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Remembering Dad

Cancer robbed me of a chance to love my father more. It also gave me a reason to miss him. My father died when I was 13 years old. He was 51 years old.

I miss having an adult relationship with my father. I miss seeing him as a grandfather to my children. I miss seeing how old age would have mellowed him, smoothed out the temper that was so incendiary when he was younger. My father would have been eighty this year. His birthday is in a few days. Tomorrow is Father's Day.

I forget Father's Day every year. I don't make any elaborate plans for gifts or for the day, either for my husband or my stepfather or my father-in-law. What I know to be true is that Father's Day is an awkward time for me. It's a time when my unconscious grieves a little more for a father who left too soon and when my conscious tries to celebrate a stepfather who has been kind and loving all these years.

So here's what I remember about my father, who died nearly three decades ago:

He was a proud man, who wanted his children to succeed in life and to excel at living out the American Dream. Each year, he made a point of visiting the principal of the school that we attended to check on our progress in the academic world. He wanted to know if we were "making it" in our part of the world.

He was a man obsessed with control. He could not reconcile the gap between what he could truly control (himself) and what he wanted to control (his family, the rest of the world). He was at his worst when my brothers and I were being kids, when we were stubborn, flippant, or innocently fumbling through life.

He was an inquisitive and courageous man. When he learned he had cancer, he began to research the newest treatments for his disease. He read books from the library. He contacted medical clinicians who were trying out leading edge techniques. He was not ready to die until all avenues had been explored.

He was an extremely efficient and intelligent man. With a family of 6 and a full-time job, he planned dinner the night before. I remember the plates of chopped up vegetables and neatly sliced raw meat in the refrigerator, just waiting to be quickly cooked in a wok at dinner time. This ensured a home-cooked meal for everyone before heading to night school classes for his engineering degree. He was multi-tasking before the word came into vogue.

He was a creative and resourceful man. He proudly bought a house that required stretching our financial resources down to the last dollar. Our new living room wasn't furnished until many years after we moved in. Instead, a ping pong table stretched out where one would have expected a settee. In a side area, my father set up our old kitchen table with electronic gadgets and parts to play with. He would fiddle with parts in clear plastic boxes, making god knows what, perfectly content. Now I know where I get the urge to make something from nothing.

I remember how his presence was always felt in the house. He was a man who ruled the roost

and then some. The irony is this: He wanted so much to be accepted by the outside world, to be seen as credible and someone who mattered, that he gave up a lot of who he was when he walked out the door each day.

My father declared bankruptcy after a restaurant he started failed after two years. My mother told me he was never the same. It broke his heart and diminished his spirit. He suffered from ulcers and insomnia. He went back to working for someone else, as a technician in a truck factory. He had pursued his dream, to be a successful entrepreneur, and he had lost. His cancer was the frustration and disappointment of this failure, manifested at the cellular level.

I have mixed feelings when I write about my father. I don't want to admit it, but I am very much like him. More than I can take in. For so long, I had seen him as someone who failed in life, who couldn't control his temper, who turned out to be insignificant in shaping who I am. I couldn't be more wrong. He never failed. He chose not to go on, when the outcome was obvious. He gave me more than I could ever thank him for in terms of discipline, drive, creativity, and resourcefulness. I also acquired his fear of losing control.

Thanks, Dad, for living your life in a way that I could learn about who you are. You would have liked the way your youngest child turned out. Happy Father's Day and Happy Birthday a few days early.

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