

“Echoes of the Heart”

Reflections on Life and Community Living

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Remembering fathers. With Father’s Day (June 15th) on the near horizon, memories of my father are very much in my mind and spirit. Dad will turn ninety-one in September. We lost my mother about a year and a half ago; and after sixty-seven wonderful years of marriage, understandably, dad still feels her loss deeply.

One of the things I’ve learned since my mother’s death is how thankful I am that she and dad had such a good life together. As spouses and parents, when we can look back at our lives with much to celebrate and few regrets, it’s a blessing indeed.

As men, being a father asks something of us. While we’re spared the pregnancy/ child-birth process—in any direct sense, at least—still, we’ve got stuff on our plate. To begin with, we have to stand up and make sure the family unit has the sustenance it needs.

Certainly, one of the core elements in any father’s identity is our role as provider—not that our spouses cannot provide as well or better. Still, when we don’t feel good about ourselves as a *breadwinner*, trickles of shame and humiliation seep into our spirit; and low self-esteem is often quick to follow.

Our temptation as men is to tie too much of our identity to the success of our career, particularly with regard to income. Too often, we think income is the only measure that counts.

Balancing the roles. One of the most challenging parts of being a father is finding the right balance in our role as husband, father and provider. My father did an excellent job of sorting all this out. All the time, as my three siblings and I remember our childhood, dad seemed to seamlessly traverse these roles.

At our best, we fathers want to make sure our families are okay. We want our wives to feel cherished, honored (as the mother of our children) and fulfilled as a human person. We want our children to have the best possible chance to realize their innate gifts and to lead purposeful and contented lives.

I remember, growing up, how my father was always our best cheerleader in anything we endeavored to do. An incurable optimist, he was forever celebrating our successes and urging us on. No matter how sweet our victories or how disappointing our losses, we always knew he was there, encouraging us and valuing us as his beloved children.

As I reflect back, perhaps one of dad’s greatest gifts was his ability to separate himself and his life-track from our lives and our own unfolding life purpose. Goals and life-purpose, of course, feed into questions of meaning and self-realization. With passions flowing and expectations often high, it’s important to be able to balance these underlying motivations.

Certainly, one of the hardest things for a hands-on father to do is to step back from his life enough to grant his children the freedom to be themselves and to pursue, unencumbered by parental guilt, a path of their own choosing—a journey in line with their own ambitions and dreams.

Only human. Finally, at the end of the day, our fathers are—in spite of all the legend to the contrary—only human. Sometimes, as *only human*, what they need most from us is compassion and forgiveness.

As men, our fathers are no less prone to excesses of the spirit than anyone else. Often times, pride and ego reign too dominant in their spirit and dysfunctional relationships, over time, end up trickling into the family tree.

Other times, amidst their flaws and failings, our fathers are able to give robustly to our personal and family lives. Again, fatherhood has its many challenges. As fathers, all we can do is—day after day—continue to work hard, make good choices, and hope for the best.

Still, when the sun sets and the final curtain begins its descent, it's all about the love. It's about wanting to see one's sons and daughters alive to the promises of God that are indelibly inscribed in their spirit. And it's about taking the gifts and opportunities that life has given us and *going for it*.

In his twilight years, now, my father continues to enjoy life—with his weekly hot dog and nightly ritual of chocolate ice cream. And his goodness of heart and generosity of spirit live on as an inspiration and reassurance to us all.