

## ***THE BESTEST DAD THAT EVER LIVED***

I am here to speak with you about my father, but I cannot do it in the past tense because to me, my father still lives. And I cannot do it without including my mother every step of the way, because Mom and Dad have always been an inseparable team of love, approval, kindness, and goodness -- with a healthy dose of stubbornness and eccentricity. (I'll leave it up to all of you to guess who is the eccentric one and who is the stubborn one.) Each supports, strengthens, and amplifies the other in every endeavor – in parenting as well as all other facets of life. Dad is part of who Mom is, and Mom is part of who Dad is. My mother's love – that steady stream, that love like a river – has had a huge impact on my father. In his book, *Such Good Things As Pass All Understanding*, Dad writes: "I never cease to be amazed by, and grateful for, her abundant, lavish love! And by her never-ending caring and support. Natalie...absolutely bewilders me with her love." It is due to my mother's abundant love that my husband says, "Had your father married someone other than Nat, he would have been a different person."

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When I was a freshman in college, I was so devastatingly homesick for my parents that I finally sought help from the school psychologist. After listening to me sob out the heartache and longing that had crippled me the entire first semester, she delivered her verdict. "Your problem," she said crisply and confidently, "is that you idealize your parents."

I left her office feeling that there was something wrong with me – that I had better grow up and get in touch with reality. Many years passed before it dawned on me that it was her diagnosis that was wrong.

The turning point came during a discussion with one of my friends. As a child, this woman had not felt accepted, nurtured, or approved of by her parents. From an early age, she had been exposed to alcoholism, marital conflict, and emotional neglect. My siblings and I had heard dozens of stories like this over the years, but we had always assumed such experiences were the exception rather than the rule. We thought everyone had parents like ours. Now I was beginning to wonder if that was really the case.

When I described my childhood and my open-minded, loving, approving, nurturing parents who were completely devoted to one another, my friend's jaw dropped. That was the moment when I realized that I had something special -- that I had idealized my parents for good reason.

Two days ago, I was reminded again what a gift God bestowed on me in my father. I was calling a nurse who had helped care for Dad to tell her of his death. "Mom," I asked, "what should I tell Sharon about how Dad felt about her?" My mother answered simply

and without hesitation: "He loved her." On the telephone, before I could deliver Mom's message, Sharon blurted out, "I loved him! There's a handful of people who have touched my life, and Pete was one of them. He loved to listen to my stories and my troubles. He gave me advice like a father. You are so fortunate -- I didn't have 10% the father you did."

What exactly is it about Dad that makes me and my siblings so fortunate?

His constant outpourings of praise and open admiration -- which he often expressed in letters as well as verbally. He perceives his children as competent, confident, strong, capable, beautiful beings, each with our own unique mix of talents and gifts that, in his eyes, are of great value to the world. And the five of us are happy witnesses to Dad's admiration of my mother, for he makes no secret of the fact that he adores her. But he doesn't just love Mom -- he values and is tremendously grateful for her presence in his life. In an essay entitled "Earth Angel," Dad writes, "I often thought her to be an angel who'd chosen to come down and live with me." In a recent journal entry, he describes her life as "a clear, shimmering white light streaking across the sky...a perfectly lovely radiance that has left its mark, its gracious, effortless trail across our world..." My mother says, "Just like you kids, I've always felt so loved and supported by Pete. He expresses his love to me every day. And he is just so grateful for the love he receives from me, from his children, from nature." Listen to his gratitude: "I'm so grateful for this lovely, lovely lady. She is indeed God's greatest gift to me."

Dad does not confine this type of support and valuing to our family. He directs it to others -- in particular, he is a great champion of women in the workplace, seeking to put them in positions of responsibility at a time when women in management was a rare thing in the manufacturing world. He recognizes the true value of women, and is firm in his belief that they are equal -- and in some instances superior -- to men. The feminine aspect, he often said, is much-needed in the business world. And Dad walked his talk at Seneca Wire, promoting his capable and dedicated secretary to the position of vice president.

