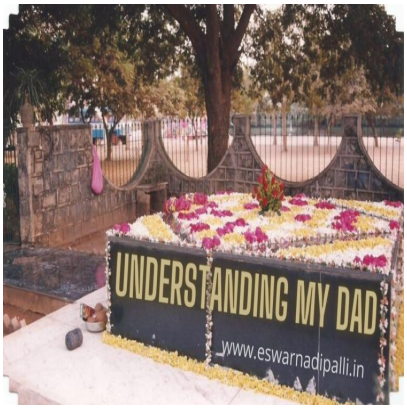


UNDERSTANDING MY DAD

Description

default watermark

(I wrote and posted this essay five years ago in 2017, and now I have revised it to add more words representing my emotions when I was a kid and later as a grown-up celebrating the tasks as a teacher and administrator. This essay remembers my dad and what he had achieved and stood for. I was grateful for all the sacrifices he made to ensure that it well provided the family for. And these few confessions are a tribute to my dad and a way to keep his legacy going.)

My dad passed away at the early age of fifty-six; he suffered a massive heart attack, a sudden tragedy shocking for my family members. I was twenty-eight then, married, and had two dependent younger brothers to care for. The shocking news fell harsher upon my mother â?? hospitalized, underwent a major operation just a day before that dreadful evening. Strapped immobile on a gurney, she had to reach home in an ambulance. Although a tough woman, the sudden tragedy left her inconsolable. People crowded in the school compound spoke in whispers about the schoolâ??s future. A poignant unease hung among parents who gathered along with hundreds of students and friends, and well-wishers added to the desolate swell waiting to pay homage to my dad. He had been a celebrated principal and administrator of one of the pioneering schools in our town.

I will never forget how my nerves trembled. I wondered how inexplicable the tug that found me at the scene unfolding in the quiet shadows on that doomed night was.

My dad was a stubborn fighter who enjoyed a robust frame, but the ordeal was quite terrifying on that late evening. â??I saw him struggling to hold his balance and body, and within seconds he just collapsed even before I attempted to keep him off from slumping.â?• Then I noticed my mind was racing fast, unable to grasp the brutal shock playing before me, and my senses ran dry; I couldnâ??t breathe my thoughts together.

â??Whatâ??s happening to him, rush? Run,â?• words perhaps, in fear, fainted in my throat.

In those ticking seconds, I felt as if I were standing on a beach; a huge wave grabbed me, stunned, and I didnâ??t know where to run and what to do. A few feet away from my dad, I stood alone. I saw him

trembling, his hand pressing on his chest and the other holding the window; I rushed toward him, confused and frightened. His silhouette looked frail in the darkness. It took me a second to sense why he was wriggling, as if someone were squeezing him tight. Foreboding thoughts ran stiffly inside me. My mind seemed to reel in fear as I rushed toward him. Shivering anxiety weakened my hands when I tried to support him with my arms, but the next moment he slipped and fumbled out of my grip and collapsed; something like an axed trunk fell to the ground. It looked scary; no one was around. I tried to call out for help, but I knew it was the hour none bothered to peep into our compound. I couldnâ??t hold him long. His bulky body stood beyond my capacity to hang onto, so I let him lay on the rough floor, unaware that he was down, lifeless, and gone forever.

The moonless night spread thick, nothing visible. Itâ??s past ten, and the incident happened on February 2, 1990.

A little over a decade and a half before, we lived in a one-acre compound; my dad first constructed five small cubicles at one corner for rentals to augment his meager income, packing one bedroom and a kitchen. I stood lean and twelve years naÃ¯ve where my dad pushed me after school hours to water the small vegetable beds. So many of them ran all across the well-tilled land I had to weed from the damp furrows of the unwanted stubbles. And followed by drawing water from the well at the end of the compound to irrigate the young coconut saplings planted along the length of the compound wall.

default watermark

Those innocent budding years helped me realize the humility in participating in many leisure tasks that my dad asked me to perform. But I was grateful for one gentle habit that stuck. The errands excited me, like a blooming flower bud â?? fresh and buoyant, to tune my tiny mind to grasp the pleasures derived from hard work and the love of labor. The excitement settled as a lifetime quest from then on. I decided never to invite idleness. Thus, the past dayâ??s encouraging sparks lit a flame that became brighter with each growing year. And later, when I grew into an independent self, my work-loving habit wonderfully became a part of my flexible personality. And indeed, my perseverance in clinging to the pattern gave me an early start to figuring out there are no shortcuts to leading a life with integrity and honor. Hard work means everything, and itâ??s worth keeping for a lifetime.

