

Introduction

Like most people, but perhaps young boys more than girls, I came to a point in my life where I became disillusioned and a bit cynical about, or with, my Dad. I have since come to call this tendency "the Feet of Clay Syndrome" when a person realizes that, to their dismay, that their father (could be any parent figure) is not godlike (read it literally, but lowercase god certainly) and altogether wonderful, but in fact is human and has perhaps more than a few all too human failings.

We know the figure of speech, "Feet of Clay", as a sense of human failings, especially pertaining to a weakness for sexual indulgence, usually the describing the man's weakness for women, but could be either sex.

It comes from the Bible, where King Nebuchadnezzar had a dream which the prophet Daniel interpreted to mean that the King, and his successors in his kingdom, were like unto a statue which was made of layers of various materials such as gold, silver, brass, etc., but which had feet made of (iron and) clay. The idea was that the statue (the kingdom) could only be as strong or powerful as the weakest part of the body, which by comparison with the other parts, was the feet, feet made of clay, with the clear message that his kingdom was going to fall apart eventually. We also know this same concept by the adage "a chain is only as strong as its weakest link." Nothing new there really.

I use the term here in its more purely Biblical sense I suppose, because there is no sexual component in the behavior involved. I intend to convey the sense of the "realization event" or sudden loss of naivete when you finally comprehend the "truth". Some of us would probably call it simply "growing up."

By that definition, I was old way before my time; in some ways, I felt older than my dad in some ways, from some early age, maybe six or so. (Since I originally wrote this, I heard secondhand that my Dad said of me that I was like an 80 year old man as a child; whatever, I wouldn't wish it on anyone.)

Whatever you call it, the experience is painful and not a little depressing. We'd really all rather believe the absolute best about our parents, and have them live up to it.

Unfortunately, they don't. They're human.

And we must, as children, try to understand, and to forgive them their frailties, and their trespasses, especially against us, and be more adult, and forgive them.

This book then, is a reflection of my own odyssey through the seminal conversations, the positive character shaping relationships that I have personally had through my first 50+ years. I went out (Only semi-consciously at first; I speak now with the perspective of 30 plus years of experience and emerging understanding.) seeking role models that would fill the intellectual and philosophical vacancies in my frame of reference, or view of the world, in an attempt to fill the gap left between my own hopes and expectations of my dad and the reality of his performance.

Some of that understanding has come through by eventually understanding my own weaknesses, my own feet of clay. Lord knows I have my own list of faults, and I hope that they in turn can be forgiven.

My own motive for this writing is to lay down the foundations for the ideals that I at least think I follow, in part as an exercise in personal growth, taking stock in a frank sort of way, by looking back to see what made me what I am. In part, it's also just a way to pass them on, for what they're worth.

I exercise a little censorship by not mentioning some of the less wholesome influences on me, preferring to focus this little work on the positive influences in my life. Ironically, some of the less wholesome influences were shown me by some of those mentioned here, but I won't say who for what; we all have feet of clay.

Perhaps not infrequently, turning 40 triggers a number of personal "stock-taking" activities, reflecting on having worked roughly half of your career, looking forward perhaps more realistically to the other half. You're roughly half way through your life (statistically more than half perhaps), so it becomes a nagging series of thoughts to consider: global, cosmic sorts of self criticism.

Am I doing what I should be doing with my life? Am I living my dream? What shall I plan to be doing next year? It's sort of like thinking about New Year's resolutions, but on a several decade scale.

Going to funerals gets one to thinking about how you yourself might be judged on the work of your life: Was it good enough? Did you do anything worth remembering? Did you try?

That inevitably gets you to other thoughts: What really matters? What am I here for anyway? Cosmic stuff.

Like a lot of folks, reading obituaries is a daily habit of mine, and it's perhaps inescapable that you think about your own future obit, while reading those of others; some lives seem well lived to read the little stories, others less so. I tend to look at the ones with a smiling picture, sometimes a little Mona Lisa smile of a long ago yearbook, others conveying a sense of a life well lived, of an innate happiness with their lot in life. I'm looking, perhaps, for their secret.

Other times, the extra length of the writeup draws the eye to discover what kind of person merited such a wordy farewell. Some actually say very little about the person, just a few basic facts, but others deliver a concise summary of a life well lived, dreams followed and executed, loves lost, etc. However, since the newspapers charge for those precious column inches, the very fact of them being published is mute testimony that someone loved them enough to put up the money for the obit.

So the immediate thought we might have is to wonder how our own obit might be written (and I understand someone is doing exactly this as an exercise in self improvement). Anything worth mentioning? Did we contribute anything? Or just, lived, died, end of story?

