In the Name of the Father

"The hero is always the embodiment of man's highest and most powerful aspiration"

Carl Jung

When my son was nine years-old, he used to think I could do no wrong. No other father on the block would attempt a fifty/fifty rail slide on a skateboard. I was his hero and nothing else in this world made me happier. I wore the scars and scabs of skating like a Scoutmaster's badges.

I never doubt these memories. Unlike the clouded sigh of a Disneyland ride, a second grade English teacher or a first love, all of them tainted and twisted by the unbalancing effects of re-interpreted youth, hormones never factor between a father and a son. Male blood lines are immune to nostalgic whim.

Recently, in the footsteps of his older sister, he has come to calling me a "loser" for making him come home before curfew. And when he does I feel like one, even though I know he doesn't mean it. The inner tumult wells up from another place and another time; the feeling will not be denied. Still, in these days of teenage angst, I would give him a kidney same as I'd ask him to mow the lawn.

On those days, I often think back to the time when my own father, just months from dying, would ask me to help out around the house. And I try to convince myself that I did. But I was born with his rebel's heart and it beat defiantly then, as it does now. I would be lying if I said that I'd done all I could for him. Or for my own son.

The singer/songwriter, Bob Dylan has said, "To live outside the law, you must be honest." This is the kind of honesty that haunts you all of your days, this striving toward what was and what could've been. To go back and shake

that rebel though, and see what truth or consequences fall from his young branches, also may begin to sprout some freedom in the admission.

I began a rough draft of this piece on February 23, 2001. My father would have turned sixty-five that day. He would have been eligible for Social Security and senior discounts at the movies, and no doubt that night we would've toasted his health with a glass of fine cabernet instead of remembering, missing him more than I could write without arcing into high sentiment, my prose taken hostage by the ache of loss. It's an essay that can never be complete, only passed on. Maybe the pain of loss informs our lives more than we can say in words.

He has been dead for over thirty-five years now, since I was a cocky, can-do-no-wrong fifteen-year-old with a restless soul. I have long since passed the age at which he died. But I don't feel old, and I don't think that I will die anytime soon. And I'm no longer afraid of dying the way I once was. I don't think so, anyway.

I suppose that it would be a shame if I weren't able to understand and reconcile his untimely death before I pass as well, to know my hero in death as I knew him in life.

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I would not wish that my father had played a smaller role in my life simply to escape the pain of his dying. I remember when he "procured" an idle ambulance from the sidelines of a football game and took me and my siblings careening through the streets of Orange County, siren blaring, lights flashing. My mother tried to act disgusted. I think of him as an only child, without siblings to fight or to tell scary stories to on a stormy night or to share a tiny bathroom with. He and my mom decided that they were going to have as many as they could make. It was seven and counting when he left us.

I think of him coming home one night from a poker game with the boys, one too many beers involved, and slipping fifty dollars under each child's pillow--in total a big chunk of what he earned in a month. In the morning he told my mom that we deserved it, even though they couldn't afford the luxury, because "kids deserve surprises."

I think of him smiling confidently at the guard at a posh country club as he drove through the gate, flashing an expired Union Oil gas card. "The only ones you should let see your fear," he would tell us, "are the ones who you can trust with it."

He was no saint. He often refused to go to Mass with the rest of the family on Sunday because he'd rather go down to the beach and have his own little bull session with his God. Yes, he had faults, imperfections lost to time and sentimentality and selective memory. He'd gained some weight, lost his patience from time to time. Probably didn't wear a seat belt. But he was a good man. And a lot our own spirit was taken with him. It's hard to break apart a big Catholic family. Losing a father is a tough blow to parry.

I find it ironic that I can accept my own eventual death and yet I cannot make sense of his suffering at the hands of a hideous, indiscriminate disease. Urban legend has it that Neil Armstrong piloted the lunar landing module into the moon's Sea of Tranquility but had trouble parallel parking back on earth. It's supposed to be easier to deal with other people's deaths, easier on earth than in space. I don't know if this angst belongs to the past or the future. But if my house is burning down, I won't agonize over which room to paint first. The lucky ones defer the question all the way to the end. I don't imagine they die well, knowing that they are dying, but not why.

