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Lessons Learned from the World's Oldest Dad

Rebecca Johnson

My father has always described himself as the “oldest dad in the world.” When I, his oldest child, graduated from high school, he was two months away from his sixtieth birthday. At an internship one summer, my boss told me about her father and how she couldn’t believe that he was approaching fifty.

“It’s unreal to me that my daddy’s going to be fifty next week and that he’s a grandfather. Time just moves so quickly,” she said.

I nodded in agreement, but realized that when my dad turned fifty, his daughter gave him not a grandchild, but a bright yellow tie with an eyeball, a heart, and the letter ‘u’ scrawled down the front of it – the perfect gift in the eyes of a third-grader.

To me, my father was always the tallest and strongest man alive. In reality, he is maybe five feet ten, but he seems so much taller than most men. He lifted huge weights in our basement, and he went running every other day. His hair had been a dirty blonde when I was very young, but after the birth and infancy of my younger brother, Eric, his hairline receded and what was left turned to a regal-looking gray. My father may be older than many dads, but you would never know it by looking at him; people regularly think of him as a decade or more younger than he actually is. More importantly though, he is smart, funny, hard-working, and the epitome of everything I wanted to someday be. A natural leader—he leads by example, and it always seemed as if nothing could affect him. I admired how he cherished the simple things in life, like daily cans of Pepsi (instead of coffee), and listening to music on our back deck at night.

My dad once told me that he wanted to live to be 125 because life is so wonderful, and that he always wants to be here to see what will happen next; there is so much beauty which makes life worth living. This outlook is apparent in his everyday life—he works out as hard today as when he was twenty-one. While my dad was on his quest to see the year 2075, his older brother, and best friend, was not so lucky.

Over Memorial Day weekend of 2005, I was sitting on the couch doing a crossword puzzle while my mom watched a crime show on televi-

sion. My mother is on the short side, not quite reaching five foot three, and she looks nearly the same as a forty-something mother of two as she did in her high school senior picture. She is louder than my father, and nearly thirteen years his junior. Like him, she holds a degree in business, but she gave up her place in the Mine Safety Appliances Company to raise Eric and me.

One day, my mother was cleaning up the dinner that she had prepared earlier. It was late on a Sunday, so it was unusual for the phone to ring. Not surprisingly, my father's sister was not calling with good news. We almost never heard from her unless something was wrong. My mom and I could hear only my father's muffled end of the brief conversation. When it was over, he stormed into the room.

“Herby's filled with cancer.”

He looked at us for a second, then abruptly left the room and went out onto the back deck. I had never received news like that before, and my mother had never seen my father react like that before. Though no words were said between us, we knew that this wasn't going to have a happy outcome. My dad is rarely angry, and it is even rarer that he says anything that isn't a calm, well-thought out statement or a silly joke. We could practically feel his sharp declaration hanging in the air, creating a tension in the room that was nearly breathtaking. My parents had been married for sixteen years and had been together even longer, but my mom looked as if she had no idea how to handle this situation. She eventually went back to watching her show, though I don't think she was really paying attention. I left the TV guide with the crossword puzzle open in my lap even though I had no intention of finishing it. It was only a few minutes after nine, but we both soon went to bed. Later, while I lay in my room and considered the shocking news, I could hear my father outside playing music late into the night.

My dad and his older brother Herby were total opposites, but the best of friends. My uncle, four years my father's senior, had been a Marine who voluntarily served in Vietnam and spent the rest of his life driving trucks and drinking whiskey. My father was the first in his family to go to college, earning a degree in Business Administration from the University of Akron. He narrowly avoided the draft and spent his life working his way up at Mine Safety Appliances.

By July of 2005, my uncle had deteriorated from a lean former Marine into the shell of a grown man. Before the cancer, he had been approximately my father's height with dark hair and, like my father, a mustache. He was very skinny compared to my dad's methodically built muscle. He rarely laughed but instead had a trademark smirk that was unique to him. He had two children—the cousins which sandwich me in the family line-up. David was seventeen and Mike was nine when their father fell ill.

His cancer had been caused by Agent Orange, sprayed in Vietnam to defoliate the jungle, and had been growing in him for decades. The oncologists couldn't say where it started, but the fatal doctor's visit was prompted by severe back pain. By the time doctors discovered the cancer, it had spread through his whole body. Nearly all of his vital organs were affected, and it caused his teeth to fall out. Even though he was on the strongest pain medications available, he would cry out in his delirium anytime he was moved or touched.

He was my favorite uncle, though I only saw him a few times a year. I was twelve when he was sick and I was never allowed to go and visit him. My grandmother, an independent eighty-one-year-old at the time, stepped in and said that I should instead remember him as he was.

"The way the world is now, you're going to see plenty of suffering and death in your lifetime. You're too young. Do not start now," she said.

So it was settled.

While I didn't watch the physical deterioration of my uncle, I instead watched what I thought was the emotional deterioration of my father. In spite of his grief, he remained composed when it came to eight-year-old Eric and me, though I often noticed him walking around the house in a haze. Even though he was physically healthy, he too was becoming a shell of his former self. The man who had such an enthusiasm for the little things in life seemed to have turned to stone. In the two months of my uncle's rapid decline, I saw many of my family members cry, but I never saw my dad shed a tear.

