

Time Flies
(or, A Tribute to Dad)

The anodyne called for quiet, preferably for the patient to be lying down someplace dimly lit, and if the pitter-patter of light rain on the roof could be added, all the better; chances for success were enhanced by covers of old, love-worn comforters, hand-made, if possible. Then a kind man's steady hand and soothing voice were needed to gently apply the magical treatment: tenderly rubbing a key around the outer edge of the ear.

My father knew this enchanted cure for the nuisance of hiccups that often plagued us as kids. Whether it was a remedy practiced out of his inherited wisdom or the fruit of his imagination, I never asked, because all that mattered at the time was that it worked. It never crossed my mind to doubt the therapy because, quite simply, I thought Dad knew everything.

When my sisters and I were growing up, whatever the question, the problem, the dilemma; whatever was broken or not working or missing; whatever was needed, wanted, or hoped for, Dad had the answer, the solution, the know-how, the wherewithal. He could fix, mend, make, adapt, adjust, or resolve whatever was asked of him. And he did so softly, modestly, and without fanfare. I doubt he was aware that he was the Answer Man, the Go-To-Guy, the Great Font of Wisdom that silently flowed in that way that deep, still waters do. Oh no, you would never hear him make a big deal of whatever he had done or made or the course of action he had taken; his strides through life were quiet ones.

Dad wasn't one for extraneous chit-chat, so we thirstily drank in whatever he said, like parched shingles soak up house stain. It was not that he measured his words to be stingy with them, as though there were a scarcity of them, or that he had to hoard them, saving them against a time when he might unexpectedly have to give a three-day soliloquy. Nor was he afraid to use them, as if uncertain as to their impact or efficacy, or worried they would somehow boomerang back at him. No, phrases and sentences actually came quite readily to Pop; they never got caught and tangled, tripping him up like the piles of vines we cut down every summer, nor did they hesitate on the periphery of his mind and tongue, like shy ballerinas off-stage before their first performance. Dad was at once eloquent and pithy, erudite and entertaining. He could be sober and

somber, giving ponderous attention to serious matters great and small, but yet more than anyone else I knew, he was thoroughly consumed by a good laugh—often, willingly, at his own expense—his whole body rocking with the mirth begat deep in his belly.

Dad could create anything, from a simple box for kindling to a cottage from the piers up. Designing and building furniture was a hobby (or perhaps it grew out of necessity, either providing for or escaping from four girls!) that evolved into an art. An "H.O.G [initials] original" became something highly sought and cherished by family and friends. No matter the application of his attention, though, he did his work with care, commitment, and a fine attention to detail. Even more, he always seemed engaged in his task, enjoying the process as much as the result.

On the hands-on side of things, Dad's skills weren't limited to building and woodworking: he could plumb a sink, wire a light, shimmy up a tree in spikes—while carrying a chain saw—with an alacrity a bear would envy; he could train a dog, coax a reluctant lawnmower to start, paint window sashes without getting a drop on the glass, and pull splinters out of tiny fingers and toes with the skill of a surgeon.

On a practical level and from a kid's point of view, it was terrific having a Renaissance Man head up the household, especially when his creativity, as limitless as the heavens, was employed at our lakeside cottage in New Hampshire. When twin Martha and I were clamoring and whining for a pony, suddenly one appeared behind the woodshed. Butterball, suitably reflecting the 50-gallon drum from which he was fashioned, trotted and loped through the fields of our minds for several summers. When we wanted to captain barges along the rocky shoreline, five minutes, a two-by-four fragment, and a scrap of planking later, our tugboats were water-worthy and adventure-ready.

Sometimes, out of the blue, he'd herd up us girls, Mom, and Crumpet, the trusty old beagle (who, as I mentioned, was trained by Dad... and listened to only him!) into the old Willys jeep (an army relic), and we'd rumble up an old dirt track to the top of a beautiful, grassy hill and spread out our sleeping bags like a line of cocoons in a collector's felt-lined box. Lying under the stars, we were entertained by tales of how he and Mom met or with legends he learned from an ancient Indian he once worked with until our heads nodded and bobbed like yoyos, heavy with sleep, and our

eyelids finally lost the battle against gravity and drew their black curtains against our eyes.

Always one for family fun, in the winters Dad would sometimes take the gang to the cottage for a frosty adventure. With a tanker-sized station wagon of the 1960s packed to the roof with food, luggage, and kids—and Crumpet—we'd head to New Hampshire. Mind you, the road to our place wasn't plowed (still isn't), so we would park across the lake and either ski, snowshoe, or post-hole across the lake, transporting our gear on our backs, in our arms, or on sleds. Of course, the door to the cottage was snowed in ("Who has the shovel?"), and once we burrowed our way into the cabin, there was no respite from the biting cold. Mom would start fires in the woodstove and fireplace (the only sources of heat in the uninsulated camp), while Dad, with one or two of us clinging to his sleeves like burrs to a mare's tail, would head back down to the lake to chop a hole in the ice for water (bottled water not being the omnipresent solution it is today).

