

TRIBUTE TO DAD

“He promised us that everything would be okay. I was a child, but I knew that everything would not be okay. That did not make my father a liar. It made him my father.”

Jonathan Safran Foer,
Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close

My father—William Lee Akers—passed away on Monday (2/21/2022) on the date of his 74th wedding anniversary (mom passed three months ago). He was 94 years old and lived an incredible life. Dad had been in a rehabilitation facility for several months: his death brought an end to a prolonged period of physical suffering.

Thank God.

I’m so grateful I was able to be at his bedside at the end.

Father-son relationships are always complex. Ours was no exception. Most of you know that I love studying about the Chinese language, history and schools of philosophy. Foremost among the latter is Confucianism: interestingly enough, the philosopher portrayed the father-son relationship as one of society’s five cardinal relationships. Confucius says that a father must display love and kindness toward his son, while the son should display obedience and reverence toward his father.¹ That relationship is a core pillar of a stable society. That is so true. Many, if not most, of the social issues we face today in this country can be traced back to the present-day plague of fatherlessness.

My dad was the best father he knew how to be.

For a son to expect anything more is unreasonable.

He may not have been perfect, but he was always there.

In my dad’s final hours, as he lay there unresponsive, gasping shallow breaths, his body fighting for life, I was able to whisper my thanks to him for several things in my life.

I know he heard me.

My father was a good role model. He was patriotic (a World War II era Marine Corps veteran), took care of his body (my dad never smoked, never drank alcohol or even sipped soft drinks), was a steady provider and reliable family breadwinner, and—in later years—loved the Lord (he wore red socks everyday as a testimony of his conversion experience).

¹ See, among countless others, Daniella Montoya, “The five relationships of Confucianism are father and son,” *academia.edu*.

Among the many things I told dad I was thankful for was teaching me how to throw and catch a baseball, catch and throw a football, and dribble and shoot a basketball. As I mentioned in an earlier missive about dad,² dad was, first and foremost, a skilled and gifted athlete:

“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—alongside legendary Pittsburg Steelers coach Chuck (Charles Henry) 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. He held the scoring records for many years at Miami Jacobs College. Dad was actively playing basketball into his 80s: as some of you know, even as a gray-haired senior, (and often in a back brace), dad would take you under the boards and beat you to death with his elbows, fake and short jump shot.”³

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 was the most competitive person I’ve ever known (that tradition carries on during our family card game wars at the home kitchen table).

My competitive spirit—many times far too competitive, I’m afraid—I owe to dad.

During my high school years, dad put his life on hold to coach summer baseball teams. He loved all his players—and they loved him—but he did it mostly for me.

As soon as dad passed, my youngest sister (Katy) said that dad would say a quick “hi” to mom, his sister, and his parents, before rushing to organize a pick-up game of basketball. So true. If there is a basketball court in heaven, dad will work his way into the starting line-up of one of the teams.

² Jeemes Akers, “Tossin’ the Coin,” *The Akers’ Collected Missives*, missive written in May 2021.

³ *Ibid.*

Dad was so proud of his Native American (Cherokee) heritage. During our trips together, I wish I had a dime for every time dad would say “man, I wonder what this country looked like when the Indians lived here?”

In an earlier missive, I mentioned the trips dad and I used to take. (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.)

Just the two of us.

I already miss being in my father’s presence.

All of this is not to say that dad didn’t have his idiosyncrasies. My dad was a very introspective individual. He shunned crowds and—unlike my mom—was very awkward around people he didn’t know. In the final years of his life, he was content to sit in his living room chair and watch westerns; John Wayne movies and television shows like *Gunsmoke*. He was happy to be by himself (as long as mom cooked, cleaned and brought him his medicine).

He was a throw-back to an earlier age in that respect.

But much—if not most—of that static existence was after they told dad he couldn’t play basketball with his elderly friends anymore (mom and his doctor both were afraid dad would forget the route to get back home).

Dad was so private. He really never let me inside his inner man: his dreams, the major disappointments in his life, or pre-marital flirtations.

Even his effort to explain “the facts of life” when I was a teenager was a clumsy, awkward experience for him.

On the other hand, he was my best man when Ima and I married and helped me at the hospital after my surgery—even though both experiences forced him to step out of his shell a bit.

But his social awkwardness and silence was okay: being in dad’s presence is what counted.

As I mentioned in my previous missive about dad, 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 *Exxon*s, *Mobil*s or anything else.

I think you get the picture.

In some respects, dad was 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 also liked to pull over and read every historical marker along the roadside. And read and *read*—and absorb—every single word! Whether it was a trip to the National Marines Museum or a driving trip down the Natchez Trace Parkway, dad would mull over every word on the museum displays or historical markers. At one battlefield site, for example, 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'm so glad dad now is in a place where his body and mind will be fully restored. Even now, I can imagine him running full speed on heaven's courts.

Finally, I realize my experience with my dad was an unusual blessing. If your own time with your earthly father has been distorted—and you have the psychological scars to prove it—invite Jesus Christ, the ultimate “Father,” to fill the void.

I think dad would want me to tell you that ...