Perhaps my career choices were guided by a secret desire to cheat death: lifeguard, firefighter, paramedic, professional athlete, and then, at forty, graduate student. And still the grand prize, Enlightenment, eludes me. My dad was my hero. Heroes aren't supposed to die.

Whose fault is that, this death of our heroes? The hero, for being human after all? Ours, for failing to see the inevitable? Didn't you shudder at the sight of Christopher Reeve strapped to his chair? The mechanical breathing machine that kept him alive was out of view, perhaps to shield us from any further reminders of our own fragility--our humanness. Reeve looked disarmingly hopeful, wearing his most courageous public face. Where did his strength come from? The cracked vertebrae came by accident, I know. But was the rest of his life an accident?

"There but for the grace of God go I," you think, and change the channel. If Superman can end up a physical prisoner on wheels and then sadly slip away, if my dad can be snatched from his wife and children at the height of his existence, how safe are we in choosing heroes?

Witness the morbid circus that followed the death of stock car racing icon, Dale Earnhardt. Five thousand people attended his televised funeral. For a time after his death, kids in preschool were taught to count by reciting "1-2-Earnhardt-4-5-6-7...because the number 3 was always Dale's. The guy drove cars at 200 mph for a living, approaching his job no differently than an accountant or an engineer. But he achieved hero status because he did things that most of us can only dream about, shake our heads, nudge our buddies while pointing to the instant replay, "Did you see that?"

Maybe Earnhardt wasn't a hero in the classic sense of folklore: one who commits a selfless act in the service of others. Maybe he was just a very gutsy, talented driver who went over the edge in the regular course of his job. In fact, athlete-heroes may only entertain us with their exploits, impress us with their creative and athletic skill--and yes, their courage--even if it is a diving catch into the grandstands and not a rush into a fiery building. We are tempted to see in athletes elements of heroism that aren't often there.

Maybe the men and women who scale the world's great mountains are heroes, not for their incredible feats of physical and mental endurance but for our perception that they have stepped further from earth than the rest of us. It

seems there is a mystical barrier between this earth and the one beyond. Since no one has yet gone there and returned to describe it, we worship those who can get close enough to touch it, to taste the fruits of the Great Beyond.

What's it like? we ask. The mountain? No. Heaven.

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And what about Reeve? He was simply riding a horse--not an especially dangerous activity. He became a celebrity through a combination of playacting, character type, and mass media exposure. He became a hero to millions through the great irony of this tragedy and his courageous fight to find meaning in what his life had become. All Superman had to do was slip into his spandex tights and red cape to save the world. Reeve had to slip into the interior of his very being to save himself.

I suppose that is part of what I still feel toward my father--the fact that I watched him suffer, watched him stoically endure tremendous physical pain as the cancer slowly and deliberately ate him away. But that was not the worst of it. The worst was that he knew toward the end that he was going, his trim, surf-tanned body of 170 pounds replaced with a jaundiced shell of 130. He knew he had fought the good fight, done everything possible, made peace with his maker. And all he could do was to wait and try to find some meaning in it. There was nothing else to rebel against.

Some mornings now, as I paddle out before the sun, waiting for its warmth, a few waves before work or class to help make the day more palatable, I too try and find some meaning in it. Yet nearly thirty years and three thousand surf mornings later, I'm not much closer to knowing, except maybe to consider that we aren't supposed to know it at all, which is a kind of meaning.

I can't go back and change what I didn't do, how I didn't spend a few hours every day with him while he was dying. I can't make the memory of my dad any different. It is a futile wish--a wish to extinguish the last embers of guilt.

But making today right can help make yesterday seem less wrong. The beautiful pain of memory is by accident, the painful beauty of imagination by design. At least I know I've tried to be more empathetic with the seriously ill.

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As we grow older, we begin to discover our parents' deficiencies. We notice their quirks and oddities. The hero becomes human**.** That is part of the circularity of things.

