

After the Game...

A week before dad passed, he gave me one last piece of advice. He said, "you think too much." I know my sister, Selma, heard him because she was in the room when he said it, but I can't remember if anyone else was there, so I apologize if I forgot someone. The reason I don't remember is that his advice took me down memory lane.

You see, this wasn't the only time he gave me this advice.

It was part of an ongoing lesson that he had been teaching me throughout my life, a lesson he began teaching me when I was 10 years old.

And that lesson began with me crying my eyes out at home plate during a little league baseball game. You see, I was the team's last chance to win the game. I was at-bat with two outs, and the moment must have overwhelmed me because I froze. I just stood there and watched the pitches go by. Then I heard the umpire call them strikes. And then...well then... I started crying. After the game, dad asked, "why was I crying?"

And while still crying, I listed out all the reasons running through my head:

- Because I didn't want to be the reason we lost...
- Because the coach won't let me play baseball again if I struck out...
- Because the umpire wasn't being fair...
- Because none of my friends will want to hang out with me anymore...

And that was the first time he said, "You think too much."

He then went on to say, "You should want to be the one everyone is relying on to win the game. You should embrace a moment like that because it's times like that...that you should feel alive. Because it's times like that, you should swing away. Because," he said, "nobody is ever going to throw you the perfect pitch." He went on to say, "You can't play the game if you're stuck thinking about it all the time. You especially won't enjoy it, and then what's the point of even playing at all."

Eventually, he compared what happened in my game to dancing. He told me, "If you have to think about each step on the dance floor, then you're not dancing. You're just going through the motions, and that's not dancing. Cause when you dance, you feel the music. You feel the rhythm. Cause when you dance, you feel the beats and move with them. You don't think about it. Because If you think about it, you end up looking like some strange guy trying to figure out a math problem, while everyone around you is having the times of their lives."

This is why after the baseball game, he didn't take me home. Instead, he rounded up a bunch of baseballs and took me back to the same baseball field, where I had just lost.

I don't know if he got this lesson from his days in the Navy, but he taught me what everyone serving in the military learns. He taught me that repetition could eliminate the need to think about doing something. As he said, "If you do something enough times, if you repeat it enough, then you can just feel what you're doing, like an instinct.....whether it's dancing or playing baseball."

This is why he pitched to me that entire day after that game. This is why he pitched until it was too dark to see the ball coming at me anymore, so when that time came again, and it actually did, where I was at-bat, and my team was relying on me to win the game, I would feel the moment rather than think about it. I would embrace the moment rather than worry about what could go wrong. And I would swing away and not just watch the pitch go whizzing by.

While it's nice to say that I won the next game for my team thanks to my dad, I know that whether I had hit the ball or struck out, the lesson went beyond the baseball game....literally.

As most of you know, dad was a mechanic. But if you didn't know, you would absolutely know that he was a mechanic when you visited his house without him even having to tell you. The evidence was in the driveway. It was a driveway filled with old cars in all different stages of a rebuild. As my mom would call it sometimes, it was a mini junkyard. Yes, Like so many mechanics, Dad had aspirations to turn these junk vehicles into great rides again.

When I lived there, my friends would visit and see the cars sitting around and asked me if I had ever worked with dad on restoring any of them. You know, did I have that iconic father and son moment. Well, let me say here, as I said to my friends, I don't have that story.

While my dad was mechanically inclined, I have proven to be the opposite- mechanically declined.

This is not to say I didn't volunteer once to work on a car with dad.

I remember it wasn't but 10 minutes when "I was helping him" change a tire that he walked around the car and saw I had let the hydraulic oil leak out the jack. I give him credit for holding in his frustration. Instead of yelling, he took a deep breath and said, "You know what will be a great help for your old man? If you can pour your dad an ice-cold coke." As I walked back to the house, he yelled, "make sure the ice is fresh."

Despite not connecting with him through the mini junkyard, it was those cars and other unfinished projects that my dad had around the house that I learn so much from him.

You see, one night, a few months after I just graduated high school, I ran out the house and towards the driveway to take out our nicest care at the time – a 1988 Dodge shadow because well...because I had a date planned that evening. That was until I met Dad, who was also standing out in the driveway. It was odd because he was dressed up. His beard was trimmed. His hair cut. It wasn't like him. He even smelled alright.

That's when he told me he also has a date, and he's taking her out in the Shadow. Naturally, I looked around the driveway, scoping out the three other cars that were parked around, and asked, "so what car can I take?"

"None of them," he said. "None of them crank up right now."

I blurted out, annoyed, "What's the point in having all these cars if none of them drive?" And then I asked, "When are you even working on them b/c I never see you out here?"

He shrugged his shoulders and dismissed me, saying, "When there's nothing better to do."

