Fathers' Gifts

In the early spring of 2003, I traveled to Pennsylvania to see my parents, concerned about the accumulating ailments of their 9th decades. At the beginning of the heaviest snow winter in 20 years, they had moved into an 18th century stone tavern with no water, a broken furnace, a bad roof, and a colony of bees in one of the walls. Placed strategically the foot of long wagon ride up through a gap in the mountain ridge, this old building had offered refuge to travelers for 260 years. Robert E. Lee spent a sleepless night there on his anxious retreat from Gettysburg. My parents have spent too many cold, sleepless nights there, too, somehow managing to live amidst the dust and debris of an ambitious restoration. Parental stories were on my mind, and doubly precious.

I shared the plane ride to Baltimore with an ex-Army Ranger of mixed African & Cherokee heritage. He told me a story about his last days with his father.

His dad, well into his 80's, had a failing heart after several previous surgeries, and he was scheduled for another open heart procedure in several days. When his son visited, he told the son: "I am not going to live through this surgery, and there are some things I need to do at home first. *You have to get me out of here*."

The surgeon balked, of course, informing the son that the father might die if he left the hospital. Upon the retort that his father would just as likely die if he stayed in the hospital, the surgeon gave reluctant permission. The son said he would return with his father in time for the operation.

They drove the rattly pickup out to the poor dirt farm where the father had lived for decades, and did 3 things. First, the two drove out to a remote, hilly corner, where they dug up a still. The father said: "This will get you money when you need it. Don't overuse it. Now hide it somewhere you can use it when you're in trouble."

Second, they drove to the old man's sister's house. "Her well is broken, and there's no way she'll ever get it fixed herself." This old man and his muscular son winched up 40 feet of well pipe to find the defective part, which was unrepairable. They realized that this part was obsolete and could not be purchased. The old man said he knew of an abandoned farm with the same well fitting, and they could scavenge that one. They drove there, pulled up the pipe, unbolted the part, returned to the first well, replaced the fitting, sank it, and drew water.

Then they drove to a knoll where they could watch the setting sun. The father sank his thumb into the earth, pulled it out, and instructed his son to put his thumb in the shallow hole. "What do you feel?"

"Dirt," the son answered.

"No, that is life that you feel. Put a seed in that hole, and you can feed your family. Plant a tree, and later you can build a house for your family. Never get too far from the earth."

They returned to the hospital at night. The father died on the operating table the next day, as he had foreseen.

One of my blessings (among the multitude of sins and curses) has been the willingness of people to tell me stories ever since I was little. One of my disciplines, perhaps one of the limited examples of wisdom, has been the willingness to listen. I wonder how many I've missed because I was too busy or haughty or cocksure or selfish at the time, but I consider these stories the fabric of life.

I hope to be able to leave the world with similar grace as that old man—as a teacher, a provider, a lover of kin, comfortable with his return to the earth, passing values that can be sustained to someone willing to accept the responsibility.

I hope that my father knows I honor him with equal gratitude, as a model of patience and tolerance, a man with quiet respect for people in all stations, a great driver, a savage bridge player, a fair fisherman, a reluctant farmer, and a pretty lucky axe thrower. He made sacrifices for his family I'd never be willing to make, spending hours every day on wretched trains to wretched cities so we could live among trees. Once his children were out of school, he surrendered security in order to pursue his vision in business, and he became the first American to lead the International Filtration Society. Admittedly, I was never quite taken in by barbershop quartet singing, church rituals, Pennsylvania countryspeak, or just about anything Republican, but I'm certain he's puzzled by a few of my convictions, too. He trusts doctors more than I do, and although they have whittled at him mercilessly and polluted his innards, they have not crushed his spirit. More than anything else, I honor his enduring devotion to my Mother and forgiving embrace of his children.

Happy birthday, Dad.

Wells Shoemaker Jr., 4/4/03