

Folks @ B+B,

please return the 5

Today is my Dad's birthday, or would've been a year ago now... ha. Anyway, the truth is, this is always a very hard day for his birthday, nor for the anniversary of his death, but just never could get past the emotional obstacles. I think I have it under control this time, though.

My parents were what you might call "experienced." "Seasoned," lol (they would've found that description funny, I'm sure of it 😊). Rarely did any of my friends have parents as old as mine, and to my discredit (a subject for another time), that often embarrassed me. The fact is, I'm much younger than all my siblings, a full 20 years younger than my eldest brother, so I was raised rather like an only child. My sibs — and my parents — always told me I was lucky, since by the time I stumbled in, my mom's hot temper had cooled a bit, and my dad's coolness toward his children had warmed. Apparently, Dad just wasn't always the most "present" father before I was born. I know some of my sisters harbored some long resentments because of that, and I really wish all my sibs could've had the same experiences I did with our dad, because one thing I can never complain of is him not being there for me. Far from it; he was actually a colossal presence in my life, by far my biggest role model, and I miss him incredibly — though I know we all do, in my family.

For a long time now I've wanted to share something to try to convey some sense of who my dad was to me, but it's been overwhelming as he was such a complicated figure. That's a general consensus from those who knew him, I think, "complicated," but even more so for those of us closest to him, especially his kids. How to "explain" someone whose emotion ran so deep that it rarely even rippled the surface, or whose pervasive sense of humor was so offbeat and wry, yet so understated, that it was frequently confused with cynicism or sarcasm by minds more conventional than his own? Still, two moments come to mind, sort of bookends to my youth, that might express a small slice of who my dad was to me.

When I was about six or seven years old, Dad and I walked to a store about half a mile away. The walk was mostly down ~~Victoria~~ ^{in Ventura, CA — a major street} Avenue with wide sidewalks and lots of traffic. Along the curb there were open planters in the sidewalk, each with a single tree growing in it. Now, half a mile is a lengthy walk for a young kid, and I was already impatient, wanting to get to the store to see the toys, so I was predictably displeased when we were nearly there ("I can see it Dad, cimon! Let's go!")

and my dad suddenly and unexpectedly stopped at one of those sidewalk trees. It was just a baby, obviously recently planted, with two wooden stakes supporting its skinny twig of a trunk. Even to my seven-year-old eyes, it looked small and pathetic, a tree barely taller than my father, but what really drove its pathos home was how one support stake was broken (by a car, a vandal, who knows?) So the soft, spindly ~~sapling~~ ^{little} sapling was bent over and pulling its fresh root ball out of the soil.

Dusk was upon us, misty and darkening, and the evening traffic was brisk. I didn't understand why we'd stopped or what my dad hoped to accomplish, but he'd already unsheathed his Buck knife and was clearly preparing to do something. Whatever that something was, it seemed certain to be time consuming, a little scary (so many speeding cars!), and basically pointless to my young, toy-fixated brain. My exact words are lost now, but as my dad continued his work — now our work as he ~~conscripted~~ ^{conscripted} my little hands to help with this and that — I asked (or more probably whined) the question: "Why do we have to do this?" Still cutting and tying and tugging away, he replied: "Because this tree needs help." I was unpersuaded, antsy to get on to the business of buying things, so I enquired further: "But, why do WE have to fix it?"

This time, Dad paused, and I've never forgotten the small, quiet thing he did next. Kneeling as he worked, he now looked directly at me from eye-to-eye level, and asked me: "Well, son, if not us, then who?" His words connected then, and along with his level tone ~~and the~~ ^{and the} unaccusing, un-angry sincerity in his ~~eyes~~ ^{eyes} I felt suddenly and inexplicably ~~ashamed~~ ^{ashamed}. In hindsight, I'm sure that wasn't his intent, he hadn't meant to make me feel judged, but at that time and tender age, I was buried by a sense of having fallen short. I felt certain that my dad had believed I, too, would've naturally wanted to do whatever could be done for a scrawny, helpless thing in need of care, and so my selfishness had disappointed him. Again, I no longer think he meant to wound me, but the feeling at the time struck hard, and it stuck.

