

For Dad

My dad passed away quite unexpectedly on February 6, 2010. He had gone with me that morning to watch my son in his dance/gymnastics class. He had lunch with us at our house. About ten minutes after he had driven away to go home, a neighbor knocked on the door to tell me, "Your dad's in trouble."

Dad died while in surgery later that evening due to massive blood loss. He had suffered from an abdominal aortic aneurysm that he never knew he had.

The suffering he endured in the hours leading up to his death will always stay with me. If anyone had deserved an easy parting, it was my dad. Some days it is still difficult for me to fathom that I will never talk to him again. It just hurts.

I wrote the following and read it at the small memorial service my siblings and I had for him a few days after his passing. The only changes I've made, for privacy reasons, are to remove my son's and husband's names. It isn't a polished piece and I prefer to keep it that way, because it was written in the frame of mind I was in at the time.

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Robert Edward Coleman was born on July 3, 1936 in Newburgh, New York. He was the next to the youngest of nine children and eventually had four half-siblings.

His mother died when he was just shy of three years old. My grandfather had a hard time finding reliable caregivers for Dad and his siblings and wasn't necessarily brimming with paternal love or concern, so he placed his six daughters and three sons in local orphanage schools under the direction of Dominican nuns. Grandpop then left to join the Army National Guard and fought in World War II.

Dad told us stories of how he often ran away from the boys' school and when he was finally able to leave when he was 14, he quit school and immediately started working various jobs (newspaper delivery boy, ambulance driver) to help support himself and his siblings in between clashes with his father.

Dad had been a bit of a rabble-rouser in his youth. He liked hot rods and told us how he would often find himself trying to outrun the local police who

knew him well. They would simply wait for Dad back at his house, so after a while he stopped trying.

Dad eventually joined the United States Post Office as a Letter Carrier and joined the Army National Guard as a reservist. He never served active duty.

In November 1960 he married my mother, whom he'd met in Frederica, DE through her cousin.

Dad worked as a Letter Carrier for the Post Office for 35 years, walking 8 miles a day and, as far as I can remember, never missing a day of work. He was well-liked by the people on his mail route, and as kids we would always benefit from two trick-or-treat excursions---one around our neighborhood, and one on Dad's mail route. His customers would shower him with gifts every Christmas, the monetary portion of which often helped to pay for gifts for us. Dad never bought anything nice for himself with the money he received in cards from his customers. His five children came first.

Dad loved and missed his siblings, who all primarily stayed in the Newburgh, NY area. He didn't get to see them much over the years. It seemed we never had the extra money to go up to visit them on a regular basis and I think it was difficult for them to find the space to accommodate the seven of us all at once. I think Dad tried to make up for that a bit this past fall, when he drove himself the ten-hour, 584-mile drive to Newburgh, stopping overnight at a predetermined hotel I had helped him pick out online. After visiting with some of his family there, he drove himself to Twinsburg, OH to see his oldest sister, Rita, before then driving himself back home here to North Carolina.

Some of my early memories of Dad include going with him on Friday, his day off, to go pick up his paycheck at the post office. He was proud to show off his youngest daughter to his co-workers/friends, and he would laugh when they would pull the ponytail of my long, strawberry blonde hair. Of all the kids, my hair color was the closest to Dad's deep red locks. I also remember that dad only spanked me once. I can't remember what for now, but I do remember it shocked me. Dad was fun. Mom was the disciplinarian.

Dad had picked up and moved himself from New Jersey to North Carolina in February of 2009. Of all the gifts I will receive throughout my life, I think the gift of this past year with Dad in North Carolina will rank as one of the best. With or because of him, I have gotten to experience numerous memorable moments: some funny, a few frustrating, many touching, and some awfully sad, but all of them cherished.

Being the next to the youngest of five children, I always had to share Dad while growing up. Having him living so close to me here enabled me to have him all to myself for a while. However I know his thoughts were also always with my four other siblings, whom he loved dearly and of whom he was so proud. If someone were to have asked Dad what his greatest achievement in life had been, he likely would have said his children.

This past year I've learned so many simple, yet still somehow important things about Dad that I never knew, but am grateful to now know. I never would have guessed that he was a big Neil Diamond fan. I discovered that he liked to paint. I learned that his dream vacation was a trip to Ireland. He enjoyed James Patterson novels and John Wayne was one of his favorite actors.

This past year especially brought to light the wonderful things I already knew or suspected of Dad, but had maybe overlooked or taken for granted. I was reminded of what a great father and provider he had been to me and my siblings. I also got to witness the wonderment of him meeting my son, his only grandchild, for the first time and instantly settling into the role of irreplaceable PopPop. I realized he preferred to be with people over being alone. Dad was a people-person and laughing and sharing with others is what made him happiest. His mind and wit were sharp and I was proud of him for that.

Dad was a fine human being---a walking, breathing bundle of goodness, positivity, and warmth. He didn't have a mean or malicious bone in his body. He was genuine. He displayed no pretensions. With Dad, what you saw is what you got, for better or for worse. Sometimes he'd say or do things that would either make me shake my head with embarrassment...or sigh with impatience...or laugh out loud initially and then continue chuckling about for a long time after. God love him, he often said the first thing that popped into his head, but we forgave him for that when necessary.

He almost never complained and never wanted to be a burden or bother to anyone. The rare moments I did hear a complaint from him, it was nearly always justified. The instances in his life where he made decisions that may have seemed selfish or unwise were rare, but much-deserved displays of self-preservation. Simple pleasures made him happy---a good dinner with his family, watching his grandson play, literally running around the backyard chasing said grandson with a water gun, talking sports or going fishing, playing Wii bowling with us, joining us on the two family vacations we took this past year.

Dad was reliable. I mean, you could really count on him. He was never late, most often he was early, and my husband and I would often joke that if we wanted Dad to show up at our house around noon, we'd tell him to come at two o'clock. He was in a hurry to see us.

He was extremely generous with his time, affection, humor, and love. No favor was too much to ask of him. He was very tolerant and patient, especially with his grandson, whom could never see too much. My son was another appendage for Dad. I am grateful beyond measure that they got to be such a big and important part of one another's lives, however short the timeframe.

Dad's corny sense of humor and ability to poke fun at himself were the two aspects of his personality that I most cherished and, to me, are the most valuable portions of his legacy.

He made me feel respected and adored and I felt the same about him. I will miss him to a degree I will never adequately express in words. I ask myself how I can possibly look to the future with the same amount of hope or optimism knowing he will not be here to turn to, to talk to, to offer encouragement, to tell me that "everything will be ok," and for me to believe deep down that he's probably right.

He was so many more things to me than just a father.

He was sunshine and laughter.

He was an upbeat, happy tune.

He was the embodiment of kindness, compassion, selflessness, strength, and courage.

He was a perfectly imperfect model in whose likeness all fathers should fashion themselves.

He was a friend.

He was Daddy.