My siblings and I are also fortunate to receive my father's nurturing and attention, for as my brother Tim says, "Dad always has time for us kids." Time for helping with homework, for a walk, for a game of catch. Time to talk, time to take us on a tour of the wire plant, time to help his 9-year-old son figure out how to replace a light switch. Time to flood the yard with a garden hose to make an ice rink. Always time for a game of golf or tennis. Time to look at the stars and name the constellations. Time to bring home lacrosse sticks, teach us how to play, and then sling the ball back and forth all afternoon. Time to set up the Lionel and Marklin trains in the basement and run them in loops for hours. Time to squeeze fresh orange juice for all five kids every morning before work. Time to teach us how to make candles from scratch. Time to go to the library, find a book on children's games, and then read aloud to the neighborhood kids, teaching us all, with great enthusiasm, how to play Run Sheepie Run and Kick the Can.

Again, Dad does not confine this attention and nurturing to his own family. In particular, he lavishes it on the natural world, never failing to marvel with “abundant, lively gratitude” as one friend puts it, at the beauty of nature – at a sparkling expanse of untrammelled snow or the late afternoon sunlight slanting across a green field. “A day spent indoors,” he often says, “is a day thrown away.” And he lives true to his own adage. On the farm in Ohio, my father pruned apple trees, mowed trails in the woods, rode our two horses, and planted dozens of spruce seedlings and ornamental trees -- hauling endless buckets of water long distances to make sure they received a good start in life. He usually managed to engage in these endeavors while dressed in his best suits and good shoes, much to my mother’s dismay. But it seemed like he was so eager to get out in the fresh air with the trees and plants and fields and animals that he just couldn’t take the time to change his clothes after work or church. And so concerned was he – and my mother as well – with the welfare of the land and animals in their care that they would not put the farm up for sale until the last of our horses died. (And it was a long wait – Casey lived to be 36, and Tara 33.) When it came time to sell, my parents continued their protection of the land, putting a conservation easement on the farm so that it can never be developed.

In his own quiet, attentive manner, my father also nurtures and tends to those around him. He initiated a college tuition reimbursement program at Seneca Wire and made a point of encouraging employees to use it. Years ago, he sought out a tempering furnace operator – a man with a high school education – and urged him to take advantage of the program. Just recently, Dad received a letter from this man. He had been promoted to Director of Engineering at a manufacturing firm, and was writing to thank my father for singling him out. The letter reads, “You have touched hundreds of lives directly and thousands when you count their families. I just want you to know that you positively altered our life course and that of our children. It is easy to get caught up in life’s daily problems and issues so that you may forget about all the good you do.” And indeed, my father never seems aware of the impact he has on the world around him.

But perhaps Dad’s greatest gift– a gift he shares, like everything else I’ve mentioned, with my mother – is his deeply-anchored, open-minded spirituality.

While my father was raised Catholic, he married my Protestant mother -- against the vehement objections of both sets of parents. In Fostoria, our family would attend mass at the Catholic church, then slip out the side door right after communion and race down the block to the Presbyterian church for coffee hour and Sunday school. (I secretly suspected that our breathless sprint was fueled not by spiritual fervor but because Dad wanted to get to the coffee hour before all the good cookies were gone.) As children, along with the freshly-squeezed orange juice on the breakfast table every morning, we’d find a spiritual book laid open for us to read – sometimes a Catholic missalette, but just as often passages from Zen Buddhism, Course in Miracles, or Science of Mind. Did we always read them? No – but the message still came through: that we were free to find God in whatever manner suited us. When many of us, as adults, found a connection with the Divine through nature, that met with Dad’s approval, as did just about everything else we did.

Dad has always possessed the courage to allow his spiritual nature to permeate not just his personal life but also his business relationships and his workplace. He eagerly and persistently seeks a place for the life of the spirit in the midst of what he called “the ordinary pursuit of worldly ends.” The deepest sense of satisfaction for my father comes when the worlds of work and spirit merge. For this reason, Dad always looked forward to his visits to the Seneca Wire plant in Mississippi, where he joined a group of wire drawers and weaving loom operators who prayed together in the privacy of a closet. Mom says, “Pete would come back so elated from the experience, thrilled to have been a part of it, and feeling that their prayers were so powerful.” But even with his deeply-felt dedication to spiritual matters, Dad doesn't preach or proselytize. Rather, as a member of his Episcopal men's discussion group (there's that open-mindedness again!) puts it, “Pete expressed his thoughts in a quiet, reflective way, not making pronouncements, but sharing his own experiences with us, and asking us to share our experiences with him.”

