

Deconstructing Dad

I am a construction worker—but not in the traditional sense, mind you. Mine is not a labor of bricks and mortar, but rather of dreams and memories. The great rebuilding that is now underway was not commissioned by some over-staffed government agency, just the passing of my father two years ago—or was it three? And like many construction projects, an old structure has become obsolete in some manner or another and must be torn down, pushed aside before a new foundation can be poured and recently minted red beams lifted into place and welded together.

The old structure is my father's world.

I am sitting on the floor of my father's office—except that it really hasn't been his office for these last few years—not since cancer crept into his lymph system without a building permit, initiated its own clandestine demolition, and carted him away from our lives. The worst thing about cancer is that it never sticks around long enough to clean up after itself. No—it left me to deal with the punch list.

His Last Will and Testament is my blue print.

The legal documents have all been executed and my dad's name has been mined from assorted accounts, automobile titles, and rosters of professional organizations. This refuge is the final piece of his world that I must dismantle, presumably to make way for something new—whatever that might be. The once ordinary items that fill his sanctuary have become sacred icons to me and sources of great comfort—his desk, his now quiet computer, and the shelves of neatly arranged books. I do this last chore not out of disrespect, disloyalty, or any lack of love, but because it must—sooner or later—be done.

Part of this pre-packaged process we call life is the inevitable deconstruction of everything our parents were. And what we cannot or will not disassemble, time will do for us—picking off our parents’ brothers and sisters, friends, neighbors, and business associates—as if they were all withered fruit hanging from trees in a dying orchard. Bit by bit, all that our parents held dear vanishes from the face of this earth.

Where do I begin?

I am scrutinizing the walls full of the familiar plaques, awards, and photographs of buildings and ships covered with the signatures of those with whom he worked. But my attention falls to the series of photographs that are held captive on his desk in wooden frames of assorted sizes and shapes. Family and friends, favorite places and trips—as I savor each one, memories of the stories my father would tell, and tell again, come flying at me—stories of growing up on the prairies of Wyoming, of those he held dear, of time spent in the Navy, and of fish stories too fantastic to believe.

Each picture frame is a window to memories past.

There is a black and white picture of my father taken when he was a little boy. He was dressed in a smart woolen suit and matching cap. He was standing with his older sister and mother. “I will always remember that trip to Montana,” my dad would recount. “I kept pestering your aunt with a rubber knife as we drove along. Every time I would jab at her, she would alert the front seat of my latest incursion. After several warnings, your grandmother turned around and said to me that if I poked my sister one more time, that knife was going out the window. One more poke I made and, sure enough, your grandmother opened the window, grabbed my knife, and threw it out onto the scorching summer pavement, never to be seen again by me.”

Oh, dad—I so miss you.

Since my father’s passing, I wake—I work—I eat—I sleep. I catch myself sometimes thinking like my father is still alive, a phone call away, or twenty minutes down the road. I dream of the Great God, the one capable of dissolving the tens of thousands of light years between my life and the firmament of heaven. I find myself bandaged in memories selected from contrary filing systems in my brain—one drawer for the fantasy that he might come back, another drawer for the reality that he won’t.

I tell myself that every old building turns to dust.

The truth is, the more I think about my father, the more details of him and his life float up from my memory, seemingly without end. And just as digging at a construction site might uncover relics from some forgotten time, I am now finding questions cemented to those details—questions that can never be answered—questions that I never thought to ask while my father was still in this physical world. What do I do with all of his letters? His photographs? And what, pray tell, do I do with the memories that I have collected?

What became of the love my parents had for one another?

My dad and my grandfather loved to fish the streams just outside of Yellowstone National Park. One photograph showed them standing hip deep in the chilly summer waters, both casting out their lines. My grandmother, who snapped the picture, was never far from them—sitting up in the car on the road, ever watchful for a wayward bear or moose. Little good did her horn honking do on one fishing expedition—my grandfather had forgotten his hearing aid and was totally oblivious to a curious bear.

I am reminded of the saying printed on the reverse of my dad’s funeral program—
“When he goes home, dear Lord, may he be met by some tanned crony of his fishing

days. His creel snug on his back, his line still wet, and thoughts of secret trout streams in his gaze. There must be a quiet woods for men like these.”

I wonder if the heavenly trout are biting today?

My favorite picture though, is of my dad standing somewhere on the fringes of the flight deck of the USS Enterprise—the Navy’s first nuclear-powered aircraft carrier. It must have been cool because he was wearing a pea coat with his hands buried deep in the pockets. His cap carried the ship’s name and designation—CVAN 65. Even though he was on his way to support the war in Vietnam, was thousands of miles from us, and was probably questioning the worth of his small contribution to the war—he was smiling. I think he was excited to be on an incredible adventure with a bunch of truly dedicated men.

Why do we only remember the good in those we loved?

We are like little tornados. We drop down from the clouds, find the earth with our toes. We wander about without knowing where our paths may take us. We dispense our destruction without meaning to hurt what we touch. And when we are done, we are sucked back up into the heavens.

What becomes of us?

I can hear my dad’s voice reminding me that death is just another part of life. “Thanks for that cheery thought,” I would always reply. He would not be pleased with my efforts to keep him alive by my talk of him or my incessant reflections about his life. After all, I do have a life of my own, filled with friends who give me strength and enjoyment. Just before he passed, my dad was lamenting about his predicament. When he was done, he turned to me and said, “But maybe it’s harder for those left behind.”

Maybe, indeed.

What dreams did my parents dream all those many years ago—what plans did they conjure up as they drove across the other-worldly stretches of Wyoming, filled with lupine and sage, heading towards a wine-streaked sky. The dust stirred up by their lives has long since settled. Silence has moved across what was their world—and mine—like a tide of lightness ebbing into darkness. The dreams of my parents reside only in my memories now, nowhere else.

I am a construction worker. Where do I begin, Dad?