

A Father's Gift

"When you comin' home, dad?"

"I don't know when, but

We'll get together then, son, you know we'll have a good time then"

--"Cats in The Cradle", by Harry Chapin

My Dad has been gone for 16 years. And this column is real-

ly more about him than it is about fishing. Although it is fishing that united us with our father in childhood and now in memory.

When you are a father who has raised his own kids and has been blessed by now watching them raise theirs, there comes a point in your life where you begin to think about where it all started.

My brother and I have been fishing just about as long as we have been walking.

It started with cane poles and bobbers and farm ponds. Mostly, there was the river.

The muddy Muskingum River running through Dresden and Zanesville Ohio, where Dad would take us, after working all day at his furniture store, to the river bank, where we would set poles in the ground on forked sticks.

We would reach into the Maxwell House coffee cans that were full of giant night-crawlers that we had hand-picked after dark in my grandmother's apple-tree infested back yard. The worms were threaded onto hooks with weights that must have been at least a half ounce, as the river current would have moved them downstream the minute they broke the surface.

We fished below a suspension bridge, behind a baseball field and football field where Dad had played just a few years prior until two concussions sent him in another direction. He played in the band—not just the high school band—the All Ohio Boys Band and was later said to have played a set with the famous saxophonist Stan Getz in some small venue that no one now recalls. He loved that trumpet and loved jazz.

About 1960 he was traveling on a flight when the cabin depressurized, collapsing both ear drums. He was deaf in one and was barely

able to hear out of the other.

The trumpet was put up—but he never stopped listening to Louie Armstrong and Jonah Jones and Al Hirt. He wore hearing aids with large black glasses and he could adjust the volume with a little dial on the top—a device that often came in handy

when he wanted to tune out my mother (or his own mother).

My father loved owning his own business in his twenties, was proud of getting his college degree in his thirties and forced his way through working tirelessly in a corporate sales job for much of his forties. In his final 15 years, my Dad started his own business with two other associates—which lasted just long enough to get the house paid off.

My Dad hated working for other people and had an entrepreneurial spirit that would have impressed Ayn Rand.

After that business had its ups and downs, Dad ultimately sort of came back full circle back to where he started. He formed Altman & Associates, called on customers, kept meticulous notes (sort of a primordial CRM system), took homemade fudge to his favorite customers (and his grandchildren) and had two green telephones in his office that had blinking lights—something my brother and I thought was very cool. My brother Jim was blessed with the same entrepreneurial spirit—as is my daughter Jennifer. The father's gift travels seamlessly across the generations.

Dad was an advocate for the homeless, cooking meals at Clifton's Night Shelter, leading the Northwoods Presbyterian Church into serving the homeless. He and my mother worked tirelessly on behalf of strangers who had nothing. In the New Testament, James tells us "faith without works is dead".

My father put his faith into works. He expected that from others—not by insisting they do so, but by doing what he believed. I would watch that from a distance, admire it, but not fully grasp the importance of it. Life is moving too fast for a man-on-the-go in his

thirties, just as it had for my father in his thirties—which happened during the 1960's.

Dad's mental and physical health began to deteriorate when his career slowed down.

Ultimately, Dad's condition worsened. Watching someone slip away, like a river's current carrying away anything in its path, forces you to recall not just those memories of your childhood.

Now, having lived nearly as long as my father did, I have a greater understanding of what his adulthood must have been like. Can we as children both understand our roles as parents as we seek to understand how we as children must have affected the lives of our parents?

His love for his family remained constant—even in the final years of his life. He died six months before their fiftieth wedding anniversary—which would have come exactly eight days after 9.11.

Now, as a father and grandfather, I am sorting through a haystack of emotions and understanding that escaped me during his final years. Recognizing your father as a good man instead of just a good father is a life cycle of parental inevitability that visits us all, a dreamscape that comes in sudden flashes that fortunately brings with it the soothing, richness of memory.

Now I am a father of three sons-in-law, each of them a blessing for our family. Each of them now fathers themselves. They are living the fast life and wonderful chaos that comes with raising a family. They are good fathers and good husbands. And someday they will make good grandfathers. I can only offer them the support that I got from my father and remind them that fatherhood comes with a beautiful price—the price of sacrifice, unselfishness and time.

Those are not only the price of fatherhood, but also its gifts.

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