My dad walked around in a medium height frame, a triangular somber face crowned with thick black and gray hair. His eyes were bright, fierce, and questioning, with years of intense study and ever penetrative to absorb anything from his vast personal library. I found him sizing up complex theories, formulae, and equations early in the mornings and late at night. Our house comprised two small rooms, and furniture was minimal and rugged, chairs and tables made of cheap wood hammered into shape where nails refused to stay in place. Though comforts were minimal, I wondered how my dad had savored those higher intellect and scientific philosophy pages. He seemed lost in a mission and immersed as if the world outside had never existed. So often, to my young mind, not sure, but I suspected he bothered less about the family responsibilities.

My paternal grandfather â?? a goldsmith by profession, with his two daughters and four sons, and my father was the youngest, migrated from a nearby village to Vijayawada in the early fifties, and it was a small town. None showed interest in the family vocation, but the siblings received respectable acclaim in fine arts. My two uncles excelled in oil painting. Besides being art teachers and photographers, they earned a name for creating life-size oil portraitures like the ones we notice, ornately framed, in the rich and famous drawing rooms.

So liberal in their outlook, my grandparents never bothered about the puritanical societal norms. Instead, they have shown a laudable judgment, being bold and unorthodox, and encouraged their daughtersâ?? education. Both my aunts received a wonderful education, entered the teaching profession, and shone as votaries of the fine arts.

In its early fifties, Vijayawada town was a small sleepy municipality with nothing noteworthy, though richly surrounded by fertile lands where paddy and sugarcane crops flourished. Maybe, I gather, it looked like a stretched-out village crowded with cycle rickshaws and gravel roads. Romancing the books and learning began for my dad in this small town. And they found him driven to spend most of his time studying. Not having good schools in the vicinity has always been a disadvantage. Years later, a roadblock slowed his forward march, a dilemma. Having completed his higher secondary education, he faced a situation he hadnâ??t expected. They arenâ??t any colleges offering graduate courses in Vijayawada, but the hurdle didnâ??t deter him. He packed his bags, rented a room in a neighboring town, and continued the sprint for graduation. Though he moved to the new place with meager means, he aced himself, like resolute people do, to win a bachelorâ??s degree specializing in mathematics and physics. Although he received little financial support from his family, the reality didnâ??t divert him from seeking opportunities in the right direction and the resilience to plant him on a focused academic turf and train his dreams.

default watermark

The years after the 1950s, I reckon, were perhaps the most eventful: the Indian state hasnâ??t come out of the post-independence anguish; despite all the discouraging prospects closing in, my dad tied his aspirations to a loftier notch, climbing the ladder of higher education not disturbing the focus of his intellectual compass that led, pleasing himself and his family, to the completion of post-graduation. Later, he achieved a doctoral thesis from the Benares Hindu University in Uttar Pradesh, Indiaâ??s most populous Hindi-speaking northern state. It amazed me when I pictured my dad walking the most challenging paths. I canâ??t but sympathize with him when I mentally recapture those bygone grueling episodes, how humbly he may have invested the best efforts facing the uphill battles six decades ago. For the emotional price he must have paid. Let me also account for the human stress endured and the countless travails and setbacks he might have shrugged off. And the surge of determination he probably has forged to tread an academic road so scraggy that it may have had intimidated any self-doubting character. But not my dadâ??s stubborn obsession â?? counting on his intellectual attributes. He followed wherever his vision led him, even to cross the transatlantic shores.

Soon after the British exited in 1947, India seemed to battle an awful crisis, the gravest of all â?? the economic front. Food and daily necessities were scarce, only sourced through overcrowded ration shops. Transportation and communications systems ran on outdated practices, and the state was struggling in the throes of self-transformation and consolidation of social structure.

During the days of such bleak realities, my dad traveled from south to farther the northern parts of India, perhaps three or four days tumbling in a train to reach the university town. I wasnâ??t sure if he was fluent in Hindi, the communicative medium in those regions. We are used to our mother tongue, Telugu. Hindi was never so standard a communicative language in most southern states, which doesnâ??t occupy a wee bit in our daily banter. And I wondered how my dad would have managed six decades ago. â??I canâ??t make any intriguing guess. I donâ??t dare to imagine. Also, he minded his dreams, and he had guts, grip, and deep heels to run after his goals.â?•

Holding a doctoral thesis in spectroscopy in physics tucked under his arms when he landed In North Carolina, the political scenario in the US too seemed unfavorably critical, more turbulent than the goings-on in India when he boarded the plane from Madras. America in the 1960s was no paradise for dream seekers; economically sunk, embroiled in crusades of racial justice and civil rights moment protests were rampant. But fortunately, those were the promising exuberant Kennedy years, too. The year was 1964, and I was a mere four-year-old kid. Yet the one outline permanently etched, what I remembered, the sepia-toned moment where my uncles and my mother waved to my dad as he walked toward the airplane. I memorized this seminal event in my dadâ??s determined life story, which still seemed to have happened a year ago.

