

Eulogy

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In a black-and-white, grainy photo from the seventies, my dad and I stand in a cemetery in Sleepy Hollow, NY, pointing to the ground between us, the grave of one of our Rawsthorne ancestors on my dad's side of the family. We are wearing matching, horizontally striped shirts. I remember the stripes were blue and orange, though they are black and grey in the photo. My dad liked wearing matching shirts, and I was young enough that I didn't even mind.

In those first 13 years I learned a lot from my dad, but much of it was unlike what I guess other kids were learning. Dad did lots of typical dad activities with me—assistant coaching my little league team, where my teammates dubbed me “the strikeout king,” joining the YMCA Indian Guides, where we learned to make Native American-inspired crafts on Wednesday evenings, go on campouts, and march in parades dressed as the Mohicans, and taking occasional trips to the “green candy store” downtown Naperville after Dad got home from work. Sprinkled into these activities, and especially at family dinners, I learned about the jocks who sat in the back row of Dad’s classes at the College of DuPage and didn’t make an effort to learn. I was goaded to contribute to conversations—at dinner, in the car—to avoid being a conversational freeloader. And starting in about fourth grade, my Dad asked me almost daily, “Did you kiss a girl today?” Alongside questions to all three of us about our romantic lives, my brothers and I were taught about “the list.” This was a list my dad maintained during his 20s of the attributes of the woman he would one day marry. The list was long but included key features like attending college on the East Coast, being a member of a sorority and, somewhat mysteriously, having little blue veins along her temples.

The week I turned 13 I parted my hair in the center and started talking back to my dad. In his lexicon, I had changed from being a “bird”—his name for all the neighborhood kids—to being a “god-damned teenager.” We all knew that that was the only kind of teenager in existence. And like all other teenagers, in those years I pushed away from Dad. When I was in middle school, my dad discovered the phrase “other directed,” which he thought perfectly described himself. I condemned him for this, believing, in the black-and-white way of many early teens, that inner direction, standing by your principles, is the higher good. Keeping information from my dad became supremely important. Dad read the notes to me written in my yearbook, after I had explicitly forebade him from doing so. To his credit, he made no attempt to conceal his behavior, but I was still furious. My senior year, he was studying to take the GRE so he could pursue a doctorate in education, and I tutored him on what to me seemed like very basic math. These experiences, coupled with my ongoing failure to kiss a girl today, pushed us apart. In parallel, my brothers and I were convinced, it pushed the three of us closer together, in solidarity in the gale of my dad’s personality.

In my 20’s, I worked to quiet my father’s critical voice in my head. I think all three of us, John, Christopher and I, struggled with what seemed like the central mystery of our family: what drew my parents together. We all knew what drew my dad to my mom: the fabled list. But I remember a family vacation in Colorado in the mid-90’s, gathering around the breakfast table and asking my mom for her side of the story. One part of the answer, the part I remember: she would never be bored. She certainly got that right. I think we three sons cared so much about this question because we had learned by example from my parents how critical and sustaining a marriage can be.

After my own wedding, I began the gradual process of appreciating more and more about my dad. His boundless energy led him to so many activities of which I had been only vaguely aware. Many are listed in his obituary—researching Naperville history, serving on the school board—but there are many more that didn’t fit in the obituary: acting in plays, taking painting classes. He was a gifted gardener and was proud of having won a first place prize for his community garden in Naperville. I have learned over the past decade that though I also like gardening, I have sadly not inherited his green thumb. Once my parents moved to Seattle in 2016, I grew to appreciate Dad’s outspokenness. Despite my mom’s attempts to

keep him from doing so, he was unabashed about reminding me that he would always prefer to get together with me and my family, every day if possible. Indeed, given his druthers, he would have moved into our house.

My dad began planning this funeral when I was in junior high school. If we played every song that he wanted to be played, you all would miss dinner. He wanted this to be a big party, I think because the most important part of his life was all of us here today, his friends and family. My daughter Scout said it correctly earlier this week: what was Grandad about? He wanted to make friends.

I am proud of my dad for being such a success. You are all his successes, the people who knew and loved him, and the people he loved and treasured. I am grateful to my dad for teaching me to reach out and connect to others, and though I will miss him, I promise to carry his lessons onward.