The next morning, after reluctantly slipping out from heaps of quilts that were as fluffy as whipped cream, we'd have one of Mom's hearty breakfasts before our favorite February sport: the H.O.G. Rope-Tow Express. Dad would secure a thick, sturdy rope, big-around as a three-year sapling and with a few knots tied along its length, to the jeep. Meanwhile, we girls donned our bulky parkas that gave us the girths of good-sized sows (pre-Gore-tex days, you know), stretchy wool ski pants, and toastiest hats and mittens. We crammed our toes into our lace-up ski boots, then stepped into the cable bindings on our wooden skis. Each of us grabbed hold of one of the rope's knots, then Dad would put the Willys in gear, and down the road we'd go, a line of puffy, brightly-glad girls nearly doubled over with laughter being towed and snaking behind the jeep like multi-colored streamers trailing a kite. Yes, Dad certainly knew how to entertain four kids, a dog, and a wife in the throes of winter!

(For the record: all of the afore-mentioned and the following still apply to Pop. If there are any exceptions, they would be that he no longer scrambles up trees in his spikes and he doesn't help us put on our ski boots anymore!)

Dad's know-all extended to the intellectual as well. He knew what was going on in the world of finance and understood the nuances of interest rates, exchange rates, fuel rates; he always kept straight the countries and people in global politics and was a whiz at math homework; he knew the

difference between a halfback and a fullback, a curve ball and a sinker, and a jump shot and a hook; he was an avid reader who recorded the hundreds of books he read in a journal; he could play the drums with a beat steady as a metronome, had a voice to sing with the angels, and was as at home on the local theater's stage as my aunt was in her kitchen when whipping up a batch of hermits.

If one of us felt cornered by a conundrum, trapped in a maze of uncertainty, Dad would help her talk her way through it, finding a tack that made sense. If we wanted to bounce ideas around, Dad provided the court to do so; if we were puzzled with a process, he helped us sort out the pieces. His sage advice evaporated a fear from our minds like brandy from a flaming cherries jubilee. In the way of the "wise ones, Dad didn't give us the answers, but he offered the tools to let each of us find her own.

Perhaps most of all, Dad knew people. He knew that the teasing that got older sister Cin motivated, laughing, or out of a slump might well backfire on me; that "Belles" (as he called my oldest sister) would thrive given a challenge that sparked her mind. Or that Mart and I didn't want to be referred to as "the twins"; that while Cindy was deft with needle and thread, she couldn't (wouldn't?) apply that dexterity to brush-clippers; and that Mart wouldn't touch that same needlework with the length of, well, said long-handled loppers! Since we lived with him, I doubt we kids thought this remarkable—that Dad treated each of us so differently, that he knew when a look was more effective than a word or when a laugh would do what a stern tone wouldn't. Pop just knew these things.

But even as young girls, we were aware of how Dad was with others: kind and respectful; an intent listener, interested in the answers he posed; a good conversationalist, but not overbearing; genuinely joyful in seeing others succeed; and perhaps most of all, he sought—and found—what was best inside of people. To observe his interactions brought the same sense of light and awe as basking in the glow of a full moon. So whether he was talking with a waitress, playing bridge with good friends, bemoaning or lauding the Patriots at a family weekend, or being part of a discussion with business associates, wherever Dad was, I yearned to be in that circle. I wanted to take in his every syllable, to be near him, and to be included with those that the warm net of his good nature gently corralled closer to him.

Yet, despite all this, while we were growing up, there was one thing that Dad said that just didn't, couldn't, wouldn't make sense to me: How in the world could a man—who seemed to know all, do all, and have a solution at hand for everything—possibly, credibly, remotely say "time flies"?! At an age when summer days stretched ahead as luxuriously as a cat on a south-facing widow sill, and when Christmas was always "forever" in the future, this was as implausible as liver and onions being a tasty treat for dinner. There was no convincing a ten-year-old that by merely inserting the word "only" before "three months," the eternity was somehow diminished. Or that "just" a couple of weeks was a tolerable span of time to wait for the next trip to the lake. Yet Dad would utter these two words with the certainty of an umpire calling a strike, usually accompanying the phrase with a slight tilt and shake of his head and a hint of a smile, indicating he was equally certain that he could do no more about it than he could change the stars' constellations. And I, no doubt, could not be induced to consider that Grandma's upcoming visit or the next pony ride would be less than an infinity in the offing.

At some anonymous moment between my ages of pigtails and having too many candles for the birthday cake, there has been a shift, and time has metamorphosed from dragging its heels like a horse reluctant to load into a trailer to racing by, like that same steed on the track of Churchill Downs. Whoa! Just last month Scott and I realized we have lived in New York now for more than ten years; for me, this is longer than I've been in any one place since I became a teenager. It doesn't seem possible, yet no matter if I count on my fingers, pull out the calculator, or look through the calendars, the answer is the same: a decade. A decade? It seems as inconceivable to believe now that such a large lump of time has slipped away as it did to swallow that Thanksgiving was "around the corner" thirty years ago! Which, I realize, means one other thing: Dad knew exactly what he was talking about when he spoke those two unlikely words!

And, by the way, the final proof of Dad's sagacity: he married Mom, didn't he?!