

My Dad



I attended a men's retreat with a few hundred other men from around California. One afternoon there was a list of workshops from which to choose. I decided to attend a workshop called 'The Daddy Wound'. I didn't choose this workshop because of any unresolved issues or buried pain in my relationship with my dad who had died a few years earlier. I chose the workshop because I work with boys and young men, many of whom cannot make the same claim. I wanted to better understand what they felt.

The speaker began, "I called this workshop the Daddy Wound because we all have one. And if you don't, if while your dad wasn't perfect, he was all you needed, look around this, you are the unicorn in this room."

As the youngest of five children rules had been set long before I was born, and my four older sisters made sure I toed the line. They thought mom let me get away with too much, but she told them, "He already has four mothers telling him what to do." It

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was harder to get away with anything when my dad was around. He was loving and fair, but strict.

One evening we were in the living room watching our little black and white Zenith television when Dad said, "Jesse, go to bed." I really didn't want to go to bed, but I knew better than to disobey. I crawled into my bed, but I couldn't go to sleep. I could hear the TV in the other room and I could hear my family laughing. After lying there crying for what seemed hours, probably five minutes, I slowly and cautiously crept out to the door of the living room. I felt like Queen Esther when she went before the king uninvited. Would my dad extend the scepter and welcome me, or would it be the end? Dad held out his arms, I climbed onto his lap and he held me. Sixty-some years later I still think of the night I learned to show love to a child.

The year before I was born Dad bought a 1953 MG. I grew up playing in that car which was usually not a problem, but one day it was parked on a slope near the garage. Dad always left the car in gear, but rarely set the parking brake. I was too little to reach the pedals without holding the bottom of the steering wheel and sliding off the seat, but I still had great fun playing at driving the car. I had fun that is until I got it out of gear and it started rolling slowly down the hill. I knew the pedal on the right was the gas, so one of the other two had to be the brake. I pushed as hard as I could on one and then the other, but I just couldn't push hard

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enough. Our house was on my grandfather's farm, and there was a cherry orchard just below our house. I was still pushing on one pedal and then the other when I felt the crash. That cute little car hit a tree and I hit the road. I ran down to Granddad's house and hid in a small porch. I waited. I have no idea how long, but I waited. Finally, I realized there was nothing for it but to go home and make a full confession. I thought this might be the end of life as I knew it. Looking back through the years and a father's eyes I realize there wasn't much I could have done that my father wouldn't have forgiven, or maybe even smiled at.

When I was in the first or second grade I didn't see much of my dad. He was a truck driver hauling logs out of the rugged mountains to the sawmill. Once in a while, I would wake up while it was still dark and see him before he left the house, and sometimes I got to stay up late enough to sit with him as he ate the dinner my mom had saved for him. It was long hours, hard work, and treacherous roads. As an adult, I was driving Dad over the summit road of Mount Emily when he told me to stop. The road was cut into the side of the mountain with a steep drop off the edge. He said, "This is where a miracle happened." He told me how he lost his brakes taking a load of logs down the mountain. He couldn't understand how he kept from rolling off the edge to his death. When he got the truck stopped he walked back up the road and looked at the tire tracks his truck had left.

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He said, "I could see the tracks of both tires, then only one, and a little further there were two again. My right tires had left the road with nothing to support them, but it wasn't my time to go."

It might be an exaggeration to say we lived just outside the city limit. It would be true, the sign said 'City of Elgin', but Elgin had to take a deep breath to say it was over a thousand people. Anyway, I could easily walk across the bridge and into town. I would save up fifteen cents and walk to Ken's gas station to buy a five-cent candy bar and a 10-cent bottle of pop. There was a three-cent deposit on the bottle, so I drank it there and left the bottle. One day when so engaged a man said, "You're Gifford's boy aren't you?" I had never thought much about how my parents were viewed by other adults, but at that moment I felt myself standing just a little straighter. I knew I had something to live up to.

Valentine's day wasn't a huge thing to me when I was 12 and I didn't really mind missing school but didn't want to be homesick. I wasn't sick enough to sleep all day, just sick enough to be miserable and bored. Mom was at work but Dad was working the swing shift so he was around till afternoon. Sometime before he left for work he got a phone call and left quickly. Mom called a little later to ask if Dad had left and I asked what was going on, "I think your granddad is dead." My parents were wonderful, loving people, but they weren't communicators.

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They were people who had emotions but didn't know how to express them. When they got home Dad started making phone calls, I listened carefully and heard him say, "Hugh passed away today." I had been trained, "Boys don't cry." My dad taught me many valuable lessons, I hadn't yet learned to ignore this one. At the funeral, when my eyes started to well up with tears I would look at the ceiling and tell myself those were interesting heating pipes. That got me through the funeral, but the graveside service was harder. The bugler played Taps, they folded the flag that had been draped over the coffin and handed it to my grandmother, my dad had to hold her up.

Back at the house people were bringing food and family members were talking, not knowing what to say. My dad was standing in front of the fireplace handling a knife he'd picked up from the mantle, it was one his father had made himself and used for years. Grandma said, "I guess you and your dad skinned a lot of deer with that knife." That was the first time I had ever seen my dad cry, and I thought, "Why would she say that." Now I know why she said it, we all need to cry sometimes. It took my dad years to learn how, but he did learn.

My father had an artistic side. He sang and played several instruments by ear. When I was small he played the polkas, folk and gospel songs, and hymns on the accordion. His friend Roy would bring his guitar and amplifier, I remember lying on the

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hardwood floor in front of Roy's amp soaking up the music. Later in life, I think the accordion became too heavy because he switched to fiddle and banjo. He could play almost anything he heard, and he played it the way he heard it. When I played with him he would often say, "That's not the way it goes." While I tend to improvise and compose, Dad played it by the book.

His artistry didn't stop with music. I have a few large pencil sketches he made from old family photographs, which are very realistic. In visual art as well as music, he didn't improvise. I think that may be why he was so impressed with poems I wrote in high school. Dad saw one on my desk when he walked by one day and told me later how much he liked it. Calling me a Robert Burns in the making was a stretch and I knew it even then, but it made me feel good.

After Granddad died Dad took care of the small farm where Grandma continued to live, and I did the things a farm kid does. I plowed in the spring, fed cows in the snow of winter, and my least favorite, hauled hay in the summer. Throughout my teen years, we would sweat together picking up bales in the field and stacking them in the barn.

As a newlywed in my early twenties, I drafted my wife to drive the tractor so Dad and I could load the trailer without stopping. She would drive between bales, I picked up what was on the left

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and Dad got the ones on the right. Trying to be helpful I would run to the other side when I had time and grab a bale from Dad's side. It backfired. Dad felt bad about not working as hard as me so he would run to my side for an extra bale. Finally, he said, "Quit that, your helping me out is about to kill me." In my head, I knew he was getting older, but that day I began to understand two things. My dad was getting older, not just gray-haired but he was slowing down. I also realized he didn't like it.

After the workshop on the Daddy Wound, I walked up to the presenter and said, "I came to this workshop for information, I did not expect it to affect me emotionally. But you called me a unicorn and I cried because I knew you were right."