

Memories of My Dad

By Gary Williams, 2016
(Edited slightly for the web)



Dwight Moody, a famous evangelist from an earlier time, remarked toward the end of his life, "One day soon you will hear that I am dead. Do not believe it. I will then be alive as never before."

Like Moody, my Dad was a man of faith. And as with Moody, I firmly believe Dad is not dead; he is alive as never before. The last few years have been rough on Dad and Mom. In 2010 he fell and suffered a brain injury, one that took away his ability to walk, caused him to be fed through a tube in his stomach, and eventually took away his ability to talk. This could have been a time of great sorrow and frustration, but in November of 2011, very early in the morning, Dad woke Mom out of a sound sleep.



Dad was excited; he had just dreamed about (or seen himself) standing in a garden of astonishing beauty. On the ground were flowers of pure gold, fallen from surrounding trees. With him in the garden was the risen Jesus, still bearing horrible stripes and wounds from being beaten and crucified. Dad could see blood, dried black and crusty, in those wounds and fell to his knees in tears. Dad said it felt real ... as if he was actually in the presence of Jesus.

Tears were still streaming down his face as he described to Mom how Jesus reached down, took his hand, and helped him to his feet.

Was this a dream or did Dad actually experience a miraculous moment with his Lord? I have no idea. It seems to me, though, that this was an act of love, meant to reassure Dad

and Mom – and us -- that when he left this world he would be crossing into God’s world. And that reassurance gave Dad a sense of peace that lasted through several more very hard years.

I’m happy for Dad because his physical struggles are over and because I know he is now with his Heavenly Father. My grief is purely selfish. I miss being able to talk with him. I miss being able to ask him questions about how to wire a wall switch or troubleshoot a problem with my car. I miss him. We all do.



The Williams Grandparents

Dad’s life began in southern California. He was the fifth and final Williams child. Grandma once admitted that this last baby was not in her plans, but told me with a big smile that he turned out to be one of the best things that happened to her.

When Dad was a child, the Great Depression was in full bloom and life was difficult. It was harder for him than for many kids because his father died when Dad was young.

Fortunately, Dad had a strong Mother, a brother-in-law who mentored him, and a lot of help from the good people at a non-denominational Christian Church in Los Angeles.

At church and at High School Dad got to know Mom. They became fast friends and, in 1941, were married. Grandma was not thrilled at losing the full

attention of her baby boy. She never completely forgave Mom for stealing him away, but she adapted somewhat gracefully and Dad continued to take care of his Mother as his own family and career began to develop.

When Dad was 10 his older sister married. That’s when Dad’s 20-year-old brother-in-law began teaching Dad many of the skills that served him well throughout his life, including how to use carpentry tools, fix things around the house, and work on cars. What Dad learned,



plus a high school architectural drawing class, was enough to convince him that he could someday build a house with his own hands. After serving in the Army Air Corp during WWII, that’s exactly what he did. To be accurate, in 1946 he and Mom began building their first house -- without power tools -- while she was taking care of my sister and me, and he was stringing and maintaining cables for Pacific Bell, a southern California telephone company.

From left: Me, Dad, sister and Mom, circa 1947





To save time and money during the long construction process, we all lived in a tent on the property. My sister and I were right there in the thick of things the entire time. I don't remember ever feeling like we were in the way (though I'm sure we were). What I recall is being given real tools and scraps of wood, and allowed to build my own creations from the time I was a toddler. Watching Mom and Dad hard at work taught me a lot about how to live my life, though I obviously did not realize it at the time.

Dad became so proficient with handyman skills – and so stubborn – he would never consider calling a professional, even when that might have been the easier decision. Eventually, he learned to fix pretty much everything he worked on. It might have taken him longer than a pro, but once he got started he didn't quit until the job was done.

Looking back, I can see how much I gained from watching him and Mom; how they worked together as husband and wife and as parents. Dad's background helped him to forge a strong work ethic. And, unlike many men, he rarely spent time or money on hobbies.



Dad on the right.

Dad liked to work on house projects, the yard, and other things that benefitted the family. The only serious hobby I can remember met its end in the 1950's. Back then he was so good at repairing radios and televisions that our phone rang constantly with people seeking help. At first, it was just friends and family. Because Dad rarely charged, not even for parts, soon the calls were coming from friends of friends of friends. Rather than turn this hobby into a business, Dad just quit working on radios and TVs. He liked fixing things and helping people, but not charging them.



Dad's sense of what was ethical and fair was so important to him that he did not want to risk offending or cheating anyone. When he sold a used car, for instance, it could not have any mechanical issues. That meant Dad often spent more to fix a car before he sold it than he could ever regain through the sale. He didn't care. It was more important to give someone a good deal than to get one for himself.

When it came to handyman skills and use of tools, Dad taught me, as his brother-in-law Amos had taught him. Dad also served as an example of how to live my faith. I don't ever remember a conversation about what he believed or why, but I did see Dad's faith in how he treated others and in how he willingly shared his time and money.

Most of Dad's career was spent at Lockheed. He started as a template maker in the company's Burbank, California, aircraft plant. Dad was so used to keeping his work secret that it wasn't until he was in his 90's that he told me for the first time some of what he did at Lockheed. For instance, prior to entering the Army Air Corp in 1943, he worked on patterns and tooling to produce the nose of the Lockheed P-38 Lightning fighter.



He also worked on parts for the P-80 jet fighter and created patterns and tooling for the instrument panel of Lockheed's magnificent three-tailed airliner, the Constellation. He said that during the war some of the things he made were so secret the people in his department never knew what they were or what they were for.

