

Fatherly Tales

As I navigated my way through adolescence, my father and I never bonded closely. As to whether my belligerence as a teenager or his stubbornness brought about this disconnect is open to debate. But, we never saw eye-to-eye about anything. However, before I became a teenager, my father and I spent many hours working on projects together. We enjoyed most of our interactions. I will admit that several incidents, back in those days, have remained fond memories and in some ways have influenced how I chose to live my own life. Here are three stories that show how he approached life.

Being about ten years old at the time, having my father bring home a bundle of Christmas presents from business associates on Christmas Eve, filled me with excitement. The whole family enjoyed this annual tradition as the gifts could be unusual, and some appeared rather exotic by our normal gift-giving standards.

But on this one particular year, in addition to the gifts, he also presented Mother with a bag that he had purchased at a fruit and vegetable market in central London.

Intrigued, she opened it and exclaimed "What are they and what do we do with them?"

With a proud smile and a twinkle in his eye, he explained that these strange berry-like fruits were called cranberries and that they should be cooked into a sauce that would be eaten with the turkey. This sent Mother into a mild panic as she found cooking the turkey stressful enough, tomorrow would be Christmas Day, and now Father had thrown a completely mystifying additional item into the mix.

A rather un-festive mood settled over the family while Father ate his dinner and Mother searched desperately through her cook books for anything relating to cranberries. They may have been imported from Venus for they were a totally unknown topic in any of her traditional English cook books.

After he had finished eating, Father said that he knew how to find out about cranberries. We all wondered what he intended doing as, back in those days, the only place to research any unusual facts was the library and it had been closed for several hours.

He went and started searching through the London phone directory. Mother enquired who he intended calling. Without a moment's hesitation, he said he would call the head chef at the Savoy Hotel. For those of you who have never heard of the Savoy Hotel in London, it was one of the finest hotel in the city at the time.

Mother's eyes opened wide and she stuttered, trying to find words "Dave, you, you can't. They don't have time for people like you. Nobody in the kitchens of the Savoy has time on Christmas Eve to talk with you."

But Father's call to the Savoy was answered and politely transferred to the kitchens. The head chef eventually picked up the call and introduced himself to my father. In a manner that felt like they had been friends for years, Father told him about the cranberries and that we could not find a recipe to make cranberry sauce.

The chef's voice took a more relaxed tone as he seemed to shed the stress of the Savoy kitchens for a few minutes "Right, now, let me go an' check a couple of files to find the best and easiest recipe for cranberry sauce. I'll be back."

Meanwhile, Mother, who had retired to the kitchen, had new concerns “Dave, please get off the phone. That’s the Savoy.” The word ‘Savoy’ had been uttered in an august whisper.

Unaware of my Mother’s concerns, the Savoy’s head chef came back to the phone “This looks like the perfect recipe. The cranberries that you bought, what weight did you buy? I’ll adjust the amounts to correspond with your quantity.”

With Father taking copious notes, the chef explained every detail of how to make cranberry sauce. It probably took between 10 and 15 minutes for the entire transfer of knowledge. Meanwhile, my Mother paced the hall, worried that somebody would come to arrest Father for distracting the Savoy’s head chef on Christmas Eve.

After the call ended, Father explained the recipe to Mother who looked a little relieved when she realized it was not very difficult and that she had all the necessary ingredients. However, she would not relax for the evening until she had extracted a promise from Dad that he would never buy something totally foreign to her, on any future Christmas Eve.

We went to bed that night knowing that Santa was on his way and that the cranberries would not be going to waste. The next day, the kitchen was a cauldron of activity with the preparations for Christmas dinner. In all of the confusion and hard work, one small bag of cranberries sat on the table untouched until just before we were ready to eat. Mother looked at the detailed recipe again, she parsed the details down to just a few basic steps. The end result was edible, but not quite what the Savoy’s chef had had in mind.

Father never again bought any cranberries or suggested making unusual sauces to have with the turkey. Mother also made my father promise that he would never call the Savoy ever again.

Several years later, my American girlfriend’s father invited us to join him for dinner at the Savoy, one evening, while he stayed there on a business trip. I must admit that I did think of looking into the kitchens to find out if the same head chef was still there. I decided against doing that; he probably was busy making cranberry sauce.

