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A daughter remembers her dad

By Ann Rosen Spector Ph.D

My father died recently at the age of 89, after a long illness.

His death was, in many ways, a relief, because he had no quality of life and now he doesn't have to be in pain or struggle.

But, although not unexpected, I am grieving for my Daddy. I am the only daughter of a complicated man.

Throughout my childhood, he worked two jobs to feed his family and never complained. As a child, I didn't understand why we always had to watch what he wanted on TV, but now I do. He bought the set, paid for the electricity to run it, and wanted a little time off.

And I loved to sit on his lap and snuggle through "The Ed Sullivan Show" or "Car 54, Where Are You?" When you are a daughter, you never have to stop snuggling with your father.

He arrived home every night at 5:30. I raced to his car, and he swept me into his arms. "Hey, there, Little Miss!" he would say and I was soon known as Missy – probably the only Missy who wasn't a Melissa.

He pushed me on the swings "up to the sky" and on the merry-go-round. He taught me to ride a bicycle, holding on forever, and then letting go without telling me. He taught me how to balance, and not just on a two-wheeler.

My Dad was an engineer and engineers are all about solving problems. They tend to be linear thinkers, so once they gather the data, they come up with a solution. If it doesn't work, it just gives you more data to try a different solution.

That lesson has served me well in all aspects of my life. When you get whacked by life, you can sit on the curb and cry, but eventually you're going to have to get up and figure how to fix it.

In some ways, my father didn't realize I was a girl. It was like living in a locker room; all our family events were sports-related. I developed a lifelong passion for playing sports, and watching baseball and football. My Dad was a Penn Stater and so were all his four children.

I was accepted at Barnard College but it meant so much to my father that I attend his alma mater so I did. Our family bleeds blue and white.

My father was also gender-blind when it came to education and career. His expectations were the same for me as for my brothers. He and I read the New York Herald Tribune every night, sharing the red recliner, starting when I was four. When I arrived in kindergarten, the teacher asked my father to stop reading with me until the other children caught up. My father, like Atticus Finch, told me to just keep it a secret between us.

When I was in college and later in graduate school, I would sometimes complain to my father that the work was too hard. "So, it's hard," he'd answer. And what he meant was, Do it, because you can. Working hard won't kill you.

I think much of the reason I completed my doctoral work was that my father never finished his. He wrote his dissertation but with two children and a job, he just didn't have the time or energy to revise it.

I dedicated my dissertation to my parents "for laying the foundation for all that I am and all that I do." My Dad was the doer.

There are other ways my Dad showed his love to his only daughter. I had three miscarriages, and when I lost the last one, I called to tell my mother. She later told me that when he came home from work and she told him, he went berserk, yelling and screaming and crying, "Why does this keep happening to her?"

And when I was carrying my first daughter to term, he drove down from New York very early in the morning, two days before the planned C-section "just to see me pregnant one more time."

That's a lot of love. It's a tsunami.

And when he held her, that little preemie, and her sister three years later, he was over the moon in love with the daughters of his daughter.

And when my mother died after a long battle with cancer in 1985, he knew that he could not make up for her nurturing. He never said as much but sent me a column by the New York Times' columnist Anna Quindlen, "When the Wrong Parent Dies." She had a tumultuous relationship with her own father, as I did with mine. Quindlen's mother had also died at an early age and it was my father's acknowledgement that he knew that I was now a motherless child but he could only do so much and I had to accept that. At the top of the page, he had scrawled, " You love your dad."

He and I had almost 60 years together. I will miss him for the rest of my life.

He was my Dad.

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