

Eulogy for Dad

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My relationship with Dad

As the youngest of my brothers and sisters, I had a unique opportunity to spend time alone with Dad. After my older siblings had left for college and began their careers, I lived alone with my parents during my last two years of high school, and the beginning of that time included a few months living alone with Dad when we first moved to Kentucky, while Mom sold our old house in Michigan.

In Kentucky, and during our many six-hour drives to Michigan, Dad and I talked about all manner of scientific things: astronomy, physics, history of science, or whatever books he was currently reading. He also introduced me to special relativity. I became more engaged in science, and thought of becoming a physicist. He taught me some concepts of calculus, and that it is more important to be able to derive a result than memorize it.

On the other hand, Dad and I had little idea how to live alone. We ate a lot of spaghetti then. We once put soda bottles in the freezer in order to quickly cool them, then forgot about them and found exploded bottles later. We sealed up our beehive in Michigan, put it in the pick-up and drove to our new place in Kentucky. When we unloaded it, the hive broke apart and the bees stung us several dozen times. Mercifully, Mom sold the house in Michigan and we were reunited in Kentucky.

When I was 18, I had a summer job at Dad's company. My job at Kuhlman was to write a computer program that would show how to get the most winds of wire onto a transformer core, essentially a math problem involving packing circles into a given geometry. This is the kind of geometry problem I would see Dad working on every Sunday, growing up.

We would be the first ones to come into to work. I quickly learned that I often got more done between 7:15 and 8:15 than between 8:15 and 5, a lesson I still make use of in my job today. And sitting in a cubicle across the aisle, I saw the way he interacted with the other engineers. He patiently asked them questions about their designs, in almost a Socratic method, to get them to realize the weak points, and I would think to myself, "He's talking to them like he talks to me, like they are children." Then I realized that it wasn't that he was treating them like children, it was that he always treated me like an adult.

Dad: a patient man

Dad was a patient man. Only as a father myself do I appreciate how patient he was: at least four times more patient than me, for I have only half as many children and lose my temper twice as much. One of my fondest and earliest memories of Dad was once at bedtime, when I was perhaps four. Normally, I would have a snack before bed, but we had come home late, it was well past my bedtime, and so into bed I went without a snack. And I cried. Being on the second floor, I had to cry quite loudly to be heard from downstairs. After a very long while of this, perhaps 10-15 minutes, I heard Dad's steel-toed shoes coming up the stairs. Even at my young age, what I expected was a frustrated parent telling me to stop making such a fuss and to go to sleep. Instead, Dad just gave me a sympathetic look and pulled two graham crackers from behind his back.

This kind of patience, day after day, had a big impact on me. I would like to be this kind of father.

A strong work ethic

Dad had an amazing work ethic. During the week, he never missed a day of work, and on the nights and weekends, he literally renovated our house from top to bottom – everything from cutting through the roof to add a new bedroom on top of the house, to jackhammering out the basement concrete to run new plumbing below it. When I expressed wonder at how big the jobs he took on were, he said it was not really amazing – you just had to have the courage to do it. But it was amazing to me then, and it's all the more amazing now that I have a full time job and family of my own, that I would have time and energy to renovate my house on nights and weekends.

In our house in Kentucky, we put a deck on the back of our house. Dad designed it, and we initially hired a contractor to build it – a raised, covered deck supported on posts below. But the floor the contractors built wasn't level. The contractor tried to claim they did it right, putting his level on deck floor, saying, "See?" With a wink at me, Dad said to them, "Wait here," and went into the garage. "Uh oh," I heard one of the contractors say, as Dad came out carrying his transit level on a tripod. And Dad and I built the rest of the deck ourselves.

The ethic of working hard for his family both at his company and at home, is something that has helped make me successful. I don't consider myself any smarter than the next guy, but seeing my parents' example really helped me put my nose to the grind-stone when I was in college. I was lucky to even get admitted to my college, but in following Dad's example of hard work, I graduated and was able to pursue an advanced degree.

Dad near the end

I didn't know Dad to be a religious man. As a very young boy, I enjoyed staying home with Dad while the older kids went to church. Dad would work on some analytical problem he hadn't solved during the week. Or he would explain something like the phases of the moon with a flashlight and oranges on the kitchen table. I enjoyed those Sundays.

Dad was practical, stoic, and private, even in times of emergency and stress. Mom recently told me that she asked Dad if he was afraid of dying. He replied, "No, I just don't want to." He was that matter of fact.

I feel that if Dad were able to offer me well-wishes for the rest of my life, he would say something like:

Jon,
May you be happy in your life and your family's
May you encounter only well-designed objects that come apart easily
and go back together with no parts leftover
May your tools be always just where you remembered leaving them
May your frames of reference be always inertial
May your wood be always square and your cut be always true

I will always love you, Dad. I will miss you.