

An Essay taken from *Moe Fields- The Special Bond Between Fathers and sons*

A Father's Legacy:

In the months and years ahead, Zach could not let go of his father's death. The three Goldman boys had reached their mid or late thirties. They had shaped the life they wanted—just as life had shaped them.

What do you put in its place when death robs you of someone you love?

One night, after reading a story to Aaron, Zach finally had an epiphany. The answer to his purpose in life would come from his son, who was almost 6-years old. Aaron's connection to his wife's parents was a great blessing in Zach's eyes. Aaron and sister Sophie would grow with an understanding of the Holocaust and the concentration camp stories Sam and Ruth Berger shared with them. But on this night, Aaron surprised Zach. For the first time, he asked, "Dad, what was your father like? Can I see a picture?"

The questions were difficult for Zach, even 12 years after his father's death. Aaron didn't immediately understand. "Please don't cry daddy. I'm sorry." Aaron began to cry, too. He could not see Zach's tears were a "joyful expression of love." Through the eyes of his children, he realized someone would always remember. Someone wanted to know.

"It's ok Aaron. It's ok," Zach said as he hugged his son. "You didn't do anything wrong. I just miss my daddy. I loved him, just like you love me. That's a good thing."

The next day, Zach sat in his office in New York for several hours. He closed the door, which often signaled to the staff that he was writing. On this day, Zach decided it was time to write about his father. More than a decade had passed, but there was no resolution. Maybe there would never be a resolution.

Zach wanted to find the answers to questions that nagged him for much of his life. What was it about his father that meant so much? What is that magic between fathers and sons? As he tried to tell his father's story, Zach realized he found his own story as well.

Murray was a fighter. He never gave up. As the Goldman brothers looked to their own children, each knew that their dad handed down to them a gift about their faith, family, and legacy.

“As long as we tell the story,” Zach would remind them. Zach sent the article to the local Trenton newspaper. After the article appeared, he received calls at home for over a month. Each stranger had a story about their own father.

A Special Bond Between Father & Sons

His hands remain a vivid image; years after his chiseled features became blurred in my memory. To a young boy, he seemed tall as a tree. Our treat was when he'd come home from work before we went to sleep.

Most of the time we were already in bed for the night. We'd hear the front door and abandoning any sense of parental rules, we'd charge from our rooms to greet him.

Effortlessly, he'd swoop down. His huge hands would lift us upward for a hug and a kiss. At that moment, the ascent seemed rewarding beyond any earthly satisfaction. Dad was home.

As we grew up, the pattern never really changed that much. His was a generation of sacrifice, doing whatever had to be done, providing for his family. Years later we would hear the stories about my father growing up in the 1930's. Independence and self-reliance were not a fad then, just a way of life.

At 15, he hopped freight trains to Philadelphia from New York for fun. He worked one year in a traveling circus setting up the tents.

At 17, he would carry steel radiators weighing over two hundred pounds up six flights of stairs for \$5 each (often making \$20). Even then, I'm told, he seemed larger than life -- a huge man, incredibly strong, with a presence well beyond his years.

Mom grew up in the same neighborhood and told us how he would walk down the street in his pinstriped dark grey zoot suit, floppy hat and spats. Usually, he was headed with a friend up to the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem, where he'd dance the night away. No one ever suspected that beneath the confident air and bold swagger was a boy of 19.

But these images were not the father I knew. My dad was a plumber. His clothes were gray and usually soiled. He didn't go to ball games with us or play sports. He worked six days a week. Our worlds came together usually on Sundays, when he'd wake me or one of my two brothers for our weekly tradition of buying bagels and lox, visiting Butterflake bakery and picking up the newspapers.

After a late morning breakfast, the three of us would be led into the master bedroom for our ritual nap--with dad. We would all protest sleeping, which usually gave us fifteen minutes to wrestle with him. Always our protests would give in to the comfort of his arms holding us so we couldn't sneak out of the room. How special Sundays were.

With great pride in having three sons, he occasionally would take us with him to work. Usually we travelled in two's, some-times solo, but almost never as a tribe. He was a large plumbing contractor. We'd watch as he directed his men puffing the cigar that was his trademark. He overcame anti-Semitism in town and helped build the first synagogue.

The roar of trucks on route to fix the pipelines of New Jersey, gave way to ringing phones and heated business conversations. In the back of the shop, we'd scale the wooden bins containing more plumbing fixtures than I had ever thought existed.

Afternoons consisted of lunch at local eateries and visits to inspect what the workers were doing. Always he would introduce us to customers and friends, "this is my number one, number two or number three son." I was never certain if he forgot our names or watched too many Charlie Chan movies. In time, it became natural to introduce ourselves as number one or two son. Nothing could please us more than for someone to say, "He's Murray's number two son."

As I grew older, his health declined. At each turn, life-threatening illnesses stalked him. He never complained. His humor could not be dampened nor his spirit extinguished. He was sick at the time I heard the story about bootleg boxing. It was 1934, and people crowded in the back of a bar where two men fought to please the patrons and earn money for their families. He used the name Moe Fields as an alias. He knocked out twenty some opponents and had his nose broken twice. He told the story with a smile and a gleam in his eyes.

My dad feared nothing, or so it seemed. We laughed a good deal that day--a proud son and a defiant father. But I didn't understand why he used a fictitious name. His voice grew soft, softer than I had ever known.

"My father was religious and would never have approved of boxing," he explained. "For certain, he would have come down there after me." He did not want to choose between the independence he valued and the love of his father. Instead, he became Moe Fields.

I often wonder what that strange magic is between father and son. I'm convinced it has nothing to do with time spent or games played. And rarely are words spoken that capture it. My brothers and I came to know my father more than most sons learn until well into their own middle age (if they ever know their father at all). His life became the silent values that guided us. Most of the lessons he taught us were not from instruction, they were indirect. He led by example. He was not perfect. As sons are apt to do, we tried to understand him.

The humor of his business card, "Murray's Plumbing and Heating--your sh__t, is my bread and butter." His combativeness when he felt wronged, like the time he punched and broke some guy's jaw over a series of anti-Semitic remarks. His belief in hard work, which I learned about at 10 years old in Lodi, New Jersey. The toilet on the second floor was stopped up and full. I was instructed to reach in with my hands to see why it wasn't working. When I finished, he said ever so bluntly, "now you understand the meaning of work." He was right.

I've read that as we get older, it's the images of childhood, which remain sharpest in our memories. I still remember my father's hands. His large and strong hands.

It has been years now since he passed on. And now I look at my own son and wonder what silent values he will find in me. I look deep within for the answers, hoping the irrepressible spirit of Moe Fields lives on.

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