Some years later, when I was eleven or so, Dad reiterated this basic ethos a little more explicitly... I think it was during one of our many road trips, probably after seeing a less-fortunate person somewhere. He floated the idea to me then that just being a fully functional and well-cared-for person (what some would label "privileged" now) implies a degree of obligation in itself, a duty among the basically happy and healthy people — his duty, my duty —

to give what one can where one can. I believe his actual words were, "Whenever you can be of help to someone who wants your help, you probably should try to help." There's more to unpack in that statement than is first obvious, and I didn't think at the time to ask what he meant by "help", but I think he'd agree that sometimes the best help is just to let someone know you care, then leave them alone - a type of help many people seem unwilling to give. Either way, this is the kind of person my dad was, and an example I've always tried to live up to.

I said there were two stories, "bookends to my youth", but the second story isn't much different from the first except that I was 14 or 15 years old, still relatively young but no longer a kid. I'd prefer to share a different kind of story, one highlighting Dad's more whimsical side, but my mood isn't right for coming up with one of those right ~~now~~^{now}. I'll just leave it here, this small ~~example~~^{glimpse} of my dad and ~~how~~^{how} he wanted me to be in the world - compassionate, empathetic, useful. He was certainly all of that, never forcing or commanding but instead guiding gently by example. He genuinely cared about people, and in a way that I believe made others more caring, too. I know I was lucky to have him in my life. Happy Birthday, Dad.

A few of my favorite Dad pics:

Me and Dad,
First Day Home



Obi-Wan, is that you?



PIC-COLLAGE

Who knows what he's pointing at... but he'd always wanted a Fire Truck!



Mom & Dad,
Las Vegas,
Denim and big
glasses... this
picture has it all!



Paris, April 1, 1922

A mile of clean sand.
 I will write my name here, and the trouble that is in my heart.
 I will write the name & place of my birth,
 What I was to be,
 And what I am.
 I will write my forty sins, my thousand follies,
 My four unspeakable acts. . . .
 I will write the names of the cities I have fled from,
 The names of men & women I have wronged.
 I will write the holy name of her I serve,
 And how I serve her ill.
 And I will sit on the beach & let the tide come in.
 I will watch with peace the great calm tongue of the tide
 Licking from the sand the unclean story of my heart.

