

Dad's Tribute

One of my earliest memories of dad is of him lying on his back on the floor of our living room and he would tell me to be “stiff as a board” because if I wiggled around it wouldn't work. I would straighten up and lean back so he could bench press my little body. After several reps he would let out a “Kunta Kinte!” Which, of course was from the scene from one of his favorite movies, *Roots*. It was just a silly game back then, and he would have not been able to fathom being the head of such a large family, but I just wonder if God was planting a seed of some sort in his mind and heart. Because to this day, our family group chat is even called, “Kuntas”.

We moved around a lot when I was growing up and because we lived in so many different climates, I have memories of dad mowing the grass, raking crazy amounts of leaves, and shoveling the snow. I remember dad would have a Walkman strapped to himself when he mowed and I have a good chuckle when he would turn the row, singing his country music super loud, since he couldn't hear himself. I had this little fisher price shopping cart and I would follow dad, pulling out the grass, roots and all, and put it in my cart. I remember after he was done mowing he would come in sopping wet with sweat and try to give me a hug. I also have fond memories of him battling against groundhogs and armadillos in those yards, but those are stories for the after-party as there might be some animal lovers here.

When we lived in France, Dad taught me how to ride a bike in front of our house, and 10 years later when we lived in North Carolina, he taught me how to drive a car in the parking lot of my high school. If you asked him, he would definitely say that he was too hard on us as kids growing up, but I remember being in that parking lot and stalling the car over and over and he would patiently say, “That's ok. Let's try again.” I feel like he always had this tension between wanting to push us to do our best and just loving us right where we were.

When we were kids we would play a game called “sharks” with dad, which was basically a really intense tickle fight (that for some reason my mom never wanted to participate in) and we would try to pin down my dad. But even when the 3 of us kids teamed up, he was often too strong.

To me as a child, my dad was invincible, a legend. He brought magic to my childhood in the form of Broadway Theater and Yankee games. And I think, in a weird way, we just always expected him to be here with us.

Our own children also have this “larger than life” love and respect for their Tata. This might be best illustrated in a book that my daughter Jo gifted him for Christmas one year when she was about 5 years old called “Tata to the Rescue.” In her story, she and her siblings get swooped up by a giant heron and carried to the top of a tree. I end up fainting in the story, but thankfully my husband knew just what to do. He pulled out his phone, and called Tata. Greg's a really good sport and didn't take offense, but it was such evidence of how highly our kids thought of their Tata. He could do anything.

As kids, we were on the road a lot with dad seeing that much of our childhood revolved around tournaments of some kind. There was one particular road trip that stands out to me. I had just had knee surgery, but Justin had a big basketball tournament coming up and, you know, we had our priorities. We drove 2 cars down to Florida so I could keep my leg elevated. These were the days before cell phones but thankfully, several years before, either Justin or Mark had received some really cool army

toy walkie talkies that you could wear on your head. The plan was for mom and dad to wear the walkie talkies as they drove in their separate cars, and all mom had to do was follow him. Now, Dad often spoke to us in his second language, which was “movie quote”. And during this trip there was a whole lot of “don’t leave your wingman” and “talk to me goose” as he channeled Maverick from Top Gun. To say that my mom found that trip a bit stressful is an understatement, but it made for some hilarious memories and that particular Garner Road Y team felt like such a family to my dad and to us all.

Three of my daughters also have some great stories of a classic 22 hour road trip that they made from Austin back to NC with mom and dad after they had flown solo out to Austin for a visit. They still laugh and laugh at all the memories.

When I got married, it was bittersweet since it meant me moving back to NC and away from the family here. He walked me down the “aisle” to the Theme from Life is Beautiful. I say aisle, but it was an outdoor amphitheater and the walk took at least a good 5 minutes. I think it was the longest 5 minutes of my dad’s life. Brown Eyed Girl has always been “our song” and dad and I danced to it at our reception. My mom would say, “he’s still got it!” as it was while out dancing that they met years before. It didn’t take long for dad to realize that Greg was the best son-in-law he ever had. Because, as the two of them always joked, he was the *only* son-in-law he ever had.

Because we lived in NC, and then moved to London, we did not have the luxury of the day to day interactions with mom and dad. But we did have the advantage of regular, really intentional, full-on times with them. In fact, today, he and mom were supposed to be flying out for a 2 week visit. He would tell me to have a punch list ready of any repairs that needed to be done or any projects I had lined up. Over the years, he built and painted an outdoor playhouse, fixed zip lines, changed a million light bulbs, and tried his best to squirrel-proof our bird feeders.