His quest never cared about hardships. With each knock, he said to himself, â??just move forward,â?• so he did and continued until he belonged to his academic dreams. He earned a doctorate in physics from the famous Banaras Hindu University, later after a brief stint in teaching at the Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur, followed by a four-year sojourn in the USA at the University of North Carolina. Unfortunately, his post-doctoral pursuit in the US was abruptly cut short because of the sudden death of his elder brother. He returned to his native place, Vijayawada, in 1968.

default watermark

You may well notice a bit of confusion in my narration: a conflict and the dislike I had maintained with my dad when I was too young. And later, the reverence I held for him, the way I adored him in my adulthood and as a career man.

My earlier memories spun around my dad after his dramatic departure and kept returning, like alluvium, to my heartâ??s shores. I possibly never let those sentiments off from my senses and the realness of the tragedy and a regretful scar it burnt. And it remained among the difficult emotions, something like a nostalgic mind photograph.

During my school days and further, when I reached college-going age, I had seen less of my dad as a parent. He always hovered above me as a strict teacher, a harsh guardian demanding nothing else but hollering about discipline. His â??spare the stick and spoil the childâ?? stubborn insistence in making me sit before school books suffocated me even before I was up in the morning â?? every day. I may have told myself a thousand times; allow me to run away from home.

My resentful dislike, I meant as a hostage, a puppet in the form of a pen, paper, and maths, prevented me from working on those prolonged, complex, confusing mathematical exercises. My ignorant years were too feeble to bear the tension my dadâ??s loud voice carried. I noticed something choking against my chest: a reflex, should I attempt to resist, a spurt of aversion kicking up to having to endure that stress. This dissenting clamor silently simmering in me rose to form a barrier, and the emotional fallout was so bad that it all ended that I got tagged as incompetent. I became dull, lost interest in my studies, and started entertaining an inert dislike toward my dad.

In the years that followed, I had to admit, in any appreciable way, that I had not gained even a fraction of outstanding academic excellence in school or subsequent years in college. A bitter secret I held for myself still today, a yawning truth. I wasnâ??t a brainy geek, nor was I shining like a bright bloke. And the fact never embarrassed me in any shamefulness or prompted any overwhelming urge or urgency to better my studies. I slept about having no trace of shamefulness and a â??who is going to careâ?? posture and no emotions at my below-average grades and mediocre results throughout my years of

academic amnesia.

Nobody knew about it.

But the psychological backlash spread the sore deep because of my dadâ??s overzealous worry that I have to fare well in education. In the subsequent years, his ruling had eroded whatever remained â?? the final scrapes of self-confidence. Let me call it a blowup of fear or hatred or both fused, but the outcome, like in a slow chemical reaction, the blend got morphed and later hardened deep in me forever. I became like a used-up phone that is good outside but doesnâ??t serve its purpose. And throughout my professional career, I lived with a stalemate mentality, a shiver of timidity displayed on my face whenever I stood to combat any adverse circumstance.

Once I started managing the school responsibilities, I had to quash the many psychological knots that remained stashed deep in me for so long to counter the subconscious stress. And I cleaned out the dust of feelings piled up and treated myself, breathing reams of hope into my adulthood. Next, to manage the challenges, I had to source a plan â?? a sane balance of courage to stand up to any significant encounters, hone my skills, pull myself out of the low self-esteemed cocoon, stand tall and invite confidence. And I figured out its possible when I have faith in my individuality, profiling some adjustments in the outlook to prop my fragile psyche to care for my life, family, and school. That meant reinventing the troubling aspect of my credibility every day. All I need is to see beyond my broken past and make the right choices, which I believe could be a helpful plan to rid my thoughts of making circles around the old self.

default watermark

The mental task wasnâ??t as easy as I had presumed.

All the negativity accumulated with those half-baked blunt feelings never went silent. It was something similar to an onion, piled layer upon layer, each more bitter than the previous. These vulnerabilities often used to tire me. I found it hard to clear away from those overcrowded suspicions I held throughout my formative years. Against my dad!

