

A Tribute to a Wayward Father On Father's Day

Richard B. McKenzie

My father's passing when I was in my 40s caught me by surprise. His death was not surprising; my reaction to it was. I felt more of a loss than I would have thought possible, given my tenuous relationship with him throughout almost all of my life. He drank too much . . . and drank too much – and was never there as the father I would have wanted, and needed (which explains why I spent my youth in an orphanage, an experience I acknowledge with gratitude).

His death marked the end -- the complete end -- of the past. Well, maybe. It was, at least, a time of coming to grips with the past -- and of forgiveness for his not being there that I did not think possible, until I was notified of his death. I am sure that there are millions of sons who have had wayward fathers, but still have faced the void I've felt when he was no longer there. I am also certain I share with them the void every Father's Day, as I tried to explain to my children on my father's passing, when everything seemed too late -- but redeeming.

Dear Children,

My father died last night. That's been an event that has caused me to reflect and to write this morning about his life. It is times like this that I wish you could have known my father better. There is much about his life that prevented you from getting to know him as a grandfather or, for that matter, my getting to know him as a father. I could dwell here on the things that caused us to know him less than we would have liked, but those things don't seem to matter at this hour, and it is very early Sunday.

Let it suffice to say that there is something very poignant and descriptive about his death, coming, as it did, one day short of Father's Day.

He never had much. By our standards, he made his way through life in the lap of poverty. Over the past decade he had everything imaginable go wrong with him. He was sick most of the time, in the hospital much of the time, and probably at death had no organ that was expendable. He had to suffer his pains in a four-room house that had to be carefully heated in winter with wood and was never cool in the summer.

I suspect that his biggest worry in life was having enough wood to heat the house through winter. I say that because he always had enough wood neatly stacked in the back of the house to last several winters, or so it seemed to me. He proved that if you are poor, you don't have to be trashy in the way you stack your wood and keep your house.

He never had indoor plumbing until a decade ago and only installed an indoor toilet when the city required him to do so. The stove in the kitchen was wood, the walls were single boards running floor to ceiling, side by side. There were no doors between the rooms. The house, which sat on stacked bricks for a foundation, was old, small, but neat in a neighborhood that, at its best, can be described as dilapidated.

There is much that he didn't have. All of that doesn't seem to be important now. I write about it only to make the point and to tell you that what seems important at this moment is what he did have. In spite of it all, I can at this time never remember his complaining about what he didn't have. He marveled at the luxury I lived in, but it was all marvel, no envy toward me, my brother, or others. Instead, he bragged about what we had, what he could make with his hands, how he could still paint, make a shed from scrap wood. He worked hard at what he did, when he

could work, was proud of what he could do, not what he couldn't. There is something to learn from the way he lived that part of his life.

In his last years, he was crippled with medical problems, and on those rare occasions I saw him, he could tell me about them. But he never complained like a lot of old people who have far fewer pains than he had. He could laugh about what his doctor could take out of him and still keep him ticking, and he could brag, again, about how he could take down his sons, how he fought Joe Louis in his early years in an exhibition match (which he truly believed he did), and how he gave the nurses at the hospital fits when he was in their care. There is much to be gained from a man who lived the way he was able to live from the simplest of means.

Then there was the laughter and jokes. I think he enjoyed living more than we ever will. He never stopped laughing and joking. And although he was always the assistant to the governor in so many of his jokes, he was always in them, the butt of them, and ready to enjoy them. There is much to be learned from someone who dared to call collect only to announce in his deepest of voices, "This is the governor speaking," an announcement always followed by an ear-splitting laugh.

I never knew him very well. There were times I wanted to do so very badly, but couldn't. I suppose I couldn't see him more often because of some memories that I could not shake, but I suppose it was also easy not to see him more. In the end what has counted most over the years is that he was the one, the only one, who came to my high school graduation. There were those who said they were close and who said they cared, as evident in their sending us to The Home, and repeatedly reminded me of how bad my father was. However, it was my Dad, not they, who saw me graduate.

In the end I know he was proud of me. In the end I know he loved me. In the end I loved him very much. In the end I wish I could have, would have, told him that one more time.

I leave this morning for his home to help my stepmother, but more importantly to pay respect to a man who lived a long and painful life largely camouflaged with humor, who taught me some things about living I hope to absorb someday. There is much that I would have liked to have changed about the way he lived, but not the person he was at his core. That is a point worth remembering on this Father's Day. I tell you this because he might, just might, be listening.

With much love,

Dad

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