The sun wasn't scorching on the day of the funeral, July 23, 2005, nor were there any signs of a midsummer western Pennsylvania thunderstorm. The day was warm and sunny, and it felt as if, when you walked outside, you were covered in a protective bubble of yellow light and comfortable heat. By all definitions, it was a perfect summer day. The green, perfectly manicured cemetery grass stuck out from under my new high heels. No breeze blew, but the heat wasn't sticky so it was more pleasant without one. I stood with my brother and mother in the first row of mourners. My father, his sister, my grandmother, Dave, and Mike had stepped forward on the other side and were standing a few feet away from the flag-draped casket. The service proceeded in a blur, and I couldn't tell you what was done or said; I couldn't tear my eyes from the casket. Uncle Herby was the first relative that I lost, and it was a struggle to comprehend that he was lifeless in that box and that the spot of ground where we were gathered was to be his new and final home. Only one moment from the day sticks out clearly to me. Taps was being played in honor of the Marine who lay before us, one who had the unique fate of not dying in the war but still because of it. The sky was clear and blue, and the notes seemed to play over

the whole earth and up into the heavens. The song is so simple, concise and heartbreaking, if only by association. For a moment, the whole world was still and silent except for that single bugle.

I tried to stand up straight, as my father always did. I wanted to look composed, as I knew he did. My light eyes were shielded from the sun by black sunglasses, just as his were. Eventually, I raised my eyes from the stripes and gazed across the plot. Dad's face was red and scrunched up like an infant's. I could see the tears streaming silently down his face from behind his dark sunglasses. He was fighting not to sob or make noise, but it was clear that in that single moment, his heart had completely broken. The wall of strength he had built up in an attempt to protect his nephews, children, mother, and baby sister had fallen down. His shoulders shook, but he never made a sound. The song seemed to drag on and on, and suddenly I hated the sun for shining. The world was happy as my family grieved. In the distance, cars drove down the highway, people moving on with life. Our painful moment, frozen in time for my family, had no value to the world. Time was going to keep moving, and my uncle would always be dead in that spot. My cousins were always going to be fatherless, and my grandmother will spend the rest of her life knowing that she once buried one of her babies. More than anything, I grieved in that moment for my father. It was so unfair that a man who worked so hard had lost his best friend. A man who never complained and always tried to do the right thing had to suffer like this. I was angry that a man who was so strong had been driven to sobbing.

I was angry that a fifty-eight-year-old veteran with a wife and two kids had suffered and died, a casualty from a meaningless war. I was angry that a woman who had been a widow for over a decade was now standing beside a flag-covered casket again, this time for one of her children. I was angry that David and Michael wouldn't have their father present at varsity wrestling matches, graduations, and weddings. I was angry that Mike was so young, and, as they often do, his memories would fade and there would almost certainly come a day when he could not picture his father's face clearly in his mind's eye. Most of all, though, I was angry that my father had to suffer.

The rest of that day and the weeks that followed don't stand out in my memory. I never saw my father cry again, even though he mourns the loss of his brother to this day. He still runs and lifts weights that I will never physically be able to hold. While I will never carry his physical burdens, I now realize that the grief and mental stress he carried during that time will someday be mine too. Whether it is a brother, parent, or child, someday I will be the one standing by that graveside mourning an unspeakable loss.

Looking back, I see that his tears were not a demonstration of

weakness, but rather of the strength that I so admired. He showed me how to handle adversity and that it is acceptable to cry. I stand by my stance that my father leads by example and is the person I hope to be like. I hope that when it becomes my turn to stand beside that casket, I can handle it as gracefully as he did.

While his brother is irreplaceable, my dad has since found new friends to watch football and drink beer with. For me, it is one of the beauties of life, that he so often describes, to see him sitting at the bar at our local fire hall with friends on either side of him. I love to see him laughing and enjoying his friends' company and whatever sporting event is on that day, whether it's the Steelers pursuing a seventh Super Bowl, the Pirates pursuing two straight decades of losing, or Sid the Kid leading his beloved Penguins back to the top.

The summer before my sophomore year of college, six years after Uncle Herby's death, my dad finally mentioned him. We were sitting on that deck, in white high-backed chairs with green floral cushions. It was a little past dusk on an August night in a suburb of Pittsburgh, and the moon and stars were newly visible in the sky. From over the stained deck railing, we could see a large, sturdy tree, at least a century old, standing in the side yard. Some nights, a giant hawk would make an appearance in either that tree or one of the ones behind our property. My dad and I sat lost in our separate thoughts about the hawk, the events of the waning summer, and my approaching return to Gettysburg. Then, out of nowhere, my dad said, "I wish you would've really gotten to know my brother. And that he could've seen the person you've become."

With that, I concur. Not because I think I am an especially impressive person, but because I would want Uncle Herby to see what my father has done. I want to know if, in the opinion of someone who was so close to him, I succeeded in my quest to learn from his example.