has to be, “Which north are we heading for?”

While all humans have an inner compass that gives them some sense of moral right, that compass by its very nature needs to be recalibrated to God’s True North. As the biblical proverb reads, “There is a way that seems right to a man”³⁰ but the end result is disastrous. By reason of our fallen nature (since Adam and Eve fell in the garden), we are, naturally speaking, in constant danger of missing the mark because “all have sinned and fall short [and miss the mark]”³¹ of what God intended for humanity. Like an arrow falling short of its intended target, mankind has this inbuilt misalignment (a bias the Bible calls *sin*) that causes us to deviate from God’s absolute Truth North.

If our inner compass is not aligned with God’s True North, then we are all in constant danger of missing the desired destination He has for us. Jesus Christ did not come to tell us about a way but rather to tell us that He is “*the way*, and the truth, and the life,” and that “No one comes to the Father except through me.”³² Therefore, as fathers we may be consciously or subconsciously teaching our children a way of life that our fathers taught us, but the question is, “Is it a Magnetic North or a biblical True North?”

In his book *Born Again*, Charles Colson, one of former President Richard Nixon’s closest aides, gives us an inside view of the White House during one of the greatest government scandals in American history. Dedicating his book to his father, Wendell Colson, Charles writes: “To my Dad—whose ideals for my

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life I have tried, not always successfully, to fulfill—and whose strength and support is with me today.”³³ Chuck, as his father preferred to call him, sought to align himself to his father’s core values, a man he once described as “the straightest of straight arrows.”³⁴ Although Chuck took a wrong turn during the Nixon administration, he refers to the compass-like character of his father as a reference point from which he could take a bearing and find a moral True North.

Sailing a sailboat is one form of navigation that involves bearing taking and finding True North. To enjoy the experience and arrive at a predetermined destination, you must first pick a fixed point of reference on the distant shore and steer towards it, no matter what. Always watching out for submerged obstacles, shallow water and bad weather, a good sailor knows that to be blown off course is expected, but to run aground isn’t. I’ve found that fatherhood is a lot like sailing a sailboat. To arrive at a predetermined destination, fathers, like sailors, accept and expect to have to periodically make minor adjustments. And both need to have a specific course planned at the onset of their journey so they are assured of going in the right direction.

Aaron, a young pastor friend of mine, is willing to do whatever it takes to point his four young children in the right direction. Believing that a dad’s role is to show his children how to live the Christian life, Aaron wants to compass all of his youngsters through their formative years. So he and his wife, Sarah, have devised a plan consisting of three one-year personal development programs.

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“There are key development years in our kids’ lives,” he wrote to me recently, “like the year before junior high when our kids are in 5th grade [10-11 years of age], 9th grade [15 years of age] and then their last year of high school. Knowing this and the difficulty and the challenges that are often associated with these transitional years, we’ve prepared a twelve-month-long discipleship program for each of them.”

Beginning with a camping trip to discuss the coming year, their program includes such things as: Dad going out for breakfast and taking walks with each of his children to engage in meaningful conversations; a planned reading program that includes the Bible and other books, such as a modern version of *Pilgrim’s Progress*; serving the poor and marginalized; as well as shadowing their father in memorizing the Sermon on the Mount.³⁵ This is a learning program that Aaron feels will not only change his children but challenge him, because he knows that there are no perfect dads or moms.

“We fail many times as parents because we don’t ask our kids the right questions and then stop and listen to the answers,” he said. “I believe our kids understand and are more sensitive than we give them credit.”

Whether through not taking time to talk *and* listen to our kids, or through personal insecurity, ignorance, independence or some other integral inability to lead, many fathers seem to struggle when it comes to helping their children throw away ballast, trim their sails, turn a rudder and make small compass adjustments. Floating directionless in a sea of adolescence, children need the

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Compass Father to guide them through the storms, submerged obstacles, adverse winds and crosscurrents of everyday life. They need dads who will direct them without the excuses of time, temperament or tiredness.

If there is one gift a father can give his children, it is the ability to make good choices and follow a right direction in life. Maybe that's why a father called Hermann gave his five-year-old son a compass. Whatever his reason, "this simple instrument completely fascinated the youth, who couldn't understand why the needles always pointed north...there must be a mysterious invisible force that acted on the compass needle causing it to hold its position,"³⁶ reasoned the young Albert Einstein.

With God's help the *Compass Father* can hold his position of godly vision and values for his children and direct their lives to embrace a positive attitude, a disciplined lifestyle, a willingness to serve others and a determination to never quit, no matter what. To compass them so they desire to follow a way of integrity, honesty, morality, fairness, consistency and spirituality that will become a fixed point of reference is a gift that will last them a lifetime.



Personal Reflections

- Did the lack of a *Compass Father* in any way affect your young life and, if so, how do you intend to avoid that with your children?
- Have you allowed any spiritual signposts to be removed from your own family, and how do you intend to reinstate them?
- Knowing each of your children as you do, what are the borders you intend to inspire them to reach?
- Can you describe the boundaries you have set for each of your children and how you intend to manage them in a loving way?
- Do you feel that you are personally, lovingly and redemptively journeying with each of your children in a conversational “Walkabout” that is progressing them toward their destiny?



Group Discussion

Think about what it was like becoming a father for the first time, and the sobering affect it had on your life. What changes have you implemented in order to be a good *Compass Father* to each of your children? What changes are you still seeking to implement?