

What it Takes to Make a Parent Happy

790 words

My best friend's birthday is February 18th. Which kind of stinks for her, because it is also the day, seventeen years ago, that my father passed away. Not that there is any connection, except for the fact that there is that connection. The same day I am mailing her birthday card I am scurrying around trying to find a grocery store in Chattanooga that sells the traditional Jewish Yartzheit candle, a small memorial votive that burns for 24 hours, and by its flicker keeps your thoughts with the deceased.

I was not terribly close to my father, and he died before reparations could be made—that is to say, he died before I wised up and realized that fathers are human, humans are fallible, ergo fathers can let you down without meaning to, and almost always without wanting to. I was a harsh critic when I was in my twenties—still am in many ways—but I have this fantasy that whatever my father's failings, being disappointed in the adult I was to become is not one of them. If I have a view of Heaven—which I do, and it includes horses, dogs, chocolate and notoriety—then it is that my father floats around in his khakis and dress shoes, thinking almost exclusively about how I have made him proud.

Many years have passed and a lot has changed since my father died. Back then my sister's oldest child was one, and this year she started college. My brother was a single guy, and this year his marriage turns sixteen, his children fourteen, eleven and nine. And I was a single girl with a singular cause: to cure myself of an unhappiness that attached itself alternately to my job and to what I perceived as my own undeniable failing: the fact that I had not pursued a career of some difficulty, like becoming an astrophysicist or a chemical engineer. It was understandable, I reasoned back then, that I was a disappointment to my father. I was a miserable, underpaid, creatively numb twenty-six year-old with no sense of humor and even less perspective. Even I didn't want to be with myself.

It's funny what we think our parents require of us. I am reminded of a Charlie Brown cartoon where Charlie Brown is apologizing to Snoopy for not staying home all the time to make him happy.

"I was already happy," Snoopy's talk bubble responds. If I had had the opportunity to ask my father how I could have made him happy, I think his answer would have been the same as Snoopy's. My father, after all, wasn't the

one with his finger on the pulse of my career. He wasn't the one with the ego to placate, all the negative emotions to tame. When I think about it, it doesn't seem like it takes all that much to make a parent happy. As the daughter of two, I would venture that simply being yourself is enough to beget a happy parent.

Last weekend my husband took his father to see an enormous sculpture in a town not far from where his parents live. The artist had achieved a modicum of fame as a result of the sculpture, as had the town itself. As they drove away from the site, my husband's father expressed disbelief that a man would spend his time involved in a seemingly unproductive pursuit (art) when he could be accomplishing other, more productive things.

"Like what?" asked my husband, who not coincidentally, makes his living as an artist.

My father-in-law thought a minute. "He could be salting hams," he offered.

I am not saying that if my father were alive today we wouldn't still find ourselves, like my husband and his father, reciprocally misunderstood. But time lends the illusion, and sometimes the gift, of perspective; while there are components of my life he could not have predicted, I am convinced he would support them nonetheless. He might have preferred that I keep my state job, but he would be thrilled to know I'm better off as a painter. He might have wished I'd had children, but he would adore and spoil my dogs. And while he wanted me to stay in Atlanta, he would be happy to know that the apple fell close to the tree, and rolled just a few hours north to the city where he was born. All in all, I'm pretty sure my father would be OK with the adult I became. Which is a comforting thought in the wee morning hours of February 19th, when the candle is flickering itself out. *Respond to this column at Danalise@juno.com.*