Dad eventually worked his way up to lead engineer. That was quite a feat considering that he had only one semester of college. His first year at UCLA was cut short by the need to earn a living. Dad made up for missing college by taking night courses, studying at home, and putting everything he had into his work. It paid off because he was never lacking for offers to change jobs within Lockheed. In about 1955, he transferred to the newly forming Lockheed Missiles and Space Division, which led to our moving from Van Nuys, in the San Fernando Valley, to northern California.



In Sunnyvale Dad helped to develop flight controls and guidance systems for submarine-based Polaris and Poseidon missiles that were America's first line of defense against the threat of Russian attack. A friend of mine was an officer on nuclear subs that carried those missiles. He said they were so accurate and reliable the sub crews bragged they could put their missiles through a kitchen window a thousand miles away.

I wonder if my friend would be shocked to hear that Dad sometimes worked on the electronics of those secret missiles while locked inside a small camping trailer that was parked in our cramped two-car garage? He also used the garage laundry tub to wash acid etch off of home-made printed circuit boards when he experimented with how to use this brand new technology on Lockheed's missiles.

It was probably fine with Dad that he couldn't tell us about the secret projects he worked on at Lockheed; he wasn't much for talking ... except later in life, when he was on certain prescribed medications. Then he could wear the ears off anyone who got close, including waiters, the clerk at Radio Shack, Mom, my sisters, and me. In my experience, at least, Dad was never one for deep discussions about life. But that was okay; I learned an awful lot by observing how he lived.

Baseball was a favorite sport around our house. When I was 8 or 9, I used to take baseball gloves and ball to the front yard and wait for him to get home from work. He'd no sooner get out of the car than I'd pester him to play catch. He always encouraged and never complained, not even as my attempts at pitching sailed over his head or wide right, sending him running into neighboring yards for the ball.

When it came to merging life lessons with family finances, Dad was pretty crafty. By the time I was 14, the work ethic I picked up at home resulted in me saving \$150 – about \$1200 in today's currency. Mom and Dad borrowed that money and hadn't repaid it yet when Dad called from work. He said someone at Lockheed had a really nice 1951 Pontiac for sale. It would be a great first car for me, and, by coincidence, the price of the Pontiac was what he owed me. If he repaid me by purchasing the Pontiac would I like it? What 14-year-old guy is going to turn down a first car? Of course I said yes! After he brought it home, I spent hours cleaning and polishing that thing. To make sure it ran well, Dad taught me how to give it a tune-up. When it was looking good and running well, he asked if he could drive it to work. I should mention at this point that Mom and Dad had only one car and really needed two. Is it any surprise that my first car, the one I would not be able to drive for another year and a half, became Dad's "borrowed" work car?



A few months later he called from work and said a 1953 Dodge hemi V8 was for sale. Would I like to trade up? I quickly sold the Pontiac, bought the Dodge and, you guessed it, Dad got a newer work car.

This Dodge led to another life lesson. Dad had a thing about carburetors. If a car wasn't running well, his default diagnosis was always carburetion. Because the "new" Dodge didn't respond well to our tune-up, Dad decided to teach me how to rebuild the carburetor. I took it off, disassembled it, and cleaned it really well. Then the two of us put it together and installed it on the car. When the engine wouldn't fire (remember that word), Dad thought all the Dodge needed was a push start. I was now about 15 and had no driver's license.

We checked in the house to make sure Mom was not paying attention, and then I got behind the wheel of my Dodge and Dad pushed it down the street with the family Plymouth. When we got up to speed, I popped the clutch. The motor gave a mighty belch through the carburetor and flames shot out from under the hood. We used a neighbor's hose to put out the fire, which fortunately did not do much damage. My lesson for the day was this: When you rebuild a carb, make sure that all the parts you take out go back in. It seems that Dad and I had neglected to reinstall a small needle valve, one that controlled fuel flow into the carb.

The next summer I was 16 and wanted to drive to Lake Tahoe with a friend so we could backpack into the wilderness. My teenager's reasoning process went like this: I have a car; I have backpacking gear; what's the problem? Mom thought we were too young. She was probably right, but Dad still convinced her that I would be responsible and safe. Their trust in me was appreciated and encouraged me to be worthy of that trust.

Backing up a few years, to late summer or early fall of 1956, while on the way to a huge extended family picnic at a downtown Los Angeles park, we stopped at Harry Apple Chrysler-Plymouth, in Hollywood, so Dad could have a quick look at Chrysler's new line of cars for 1957.



Yet another family picnic, circa 1959

He didn't intend to buy one. In fact, he and Mom had never owned a new car. The 1951 Plymouth he was driving that day was the newest and best car they'd ever had ... though he called it a "gutless wonder" and nicknamed it the "Gray Dragon," because it was gray and felt like it was draggin' an anchor if he tried to pass another car ... something he liked to do whenever possible.

When we arrived late to the family picnic it was in a brand new 1957 Plymouth Belvedere, with the largest "Fury" engine available.

Dad liked to drag race anyone and everyone in that car, including kids from my older sister's high school when he went to pick her up after special events. I thought it was fun; she used to duck and hide her face. After I finally got my license, Dad and I were not adverse to impromptu drag races with each other, often on the way home from church or out on a nearby expressway.

I'm grateful for these memories, and a whole lot more. They've stayed with me and helped to shape me as both a husband and father. Thinking back on this mentoring process reminds me of something Christian theologian Dallas Willard wrote. He said that "Jesus shows his apprentices how to live in the light of the fact that they will never stop living." This is good news! Though we miss Dad terribly, because he was an apprentice of Jesus, we can find joy in knowing that he is now present with the Lord, even while absent from the body (2 Cor 5:8).

