

As I ponder my childhood memories of my father, it occurs to me that God must have quite a sense of humor. Putting middle aged adults under the same roof as pre-teens and teenagers creates the potential for endless strife and drama, or Sturm und Drang, as my German ancestors would have said.

Fortunately my father's steady presence provided for a mostly drama-free home growing up. I suspect all who knew my father would describe him as a man of few words. As a teenager I, of course, had my moments where I longed for paragraphs instead of a few words. At that time I failed to understand that a single sentence can communicate paragraphs, and much more memorably.

Several of his one sentence observations and correctives still resonate with me. My favorite of these is linked to one of my one of my earliest memories of my father, who had a vast knowledge of flora and fauna. We spotted a bluebird in the sheep pasture next door to our house. He wrote down the date of this observation in his Peterson's Field Guide to the Birds. Over the years he would periodically ask, "Do you remember when we saw the bluebird?"

My father had a high IQ of 160+. His parents wanted him to become a lawyer or veterinarian. When he did his mandatory two year stint in the Army after college, where he was stationed in Germany working in cracking codes and other Intelligence work for the communications department, his superiors wanted him to pursue this as a full time career. Even though he had not yet met my mother, he knew he wanted to be a family man someday, and decided to return to Illinois instead. This is how he ended up in commercial insurance, which was the industry he worked in for his entire career, thereby laying the groundwork for stability before my brother and I were even gleams in his eye.

My father's mid-life struggles began when I was in college, when he faced a number of eye problems requiring multiple surgeries. Then, to add insult to injury, he was laid off from his longtime job, leaving him without insurance and money when in need of one of these surgeries.

He had a part-time job during this time period that required some travel. He was unable to drive for one of these required trips, due to eye surgery recovery. I took the day off from my college summer job and drove him all around rural Wisconsin. The ignition of the car couldn't be turned off because it would take too long to restart. Money wasn't immediately available to fix this glitch. So I sat in the car with the engine running and read a book at each stop. This was the first time that I helped my father in a moment of genuine need; prior to this it was always him helping me. This experience solidified for me that this is what family is for and his quiet perseverance during this time provided a template for how to handle mid-life struggles.

As my father entered his 70s, after many years of mostly smooth sailing, he began to have trouble walking. The beginning of this new reality was a bit rocky. Eventually he could no longer walk at all and used a walker and wheelchair. During this time he sometimes began phone conversations with the sentence, "How can I help?" even though it could be said that, physically

at least, he was the one in need of help. But that one sentence communicated to me that he was forever the father, still an understanding and stabilizing force, even though I was middle-aged. Perhaps especially because I was middle-aged.

As my father's illness progressed he was happier than I had ever seen him before. He was more loquacious and his dry sense of humor even more in evidence. The weaker his muscles became, the stronger he became as a person. What a wonderful parting gift and legacy.

And yes, dad, I remember when we saw the bluebird.