

Finding my Father's Diaries

After Dad died, I found myself sitting at his desk holding his diaries. Three black booklets discovered in a lower drawer embossed with "Diary" on the cover along with the years 2018, 2019, or 2020 respectively. The last three he lived before passing away on January 12, 2021, from complications due to Covid-19. He was 73 years old.

The discovery Dad kept diaries really surprised me. I wouldn't believe it possible had I not been holding those three thin, cheap books in my hand - the kind you could buy at any Barnes & Noble off the sale rack for less than five dollars. I was shocked because Dad never looked kindly upon that art form. He considered journaling far too "flowery" and those who practiced such arts "girlie." Weak even. Particularly men.

For example, when I was twelve years old, I excitedly signed up for a writing class at my middle school, or what we used to call junior high, because I was entertaining the idea I might want to write a novel. I recently read Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles* and was very taken with the power of story. The teacher of the class, Mr. Marsh, asked that very same question the first day - *Why are you taking this class?* - and sent us home with the assignment to journal our "thoughts and feelings" in the Mead spiral notebooks he handed out. Dad came home and found me at the kitchen table writing away. And when he learned what I was doing, took the book away immediately and called Mr. Marsh to find out just what kind of teacher he thought he was. Dad didn't like I was wasting time writing "girl crap" when I should've been outside playing baseball or chopping down a forest or changing a tire or something like that. After, Mr. Marsh never said anything about his conversation with my father when I returned to school. But he did say I could write my assignments in class from now on and leave my notebook at his

desk before going home for the day. And he gave me a look I had no difficulty translating. To which all I could do in return was shrug as if to suggest, "I know, right? What's a boy to do?"

So when it came to Dad's diaries, I was surprised by their discovery. Sort of like discovering Thomas Jefferson had written not one Declaration of Independence, but three. I wondered what life secrets these diaries held. They could very well be a goldmine. Or an indictment. Maybe the insights of a damaged man. Or the bitter monologues of a retired cop. Or the laments of an angry father who, late in life, thought becoming a church deacon could save him from the judgment his prodigious temper had wrought. Or maybe he just bought them for scratch paper. I really wouldn't know till I opened them. But I held off.

Caution was always the best course around Dad. He was mostly a temperamental man prone to anger. And to say he had opinions would be an understatement. He was a southern boy raised by the hard edges of a southern father who, himself, had been part of the "greatest" generation and participated in the invasion of Normandy beach on D-day. Being a "man" was very important to both of them though enacted in decidedly different ways. My grandfather felt men were stoic in the face of long suffering. My father believed men were loud, tough, and willing to fight anyone who showed disrespect. Neither shied away from disagreeing with the other.

But Dad was not a writer. I only knew of one other example, which I discovered wholly by accident when I was twelve. I was searching our barn for "historical artifacts" when I came across a shoe box buried inside an old Army footlocker with a half a dozen letters in the box. Thinking they could be war letters, I started reading and discovered they were actually love letters my father wrote to my mother during the two months they dated while he was away serving in the Navy. Well, love letters isn't really the right description. More like pornographic field notes, barely legible, filled with frankly unimaginative and filthy, "penthouse forum" content. At least as far as I could tell from the two I skimmed before shoving them back into their box and fleeing the scene.

Maybe, I thought, in his senior years Dad felt the rush of time and decided to jot down a few tender memories for his children's sake before he passed. Or maybe, without us knowing, he

penned the great American novel, written in obscurity like John Kennedy Toole, hoping it would be discovered and published posthumously.

I had many such thoughts in as many minutes. Even one fleeting consideration – a way, way out-of-the-box moment – wondering if he had written poetry. Doubtful considering his take on the pretentious quality of said art form and those who participated. But still, it could happen. I just hoped, if anything, these diaries held a few parting words of love and encouragement for the family he left behind. Whom I knew he did love, just in his own way.

My father did read and write on occasion. Appropriate writing, though, was reserved for auto mechanic manuals, bible studies, and the great action hero tales taken from the old west. Not for some “fairy” who needed to express their “hoity-toity bullshit.” Functionality not art was his motto.

Holding Dad’s diaries made me hesitant because I wasn’t sure I wanted to read them. Mainly because, ever since his passing, I felt relief. Peaceful even, knowing I no longer had to contend with the living, difficult, demanding, and frustrating father he could often be. Nor did I want to introduce any guilt – especially if his diaries happened to contain all his failed hopes and dreams – were I to realize I could have bridged the gap between us. I knew I was being selfish, but I wanted to keep my new sense of emotional freedom. I didn’t want to lose it. What if in reading his diaries, I learned he was not some self-absorbed troglodyte, but a person of genuine heart trapped in his own skin? Or what if he had secrets? Like maybe a sixth toe, or a secret lover, or a second family. What if he had once voted democrat and liked to sing show tunes? Who knew? I wasn’t sure I wanted to.

