

MINERAL AREA COUNCIL ON THE ARTS

2020 CREATIVE WRITING CONTEST
WINNER

Theme: The Journey

Adult Essay

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Train up a child in the way that he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it.

Proverbs 22.6

I was 12 in the summer of 1973. A happy child who worshipped at the altar of baseball. I could tell you the stats of any player whose card you held up before me and was certain of my future as the third baseman for the St. Louis Cardinals. My heroes wore red and white and held court in Busch Stadium.

How little I knew of heroes then. What they were. What they did with their lives.

It never occurred to me in those idyllic days that perhaps the greatest hero I would ever know was a simple man who worked hard providing for his wife and son and beloved mother.

My father was a man who took on great responsibility at an early age. His own childhood abruptly interrupted by the death of my grandfather, Dad put aside his own dreams and went to work, determined, despite his own deep grief at the loss of his Dad, to insure that my grandmother would be cared for and not struggle to make ends meet.

I have often wondered what went through his mind in those first terrible days after grandpa passed suddenly and unexpectedly from a heart attack. The man he called Pop was the cornerstone of his life. I know my Dad worshipped his memory. He once told me there had never been a better man than his Pop. I never met my grandfather and yet, through my father's memories I came to know him well and love him. I was impressed, as a boy, by dad's devotion to his father's legacy and how undying the respect he held for him was. My dad was not easily impressed, and it drove home how special my grandfather had been.

Dad worked in a lumber yard for a few years until he was old enough to apply for the railroad. He and mom married, and dad bought his first home, building a home for his mother next door. I came along in 1961 and our family was complete.

My father had a lifelong love of mechanical and auto body repair work and had opened a small shop both as a hobby and to supplement his income. By this time, he was working in the mining industry, a job that,

while paying well, was far more dangerous than my mother and grandmother would have liked. Dad worked night shift in the mine and ran his repair shop during the day. He was a rare business owner in that he never advertised, depending solely on word of mouth to attract customers. It was a rare day when any bay was open.

On a hot July day in the summer of 1973 my father was working on putting a motor in a truck and it was turning out to be one of those jobs where absolutely nothing was going well. For one of the few times I can remember Dad was in a bad mood and his near ever-present smile nowhere to be seen. I was trying to help but was too young and inexperienced to be of much use to him.

Muttering under his breath, he threw the wrench down and told me to run tell Mom we were going to Flat River for parts. I was quiet as we left home, and my dad didn't speak at all, simply lit a cigarette and drove. It was rare for him to be visibly downcast and I wished I could help. Not being a totally ignorant child, I remembered the admonition of silence being golden and tried not to upset dad further.

We were not far from home when we passed a man in uniform walking along the side of the road. Not saying a word, dad pulled over and waited for him to come up to us. When he hurried up to the truck, fighting his heavy bag into position over his shoulder, I was surprised by how young he appeared. It was hard for me to believe, he looked hardly older than I did in that day. Sweating and visibly exhausted, he thanked dad for pulling over. Dad asked where he was headed and the young soldier replied, 'home, sir. I'm going home.'

Where's home, Dad asked? 'Potosi, sir.'

'Throw your duffle in the bed, son. We'll take you home.'

Gratefully, the soldier heaved his bag into the bed and climbed into the cab. I scooted over close to my dad to give him room and was again taken aback by how very youthful he looked.

I was surprised by dad's offer, as Potosi was 20 miles away and he had been in a hurry to return to the job at hand. Dad had served in the Army himself, and I suppose he saw a bit of his own self in the young man. Regardless of the reason, he would not pass a man in uniform, if possible.

As he drove, dad and the young soldier talked about where he had been, I was shocked to learn he was returning from Vietnam, a place I knew of only from the nightly news, a place we were at war, but I couldn't have told you where or why.

As he spoke the pain of his memories was evident in his voice and face. He did not go into details and didn't need to. Even to a boy like I was it was obvious. He was 19 that summer, he told us, an age when cars and girls and first jobs should have been on his mind, not a bloody war half a world away.

Dad didn't speak a lot, simply listened as he unburdened himself to a fellow soldier, my father having earlier spoken of his own time in uniform. He was a good listener and could draw out most anyone with a simple empathy I often envied but could never quite duplicate.

The miles rolled swiftly on and I could see the gladness in the young soldiers' eyes as we entered familiar territory for him. How many nights had he dreamed of this very moment as he sought comfort in his memories so far from his home? How many times had he despaired the moment would ever come?

As we crested the final hill on Highway 8 and his hometown lay before him in the bright sunlight, I heard a choking sound from him and tried not to look as he fought back the tears. Proud he was, but he was still a young man and the home he had so missed filled his vision. His emotion affected my young self as my eyes filled with tears for him. Dad simply stayed quiet, understanding all too well the moment.

Dad asked where he needed to go, and he replied that we could just drop him off at the stop sign and he would walk the rest of the way. He said we had done so much already

My father answered. 'son, I said we'd take you home and that's just what we're going to do.'

Laughing, the young GI gave Dad directions to his parents' home. It was a moment that would come to mind often in my life. We pulled up across the street from his house and he sat for just a moment, gathering himself, before he got out of the truck and retrieved his duffle from the bed. He stood by the truck, gripping dad's hand, trying to find the words as unashamed tears ran down his face. My father gripped his hand and told him it was he who was owed thanks and it was our privilege.

We watched him walking away and saw him drop his bag and break into a run as an older lady came out the door, we heard her happy screams and saw his father and siblings come to him and encircle him in loving hugs and welcome kisses.

He was home. All the horrors he had lived and may live again temporarily forgotten, replaced by love stronger than fear, stronger than death, in the arms of the woman who gave him life.

My dad watched for just a moment after and silently drove away. As we went back toward Flat River my father's dark mood had lifted and his eyes had a happy light in them.

Laughing, I told dad we had gone 40 miles out of our way to take that soldier home.

Dad said, yes, we had, but son, he went 8000 miles out of his way for us, remember that. It was dad's way of teaching, not to speak of what was right, but to do what was right and honorable, to show by example how a man should live.

My father died on a gray December day, just before Christmas. He was 84 and had touched many lives as he had touched the young soldiers. A man of quiet faith and deep love and humility, dad left a legacy of kindness and friends too many to count.

I remember the stories my dad told me of his own father. I remember the love and tenderness with which he treated my mother and grandmother all those many years. And I remember a man always approachable, always with a moment to spare a young son with too many questions.

I like to think, in his final moment on the earth, that Dad saw my mother, with his mom and dad, stretching forth their hands with loving smiles and saying, 'Come on, Bill. We'll take you home.'

As we move through this journey of life may each of us take a moment to be the helping hand, the sympathetic ear, the kind word, the example for another traveler in need. And may we all remember there is a Creator in who all things are possible for those who believe.

In loving memory of William Edward Marler. My father, my inspiration and guiding light, and the only hero I have ever known. I love you so much, Dad, and I miss you terribly.