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Lessons From Our Fathers

by Herb Greenberg and Patrick Sweeney

What lessons did we learn from our fathers? Have you taken on his favorite phrase? Do you change the oil or shoot hoops with that certain technique he taught you? Or do you sometimes catch yourself using an inflection on some specific word just like your dad? What will your children learn from you – intentionally or not?

"Those questions get at the heart of who I am," said Jeffrey Lurie, owner of the Philadelphia Eagles, when we interviewed him for our book about the qualities that drive people to succeed. "The truth of the matter is that much of who I am has to do with the fact that my father died when I was very young. And he's the one who taught me the game of football."

Jeffrey was nine years old when his father passed away after a long bout with cancer. His father was one of the first experimental chemotherapy patients in the United States. "They did everything they could," he explained, "but there was no turning it around."

Growing up in the shadow of his father was "a complicated situation," as Jeffrey described it. "I was the oldest child with a younger sister and an autistic brother. My mother had her hands full. For me, it was difficult to be the oldest male in the family at such a young age. So I think what happened to me is that on the one hand I felt a heavy sense of responsibility, and on the other hand I felt a need to escape. I would try to be around for my mother. Then I would delve into sports and movies as my escape. In fact, my favorite movie of all time is *The Great Escape*, starring Steve McQueen."

There he was, nine years old, trying to be responsible and, at the same time, looking for an escape hatch. "I turned my escapes into the dreams I wanted to fulfill," he said.

"From the time my father died, you know, I've always valued life more because of what happened," Jeffrey explained. "When you see your father deteriorate and die so young, you are thankful just to be alive. And then you take your own life very seriously. So I grew up feeling certain about some things, but puzzled about others. Like why did my talented, handsome, vibrant young father die so early? I still wrestle with that huge question. Yet there was no denying that he was no longer with us. That everything had changed."

Jeffrey wanted to be there for his mother while, deep down, there was a longing to disappear into the movies he was watching. What kept him going?

"Undeniably, part of my motivation was that I really wanted to do something special to honor my father, as well as to acknowledge how great my mom was through it all. So I thought that if I could be really successful, that would be a testimony to both of them. That's really been a driving force for me."

He paused, then added, "When something as devastating as losing your father occurs, you can see yourself as a victim and expect that bad things are always going to happen. Or you can redirect your energy...you can take what happened and create something wonderful because of it. The loss of my father gave me an appreciation of the fragility of life. That is one of life's most important lessons. Part of my confidence and optimism is a direct result of the lessons I've learned from adversity. I know how short life can be, and that propels me."

When we asked Jeffrey what lessons he would want a child to learn from his life, he shrugged, smiled and said, "Oh, I don't know. I'm just looking forward to getting home tonight to play ping-pong with my son."

There's surely a lesson in that answer.

When we asked Muggsy Bogues, the shortest National Basketball Association player of all time, what lesson he would like a child to learn from his life, he said, "Never give up. If you believe in something, don't let anybody sway you. Go all-out and see it through. Don't be afraid to reach for your dreams. If you fail, so what? As long as you gave it everything. You'll get there. Believe in yourself and go for it."

"When I'm talking with young people, I tell them the story of the Movement," Congressman John Lewis (D-GA), the renowned civil rights advocate, shared with us. "And sometimes I tell them that if someone had told me when I was a kid growing up on a sharecropper's farm that I would one day work with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and with President Kennedy and with Robert Kennedy and that I would be a member of Congress, I'd say, 'You're crazy.' But it happened. So I say to young people, 'Don't give up. Don't give in. Don't become bitter. Don't become hostile. Don't get lost in the sea of despair. Keep the faith. Hold on to your dreams. Do everything you can to make those dreams real.' And I tell them to love. It is better to love than to hate. Always."

Joao Carlos Martins, who performed a passionate, landmark Bach recital at Carnegie Hall after losing the use of his right hand, said, "I would advise my children to control their emotions in a way that I did not. I let my emotions run away with me. It was good for my music, but not for some of the personal decisions I made. I would advise them to be a little bit cooler than I was. But one thing I would like them to have from me is to love life the way I do. Because this is the way we can have a hope for tomorrow. To love life. I love life every minute of the day."

Angelo Sotira, whose online company was purchased by Michael Ovits while he was still in high school, added, "School is busy trying to make people well-rounded. And if you have an edge, you might not fit in. Though I'm a great admirer of education, people without edges are often less interesting. And well-rounded people can be quite boring. So learn what you can from school, but realize it's only one place to learn. There are plenty of other places. My advice is: if you're interested in being on the cutting edge, if you have it in you to go out there and tear things up, do it. Granted, that's not great advice for everybody. But if you're built that way, you know what I mean."

You know what he means?

Advice either rings true or it doesn't.

All we can tell you for certain is that the last piece of advice children generally want to hear is the one that comes from their parents.

Still we pass things on. Even when we don't mean to.

-- Herb Greenberg and Patrick Sweeney are the authors of "Succeed on Your Own Terms," from which this column was adapted.

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