I looked around Dad’s den – a space spanning the entire length and width of his basement. 2100 square feet of wide-open space turned into his personal fortress of solitude complete with a big oak desk centrally placed in the center of the room resting on a giant woven rug. A row of bookshelves running end to end on one end holding hundreds of books by his selectively favored authors collected over a lifetime: Zane Grey, W.E.B. DuBois, Tom Clancy, Robert Ludlum. Dozens of bibles and bible commentaries. And auto manuals for Ford and Dodge, never Toyota. On the opposite wall, to the left of the desk, were rows of file cabinets

six feet high stuffed with old Sunday morning church programs, copied hymnal sheet music, and hundreds upon thousands of copied bible studies with his notes jotted in the margins. Behind the desk, hanging on the east wall were motivational posters and Christ-depicted reprints - The Last Supper, God's hands holding a dove, Footprints in the Sand, that sort of tchotchke. And finally on the west wall directly in line of sight with his desk was his personal vanity wall containing photos from his police days, photos of famous lawmen, plaques and awards, old west memorabilia, and a framed shadow box of Wyatt Earp's 1873 Colt "peacemaker" replica pistol and Tombstone badge hanging conspicuously next to his own shadow box with his own police-issued 1978 Smith & Wesson .357 revolver, retired police badge, and police ID. All that was missing was a big cowboy hat and spurs to complete the image of a retired cowboy lawman.

The entire room reflected who my father predominantly saw himself as. A modern-day Wyatt Earp, battered by the job, rugged, long-suffering, misunderstood. Ironically, I noticed there was nary a single photo of his wife or children in the entire basement. Which was why I had been rifling his desk drawers in the first place only to discover the diaries.

I was responsible for his downstairs basement den because of my mother. Not even ten minutes after returning home from Dad's funeral, Mom turned to my brother, sister, and I to inform us we were to deal with it all.

"All of it goes," she said, "Everything. Either you take it or it goes to Goodwill or to the dump. I don't care. I just want his things gone."

To emphasize her point, she went into her bedroom and closed the door.

I certainly understood my mother's impulse to remove any vestiges of Dad for closure's sake. She had been married to the man for 53 years, lived in five different states with him, birthed and raised three children for him, and, in the meantime, cooked, cleaned, and handled all the family finances since day one. I doubt she even remembered who she was before she was "Rick and Carol." Yet she still had the rest of her life to figure it out, while his had ended.

“I’ll take the kitchen and living room,” my sister Pam jumped in, “you take the downstairs den, and Joel can handle the garage. Take what you want, save any important stuff for mom, and let’s donate the rest. That should cover all our bases.”

Ahh, Pam, my older sister. The self-designated boss of us all and queen of opinion. Closest to our father in attitude and personality. Sometimes to disturbing effect - which hadn’t changed since we were kids. Sure, a helpful trait when she entered the business world as a professional cutthroat, but it tended to annoy us, her brothers, all the other days. In this case, unfortunately, I happened to agree with her and headed down to the basement.

Thinking back now, I realized I loved Dad equally in my own way as much as he loved me in his. We weren’t often synchronous, but there was love between us among a complicated adult relationship of elder father and grown son. I don’t think he ever really understood me. And I never wanted to commune in his world. His insistence from my earliest youth that I was “too much like your mother” irritated me. Especially knowing it came from jealousy. I was closer to my mother most of my life, which he always took as a rejection. He had a great lonely hole in his heart which needed filling. Too often. Still, he managed to go to college, get a degree, find a career, a wife, sire children, buy a house, and have financial means sufficient to support everyone well into his retirement. Which I think was noble. That he wanted our undying fealty in return, to bend the knee like servants of old honoring their lord and master, happily accepting the crumbs from his table, didn’t sit well with me. Never had. The rest of my family seemed fine with it.

And so sitting at his desk looking across the same view he must have looked at every morning and evening for nearly fifty years, I hoped his diaries would offer a connection. A new way to see a father who had been more selfish than selfless, burdened than insightful, and much too invested in his own pride.

Sitting at his desk, I tried to be Dad for a few moments. Look out at his room through his eyes. See how he privately approached the world. And I hoped to find something in that private room that could possibly connect more completely. Hell, maybe I just wanted simple closure after all.

Sitting in Dad's den, channeling my father, I opened the first of his three diaries and began reading. This is what they said...

The End.