

It was a year ago this month that I told my dad he was the best teacher I ever had.

For the first eight years of my life, this thing I remember most vividly was how he sang heart-felt country songs while accompanying himself on the four-string banjo. He filled our home nearly every evening after dinner with the warmth of live music performed by a self-taught amateur. Listening to his example, I learned the essence of musical presentation: it must be simple, honest, and up-close. At this time, he was also a gifted amateur watercolorist, painting local scenes from Iowa, as well as from far-off Colorado and Cape Cod. While I knew absolutely nothing of how my dad made his living, he was teaching me how to make a life.

From about the age of eight into my teens, dad had mostly given up singing, playing banjo, and painting. His interests had shifted to cultivating a large vegetable garden. The bountiful organic produce (skillfully prepared by my mother) wasn't always to my liking, but it taught me the value of healthy choices, something that is central to my life today. My dad's interests had also shifted to spending more time in his study, writing his research papers. He provided guidance and editing when it came to my school papers, which provided a strong foundation for my own personal writing style. At this same time, I began collecting beer cans – a perfect match for my dad's interest for what was on the inside! On trips out-of-state, we would stop on roadsides, looking for new additions to the collection. He and I would also go to local grocery and liquor stores where I would point out which beers were not in my collection. I only remember two occasions when an unfamiliar brand was undrinkable!

I learned from my dad, the carpenter. He built many items, including our rabbit hutch, pigeon cage, camping trailer, and ping pong table. Of course, a love of animals, the out-of-doors and games of skill were byproducts of these projects. Dad was also a master storyteller, using dramatic pauses and artful exaggeration to highlight the absurdities of life. A man of few words, one rarely heard him swear – yet he was known for reciting dirty limericks at parties!

I also learned from my dad the philosopher. Once in elementary school, I had spent the greater part of a day laughing with friends. The next day I expressed my concern for having injured myself from all the laughing. He said without hesitation, "The real problems begin when the laughing stops." On another occasion he had been stung by a wasp while mowing the lawn. I quickly suggested spraying the nest with Raid and he immediately replied, "No. We all have get along." I also learned the art of losing one's patience. After a two-week visit by a pesky relative, he finally told her, "Helen, you've been a pain in the ass ever since you got here. You have worn out your welcome."

Yet for all his strengths, his skills at navigation in an automobile were suspect at best. In fact, on longer trips, some sort of incident was almost a given. Like the time we drove to Chicago and my dad was pulled over going the wrong way down a one-way street. Or the time we got stuck in a snowdrift...on Interstate 80! Or on one trip to Kansas City where dad forgot to pay the gas station attendant. Or the time we drove to Cape Cod, and upon reaching the ocean, Dad got out of the car, rushed into the oncoming waves and suddenly his glasses were washed away! If we ever got lost, he would shake his head and defeatedly say, "Well, I don't know what we're going to do now." Such troubles were greatly minimized however, since Dad always rode his bicycle to work.

I think if I were to use one word to describe my dad, it would be: integrity. He has been a positive role model for how I live my life and for this I am eternally grateful. I love him very much!

- - - James R Noyes, November 2006