The focus of my father's strong spiritual life has always been a single-minded, whole-hearted desire to surrender to God. “I will have but one New Year's resolution,” reads an entry in his journal on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 1978. “That is to be wholly God's.” This is Dad's greatest labor, his life's work. With characteristic humility, he never feels he has achieved this goal. He remains constantly at work in his own internal garden, always on the lookout for weeds sprouting up, for any obstacles to the free flow of love that he associates with being completely open and surrendered to God. In pursuit of his goal to become wholly God's, he meditated and prayed, sought guidance from nuns and priests, attended workshops and prayer groups, read countless books, and spent hours journaling. He even wrote letters to God asking for help, like this one: “Dear God, I hope you'll make me less critical, more accepting and outgoing and warmer to others. Less rejecting! More loving! I no longer want to dislike or disapprove or silently reject another... So just take this negativeness from me.”

If my father has a flaw, it is his ingrained belief that he failed as a businessman, particularly in his attempts to make Seneca a better place to work. A close friend and Seneca board member who visited in Dad's last days finally dispelled that belief. When Dad told him, “I tried a lot of things at Seneca over the years that didn't work,” his friend countered by saying, “Pete, you were ahead of your time with your ideas, but you certainly paved the way, because many of those ideas are working now, and the company is doing phenomenally well.”

However, my father's biggest success, in my eyes, is not in the business arena, but in love, and this is what I want to close with: sharing with you what I consider my father's most beautiful achievement – an achievement that my mother, my brothers and sisters, and I will remember and cherish for the rest of our lives.

It took place in the last 24 hours of Dad's earthly life. The six of us were gathered around my father on my parents' bed, waiting anxiously for the hospice nurse to show up. Dad was struggling for breath and could not speak. He was dying and was clearly in great pain and physical distress. We sang his favorite hymns, talked of what a wonderful father he is, told him how much we loved him. He understood everything we said, but was

unable to respond except with an occasional smile. When the nurse finally arrived, she took one look at Dad and immediately mixed up a strong dose of pain medication. We didn't know it at the time, but this medicine that would mercifully ease my father's pain and distress would also put him to sleep and, therefore, continually out of reach to us until his death the following day.

Spoon in hand, the nurse approached the bed with the first dose of medicine – but then she stopped short, hovering just outside the circle of our family. Something was happening, and she was wise enough, sensitive enough, to notice it and allow it room to take place. My mother sensed it, too, and moved away from Dad's side, urging her five children closer to her beloved husband.

Dad began looking at each of us in turn. First Betsy, then Tim, then John, then Mary, holding each of their gazes for a long moment. The room was completely silent – no one spoke a word. Then he turned to me. I noticed his eyes had changed color, from hazel to a deep, dark, luminous brown, lit with a silvery light. My father gazed at me steadily with these dark, luminous eyes, and I caught my breath as I felt what was pouring out of them. “Oh!” I gasped, my hand to my heart. “You love me!” Dad's eyes were on fire with love – it was almost unbearable, the purity and intensity of love that poured forth from his eyes and burned into my heart.

My father held my gaze, his eyes glowing, his love for me blazing. I will never forget that moment. It was the most exquisite, perfect expression of love, unlike anything I have ever experienced – absolutely pure; stunning and profoundly heart-opening. I can still feel it, and I already know that it is at work in me, transforming my life. Like Father Evans said of St. Ignatius, it has set me on a new course.

Then Dad searched out Mom with his eyes, and she crawled over the bed and put her face up to his. He trained those glowing eyes on her, and she, too, received into her heart, as we all had, his powerful, wordless gift of love.

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The book of Malachi contains one of Dad's favorite bible verses: “And prove me not herewith, saith the Lord of Hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be enough room to receive it.”

In my father's final moments, with his eyes alone, he opened the windows of heaven and poured out the most incredible blessing to his family. He became what he has always wanted to be, what he worked his whole life to become: pure love. This is the living spirit of my father – the spirit that lives on in my family's hearts and is already at work, permeating and transforming our thoughts, words, and actions. May all of you – because I know that each of you has been touched in some way by his love – also carry my father's living spirit in your hearts and out into the world.