But his favorite was when I had errands for him to do outside the house. He called these his “missions” and it was our kids’ favorite thing to join him on these missions as they usually ended in going out to McDonald’s or some other restaurant. The ultimate mission was when they got to go to Costco. We have 5 children, and I would ask him every time if he was sure that he wanted to take all of them to Costco. “Yes, it’s great.” Ok. Actually, if dad had been cremated, I could see him wanting, or at least joking about wanting, his ashes scattered along the aisles of a Costco.

It was during one of these Costco visits that I truly began to see the powerful work that God was doing in my dad. As the story goes, the kids apparently began asking him for stuff. (which I was like, yep, that’s why you don’t take them.) And specifically they were asking for mac and cheese. And kept asking and asking for mac and cheese. I guess dad had had enough because he raised his voice and said, “if you ask me one more time for mac and cheese....” And that’s when one of the kids pipped up and answered, “Tata you sound like Miles Finch from elf” (when he goes, “call me elf one more time”). And it broke him. Dad busted out laughing and his anger dissolved. When they got home and he retold the story, he laughed and then cried out of both the joy and conviction that he felt. My sister-in-law Sally said in a post about dad this week that he was “humble enough to be challenged by his children and friends”. And I’ll go further to say even his grandchildren.

This is one of the most powerful lessons that he gave us. What it looks like for a strong, and proud man to admit when he’s wrong; to say that he’s sorry and then to receive forgiveness from those he’s wronged.

It goes without saying that he loved his grandchildren and he loved to be able to encourage them in all their endeavors. Each week, for example, he would carve out time for a zoom Spanish conversation with Jo which I think was always one of the highlights of both their weeks.

Of course when the family was all together it was his favorite. The chaos of cousins would drive him totally crazy, and he loved it. From bouncy castles and blow up pools in his backyard to Dave and Busters, Main Event, Round Rock Express baseball games, family reunions at Great Wolf Lodge, the mountains of Tuckaleechee, Tenn., and the beach in Florida- it made him so happy to see his tribe together. Mom and dad have great, quirky house that has 2 kitchens which made it the perfect setting for our own Cousins Chopped Challenge which the grandkids LOVED. Dad would go on his “mission” (to Costco of course) to get all the food, including the secret ingredient, and then try to disappear for a couple hours during the craziness of the competition. But he **loved** knowing that he played a big part in their joy.

Although he might have wanted to portray an external façade of an Ebenezer Scrooge or a Henry F. Potter, he was really just a big softie. He was my biggest fan back when I was on the court or the field, and has continued to be ever since, often sending me notes to tell me how proud he was of me, especially in my role as mom.

During any one of his visits to our family, when it came nearer to having to say goodbye, he had this ritual of making it as hard as possible on himself. He would draw a picture on our white board of a cowboy riding into an Arizona sunset and when the last goodbye was said, he’d send a link to George Strait’s (or Jorge Derecho as he referred to him) song, *The Cowboy Rides Away*.

Dad’s favorite movie was *It’s a Wonderful Life* which we grew up watching multiple times each Christmas and had almost every line memorized. I’ve never been able to sing Hark the Herald Angels Sing without choking up thinking about that movie, and my dad.

Like George Baily, dad had a selfless, generous heart. He was by far **the** most generous person I know. Unlike George though, dad actually got to do all the things that the movie character wished that he could have. He travelled the world, he received the accolades and trophies and articles and certificates that you can go see evidence of out in the hallway. But if he were standing here, he would say like the apostle Paul that it’s all rubbish and would frankly be embarrassed that it’s all on display. The day before Dad died, Halim, who will be speaking in a minute, preached on Matthew 26 which is the story of Mary and Martha and I found dad’s journal with his notes that he took during that sermon. At the bottom of the page he had written the question, “What’s the most important thing?” and answered it, “sitting at the feet of Jesus”.

Dad **did** a lot of stuff. He did a lot of **great** stuff for **a lot** of people.

But I love that the one thing he desperately wanted to get “better at” was simply sitting in the grace of his savior Jesus and allowing that grace to transform his life.

Dad once wrote this to his grandkids:

“I like being Tata. But most of all, I am blessed and thankful to have been called and adopted by our Lord through the redemptive work of His son Jesus.”

I love thinking about the ripple effect, the legacy, physically and spiritually that, just like Kunta Kinte, my dad will have for generations to come. And in the meantime, cousins, he'll be preparing the logistics for the most awesome family reunion ever!

I miss you Dad.