

GRAND TOUR

Bully Pulpit

By Bruce W. Cook



My father died two and a half years ago. I never thought I would miss him. But I do. Holiday time, or maybe it's just end of the year melancholy, brings out the emotions. Some are raw. I thought I would write them down because my feelings, I think, are quite common among so many of us. And the holidays are, among many important things, a time to remember loved ones lost. A time for reflection. A time to heal. A time to make

plans that might include avoiding or reversing some of the mistakes of the past.

I was not close to my father. At least not in the way some men interact, talking on a daily basis, participating in events together. I cannot remember having a discussion with my father on politics or religion or any serious matter. He never advised me.

Yet, he was an ever present figure; not an absentee parent. Outside of a Saturday golfing expedition with his friends, my father was home. He did not travel for work and was not consumed by career or social advancement. His needs were met, he was content. Or so it seemed.

While we sat down to dinner as a family on a regular basis, this common model of mid-20th century American life suffered from another common characteristic—the malaise of disconnect. I would come to learn that the imaginary concrete wall around emotions, feeling and personal expression for a man of the American Century would be in part the result of both surviving the Great Depression and military service during WWII.

For so many it had been the best and worst of times. For some it had been unspeakably horrific. It was over, and it had changed the lives, and certainly the emotional make-up of the survivors. No wonder the 1950s that followed was a time of American glory; Cadillac fins, Levittown, Elvis, and pink plastic flamingos on the lawn.

In my father's case, there was more. As a young toddler his parents had left him in the care of his nanny in Boston as they traveled, eventually settling in San Francisco expanding their business to the west coast. They sent for him when he was eleven. Arriving in San Francisco to meet a younger brother who had become the star in his parents eyes, my father, the older son, would never truly find his place in his own family.

The younger brother would rise in the world meteorically. He was the A student, the class president, the better athlete. He would become a physician, in fact a brain surgeon, and would enter service in WWII as a fighter pilot trained by flight instructor Barry Goldwater. In the final days of WWII, he would be downed over Germany, leaving behind a wife and parents who would never really recover from the loss. And neither would my father, the son of lesser glory, who would then devote himself to his parents abandoning his hopes of a law career, instead working in the family business out of loyalty to his aging father. He figured it was his lot, his duty, his path. He never complained. He lived in a time, a world, which was not all about his needs. But he was wounded and there was no place to get help or even consider the option. It just wasn't

manly. It wasn't strong. It wasn't right.

Like so many children of the 1950s and 1960s—the fabulous baby boomers, I was raised to believe that anything was possible, attainable, available. It was not the brave new world, but rather the incredible American new world, and we could all grow up to be rich, famous, and lead lives of unfathomable fulfillment. Opportunity existed for my generation that had only been a dream for many people in generations past. Everything was changing and seemingly for the better. Public education was excellent and elevating the lives of more Americans. Civil rights struggles were opening doors shut for centuries. This was just the tip of the iceberg of change.

With all the wonders of the time, the peace and the prosperity in my own years of growing up without depression or world war, I did not have a relationship with my father. This despite the fact that everything was in place to afford a great connection. It didn't matter to me then. I was not the bitter disgruntled child. I was busy, and I frankly didn't know it could be any different.

Now, as I cross the half century mark, it bothers me. Why do we wait until our parents are gone to face these questions? In my life I know I have repeated the mistakes of my father. Ironically, or maybe uncontrollably, my father repeated the pattern of his parents. My younger sister was his star. She was beautiful, brilliant and talented and a champion swimmer to boot. He did everything with her. When she was killed tragically at the age of 33, leaving behind a husband, three young children and a father who adored her, he too would never really recover from the loss.

But my father would be stoic, as always, never to speak a word of his own desperation. My mother, a formidable person in her own right, would die soon after the death of my sister. My father would remarry. His new wife was much younger and they would start a whole new chapter together. Ten years later at nearly the age of 91 my father would be on his death bed and for one brief moment would share his feelings as I sat in a chair on the other end of the room, as far away from his bed as I could physically be without leaving the room. As his dedicated young wife, whom he loved and cherished, sat beside his hospital bed holding his hand, my father shared his emotions. He told us both how much he loved us.

Funny, I always knew that. I just wanted so much more that simply was not possible for him to give or for me to ask for. I share with you the fact that I struggle, I fight not to repeat this pattern with my children. I also know that I am not as successful as I might wish to be. Writing this very personal holiday message is, for me, cathartic. I offer one Christmas and Hanukkah wish to anyone who might read this page. It's simple. Find a path to share your emotions, your love for your family, your friends, your world. One other thing. We do not have forever. Tomorrow is not promised to anyone. Today is your chance to make a change. This is, after all, our time, and love is truly the answer—now and always. **GT**

Bruce Cook is the creator of Grand Tour Magazine. He is a twice-weekly columnist for the Los Angeles Times/Daily Pilot, and serves as Editor of the prestigious Bay Window Magazine. Cook has been heard on San Diego radio for the past five years, and is an Emmy-nominated television writer and producer responsible for such programs as Entertainment Tonight.