Since my plans were ruined, I went at him a little, poking the bear, and I asked, "Well, did you ever think about just working on one car at a time, so you know, that way we wouldn't have all this junk piling up around the house?"

Then he said it again. He said, "You think too much."

He then said, "I keep them all around because I don't know what I'm going to feel like working on any given day. Maybe I will feel like working on the Chevy Vega over there or the blue truck, or maybe I will feel like working on the air condition unit sitting in the garage..." As he was talking, mom walked out of the house, ready to go on her date. That's when dad grabbed her and started dancing with her before saying, "...or maybe I feel like dancing."

After so many years went by since we had that conversation, dad and I found ourselves talking again in the same driveway next to all things - the same Chevy Vega, still undrivable. This time we were waiting for a toll truck driver to come over and pick up the Vega and take it to an actual junkyard. You see, this time, dad had been diagnosed with cancer. Realizing that he definitely wasn't going to be working on them anymore, we began to sell some of the cars. Standing there in the driveway, dad said, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry that I left you with this mess, all these projects that I never got around to finishing."

And I told him, "Don't worry about it."

A couple of months later, he passed away, and I went around the house and took an inventory of all those unfinished projects. While making this inventory, I found a ladder lying sideways in between some bushes and the house. Along with it, I found a screwdriver and some screws next to pieces of lighting fixtures. It was like an archaeological find.

This was when an intense feeling surged through me, followed by this vision that was then followed by this realization. These projects scattered around the house weren't symbols of a man who didn't get stuff done. They weren't symbols of a habitable procrastinator.

Actually, they were monuments, evidence of a man who lived a full life.

When looking at that ladder on the ground, I could now see what happened. I saw mom peeking out the front door, yelling for dad, telling him that Johnny and Delores want to grab some Bar-B-Que in a few minutes. Without hesitation, I saw dad stop working and put down the ladder because now...now...he had something better to do.

It now made sense. I remember seeing tires shoved in the back seat of one of the junk rides and wondered why. Well, now I saw it clearly. Dad's grandkids were heading over to the house to go swimming, so he immediately stopped working, shoved the tires inside, so he could go swimming with them right away.

You see, all around me were projects that he stopped doing to spend time with the people in this room. He stopped working on those projects to travel and to see as much of this world as possible. He stopped working on those projects to tell jokes with us, laugh with us, and share his life with us. And we, without hesitating, shared our lives back with him.

He chose to get the most out of life, and for him, that meant putting the tools down occasionally. Only what he didn't anticipate or realize was how much love would be returned to him. Why did we love him so much? Because who doesn't want to be around someone getting the most out of life?

When it came to the unfinished projects, his only mistake was underestimating how much of this world he would take in and how many experiences he would share with us. So much so, he would always have something better to do.

- Because life meant spending a few days at the beach with his brother because that was something better to do.

- Because life meant cooking with Henry Etta and for the Church because that something better to do.

- Because life meant attending his nieces' weddings because that was something better to do.

- Because life meant taking a road trip with me and singing off-key to Motown Greatest Hits CD.

-Because life meant driving into Atlanta to catch a movie with me and my girlfriend, Kieva, and then talk about how bad the movie was over a chimichanga and some Mexican corn at Frontera's because that was something better to do.

-It meant seeing his daughter in Wisconsin or meeting her and her family in Tennessee for a great adventure up Mount LeConte.

-It meant seeing the Panama Canal with some of you in this room.

-It meant seeing Alaska so that he could see the whales, the bears, and the glaciers up close.

-It meant organizing fun getaways for the Young @ Hearts here in the Church for all those years.

-It meant sharing his life with the love of his life, his wife of over 50 years. It meant sharing his life with my mom. It meant countless times, where they stayed up way late in the night together, where they would find each other falling asleep on the couch. Because why? Because neither one of them ever wanted to call it a night. This, of course, was something better to do.

-And It even meant going over to my house and fixing my car so his mechanically decline son could get to work on time.

These were all the times that meant more to him than finishing all the projects that we, as a family, teased him about not finishing.

Everyone in this room, we are here because we met something to my dad. And in his final days, I know we were so happy he did because what got us through all the pain, including him, was sharing all those memories, all those times that he had something better to do.

I know he found peace in his final days because he knew he lived a heck of a life.

He knew he did what he **felt** like doing.

When he and I were waiting for the tow truck to come and take away the Chevy Vega, I wished he would have said, "I'm sorry, Eric, for always having something better to do," in a sort of cocky tone.

I also wish that I would have had a different response than "don't worry about it."

Well, I can't go back and say I wanted to say then, but I can at least say it now...and that is "Dad, thank you, thank you for always having something better do."