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A Father's Day tribute to a dad who gives all he's got

BY MATT BARON

My father became a dad on the day that John F. Kennedy was slain. That's when my sister, Judi, was conceived.



I didn't learn this historical connection until well into my adult years. And I didn't gather the tidbit from my dad—it was my mom who spilled the beans in one of her TMI (“Too Much Information”) moments.

Mom and I have always been close—so much so that I know where I was conceived (I'll spare you that bit of TMI.)

As for Pops, well, we have a positive relationship that's only improved over the years. But he's someone I don't really feel that I truly know.

This used to really bug me, peaking at something approaching anguish when I began college. It was

the byproduct of my hyper-curiosity, a few introductory psychology classes and my more-than-nutritionally necessary alcohol consumption.

At that point in my life, though I am sure he had done it other times, I could recall only one occasion that he told me that he loved me. It was a most bittersweet memory, coming as it did when I was 11, during the living room sit-down when he and mom told us four kids that they were splitting up.

Then one spring day, when I was a 19-year-old college sophomore, Mom set me straight in a phone call.

“It has nothing to do with you, Matt,” she said. “He can't give you what he doesn't have.”

That made perfect sense. In that moment, I was set free of my angst.

And I could then appreciate Dad for what he was able to offer: a reliable, supportive presence when I played sports; intelligent, insightful conversation on a wide range of topics, especially sports and sports trivia; financial support that helped me get through college; a great sense of humor; quirky habits like doling out ice cream after carefully divvying it up with a butcher knife; and unabashed hugs during our farewells.

As I reflect on this list, and as I have grown older and become a father myself, I am even more grateful for the negative, dysfunctional baggage that Dad has not given me.

We may not be bosom buddies, but Dad and I don't suffer from any of the estrangement, resentment and other hurts that exist between all too many parents and children.

Meanwhile, our relationship has gradually gone beyond the surface.

A dozen years ago, I took the bold step, at the end of our phone calls, of telling Dad that I loved him. I could tell I caught him off-guard, but he replied in kind.

My siblings later told me that more frequently he was telling them he loved them, too. Now he even blurts it out to me before I say it.

Another indicator of our deepening relationship: my wife, Bridgett, can no longer detect when I'm talking to Dad.

For years, she would give a knowing chuckle when my chat with Dad would careen toward a familiar theme. Our dialogue would go something like this:

Me: "So we're thinking about starting a family..."

Dad: "Oh, good. Hey, Red Sox have men on first and third, two outs. Here's the pitch, Ramirez hits it up the middle, it's through for a single!"

Me (sighing, resigned to this new topic): "Oh, great. What's the score now?" (Bridgett suppresses a laugh in the background.)

Lately, however, our talks range more frequently beyond the Boston professional sports scene and into the meatier, more

personal terrain of family, work, children, and the stuff of day-to-day life.

Since March, we've been talking a lot more about his health. He's having trouble breathing, among other ailments, and in

been a stickler with his first-in, first-out policy on consuming food.)

I have no idea how many more Father's Days remain for Dad, but this much I do know: the Red Sox are playing the Cincin-

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late April he was diagnosed with congestive heart failure. I sent him a letter quoting Philipians, including an encouragement to "rejoice in the Lord always."

I really don't know if he's going to go for that, frankly.

But I've gotten to know Dad well enough that I also included some other material, such as alternative terms for congestive heart failure. One is FIFO (Fibrillation Is Freaking Out) Syndrome, in honor of one of his favorite expressions. (He has always

nati Reds on that particular Sunday this June, and, more than ever before, I look forward to hearing Dad's play-by-play account.

Matt Baron is the father of twin 4-year-olds, Zachary and Maggie Rose. For Christmas 2007, the family had a great visit with Grandpa Phil and Grandma Moe at their Port St. Lucie home.

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PUBLISHER

Michelle Liem

ASSOCIATE EDITOR

KiKi Bochi

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT

Lisa England

CONTRIBUTORS

Nancy Collamer • Heather Deeley • Rick Epstein • Debbie Farmer • Carolyn Jabs
Gregory Keer • Susan Kehl • Kathy Sena • Melanie Snyder

ADVERTISING SALES

Cindi Inklebarger • Anina Venuti

GRAPHICS AND DESIGN

Susan Rosser – Rosser Marketing

PRODUCTION ASSISTANT

Toni Kirkland

ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT

Stacey Milch

CORPORATE OFFICE

3150 Hidden Hollow Lane, Davie, FL 33328

Phone 954-424-7405

Fax 954-424-8898

info@browardfamilylife.com

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