

A Son's Eulogy for his Father

How Randall R. Dipert danced through life, lived to at least 129, and gave me the ultimate gift.

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My Dad was a good, good man, and the best father anyone could ever hope for. He is such a big part of who I am, and his influence on my life was so great, that news of his passing shocked me like a surprise amputation, or being struck blind. Shock turned into grief, and now grief is turning into gratitude, as I realized that he left me many gifts.

Every new life experience, combined with some memory of him, allows me to unwrap one of his gifts. The event of his passing, combined with my memory of him, allows me to now unwrap his biggest gift, and to appreciate the way he lived his life in order to give it to me.

We have the idea in our society that a person's life follows a linear trajectory: you go to school, you work, you start a family, you retire, and then you die. Through each stage are various milestones. A man's success can be measured by comparing his progress to that of others. This perspective is what Alan Watts, the famous Western interpreter of Eastern philosophy, once called in one of his lectures the "idea of life as a journey or pilgrimage."

My Dad was brilliant, and saw the world differently than most people, and he took delight in defying various conventions. However, the idea of life as a journey was not one he contested. Like many of his generation, he compared his journey to that of his father's, and against others he admired, and he was too often disappointed with himself.

The “life as a journey” idea is part of my fabric too. One of the more punishing thoughts I had was that my Dad was robbed. He was just 68 and had barely retired. He was supposed to hit a few more milestones. It made me angry.

Fortunately, Watts proposed an alternative perspective in that lecture. He says:

... we simply cheated ourselves a whole way down the line. We thought of life by analogy with a journey, with a pilgrimage, which had a serious purpose at the end the thing was to get to that end success or whatever it is or maybe heaven, after you're there. But we missed the point, the whole way along it was a *musical* thing and you were supposed to sing or dance while the music was being played.

Well, my Dad might have thought of his life as a journey, but I am so happy to report that he absolutely did *not* cheat himself “the whole way down the line”. I don't know anyone else who made better use of their time on this Earth, or who danced and sang so much before they had to go. My Dad was an intrinsically playful and joyful person who delighted in the simplest acts of learning, sharing, and kindness, over the course of his entire life. He obviously heard the music, and he obviously couldn't help but to dance the whole way down the line.

I find beauty in the fact that my Dad, a world-renowned expert on Western philosophy, lived his life in the ideal way proposed by one of the world's foremost experts on Eastern philosophy. Let me tell you how he did it.

According to the University of Buffalo my Dad retired in 2017. In reality, he retired as a child, at the moment he learned of a place called school where he could do what came naturally to him: experimenting, exploring, debating, and thinking. He had a ridiculously happy retirement that lasted at least 63 years.

According to SUNY Fredonia, he started teaching in 1977. In reality, he was so bright, his family probably started to learn from him as soon as he was able to talk. He subsequently and humbly instructed thousands of grateful people over a teaching career that lasted at least 66 years.

Because he simultaneously worked and was retired, he enjoyed far more time doing either than the average person. In fact, when you sum these periods, you arrive at an astounding lifespan of 129 years. It's hard to feel angry about that number.

It's especially hard when you consider the way he wove his family into his dance. As soon as he had a family of his own, he deliberately engineered his life to maximize the time he spent with that family — and with me.

He was always working on ways to enrich my life and share experiences with me. He accompanied me to Cub Scout camp over many summers. He taught me to hike, to sail, to swim, and to appreciate the simpler things, like a hot breakfast in the wilderness. He taught me computers, a profession that now affords me the kind of time with my family that he had with his.

We built and launched model rockets. We rescued a lost baby rabbit. We took things apart to understand how they worked. We fixed things. We built things, like a custom guinea pig cage. One time we bought electric motors at Radio Shack, stuck props on them, and attached them to a foam glider just to see if it would fly. It did... kind of.

He was always accessible. During the school year, he did much of his grading and writing at home, with his office door open and the classical music blasting. I remember wandering in and playing with stuff on his desk, and he almost never asked me to leave. Instead, he might ask me questions about school, or discuss ideas from his classes, like:

In 100 years, we might look back on eating meat the way we now look back on slavery. What's something else we'll think differently about in the future?

It's soon enough after his passing that relating memories like that one is still painful. But it's been long enough for me to understand that through these memories, I unwrap his greatest gift to me, a gift he gave when he was alive and that keeps giving even though he is gone.

My Dad gave me the gift of **knowing him** and he made the time to **know me**. No son could ask for more.