My dad died before I could notice his odd little quirks, before he put on a few pounds around the waist, before his sideburns turned gray, before he might've voted Republican, before hair started to grow in his ears. He died standing atop that pedestal on which a young son places his father. He was still a myth to me when he died. Two days before he was diagnosed with advanced thoracic cancer, he complained of back pain from "one too many games of beach volleyball." My mom handed him two aspirin. My older sister called him "soft." He picked up the aspirin and threw them in the pool.

I watched him surf that last healthy day, embarrassed; my parents were invading my teenage space. But secretly I wanted to go up to my friends and scream in their ear, "Did you see my dad's last ride? The dude is three times our age and rips!"

As I age, that is the image that grows stronger in my mind, gradually displacing the images of him withering away. That is what I want and must hold onto--a single image of a strong, proud young man, regally perched on the tip of his board, arching across large blue waves, a smile so wide you could see it for half a mile.

If I hold that one image tight enough and close enough, all the bad ones fade. It is not easy, one moment of his heaven doing battle with eighteen months of our hell. The numbers work against you, but you have your heart on your side. In the end, that has to be enough.

And just how do heroes come to be? Is it they who follow their hearts, or is it us, the adoring crowd who want to place them in a category that we can strive toward, admire and emulate? Once the hero hears the call to adventure, he will suffer if he denies it more than he will suffer in the struggle to greatness. We know this from both myth and experience.

But then, as we watch them slip and fall, victims of time and fashion, they still return to us with the knowledge of having lived a hero's existence. And not often enough do we embrace them for their wisdom. The hero again becomes a victim, disposed of by a disposable society. His foe is no longer dragons or evil forces or even age and miles of hard road. It is us, discarded that which we've used. For their declining beauty and achievement reminds us of our own morality and that the beauty of our youth will soon be replaced with our own truth of loss.

Most of us die too young or too old. At some point we must realize that on some grander scale, life is indeed short and our ego-filled existence utterly insignificant. We try to pull ourselves up by making love, making money, making the grade; all the while making less and less time to face the fact that we can't do it alone. And when we can't, we look to others to do it for us—our heroes. In one way or another, we are defined in others. This should be celebrated not looked upon as a weakness. You know, Barbara Streisand—*people who need people*?

Some time after his career had ended, as his health began to fail, the great Mickey Mantle was spotted by a reporter in a hotel lobby sitting alone next to a window, listening to the rain bounce off the large, clear panes. When the reporter approached, Mantle held up his hand and said softly to the man, "Listen. It sounds just like applause, doesn't it?" A hero is born with a Warrior's Heart, the need to be needed. Sometimes he gets his applause wherever he can.

Maybe the scholar and mythologist Joseph Campbell was right when he told us that heroes are chosen in some doctrine of naturalism, some random,

before-we-were-born selection process. And we simply go along for the ride as a participant, an observer, a fan, or an everyman.

This could be said of Christopher Reeve's willingness to go public with his plight, and of Dale Earnhardt accelerating into a turn at 230 mph in hopes of passing one more car. It could be said of Mantle, who played nearly his entire career injured. Every hero pays a price for the privilege that comes with hero status.

According to Campbell's mythic archetype, the responsibility of heroes is to return to their "tribe" and share the knowledge gleaned on their Journey. My dad never recovered from cancer to tell me what it is like to have one's body devoured by metastasizing cells. Yet his struggle was played out for all of us to see--in his jaundiced- eyes and in his immutable will.

And the great Mick, who died from a hereditary disease and complications from alcoholism, was never able to return to the world from which he came and which adored him so. Like most men who give us feats of greatness before they develop feet of clay, his legend is larger than his life.

Carl Jung wrote, "The hero is a hero just because he sees resistance to the forbidden goal in all of life's difficulties and yet fights that resistance with the whole hearted yearning that strives towards the treasure hard to attain, and perhaps unattainable--a yearning that paralyses and kills the ordinary man." On the baseball diamond, Mickey Mantle was a hero. Off it he was an ordinary man, and it killed him.

