

A Tribute to My Dad: Fathers Day, 2014

By Nick Gier

It is said that people do not appreciate the fullness of their parents' love until they have children of their own. That is certainly true in my case. In my teenage years and early adult years I rebelled against my parents. I developed my liberal views quite early, and I became a student leader against the War in Vietnam at Oregon State.

My father was a staunch Democrat during the 30s, 40s, and 50s, but the dramatic changes of 60s were deeply unsettling to him, just as it was for many others in his generation. My mother worked on the Barry Goldwater campaign of 1964, but my dad still voted for LBJ. They both voted for George Wallace in 1968. As you can well imagine, there was lots of political tension in our home.

Instead of trying to understand my parents, I wrote nasty letter after nasty letter chastising them for what I perceived to be their political ignorance and moral rigidity. No matter how strong my criticisms, however, my parents always expressed their love for me. It seemed that the more I rebelled, the more they accepted me. That didn't make any sense to me. I didn't deserve their love. I even thought that I didn't want it.

When I went to Denmark as a Rotary Fellow in 1966, I vowed that I would never return to a country that made war on defenseless Asians, and a people who did not want their own children to be free of strict religious and conservative ideologies. I did come back, however, and savored the first cheeseburger and shake I'd had in over a year, but my political views remained the same.

One reason that I didn't appreciate my dad is that he did not conform to the image of a 1950s male. My maternal grandmother came to live with us in Medford, Oregon when I was three old. She had an apartment house and my father helped her collect delinquent rent. I'll never forget one summer evening in the 1950s when my dad came back to the car empty-handed and frustrated about a deadbeat tenant. From the backseat my brother and I offered our advice in unison: "Why don't you go beat him up?"

We were devastated by his response: "Sons, I could not beat my way out of wet paper back." Little did I know that in the depths of my initial disappointment that the seeds of the man that was to become was planted by a father who was always a farmer at heart. A little more than a decade later I would be chanting "Make Love not War," would be studying Asian religions, would later be a fellow at the Martin Peace Institute at the University of Idaho, and would write a book on Gandhi.

When my brother and I were born, my dad was a train master on the Union Pacific. He would be out on assignment for a week at a time. When he came home, his boys would run away from him. We did not know who this strange man was.

This broke his heart, and he decided to give a very good job and even better pension for his sons. My parents sold everything that they could not pack in a 1947 Mercury Coup and moved to Eagle Point, Oregon, where my father bought a dairy farm. Just his luck, milk prices tanked and within a year and half we moved to Medford, where my brother and I received excellent educations and my father made a fairly good living selling cars.

At the age of 27 I would become a father to a daughter who has become the female version of my father: all sweetness and light—the embodiment of goodness. I'm a combination of my dad and my mother, who was not always so sweet. (My mother's feistiness comes out in my public persona.) For some mysterious reason there is a straight line of goodness descending from my father directly to my daughter.

My mother was a strict disciplinarian and the refrigerator calendar was covered with daily demerit marks. She warned us that if we ever reached a certain number of those black marks, our dad would give us a whipping. My mother often raised her voice but she never raised her hand against us. One day our demerits had increased so much that, when my dad came home that evening, my mom told him that his sons had to be punished. I can still remember my dad standing over us with his belt: he simply could not do it, and it certainly didn't help that both my brother and I were laughing at him. He was still not credible as what we believed to be a “real” man.

Even under the influence of this good, loving, and sensitive man, I still felt uncomfortable about my dad's reaction when he sent me off to Denmark for my Rotary fellowship. My mom gave me a warm hug, but my dad shook my hand and cried. Only when I was in my 50s and my dad was in his 70s did we, at his initiation, say that we loved each other. In 1996 my dad died in a car accident on Interstate 10 outside of Palm Springs. I miss him every day.

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