

A dad at heart

When comedian Tim Conway died May 14 at age 85, most of us mourned the loss to the world of a comic genius. (If you don't agree that Conway was a genius, just search online for "Tim Conway dentist" and see if you can get through the nine-minute sketch without laughing.)

But not everyone saw him that way - or in only that way. In a statement about her father's death, his daughter Kelly Conway said: "The love he gave us, and the laughter he gave the world will never be replaced, but will be remembered forever. He is at peace now, but I will miss him every second of every day until we meet again in heaven."

Kelly - and her five brothers and a stepsister - saw Tim not as the TV and movie star who played a bumbling ensign in "McHale's Navy," joined Don Knotts in "The Apple Dumpling Gang," and entertained us for years on "The Carol Burnett Show," but as a father, a dad at heart.

And he was a Catholic who went to Mass. In a 2007 interview with Catholic News Service, Conway said he wasn't made to feel uncomfortable by fellow parishioners because of his celebrity status.

In his obituary, CNS reported that the future actor, writer, director and comedian was athletic as a high school student and excelled at tumbling - which The New York Times noted was a skill that he "later deployed to great effect in his comedy."

That's another thing to remember: dads start out as kids themselves. Conway - as most other famous people - didn't start out as a celebrity. He was a kid who happened to find a sport in high school that he enjoyed and at which he excelled. That he was able to use those skills in later life was a bonus.

The Conways' example may be similar for many celebrities' children. They may know what their parents do for a living, and realize what makes them famous. But the most important part of their job is to be a mother or a father to their children. If they can do that well, the rest is gravy, right? Sometimes a lot of gravy, but gravy nonetheless.

My dad, Harold, was a math teacher. Not a celebrity, by any means, but over 35 years, he taught a lot of students and had a significant impact on many.

When I was young, my family worked every week for my uncle at his flea market booth, so we got to know some of the other regular vendors. Once, as I was talking to a man who had a booth near us, I happened to mention the high school where my dad taught. It turned out the vendor had gone to that school, and asked my dad's name. When I told him, he rushed over to our booth and gave my dad a big hug. "Thank you for failing me in math," he told my dad. The setback forced him to buckle down in math the next year, and he eventually was able to run a successful business.

When dad was home with us, he would teach us math tricks and help us with our homework, in addition to raising us by word and example. We were not formally dad's students, but we learned well from him - not only math but lessons in life and faith.

I also have to remember that my dad, too, was not always a husband and father. We have some of his childhood photos - riding a tricycle, boxing with his youngest brother, and from his days in the Army Air Corps before he married our mom.

All those parts of his early life shaped the man he would become at heart: husband, father and grandfather.

No, my father wasn't famous, but he was my dad. He passed away in 2003. And just like Kelly Conway said of her father, my siblings and I would say, "We knew he would have to leave us someday, but that day came too soon."