

## Pride

The sky can be my time machine. This morning's painting of yellow clouds trailing across the blue expanse is much the same as that on a Saturday nearly a half century ago when I was a teenager running a small job press for a part time printer in my hometown. "Bedroom printers," these small business owners were called. Many, including my boss, had full time jobs in factories. They printed on weekends in their cellars and garages. Al had set up shop in the stable out behind his cousin's amusements business. The early 1800's building was made of laid up stone, had minimal heat and housed Al's small printing operation as well as pin ball machines and juke boxes.

In the corner I stood on one leg at Al's press, the other leg pumping away as I printed numbered raffle tickets for a club that was trying to raise money.

I'd had an encounter at home with my father just an hour before and I could still feel the sting of it. We argued over some trifle having to do with my leaving the butter out on the table and letting it get warm. I told myself not to feel bad. After all, I had scored a few good verbal blows against the old man and finished triumphantly by walking out of the house and slamming the door. Yet I felt upset and guilty. I suppose my immaturity prevented me from admitting I was wrong. Dramatics and denial can make sense to the head but the heart knows the truth.

Besides, Dad wasn't upset about the butter. The two of us were groaning under the weight of something neither could bring ourselves to discuss. Two days before I had insulted and hurt him.

Lost in thought, I missed a throw onto the platen and messed up the ticket sequence. I didn't notice Al come up behind me.

"God dammit," he shouted at me, "you screwed up the counter. We gotta go back to 2972 and print them all over again!"

"I'm sorry, Al," I said, "I was ..."

"You was staring out the God dammed window at the sky is what you were doin! What're you gonna be when you grow up, a weatherman?"

"I don't know what I'm going to be," I said. "Maybe I'll be a bum." I said it seriously, feeling down on myself.

"You ain't gonna be no bum, youngster. I get a feelin' about people, ya know? Yer one of those lucky bastards that God takes care of. Me, I gotta work for a livin', so get outta my way while I reset the counters."

I was soon back pumping the press trying to stay alert and not get the counters out of sync again.

But my mind drifted back to when I was younger. Although my father and I were often at odds in my teen years, I couldn't deny that he had meant the world to me when I was a little kid.

Dad was a newspaper pressman and an expert at his trade. When I was six or seven years old I thought he was the smartest man in the world. I can't count the number of times I told anyone who would listen that my father printed the newspapers that went all over the city and even down the valley to the small mill towns along the river.

Imagine me, a seven year old kid brought down to the newspaper and walked into the pressroom to watch the men mount the heavy stereotype plates and thread the huge rolls of newsprint up from the basement into the gargantuan Hoe presses. Wrenches clanged and after a few minutes it grew quiet. Someone called, "All Clear." Lights began to blink in warning and a sharp staccato buzzer blared out from somewhere above, echoing up and down the line of presses. It reminded me of a submarine's dive alarm I'd heard at the movies when the crew filled the tanks and dove beneath

the waves. Soon I was dragged below the surface of the noise as the presses clunked and groaned and quickly got up to speed with a roar that was deafening. I wanted to hold my hands over my ears, but none of the men seemed impressed, so I kept my arms at my side and suppressed the urge to scream in delight over the thundering machinery. The presses began to spit out the afternoon edition and sent a stream of miraculously folded newspapers of 54-pages each along a conveyor contraption that went up and across the ceiling and over to the waiting men who bundled them up in the mailroom.

When I left the newspaper that day with my father I was the proudest seven year old one could imagine. Only a few years later I was a teenager when I stopped by the pressroom one afternoon to get the keys and borrow his car. When his boss asked me to pose with Dad in a photo for the company in-house newsletter, I refused. I didn't want to be seen in public with my father in his coveralls and printers cap. I had said only, "I can't," and Dad had laughed it off, but I could see he was hurt.

That night when we got home I ate the food he provided and went out in the evening wearing a new jacket he had bought me with the money he earned working in his coveralls.

The next day I sat in math class up the street in an old brick high school building with roots down to the sub strata of rock. My soles could just feel the vibration of the presses start up for the Valley Edition at 10:30 in the morning. I felt exactly like the person Al told me I wasn't, a bum.

"God dammit, Davey," I heard Al shout in my ear. "The counters are off again! What the hell's the matter with you this morning?"

I mumbled something.

"Here," he said. "Get over here and take the glue pot and make up this order of pads. You're not good for anything else this morning!"

I did as I was told.

"What's buggin' you, huh?" Al asked, and he seemed to mean it.

"My father and I had a fight," I said. I told him about my refusal to be in the photo, hoping

he would take my side, although I knew no one would agree with me.

"So you're not proud of your old man?" Al asked.

"I just didn't want to be in the photo," I said.

How come you're not too proud to work here with me in this shit hole garage?" he asked.

I'd never thought of that.

"I know what your problem is," he said. "You don't know how to apologize."

"Sure I do!" I said.

"Not to your father. Have you ever done that?" he asked.

"Well, I've never had any reason to," I replied.

Al glanced across the work table at me. He looked stunned. I remembered he was a father and for a moment something about his countenance reminded me of my Dad. Then he leaned back and laughed. And he kept laughing. All morning. Every ten minutes or so he'd look over at me and start laughing again. Eventually he got me laughing and told me all the dumb things his kids did when they were teens. He told me he loved them more than the air he breathed.

That night I went home and apologized to my father. He nodded. He never said, "You're a good son," or reached out to give me an affectionate hug. He wasn't capable of those actions, but something in his eyes told me he loved me. I can still see it and I have treasured it over fifty years.

It has since occurred to me I never did anything to earn his love. That is a first principle of fatherhood. And a first lesson of being a son.

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