When I was a teenager, our family lived in the suburbs of north London. Back in those years, the early winter was a season for really bad fogs, which dropped vicinity down to just a matter of feet. Driving became a nightmare and many evenings were spent waiting for my father to make the arduous journey from central London to home. Normally, it took just under an hour, but on the bad foggy nights it could take him more than three or four hours for the trip.

One evening was particularly bad and the fog was showing some classic strange characteristics. It started at about three feet off the ground. Below that, one could see for a long way, but there was a distinct "barrier" at about three feet and heavy fog sat above the "barrier". The fog laid as a blanket up to height of about 15 feet. Above that, the stars and moon sparkled without concern.

My father sat in a slow moving line of cars, driven by frustrated commuters trying to reach their homes. All of a sudden, a sports car zoomed past him on the outer lane

and came to a halt a few feet ahead. Father thought for a second and realized that the sports car was low enough for the driver to be in the clear, under the lowest layer of fog. Without a thought, he pulled out of the line of cars and stopped close to the tail lights of the sports car. He hoped that the sports car was just stopping for a red traffic light. Soon the cars around them started to inch forward while the sports car moved forward at a more normal pace. Father stayed glued to those tail lights, in pursuit of the fastest vehicle within miles.

Luckily, he had a reasonably good sense of direction and judged that the sports car was taking him a little off-route, but they were moving generally in the right direction. After about half an hour of this cat and mouse game, the sports car came to a halt with Father patiently ready for the next movement. But instead of movement, the sports car's lights went out. Father began to mull over his various options.

Father noticed a figure walking next to his side of the car. The man stopped next to his window and Father wound down his window. To protect himself from the damp, cold fog, the man had a wool scarf wrapped around his neck and half his face.

The man mumbled "I know you have been following me for a while. I had the advantage of seein' under the fog. I can't say I'm surprised that somebody used me as their pair of eyes. I'm happy to have helped you so far."

Father wanted to show his appreciation "Well, it didn't take me long to work out I needed to latch onto your tail lights, and "

But before he could continue, the man stopped him "I appreciate your thanks, but I'd be most obliged, if you could back out of my garage." Father had been so intent on staying close to the tail lights that he had pulled into the man's garage and the man could not close the doors with Father half in the garage.

Once Father was back on the street, he determined his approximate location and began charting a course for home. Thankfully, the fog began to lift and, after another half an hour, he arrived home with a large beaming smile on his face. Immediately, he told us the tale of his homeward journey.

Father was not a parent who shared words of wisdom or told us how to live our lives. His actions spoke volumes in terms of how to address problems. He made far more progress following the sports car's tail lights, cut an hour off the journey, and landed up no more lost than anyone else who crawled along in the paralyzed traffic. To need to back out of someone's garage may have felt embarrassing at the time, but what a great story to share later. And now, I am happy to laugh about, and share, one of my father's foibles because I have my own foibles that make my family laugh.

Having just heard a hysterical tale about the first guy to row across the English Channel in a bath tub, I was reminded about another Father tale that demonstrated his disregard for what most people may have chosen to do, in any circumstance. As seemed to be our family's annual vacation plan, we returned to a small cottage on a rather wind-swept island off the south coast of England for a two-week holiday. The island had, I presumed, been named after a local dignitary in years past. Why else would anyone name an island "Haling Island"? It was pronounced "Hailing Island" –

doesn't that sound appealing as a vacation resort? Having subjected the family to another vacation on this delightful isle, on one particular year, we soon found that stretch of the coast was being pounded with continual rainstorms. They held the temperature in the chilly to down-right cold range. Instead of building sand castles in the sand dunes that laid just a matter of yards across the road from the cottage's front door, we spent boring days playing board games and listening to the radio. Being about 9 years old, I had no tolerance for being stuck in doors and probably became a real pain. As the weather showed no sign of abating, my parents decided to arrange a day trip to anywhere, provided it was off the island.

We drove to the local city, Portsmouth, which for centuries had been the main naval base for the British Navy. I did not feel overly happy looking at shop windows as rain cascaded down them. After lunch in a dismal little café, Father had an idea "It looks like the rain may be stopping. How about we take a jaunt down to the docks to see if we can see any battleships or anything interesting?"

That caught my attention "Oh. That would be great."