Edna St. Vincent Millay

*I don't know whether
 Dad was a big St. Vincent
 Millay fan... but I am.*

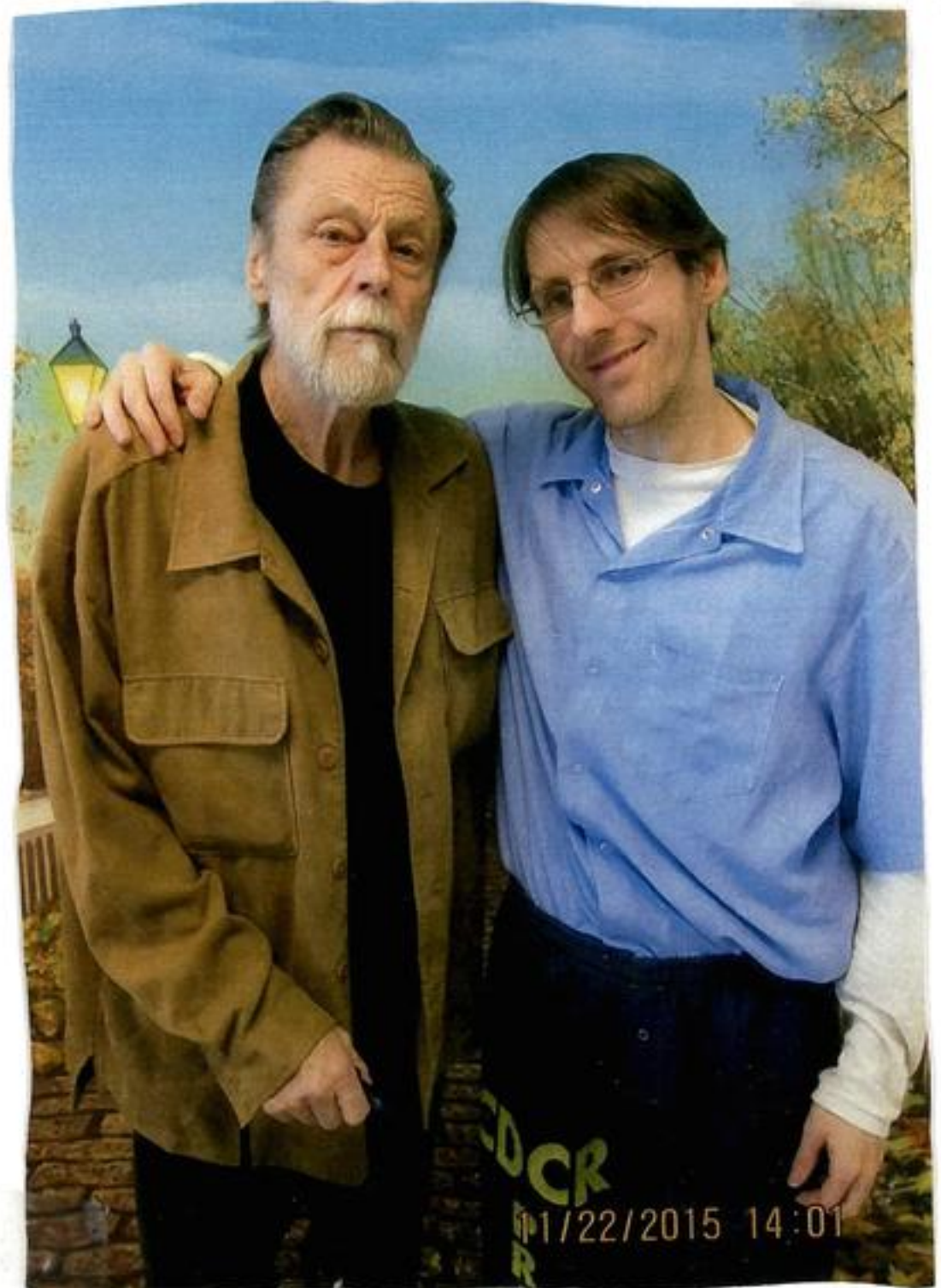
*I think he'd have
 appreciated this.*

*I found it after he
 was already gone. ☺*

*This may be the last picture ever
 taken of my dad. He died less
 than 5 months later.*

*We almost didn't take this
 picture.*

*It was the last time I ever
 saw him.*



RCHS HYPERTEXT READER

Ozymandias

By Percy Bysshe Shelley

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said--"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert....Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
5 And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
10 My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings,
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."



RCHS HYPERTEXT READER

* Dad sent this to me about a year after I was sentenced. He almost never wrote letters to me, but he frequently communicated this way... sending me news clippings, poems, stories, comic strips, etc.. The comics he'd send were usually pretty ~~straightforward~~ ^{straightforward} and sometimes scathing. Otherwise, the ambiguity of Ozymandias was normal. Blunt clarity was not the sandbox Dad typically played in.

* I wish I could take credit for this, but I didn't write it. My friend AJO sent it to me... maybe he is responsible. In any case, I wish I'd seen it a few years earlier, because my dad would've loved it.

The End of the Raven

-- by Edgar Allen Poe's Cat

On a night quite unenchanted, when the rain was downward slanting,

I awakened to the ranting of the man I catch mice for.

Tipsy and a bit unshaven, in a tone I found quite craven,

Poe was talking to a Raven perched above the chamber door.

"Raven's very tasty," thought I, as I tiptoed o'er the floor,

"There is nothing I like more"

Soft upon the rug I treaded, calm and careful as I headed

Towards his roost atop that dreaded bust of Pallas I deplore.

While the bard and birdie chattered, I made sure that nothing clattered,

Creaked, or snapped, or fell, or shattered, as I crossed the corridor;

For his house is crammed with trinkets, curios and weird decor -

Bric-a-brac and junk galore.

still the Raven never fluttered, standing stock-still as he uttered,

In a voice that shrieked and sputtered, his two cents' worth -

"Nevermore."

While this dirge the birdbrain kept up, oh, so silently I crept up,

Then I crouched and quickly leapt up, pouncing on the feathered bore.

Soon he was a heap of plumage, and a little blood and gore -

Only this and not much more.

"Oooo!" my pickled poet cried out, "Pussycat, it's time I dried out!

Never sat I in my hideout talking to a bird before;
How I've wallowed in self-pity, while my gallant,
valiant kitty

Put and end to that damned ditty" - then I heard him start to snore.

Back atop the door I clambered, eyed that statue I abhor,

Jumped - and smashed it on the floor;
Busted bust for evermore.

--E.A.Poe's Cat