

TOSSIN' THE COIN: A FATHER'S PRESENCE

“While there’s currently great turmoil, there is even greater opportunity for US to work together to transform our community. Far too many of our children are fatherless, far too many of our mothers are standing in the prison waiting rooms and far too many of our young people feel hopeless.”

T.I.

“The Christian life is to live all of your life in the presence of God.”

R.C. Sproul

One of the many casualties of my father’s recent physical and mental decline is the trips we used to take on a frequent basis.

Just the two of us.

I miss being in my father’s presence.

Our trips were never planned in advance. During academic breaks in my teaching years at Alice Lloyd College, I would make the pilgrimage to the hamlet of Springboro, Ohio (where my parents still live), drop Imogene and Kimberly off to spend some time with my mom, and dad and I would hit the road. We would hop in his white pick-up truck and just take off.

The first seven or eight major decisions of our trip were decided by the flip of a coin.

Heads left, tails right.

We just let the rest of the trip spontaneously happen.

What adventures we had!

One trip took us down to visit the Shiloh Civil War battlefield (still my favorite Civil War site), then down the Natchez Trace and ending up at the battlefield sites in New Orleans. Other trips, in part, took us to the St. Louis Arch, or down into Texas, or to Fort Necessity, or Niagra Falls, or tracing Route 23 all the way down to Atlanta.

On one particular trip up into Canada over Christmas break we got stuck in the ice and snow in the middle of nowhere. And I mean nowhere! It was before cellphones. We hadn’t passed a car for hours. Suddenly, a man drives up with just the right equipment and pulls us out of our predicament. Then, as abruptly as he appeared, he drove off; like, as in vanishing. My dad remains convinced it was an angel sent to bail two Akers’ knuckleheads out of a fix.

My dad is a very introspective individual. He shuns crowds and—unlike my mom—is very awkward around people he doesn’t know. I mention this only to say that during our trips there would be hours on end that he wouldn’t say a word. Or

when he would speak it was usually, “man, I wonder what this country looked like when the Indians (native Americans) lived here?”

The silence was okay: being in his presence is what counted.

We both knew without saying it that these excursions couldn't last forever.

Sigh.

If I engaged dad in conversation at all, it generally had to be about sports. (Many of you know that dad was a tremendous athlete in his own right: he played football for a short time at the University of Dayton after his WWII service with the Marines—alongside legendary Pittsburgh Steelers coach Chuck Noll—and for years was a stalwart inside scorer in the Dayton, Ohio industrial basketball leagues, including a couple seasons paired with Kentucky's high school legend “King” Kelly Coleman.) Dad was actively playing basketball into his 80s: as some of you know, even as a gray-haired senior, dad would take you under the boards and beat you to death with his elbows, fake and short jump shot.

In your face.

As a youngster, I begged dad to take me with him to watch him play. He would work all day and then play ball in the evenings. Many times, I would have to punch him in the arm to keep him from falling asleep at the wheel.

One of the saddest days in my life was when I beat dad in a pick-up basketball game on the outside court in the park behind the house. Did he finally let me win? Not on your life. Dad is the most competitive person I know (that tradition carries on during our family card game wars at the kitchen table).

Back to our road trips. Being in dad's presence came at a bit of a cost. He had this habit of waiting until the gas hand was below empty before he would seriously start looking for gas stations. To make matters worse, he was convinced—for some reason—that Shell gasoline made the truck run better, so with the gas hand hovering dangerously below empty, he would pass Exxons, Mobils or anything else.

I think you get the picture.

Dad also is like a camel. In those days he could eat prodigious amounts of food at an all-you-can-eat breakfast and go the rest of the day without food. So, these road trips presented quite the challenge for my preferred 12-meal-a-day plan.

Dad liked to pull over and read every historical marker along the roadside. And read, and read—and absorb—every single word! If any of you have made the trip down the Natchez Trace Parkway, you know there are historical markers (such as the last passenger pigeon flock sighted near here) all the way down the road. It took us all day to get fifty miles! At one battlefield site, I had walked the complete park and studied the progress of the battle only to return and find dad stalled at the first cluster of battlefield markers denoting the opening volley!

But dad loved it and—because of his presence—so did I.

I thought of those road trips with dad last week when I heard an on-line sermon by Grace Larson Brumley. During that message she noted that we—as Christians—need to “desperately seek” the presence of Father God. Her message was based on the scriptural account found in Genesis 32:14-17. Here, the Israelites are wandering in the desert and while Moses left them to commune with God on the mountain, the people melted their gold belongings from Egypt and created a golden calf. Moses began pleading with God not to destroy the people: “And he (Moses) said unto Him, ‘If thy *presence* go not with me, carry us not up hence.’” In other words, if Moses could not count on God’s presence being with him, he would rather stay there in the wilderness than advance toward the Promised Land.

That is a powerful truth. Without the constant presence of God, we will turn to idols in our lives. I am so grateful that my earthly father William Lee Akers—despite his many flaws (many of which he was unselfish enough to pass on to me)—taught me the value of being in the presence of my Father. I have come to realize, after all these years, that engaging myself in the quest to dwell, worship and rest in the Father’s presence is the most valuable of life’s undertakings.

Several years ago, I attended a session near Capitol Hill provided for a number of Christian ministers and pastors (I was invited by a former pastor of mine from the Kentucky years). I will never forget one presentation. The speaker was talking about a convocation address he gave at a large high school in the inner city of Los Angeles. Everything was fine until he used a personal illustration to emphasize a point: all of a sudden, it was like a blanket of non-receptiveness fell over the audience. Later, he asked the principal what happened. The principal told him that when he used the illustration of his close relationship with his father as an example, he lost them. The speaker then recalled that just after he mentioned that during his talk, many of the students in the audience, particularly the young men, looked down at their feet. “Do you know,” the principal said, “that over 70% of these young people come from fatherless homes.”

That number is higher now.

Call me crazy if you like. But I sincerely believe the answers to the restlessness and violence of our youth will not be solved by expanded government welfare programs, but rather well-reasoned (and well-prayed over) community efforts to address the plague of fatherlessness in our culture.

Kids of every color, socio-economic background and blossoming political ideology need to spend time in the presence of loving fathers. It is that simple. And those fathers, in turn, need to reach out with nurturing, non-threatening arms.

I know it is a tall order—and a bold prayer.

Finally, if your own time with your earthly father has been distorted—and you have the psychological scars to prove it—invite Jesus Christ to fill the void.