Like Father, Like Son

Ray Wolpow

“Toilet paper, where is my toilet paper?” All my life my father, the teacher, has been shuffling papers and drinking ice water. Today is no different. He lies in bed, one eye closed, his mind like a computer scanning its drives unable to find the operating system. I hand him the roll. “Tear off a little bundle for me and put it by my waist.” Sensing my father’s desperation, I comply. In clear view of everyone else I hand him the roll. “Tear off a little bundle for me and put it by my waist.” Sensing my father’s desperation, I comply. In clear view of everyone else in the room, he removes his urine bottle and meticulously cleans himself off. Discretely, I pull the sheet over his legs and waist. In rebellion, he shakes it back off with his right arm. My mom insists, “Cover yourself up, Meyer.” He is annoyed, “I’m doing the best I can.” He is.

I bring him his white-styrofoam, plastic-covered cup of water, shaking it first to make sure it has plenty of ice. Some of my worst fights with him as a child were when I hadn’t prepared enough ice cubes for his “drinks.” But this day, in room 427 of the Telemetry Ward at Bershire Medical Center, I put the straw up to his mouth and he drinks two gulps. “Is your water cold enough?” I ask. He nods. Once again he asks me for toilet paper. I grant his wish. “Speaking of paper,” I say with a smile, “any chance I can get you to grade some of these papers I need to get ready for school?” I too am a teacher. “No, I am glad to be retired and out of that business,” he says with a smile while continuing to focus on his own calling.

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When I was a toddler, I played “open the hanger” while my father made propeller sounds and eventually landed a food-filled spoon in my wide-open mouth. A generation later, I played the same game with my two sons. Admittedly, my sound effects more closely resembled jet engines. Today, I feed my father and I do so with dignity, not frivolity. First, cottage cheese with little pieces of lettuce on it. Then sips of milk through a straw. Between sips, I spoon-feed him cherry jello with whipped cream. He likes the whipped cream. When the milk is gone, I offer him ice water between spoons of jello. Turning his head away from the styrofoam cup, he says,

“I want some more milk.”

“I’m sorry. There’s no more milk left, Dad. Here, have some ice water.”

“Okay.”

I spoon him some more jello and offer water to wash it down. He turns his head away.
“I want some more milk.”

“I’m sorry. There’s no more milk left, Dad. Here, have some ice water.”

“Okay.”

I can’t provide him with the solution he seeks. Nonetheless, he complies and drinks the ice water.

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Dad wasn’t always grading papers. I remember him parking our sky-blue DeSoto with its rusted chrome hood ornament on Bedford Avenue. On this day I ride in the front, where Mom usually sits. She is back home with my new baby sister. Today, my dad and I are going to do a “man” thing. While I wait at the curbside, I watch my long, lanky dad lock the car door with his key. He checks all the other doors and takes my six-year old hand in his. Making our way to the ballpark, we dodge trolleys and waves of people, until almost magically, we find our way through turnstiles, signs with rows and numbers, and aisle upon aisle of seats, until we are high above the right fielder.

This is the last game between the N.Y. Giants and the Brooklyn Dodgers at Ebbets Field. I can hardly see the players, but I know I am looking at my heroes, Pee Wee Reese, Duke Snider, Charlie Kneel. Soon Dad turns to me and explains that the seventh inning stretch is coming. He intends to stand before the Giants come to bat. This is because he is a Giants fan. He tells me that I could stand with him if I want, but since I am a Dodger fan I will probably prefer to wait until the Dodgers come to bat. I watch my dad stand and stretch. He and the other Giant fans are but a few here at the Dodger’s home arena. Three outs later I stand and wave at Pee Wee.

But today in the hospital, my father stares blankly towards the television. I’ve turned on the Orioles/White Sox game. The wild card could be hanging in the balance. “What’s the score of the Yankee game?” Dad keeps asking me. “I don’t know yet, Dad. But I’m sure your Yankees are clobbering the Tigers. I’ll let you know.”

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I’m not very good at saying “goodbye.” I usually figure I can always process the farewell later. But later never comes. When I take the time to think about this, I realize that I’m afraid of letting my feelings out. I’m scheduled to fly home early the next morning. I have classes to meet. What if I never see him again? How do I say goodbye? If I do see him, what vestiges of my father will remain?

I ask my dad if he has any messages for me to pass on to his two grandsons. “Yes, give them each a kiss for me.” I crouch over his six-foot long body which has been in bed for a week, over his twisted and partially repaired hips, over his left leg and foot which he can’t move anymore, over the urine bottle and the roll of toilet paper, to the man who is still my father. “Sure, Dad, I’ll be glad to. Why don’t you deposit those two kisses right here on my cheek and I’ll pass them on…”
He smiles. I bend down until I feel his unshaven face and chapped lips. He kisses me twice. I run my fingers across his shiny head to his crown of white curly hair. I kiss him on the forehead and tell him I love him. He answers, “I love you too, son.” I straighten, avoid looking at him and slip out the door.

I march down the ward, past the empty wheelchairs, the containers for soiled linen, and the uncollected dinner trays. As I step into an empty waiting room, my feelings leak out of my closed eyes and soak my recently kissed cheek.

Like father, like son… Like my father I know teaching requires loving and nurturing the children and families of others. As a child, this meant Dad often spent more time with his students and their papers than with me. Today, thirty-five years later, I walk into a classroom of my own and realize that my choice to teach, like that of my father, leaves little time to serve the family which is my own.