I wonder if my dad felt a hero's call. I never had the chance to ask him. On the morning that he died, he called each of us kids into his bed where he lay dying and said goodbye with dignity and prowess, unvanquished to the end. Propped up on three pillows, a little trickle of blood oozing out of the side of his smiling mouth, a hug, a kiss, and a strained voice asking us to take care of each other, as if he were sending us off to summer camp, a sleeping bag in one hand, a note on how to live a good life in the other. And then he was gone.

Tell me. Is there a difference between batting .325 for ten seasons in a row and raising seven kids on $1,000 a month? Which is greater: to be revered by a few or simply admired by millions? We need heroes in our lives, although I'm not so sure we know who they are anymore.

Roberto Clemente, arguably the best all-around baseball player of the modern era, is a hero to us not for his 3,000 hits or his seven Gold Glove Awards. No, I think of Clemente dying in a plane crash on the way to Nicaragua to help victims of a massive earthquake. For *that,* he was heroic. On the baseball field, he was a very talented athlete. We must not confuse the two.

I wonder if it would have made a difference if my dad had died suddenly and violently, without the eighteen months of gradual and relentless decline. Would he seem more of a hero and less a victim? Would my faith and understanding in his passing be any different if God had simply reached down with His hand and plucked him cleanly from this earth, sparing him the ultimate human embarrassment--bodily impression of a deity ambivalent?

Sometimes we make our own decisions, sometimes they are made for us. And sometimes the two run together. Some athletes retire at the top of their game so as to never allow the public to witness their inevitable decline. Others, like my dad, have no choice, forced out by injury or illness.

On occasion I try to tell my own son what his grandpa would have been like, how cool it would have been for the three of us to surf together. Most of the time I can't finish the conversation; too much past feeling bubbles up like liquid earth from the core--hot, unstoppable, necessary. One day, when the moment was right, I told my son that my dad would have really liked him, that he might have become a hero to my father. Nine years old, he turned to me and held my shoulders between his little hands, just like I was supposed to hold his, and said, "Yeah but Dad, I bet you were kinda' like his hero too."

Eighteen years on the road, chasing that thin, white fog line up and down the Pacific Coast Highway, chasing chalk lines hastily laid out on the decomposed granite dirt of a high school track, the black tile on the bottom of the pool

printed forever on the top of my brain--it was time for me to leave the world of professional athletics.

A little better than average, I may have raced as though each day was irreplaceable. But for more years than I care to recount; the sun had set on that day and I was losing to kids half my age. I was nobody's athletic hero anymore.

But there was a time, on the front nine of my career, when I impressed enough to earn that label. Once I was leading a triathlon that had lasted nearly nine hours. With half a mile left to run and two young hotshots breathing down my neck, I had to piss so bad it was killing me. To stop, even to slow down, would cause me to lose the race. Knowing that a precise emotion requires a precise action, I reached down, pulled my shorts to the side, relaxed the appropriate muscles as best I could, and let her fly. The finish line in sight, the crowd cheering, two young speedsters on my heels, urine flying, women pointing, people staring, old men wondering, kids laughing, I thought: fuck 'em all. I crossed the line first and began looking for a cup of water to rinse with.

As I walked away, proud as a damn peacock, an official-looking man approached me and asked, "Mr. Tinley?" I expected he was going to disqualify me and wreck the whole day. He simply stuck his hand out to shake mine, not worried that my fingers were wet with sweat and pee. "I saw you dig deep," he said. "Really deep. You're my hero." Then he walked away, leaving me to wonder at the meaning of his words.

I remembered that day not long ago and wished more than anything that my dad could have been there. Not to see me win, not to see someone call me a hero, but to see me answer a call and follow that path, an exploding rebel soul on a journey of its own and fate's making, regardless of the price. I imagine him seeing himself in me, a reflection made clear with the hand's swipe at a foggy mirror.

If I've learned anything about life, then I must know a little about dying. All I wanted was for my dad to know that I tried. I really tried. And when I think of my son trying, really trying, to make me feel better about the death of *my*

own dad, I know that he will be a hero to someone, as he already is to me. I will hold his teenage shoulders, look into his eyes as he tries to squirm away, and not worry if mine are full of tears as I tell him so. If I fail to do that, then God take me now. I am defined by those ahead and behind and all around me. There can be no other way.