My sister, Linda was a little less enthusiastic "They probably have guards and won't like us looking at them."

I countered "But, there could be enormous ships with huge guns and maybe, rockets, even."

Mother tried to cool a potential spat between we two frustrated kids "I doubt that we will be able to see anything, but if you think its worth it, Dave, then let's do it."

Dad drove towards the water and soon found signs, pointing towards the Naval Ship Yard. After a few mis-navigations, we found ourselves on a large street lined with beautifully maintained Georgian period houses. There, at the end of the street, ornate steel gates marked the entrance to the Naval dock yard. Sailors, armed with rifles, patrolled the gates and fence that extended far beyond our sight.

Father did not take his foot off the gas and continued towards the gate.

Mother straightened in her seat and looked hesitantly at Father "You can't drive in there. It's forbidden. Dave, we'll be arrested. Stop the car, now."

He smiled and only stopped at the gate, where one of the sailors approached.

With authority, he stated "Sir, you cannot enter through these gates. This is government property and civilians are not allowed to enter."

I slumped down into the back seat and pouted "I really wanted to see a ship."

Dad added "I know this is not your standard practice, but its not much fun for the kids with it raining all the time. Can we just have a quick look around?"

The sailor thought for a short time "Look, I don't do this for most folks, but just make it a brief circuit down to the water and back. It should be quiet. Go on, but be quick."

Dad rolled up his window as he drove into one of the most protected bases in Britain. Mother stammered "Oh, my gracious. You just talked us into Portsmouth Harbor. I can't believe you. Now let's get out of here, soon. I'm a nervous wreck."

Dad drove through streets lined with warehouses and offices. We were all amused when everyone, who saw us, saluted as we passed.

When we reached the water's edge, there stretching around multiple docks lay more ships and guns than any 9-year-old boy could ever fantasize about. While Mother insisted we turned around immediately, Father turned to drive alongside the water. He proceeded to follow the main road that ran through the docks. Outside of one building that sat right on the edge of the water, a group of naval officers stood talking. Seeing us, they motioned for us to stop.

Father feigned innocence "The guard on the gate said it would be fine for us to take a quick look around. I hope we are not in the way."

One of the officers looked inside the car and noticed Linda and I sitting, amazed, in the back seat. "Would you all like to take a boat tour round the docks? It looks like the rain will hold off for a while."

Dad looked over his shoulder just in time to hear me shout "Ye. Oh boy."

Linda and Mother looked rather uncomfortable, but seemed willing to join Dad and myself.

The officer introduced himself as the Harbor Master and said that his launch was fueled and ready. He didn't seem to have any issues, when Dad introduced our family as a bunch of civilians who had just talked their way into the docks. Dad parked the car and we were escorted down to the Harbor Mater's launch, where sailors helped us board safely.

A junior sailor stood behind the wheel, pressing buttons and steering, in response to the Harbor Master's orders. As we passed numerous huge ships that loomed so overwhelmingly above our launch. As we passed each ship and submarine, the Master reeled off various facts, figures and stories about them. My overloaded mind juggled with so much information. I stood awe-struck, staring out of the misting windows as we passed ships, some of which I had seen and read about in magazines, previously.

When the Master said we needed to return, the sailor pulled hard on the wheel to swing us back towards the Harbor Mater's offices. The Master looked over at me "Would you like to drive the launch, sonny?"

I hesitantly turned to Mother and Father, standing on the other side of the wheel house. Father said "Go on. You will probably never have another offer like that."

My hands started sweating and I must have suddenly looked terrified, because Mother added "Be careful. Don't hit anything."

I took the wheel from the sailor, who positioned himself right at my shoulder. My knees quaked as the launch rolled when a wave crossed its path. I was petrified I would ram and sink a battleship, while steering a 30-foot launch, but I was 9 years old and reality could be scarier than my imagination.

I succeeded making the necessary turns, with a little coaching, to bring us back to the start. My heart rate was still so elevated, afterwards, that the junior sailor had to lift me onto the dock.

We all returned to the car and Father navigated his way back to gate, where the sailor who had initially granted us entry had long been off-duty. So much for a quick look around.

I did think about joining the Navy, as I progressed through school, but decided that steering a launch around the docks would be the pinnacle of my military career.