



Watching My Father

By Carol Harper

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They say behind every good man is a good woman. That could certainly be said about my father, but then again, from a very early age, I watched both of my parents as they built and defined a marriage relationship as a team, and we as children, team players. All of us were taught to do our part as a family. Gone might be the traditional definition of that word “family”, as such a word and concept has been defined and redefined over the years. But to me, family is how you define it and what you make it.

And my dad worked hard for his—traveling long distances and working long hours and days as a welder on the oil rigs and pipelines of Wyoming. Up before dawn, often back after sunset, he was in such demand all over the State because he was a welder certified in many different types of welds. There were times that I missed him so much, so I treasured whenever he was home. However, even when he was home, he’d be doing projects for others – welding trailer hitches, cattle guards, fences, etc. He had a heart for helping people, and was always there for them. In fact, there were many times where we as a family had to sacrifice our own time with him, even holidays. People could always count on him, anytime. I guess I can blame my inability to say “no” because of what I learned from my dad; he was always there for people, always willing to lend a hand when needed. I watched him work hard, for his family, friends, even complete strangers. That’s just the kind of man he was.

I remember when I was pretty small, taking day trips with him in the welding truck, out to the rigs. I’d dress up in a dress, white tights and my little shiny black patent leather shoes, and “*sit good and quiet*” in the cab of the welding truck with my books, coloring books and paper dolls while he’d work all day on the rig. I would lay my head down on the oil and dirt covered seat, look out the window and watch the drill on the rig go up and down, and fall asleep to the sounds of Johnny Cash and Dolly Parton coming from the truck’s AM radio. If I was good, we would stop in Shoshoni and get malts at the drug store. I loved my “work” days with Dad.

I watched him play. He liked to wrestle like a big bear with my brother and I. Sometimes he'd pretend to be a "sleeping giant" and Mike and I would tease him as we'd dance around and tap our feet into the belt "trap" he made...then we'd laugh and shriek when the belt suddenly snapped around our ankles. He loved to take the boat out on the lake, loved to see if he could dump us while we were waterskiing. He loved to barbecue in the pig (barrel) barbecuers that he made, loved to relax on the porch of his folks' farmhouse and sing with his brothers, break out the harmonica. I learned the old bluegrass hymns, cowboy and folk songs on that porch, just listening to my dad and his brothers crank out harmonies to "Amazing Grace" or "Red River Valley". He'd take us hiking, camping, fishing or hunting up North, near Dubois, above Lander, Louis Lake, etc. I would never know any place in Wyoming if it weren't for my dad. Places like Meeteetsee, or Muddy Gap, or Bairoil. Who knew!

I watched him share. Whenever he had food – a sandwich, fruit, a bag of chips or nuts etc. he'd always offer some to whomever was there (even if they had food themselves). I watched him give money to the homeless, no reason needed or questions asked. He just automatically gave out of the goodness of his heart, all the time.

I watched him teach me. He taught me honesty. Whenever I told a lie, he knew it, and he told me that it hurt him when I did. It made me cry because the last thing I ever wanted to do was hurt my dad. Later in life, I came to realize that he was teaching me that, if I lie, I'm not only hurting those I lie to, I'm also hurting myself.

He taught me to have self-respect and to be respectful. He was soft spoken, yet his words carried great weight and influence, teaching me to be wise, to listen and learn from others. He taught me humility: "*Remember who you are.*" When I excelled in music, and started winning piano competitions and awards at music festivals, he said that I deserved them because I had a gift and worked hard, and not to let it go to my head (but then he'd always smile and whisper to everyone: "*Yeah, I taught her everything she knows!*") He'd tell me that I was a winner, "*...so now get over there and act like one*" - congratulate the other contestants, smile and shake hands with everyone, share the moment to recognize and appreciate everyone's talents and gifts.

He taught me to forgive. When he was young, his face and upper body were badly burned by a boy who had kicked a can filled with boiling hot kerosene (it was being used as a hand-warmer). The boy never came back to apologize, and no one ever saw or heard about him again. But every time my dad tells the story, he doesn't say a bad thing about the boy, nor about the injustice of the incident that scarred his face for life. He simply used the story for good, in teaching that bad things happen in life, there are people who do hurtful things, and how we handle it can say a lot about the kind of person we are. There isn't a bitter bone in his body, so I know what kind of person my dad chose to be.

I watched him create and build. He built a puppet stage, stilts and go-carts for me and my brother. He built a beautiful ornamental fence around the yard, would build spiral stairways in peoples' homes, made tractor seat chairs, barbecuers, made all kinds of things out of scrap metal. If it could be welded together, it was fair game for his torch! There were countless early morning breakfasts where my dad and I would sit at the table and brainstorm ideas and inventions. "*What if...?*" and "*You know what they should make?*" I so loved playing entrepreneur inventor with

him. I watched as my mom and dad worked as a team to turn a small welding and machine shop into a multi-million dollar manufacturing corporation, employing people in the community and on the reservation.

I watched my dad grieve, watched him bury his mother, his father, his wife. I watched as his hazel eyes filled with tears, his tanned, worn face displaying a distinct reflective serenity. I watched through my own tear-filled eyes and anguish as I saw him lean over my mother's casket and gently kiss her for the last time. I had never seen such love for the love of his life. I knew that, if true love was ever defined without words ever having to be said, that moment was it. Yet, I watched as my dad also found love again, and learned that death is not the end of life. I watched his new love light up his eyes again, helped him smile and laugh again...learning that it is okay to let go, close a chapter, and find a new beginning, a new path on a new journey.

The man I call my father is a man I have watched my whole life, and have come to realize that men like Charles Henry Starks of Riverton, Wyoming are extremely rare...honest, hard-working, generous, forgiving, kind-hearted family man that teaches the same through the way he lives his life. And as I let go, close chapters, find new beginnings and new paths on my own journey of life, I realize how much he has influenced me and has shaped and made me the kind of person I am today. I can only hope to remember to "*sit good and quiet*"...work hard, play hard...share with others...remember who I am...be a winner and act like one, too...always ask "What if?" ...be a team player...be humble, be forgiving...find love again...

Thanks, Dad. You really did teach me everything I know. Everything that ever mattered.

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