

Still Learning From Dad

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Reading – from *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion. For most men, it appears to me, are in a strange uncertainty about it, whether it is of the devil or of God, and have *somewhat hastily* concluded that it is the chief end of man here to "glorify God and enjoy him forever."

Sermon

Today's is a personal sermon. It is about my father, not yours...

Yet as I speak I invite you to think about your father or another man, or anyone else, in your life who has been an example for you, an inspiration, a teacher.

If my father were still alive, he would be 91 years old.

Which is hard to imagine, since he was so active even up until a month before his death from cancer twenty years ago. He was playing tennis in June and died at the end of July. (Actually, if he were 91 he'd probably still be playing tennis...)

And Dad didn't just tap the ball back and forth. He played to win, and even as his legs slowed (a bit) with age, it seemed as though his drop shot became ever more lethal. I can still hear his "Ha, haaaa!" when one of his patented shots hit its mark and left one of us in the younger generation stumbling and sputtering.

Not that he was a championship player. But he was good, and he loved the game; and when he was playing he was completely immersed – the goal being... well, I was going to say victory, but actually that was the secondary goal. His primary purpose was to have a really good time on the tennis court with family or friends. And to have a good time on the tennis court you had to play hard.

And you know, I realize that throughout his life Dad tried to spend as little time as possible doing things that he didn't like doing or that he didn't think were worth doing... and therefore worth doing with intensity.

This was as true (probably up several notches) in the operating room as a general surgeon as it was on the tennis court. Or golf course. Or as he painted one of his impressionist oils.

In short, and maybe not in so many words, Dad knew about the idea "follow your bliss" before the rest of the world learned about it from Joseph Campbell in the midst of his "Power of Myth" interviews with Bill Moyers.

So let me tell you why my father went into the field of medicine – following his bliss... - at least as I recall him describing his thought process.

Dad was always interested in life's big questions: Where did we come from? Where are we going? Is there a God? What is the purpose of our lives?

And so on.

Yet he realized pretty early on that these kinds of questions were not going to offer up answers easily or directly, bullet points in a philosophy text.

So – as he once told me (at least as I recall him telling me) – he decided to go into medicine out of a two-fold motivation. First, he thought that being close to people in extreme situations, life and death situations, might yield at least some glimmer of an answer to some of those big questions. And second, he knew that as a physician, whether or not he ever got any closer to “answers” he would be doing some good along the way.

As for surgery. Well, the craft of surgery appealed to him, and it is also surely true that as a surgeon you are about as close (physically anyway) to life and death as you can get.

So that became Dad's life. The long training. The long hours. The midnight calls. Everything from half hour appendectomies to five hour procedures to repair aortic aneurisms (operations he would sometimes diagram for us on napkins at the dinner table).

To put it simply, I think Dad went into medicine and the operating room for reasons quite similar to Thoreau's for going to the woods. (And *Walden* did have a prominent place on Dad's book shelf.)

Hear again the beginning of that well known passage from *Walden* which we heard – once again – earlier this morning:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

So, yes, I believe my father went to the operating room to live deliberately, to front the essential facts of life, and to see if he could not learn what it had to teach.

Well? Did Dad learn what life had to teach? Near the end of his life he said that... he hadn't.

But I'm not so sure.

I look at *how* he lived, and I believe that though he may not have gotten any closer to being able to articulate answers to the biggest questions of God's existence, the transcendent purpose of our lives, and so on, he did answer the more intimate big questions – questions which have to do with how to live your life – and he answered these questions *with* his life, through the way that he lived.

In fact, it seems to me that in some ways he intuitively had at least some of the answers right off the bat: By choosing to pursue a career that put him close to life and death, and choosing to do something that would be of use (one of his favorite phrases, by the way, in his later years – “be of use”) along the way, whatever else he might or might not learn. There's an answer for you about how to try to live a worthwhile life.

Now, Thoreau continued in that passage, as we heard. He wrote of his desire to “live deep and suck out all the marrow of life... to drive life into a corner...” to discover whether life is mean or sublime. Perhaps we ordinarily imagine Thoreau peacefully sitting on the front step of his cabin or drifting in a rowboat on Walden Pond... and he did both these things. But his language is substantially more intense than such images suggest. And Thoreau – a devoted naturalist with an obsessive attention to detail, also as a trenchant social and political critic, not to mention a writer dedicated to his craft – Thoreau himself lived pretty intensely.

As did my father, as I've suggested already. Another lesson there – presence, intense focus on whatever you're doing. (Though I have to say that my Dad's intense focus on one thing sometimes led him to extremes of absent-mindedness concerning other things... - and whatever else I've learned from Dad, I'm afraid I've absorbed some of that too...)

But... another lesson: intense focus didn't mean that Dad didn't know how to have a good time. Part of what I find myself still learning from Dad has to do with the way – again, as I suggested to begin with – in which he knew not only how to work hard, but also to play hard. He was *present* in the operating room and on the tennis court or golf course or just around the dinner table swapping stories and jokes. For I don't want to leave you with the impression that for my Dad “intense” was always the same as “serious” – sometimes to be sure, but not always. Dad had a great sense of humor and though in many ways he did take life seriously, he also had a knack for letting you know (in a good way!) when you were taking *yourself* too seriously.

Finally – and be no means least important – Dad was always looking at the bigger picture... and what his part might be in that bigger picture. You might say he was a citizen physician. He thought and wrote about health care reform, and in retirement he and my mother became active in PSR, Physicians for Social Responsibility (the U.S. affiliate of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War).

By now it is clear that I believe my father was extraordinary in many ways (not without flaws, but extraordinary). Yet I also know that there are plenty of extraordinary fathers out there, plenty of extraordinary people. I officiate at enough funerals and memorial services to have discovered a long time ago that though the world doesn't have many (if any!) perfect people, it has plenty of *good* people, each with some gift. Some do a better job of discovering and using their gifts to serve life than others. But most contribute some blessing to the larger good.

As for Dad – here, summing in a few words much of what I've been saying today, are some lessons I still try to take to heart... still learning from Dad:

- Hold on to the big questions. (As the poet Rilke put it, maybe someday you'll *live* into the answers.)
- Work hard. And play hard. (As Thoreau put it, suck out the marrow of life...)
- Care about and for people.
- Try to make a difference in a troubled world. (Be of use.)
- And keep some perspective – take a walk around the block to sort out your troubles (as we did more than once); and have a sense of humor, don't take yourself too seriously,

Well, on this Father's Day, twenty years after Dad's passing, I still feel his presence in the best of ways. I can still hear his “ha haaa...” on the tennis court (and if I'm lucky enough to place a drop shot anything like his I might be shouting it myself!). And, as I walk my life's journey, I still hear the echoes of his lessons (taught mostly, it should be emphasized, as my brothers reminded me this week when we reflected together about Dad, by example not lecture); and as you would probably guess I too keep a copy of *Walden* prominently on my shelf.

So today I invite you once again to embrace your own journey, whether inspired most by your father or by other loved ones, teachers, or mentors – your own journey, each of you in your own way – and a shared journey too, as together we hold the big questions, bring presence to all that we do, try to make a difference – and keep our sense of humor along the way too.

So may it be.