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Struggling with my Father's Blessing

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My father died when I was twenty-three, a seminarian, green, still learning about life. It's hard to lose your father at any age and my grief was compounded by the fact that I had just begun to appreciate him.

Only some time later did I realize that I no longer needed him, though I still badly wanted him. What he had to give me, he had already given. I had his blessing, and that contained who he really was and what ultimately the gift of his life was to me.

I knew that I had his blessing. My life and the direction it had taken pleased him, made him proud. Like God's voice at the baptism of his Jesus, his too had already communicated to me: You are my son in whom I am well pleased. That's about as much a person may ask from a father.

And what did he leave me, and the rest of his offspring? Too much to name, but, among other things: He was one of the truly moral persons I have ever known, allowing himself the minimum of moral compromise. He wasn't a man who bought the line that we are only human and so it's okay to allow ourselves certain exemptions. He used to famously tell us: "Anyone can show me humanity; I need someone to show me divinity!" He expected you not to fail, to live up to what faith and morality asked of you, to not make excuses. If we, his family, inhaled anything from his presence, it was this moral stubbornness.

Beyond this, he had a steady, almost pathological, sanity. There were no hysterical or psychotic outbursts, no depressions, no lack of steadiness, no having to guess where his soul and psyche might be on a given day. With that steadiness, along with my mother's supporting presence, he made for us a home that was always a safe cocoon, a boring place sometimes, but always a safe one. When I think of the home I grew up in I think of a safe shelter where you could look at storms outside from a place of warmth and security.

And because we were a large family and his love and attention had to be shared with multiple siblings, I never thought of him as "my" father, but always as "our" father. This, perhaps more than anything else, has helped me grasp the first challenge in the Lord's Prayer, namely, that God is "Our" Father, Someone we share with others, not a private entity. Moreover his family extended to more than his own children. I learned early not to resent the fact that he couldn't always be with us, that he had good reasons to be elsewhere: work, community, church, hospital and school boards, political involvements. He was an elder for a wider family than just our own.

Finally, not least, he blessed me and my brothers and sisters with a love for baseball. He managed a local baseball team for a good number of years. This was his particular outlet for freeness, a place where his soul could enjoy some Sabbath.

But blessings never come pure, my father was human, and a man's greatest strength is also his greatest weakness. In all that moral fiber and rock-solid sanity, there was also a reticence that sometimes didn't allow him to drink in fully life's exuberance. Every son watches how his father dances and unconsciously sizes him up against certain things: hesitancy, fluidity, abandon, exhibitionism, false bracketing of sanity, irresponsibility. My father never had much fluidity to his dance, and I have inherited that, something that pains me deeply. There were times, both as a child and as an adult, when, at a given moment, I would have traded my father for a dad who had a more fluid dance-step, for someone with less reticence in the face of life's exuberance.

And that is partly my struggle to receive his full blessing. I'm often reminded of William Blake's famous line in, *Infant Sorrow*: "Struggling in my father's hands." For me, that means struggling with his inability at times to simply let go and drink in life's full gift.

But, if there was hesitancy, there was no irresponsibility in his dance, even if sometimes that meant standing outside the dance. I was grieved at his funeral, but proud too, proud for the respect that was poured out for him, for the way he lived his life. There was no judgment that day on his reticence.

As of January 5th this year, my earthly days began to number more than my father's. I'm older now than he was. But I still live inside his blessing, consciously and unconsciously striving to measure up, to honor what he gave me, my father. And mostly that's good, though I also have moments when I find myself standing outside of life's exuberance, reticent, his look on my face, looking with envy at those who have a more fluid dance step - me, ever my father's son.

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