My dad, in every manner, overshadowed me. I never breathed easy so long as he was around and active. But, although it may sound funny now, his image always possessed a part of me; his fearsome voice kept ringing as punctual as loud as a school bell, never still, and I couldnâ??t shake away from his persona, funnily enough, even long after I got married.

My life took a different tangential; soon after, my dad passed away. I discovered that the emotional wounds seem to fall like discarded scraps of vegetable peel after a peel. Negativity cramped for so long fled quickly, like a toddler would burst out after the last school bell, and hope comforted itself much sooner than I expected. I started seeing a radiating version of myself and said, â??Iâ??m sure I will continue to live on more relaxing terms.â?•

Itâ??s like a revival, as if I were a bird out of a cage, those suppressive walls of my dadâ??s predominance. I found an overwhelming emotional space out there. The days allowed me to move fast and slow, and I imagined myself floating and splashing around like a kid roaming on a beach away from an adultâ??s gaze â?? carefree and fearless.

But a prickling sense of consciousness started buzzing about my carefree nerves. In reality, the freedom didnâ??t afford any sunshine, and I found myself within a different haunting fence, in a

vacuum of my dadâ??s emotive absence. It started stinging, a â??something not wellâ?? inertia holding me back, an impulse that tasted not so good, unsuspecting, weighing heavily upon me. I couldnâ??t explain this strange recoil of commotion in plain terms.

Feeling empty and guilty, I wondered about the causes of that invisible sentimentalism stalking me after my dadâ??s demise. I debated for a long, unsure of how I needed to deal with my past errors, when I found myself squatting at the crossroads, preparing to move on.

â??Perhaps I have overdone my views by tweaking how my dad conveyed his anguish and aspirations. But, unfortunately, I wasnâ??t smart enough to see the reveals of his feelings,â?• I thought, looking back at the past events.

The more I recalled the years I fire fought my dad, and I had to agree itâ??s my infantile behavior, the more I regretted the vulnerability I have carried till today. But the buried pain, though, doesnâ??t seem to melt away any sooner.

My fault never seemed apparent until after many months, when I understood the exhaustion of his absence, and it didnâ??t make my further journey to my daily plans any less difficult. It seemed like my gross mistake not recognizing the path he had illuminated. But I only saw shadows, never the meaning of the invisible hand that showed the way ahead by an academic explorer â?? my dad.

default watermark

In my dadâ??s approach, I mistook the spirit of his attitude; I displayed an utter disregard for the guidance he had emphasized all these years. I regret I had never behaved like a grown-up. Indeed, I also failed to respond like an obedient kid to his kindred parenting. Maybe I wasnâ??t strong enough to sense his learned logic from a helpful perspective. I paid a heavy intellectual price for not believing his learning philosophy,and itâ??s like closing the door to prophesy of behavior that waited to come. Itâ??s out of shame and remorsefulness, and I have to admit graciously, I never fell in line the way he expected me to.

Sometimes, when I open my chaotic book, the way I used to exist, in those blindfolded days, and suddenly, the blinkers untied, I reflect on the years filled by my dadâ??s intense self. I sense an aura, a silhouette of his profile, seeing him deep in thinking and lost in subjects and showing his profound love of his obsession â?? reading. I have allowed that habit to go deep into myself with an incisive penchant â?? perusing good books. I can say it has given me a unique identity and faithfully revealed what I was, unbelievably not.

Over the years, I have realized this. How foolishly I was blind throughout my growing years. I found my dad had encouraged me with parental grit and had never spilled a hint that he meant a loving parent seeking my growth and wellbeing. However, it still baffles me how he had done it, positioned, with tact, that psychological distance all those years.

My dad wouldnâ??t have suspected the foreboding fate he was about to meet on that fateful night. Yet, till today, I wonder at that inexplicable realness, â??What is the quirky providence that has prompted me to rush to be near him?â?• a flash of flukiness, a twist of fate that sought me, being the eldest son, at the right time. How serendipitously, I stayed beside him and faced the ordeal I never imagined I would ever suffer, to witness his last breath disappear into thin air?

I remember the penultimate seconds where I waited, holding my dad close with nothing but devotedness in those shadows. Those indelible watershed moments in my life had reformative anguish and saw an emergence of a new person. It seemed like a gratifying destiny waiting to accept me in the future years. He had left his body, but he filled mine with a new consciousness and realization. Soon I have inspired myself to take charge of the days that awaited me; it seemed like I had shed my old skin and entered a new habit.

