

Lessons from my dad



When we become parents, we become providers. At first, it's the basics: a place to live, something to eat, soft fabrics to keep baby warm. Then, we add education: Sunday school, preschool, K-12, college. But, throughout each moment of our lives and theirs we are teaching our children what we think it means to be a good person.

Those informal lessons are what matters most. They're the kind gestures we don't expect anyone to notice. They're teachable moments that have the sticking power of warm spaghetti. They're the video clips our children burn into their minds and play again and again. My dad has given me a lifetime of memories that have influenced decisions both big and small since the Father's Day weekend I came home from the hospital as a newborn. Here are a few of those times when my dad stood taller than most men, and encouraged me to join him in making the world a better place.

I'm seven years old, and it's summer. We are seated three across the blue perforated vinyl bench seat in my dad's white Chevy S-10 pickup.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"To the recycling center," he said.

"Why?" I asked. I was bored. I wanted to be in my friend's pool, not in this hot truck hauling bags of crushed cans across town.

"They're going to turn these cans into other things instead of throwing them away. It's going to help save the environment, like the Chesapeake Bay," he said.

For every summer of my life, my dad and his family had rented a house on the Bay to go fishing and crabbing. My cousins and I swam in the waters of the Chesapeake and played baseball and a million other games of our own imaginations on her shores. Maybe those cans would become a boat or something.

It wasn't popular or easy to recycle when my dad chose to make his small contribution to the environment, but it stuck with me, and now, especially as an art teacher, I'm quick to reduce, reuse, and recycle. God created this world for us and we must honor Him by taking care of it. That's what my dad taught me.

I'm fifteen years old, and I'm difficult. My dad and I don't seem to see eye-to-eye about anything. Sports are his life, and I've decided to be an artist. It couldn't be further from my dad's world, but he built a bridge to mine and made plans to take me to the Walter's one day. Reluctantly, I went along, disappearing into the alternative music streaming through my Discman (another thing he didn't understand).

On our elevator ride to the second floor, we found ourselves stuck. For half an hour! What else could we do, but talk? I told him that I wanted to study art in college, and he suggested I become an art teacher. I told him it wasn't what I had in mind, but he reminded me that I have a gift for working with children, that I come from a long line of teachers and that a career in education would offer a stable income for my family. I insisted that I wasn't interested.

My dad maintained his cool, even when the maintenance man who finally freed us from our trap appeared, sandwich in hand. He and I spent the rest of the day taking in Japanese screen prints and Faberge eggs together, my Discman packed neatly away in my purse. I took the opportunity to teach him the art history and criticism I learned in school, and, without knowing it, he set the foundation for my entire future.



I'm 29, I've just delivered my second child, and my beloved cat, Kurt, whom I've had since I was in middle school, is very ill. Letting him go was losing a part of who I was; the child who still existed in me. He was black and sleek and affectionate, like every other feline my dad had loved, and watching him dwindle into a bundle of bones with sunken pale yellow eyes was too much to take. The vet said he wouldn't

last but another couple of painful weeks, so I made the hardest choice I'd ever had to make.

And my dad came with me. He and I both held Kurt in his final moments, then we held onto each other. His compassion for animals is unrivaled. Both he and my mom are pretty much vegetarians, and, consequently, so am I. He rescued domestic rabbits that some idiot set loose in the neighborhood. Sometimes he buys a bag of food for the shy cats who live with me now. He believes in being gentle towards the defenseless.

My dad attended Archbishop Curley High School and has a special devotion to St. Francis. Maybe that explains the birdfeeders and houses he keeps throughout the yard. He encourages me to do the same.

I'm still 29. A tree has fallen on my house. My parents open their door. "Stay as long as you need to," my dad says. They help us with our babies. My dad stays up late nights with Frank. They develop a bond stronger than Velcro. He is patient. He is kind. He is always willing to look after my boys if he's available. And I can't ask for a better caregiver because he's done so much for me.

My dad's given me my faith. He's filled my plates with fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. He's gave me a place to call home as a child and as an adult. He's given me my formal education. But most of all he's give me and my family love. Thanks for everything, Dad!

