

14th Storyworth: What Was Your Father Like When You Were A Child?

My earliest recollection of my Dad was in Ellenville NY where he was a licensed Funeral Director. Even years after he ceased actively performing that role he maintained his license as active and was paid by another funeral home, whose location I never caught, because of a peculiar requirement by NY State which protects “guilds” from competitors. So they must have a license on display, and there are a host of other businesses with similar rules, even if nobody at the place of business is the actual license holder. Odd. And like Patents, which are NEVER awarded to a company, which cannot invent ANYTHING, but instead to individuals, even as the rights are owned by those companies which employ them, with no required compensation whatsoever.

Anyway, my Dad ran a Funeral Home owned by someone else, which was a pretty stable business for him. He might have retired from there, except the place was destroyed by a flood which came down through the valley in Sullivan County and tore out half the grounds of the property because of the location it was relative to the stream, which usually was otherwise a trickle. I don't really know a lot more than that about the circumstances, but I recall the flood, and my Dad soon thereafter started working for Fuller Brush Co. as a route salesman, in Dutchess County NY.

My Dad had become an embalmer, a requirement for a Funeral Director license, and obviously worked with some pretty nasty chemicals, which are substituted for the blood and other fluids in a deceased body. He was fascinated by human anatomy, which he obviously had to study, as well as becoming a pretty remarkable cosmetologist, which means he dressed the body to cover physical damages and the like for people who wanted an open casket for their loved ones' funerals, something I understand is far less common today. As I understand it, most today opt for cremation, and then have a funeral ceremony after the actual pyre has occurred. That will be my personal preference, too, because it is the lowest cost, and I cannot envision any benefit to my loved ones for throwing away that much economic value after I am deceased. Let's party beforehand while I am still able to enjoy it ;-)

Back to my Dad; he was always a decent provider for the family. We never went hungry as such, but we were also always lower middle class economically, which became most telling when we eventually lived in Hyde Park, along the Hudson Valley, which was a bedroom town for IBM. As I noted in prior writings, my friends' dads (mostly ;-) were “Engineers” because EVERYBODY at IBM got that moniker it seemed; even the janitor was a Sanitary Engineer. And they had regular hours like most middle class folks.

So while my friends' dads were usually available to play with them on weekends, if not weeknights, MY Dad was usually found working on his stockroom. But that also gave me some hands-on experience with inventory management, which included stock rotation, as there were a number of items available for Fuller Brush customers which were perishable. I also got to see him work on commission, even though he was an “employee” by the current IRS rules, as distinguished from, for example, an Uber or Lyft driver who are purposely kept as “Independent Contractors” because that limits the corporate responsibility for pensions and the like, one of the less than fair actions allowed by changes to Tax Law which has benefitted big business at the expense of its work force, whose long-term work for companies seemingly has no benefit. And then the corporations bemoan the loss of “loyalty”, as if that could not have been predicted by a fifth grader.

But his schedule effectively made my Dad unavailable for most of my formative years. We had lived for awhile on Rt 9G on the east side of Hyde Park in a home on the property of the Guernsey Dairy Farm there. Dad was an excellent route salesman, so of course they wanted him to become a field manager, for which they moved us briefly to Syracuse NY, somewhat prophetic given my future which had me live near there.

Unfortunately, while my Dad was an excellent individual contributor, I am not sure he was ever cut out to be a success as anybody's supervisor. My awareness of that was part of why I strove so hard to assure I got some direct supervisory role as soon as possible in MY professional career, at both Fafnir and Rollway Bearing, because dealing with subordinate problems requires entirely different skills from those of a direct contributor, something which most industry STILL seems to be blind-sided by. PEOPLE skills are required to be a good supervisor, while VISIONARY and ORGANIZATIONAL skills are needed for Management. Meanwhile technical skills specific to the task at hand are more appropriate for direct contributors. And few people are naturally gifted with all that mix. And while it CAN be learned, for the most part, the expectation by many corporations is that good ICs make good Managers, which is a VERY flawed premise, which sadly ruins far too many good ICs, and often costs the corporations which "promote them" the very services and talents that made them valuable in the first place, a REALLY weird paradox.

Were I designing a system from scratch, I would assure something more akin to the Intel model, wherein they have dual tracks – technical and managerial – and one need never cross between them to reap plentiful rewards. That last issue is the stumbling factor for far too many organizations which sub-optimize those strategies.

I must at this point also acknowledge that part of what made my Dad a success as a salesman was his personality. He was a handsome man who knew how to smile and put people at ease. It also was at the heart of a painful reality about which I knew nothing until I became an adult myself, and it was the almost certain fact that my Mom knew about it and did nothing which I consider her primary failure, to say little of his. But he molested my sisters, and I eventually observed he had gotten away with it so often that it came as a surprise to him when he was eventually called out on it when he molested his granddaughters and nieces of mine. But even then his punishment was still not sufficient to break him of bad habits developed over his lifetime, sadly.

So, while he was generally a good provider for the family, that flaw was sufficient that he and I largely parted ways almost entirely once I had a family of my own, something I am and will be sad about my entire life, because it was unnecessary. I hope we as a society are starting to see that we must protect the vulnerable in our midst or we will never be able to escape the abusers it creates and allows for on a daily basis. And the FIRST time we look away rather than confronting such misbehaviors is the first empowerment we are guilty of. I sadly had to witness the past four years of such political lack of integrity, and am sad to say it continues largely unobstructed to this day. But our society MUST stop that empowerment or we do a deadly disservice to ALL who are vulnerable, not just our daughters.

After leaving Fuller Brush, my Dad worked at various sales roles, eventually selling floor coverings in Hyde Park at a retail establishment. At least that allowed him to be home at night. But by then I was already well on my way to College and my own adult life, with all the painful baggage I eventually would learn and carry with me. So I have to admit my relationship with my Dad was not what I would have hoped it might become. I never thought of him as the "senior advisor" he might otherwise have become, and integrity, or specifically His lack of it, was at the heart of that sadness. It was a friend of his at the carpet store who offered me his '63 Bel Air Wagon if I would remove it from his yard, because he thought it needed a new transmission, about which I wrote a few articles back, and which became my ticket to liberation from family constraint.

I am also sure there are many plusses My Dad provided me which I cannot comfortably acknowledge because of his flaws. But I must at some point say that he provided me on some level a model for what a responsible father does, even if flawed. I will spend the rest of MY life trying to reconcile that reality, however sad it leaves me. ;-)

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