Henceforth, I started adapting to a different lifestyle, as if I had descended into a new world â?? wiser and gentle. I never breathed so easily, enjoying the leisure as if I were a fearless rabbit in a garden. Yet, a lingering, aggressive fear started shaping somewhere in the corners. Can I lead a life removed from the protected shadows of my dad? Can I see myself as a foot soldier walking along with the footprints he laid before me: righteous, strict, and success-minded?

A few months later, I wasted no time and took charge of the institutional duties of the school, which he managed for a decade and a half. Days were busy with a good amount of work; in ways I wanted to engage myself â?? sort of independent being, to be something different, something my heart loved. The newfound strength spelled itself through an awakening process, coming out in small steps. Itâ??s hard, though, not to be swept away by the painful mourning, giving me a chance to steady my future. Still, the pain of his absence paraded before me every day, and I never missed the chorus of my dadâ??s instructions hovering close to me.

default watermark

Something like:

Most aspects of life will not fulfill our requirements. Therefore, stay calm, and do not let the disappointments pull you down.â?• He said.

If I pry a little closer to the memories that led to my dad behaving in a certain way, he had been what he had been toward me: rigid, indifferent, and detached. I knew those were all the emotionally inflated messages I fed myself during those years, his tough stance supervising my adolescence. I never imagined my dad had a plan, entertained a vision with an unrevealed strategy that would steer me into a promising future. Even in my lazy dreams, I never suspected he held those subterranean sentiments. He had never made clear any of his rationales. As a dumb lad, only I never understood the truth behind his fierce-looking profile, a fact that I couldnâ??t interpret those simple veiled efforts that he, little by little, in many whimsical ways, conferred the best he had to impart to his son.

The following three decades are a solo journey of self-discovery while mourning his absence. Though I allowed that gnawing guilt, the ingrained image I had held in my early days, to go away, the pang of remorse refused to subside. In the years that followed, my dadâ??s memories never stopped bothering me, never faded, instead shone like a guiding path, and nudged me to go after his way of living. I found no escape from the nostalgic dominance which followed me as a shadow, and no way could I shield myself. Therefore, I accepted the essence I was liable to live with and reconciled that I could never lead a life insured away from his reminiscences. My dadâ??s predominance was not like an â??out of sight, out of mindâ?? case of diminishing influence. The imagery maybe like this: his yearning soul may have, perhaps, installed an embryonic core deep inside me, creating healing noises, intervening at the right time, voicing his concerns, and calling to convey, â??Donâ??t keep you away from me.â?•

Scanning through some of my dadâ??s photographs extracted from three decades of well-preserved albums, trying to wipe dry his giddy memories, I still stare in awe at the elegant visual feature of his

attitude. The way he walked in, with shining black shoes and a glittering white shirt, the aspect of a proud swagger used to be a relishing visual. As a ten-year dainty frame, as if to mimic, I also made a few amusing attempts to hold with my little hands the half trousers fitted limply around my skinny waist.

Those threads of faint memories glowed, a misty light to illuminate the yesteryearsâ?? splendor. But, one feature â?? my dadâ??s distinctive dressing style had left an iconic image on my mental sensor. Itâ??s the dignity with which he strode wearing his â??foreign-returnedâ?? qualification, endorsed by his spick-and-span dressing order.

Faithfully, even three decades after his departure, when he was hardly a fifty-six-year-old academic champion, his dressing style somehow left a lasting influence. I imitate his adoring dressing attitude. I have to say, and it has prompted in me a sort of self-love. And over the years, I allowed my body to enjoy how I felt better, and I was proud of those impressions. However, I may look half as elegant as he once used to be, but I still derived the satisfaction that I have been trying to be his son.

At 56, though it sounds weird, I arrived at the same milestone wherein my father succumbed to a heart ailment. It had been well over twenty-five years since I selected the teaching career, and I chose it to be my destiny that my dad had preordained. As a teacher and administrator with an eye for elegant dress sense, Iâ??m respected, admired, and complimented.

default watermark

Deep in introspection, as I stroll down the long corridors of the school that he had established, not a day ends without his image stumbling into my thoughts, like a medley â?? his incisive voice, authoritarian aspect, and demanding eyes.

The splendid memories intermingled every day; every step and word endeared me. And I wish my life filled with dutiful faithfulness to my dad â?? and heâ??s eternal.

Category

1. Uncategorized

Date Created
2022/05/16
Author
eswarnadipalli