

## **My Favorite Memory of My Father**

*By Maurice Carter in The Covington News – June 16, 2013*

My favorite memory of my father isn't a memory at all – or, at least it's not mine. It's a tale told years ago by his older sister about Dad's first day at elementary school in the South Georgia town where they were born.

During mid-morning recess, which Dad mistook for lunchtime, he pulled out the sack lunch his mother had made and proceeded to devour it. When the real lunch hour finally rolled around, he was upset, my aunt said, to have nothing to eat.

I can't remember how old I was when I heard that story, but it was the first time I ever thought of my father as a boy. It had never occurred to me that he wasn't always my father. As an adult, I wanted to reach back through all those decades and comfort that boy who would become my dad.

A father and son travel the same basic journey from cradle to grave, but the timing is never aligned. Like celluloid strips of film fitting neatly over the same sprockets on the projector, our scenes are out sync.

Singer-songwriter Harry Chapin captured that bittersweet reality in his 1974 ballad "Cat's in the Cradle," -- the all-to-familiar story of a father too busy to share his son's childhood and an adult son who can later spare no time to ease his father's journey into the twilight of life.

In his song "Father and Son," Cat Stevens reveals the conflict and frustration of two men coming from different points in life. The father wants so badly to share the wisdom of his years to ease the son's journey and spare him painful mistakes in life. But, life lessons are never so easily passed along.

Like any child, I wanted my father to be my provider and protector, which he was. He was also football coach, little league president, and many other things that took a lot of time for someone trying to provide for a family of five. Not to mention being caretaker for his own aging parents.

In the journey to adulthood, we learn our parents are just people too. And, I was fine with that. As an adult, I yearned for nothing more than the simple bond of friendship between two men. I'd known him as a father, but I wanted to know my dad as a person.

I don't think he understood. I needed to become a man, but he needed to remain a father. He'd held many other roles himself, but son was the only one I'd ever played in his life. I was ready to accept his human limitations, but he wasn't ready to reveal them.

For a while, growing up for me meant growing apart for us. There were no cross words between us. But, the long journey to the man I was meant to be took me far from life as we'd known it. We were together for birthdays and holidays, but most of the life I was building stood apart from his world.

In time, as I settled into my own family, career, and life, I tried to reconnect for that friendship I was yearning. We spoke many times about having lunch together, but it somehow never happened. Dad didn't hear too well, and it got worse with age, so meaningful phone calls were pretty much impossible.

He was going to call me to schedule that lunch. We were going to get together... someday... when his work slowed down.

His work slowed down – it ended – one morning at age 70, when spinal surgery left him paralyzed from the waist down. For four years, he lived at home with my mom as his primary caregiver. Between the trauma of his injury, his medications, bouts of infection attacking his vulnerable body, hearing loss, and likely some dementia, his ability to communicate declined.

So, my favorite memory of dad is an event that predates my existence by some 16 years. It's why I cry watching Kevin Costner as Ray Kinsella, playing catch with his dad in "Field of Dreams."

A year ago, on the Sunday before Father's Day, I watched my dad take what I prayed would be his last breath. His spirit was finally free. In the hour preceding, during moments I was alone by his bed, I found myself singing Bob Marley's "Three Little Birds."

"Don't worry, about a thing, cause every little thing's gonna be alright."

I wasn't there to comfort him in the beginning, but I finally got my chance.

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