As I looked back at the other father figures in my life, I realized that I took from a goodly number of them certain little rules for living. Implicitly, I also had to ask myself whether there was anything at all worth emulating in my genetic father, a rather painful question, since it involves rejection, ranging from total rejection to partial.

I am somewhat relieved to report that after reflection I can say that there ARE a good number of positive qualities that I have gotten directly from my Dad, especially since it means that I can show him this work, and have it published while he is still alive without hurting his feelings. (One of my guiding principles by now is that it's highly desirable to avoid hurting other people's feelings if at all possible.)

The essential message from me to him, and all of the rest of my fathers, is that I love you, and that I'm thankful that you were there in my life, to give me a lesson or two.

The big influencers provided guidance to me mostly by example, as much as from any specific phrase or maxim. A common thread in all of my fathers has been a strong sense of ethics, of personal integrity, living as a man of honor. It has only lately occurred to me that that is the case. Such subtle yet powerful influences are so pervasive as to elude detection sometimes, operating on the level of "monkey-see, monkey-do".

There are probably others I still can't see. My musical influences in particular are somewhat unobvious, and in this kind of evaluation, not unimportant, but not all that easy to grasp objectively. One exception might be Eric Burdon's line "don't let music pass you by" though. I get into that whole subject more in the liner notes for my albums, but will mention it generally here too.

Perhaps even larger than music, and even harder for me to see are the many literary influences on me, from Shakespeare to the Bible, from Science Fiction to hard Science, Ben Franklin to Frank Herbert. It might be more instructive to know that I have wide tastes in reading rather than to try to come up with a list of authors. I especially favor Science Fiction simply because it helps stretch your notions of what is possible. Star Trek's Captain Kirk, and other captains since the original, had the persistent quality of rejecting "either-or" alternatives as posed, somehow always coming up with a third option that would be the best solution.

Like many, I like the quest stories, usually found in the Fantasy section, but often in Science Fiction as well, but similar stories about Marco Polo or Christopher Columbus are equally appealing. Detective stories, while sometimes tiresome in their morbidity, and spy novels, are intriguing as puzzles in human nature, if nothing else.

An unknown friend once suggested that I read some "good books" when he saw me reading some kind of literary chaff, at one of my late night jobs where diversion was required. Ever since, I have tried to wade through all of the well known books that have come to be generally regarded as classics of the English language (some in translation actually), while enjoying some of the lighter "mind rot" (my friend Don Burns used to call them) just for fun in between.

So the many literary characters encountered over the years have doubtless helped shape my notions of an ideal person, but are by now so muddled together as to escape clear identification, so my first hand recollections will have to do.

Observing a life well lived is a powerful persuader, clarifier, motivator and helper in making one's own life choices. I once heard a preacher call that kind of life the best sermon there is, and it's not altogether unsubtle at any rate, at least if you stop and think about it.

I do not intend to minimize the role of my mother, or of women generally, in my life. It's simply that there is a special sort of relationship between the father and the son, the mother and the daughter, and this discussion is driven by the relationship from my point of view, as a son to a father (and fathers).

Nor do I wish to devalue the positive contribution of women to my personal development by not mentioning them here. That is simply another book entirely, which will actually be much easier and more pleasant to write compared to this one, since this one turned out to be somewhat more of a self therapy session.

Religious Figures

Somewhere along the way, thinking about my influences, it also became obvious that I had another blind spot: what is the place of the towering historical figure(s) of religion in my set of role models? I mean Jesus, Moses, Mohammed, Buddha, etc.; surely they too have a place in my value system. Perhaps it's a "forest and trees" problem again: the impact is so large, and so pervasive in our society as to be missed entirely.

For one thing, how can we, as mere modern humans, possibly compare ourselves to someone like Jesus? It's easy to compare, but we certainly find ourselves on the short end of the comparison; we're mostly much too small minded, much too materialistic, basically, much too insignificant. So what's the lesson?

Again, this is possibly a whole book length subject in itself, but I think that there are some central themes: a life well lived, dedicated to the overall betterment of humanity, lived with integrity, with an overriding love for all that tempers the harsher pronouncements. Self sacrifice to the greater good certainly.

What are we here for anyway? This becomes a set of enduring questions that we need to consider and reconsider as we move through life. The spiritual examples suggest it's not to become rich, owning many things, although put in the proper perspective, perhaps those things are not intrinsically evil. I recently heard it put "that it's best to not be overly preoccupied with material things."

What will we leave behind? I suggest that if we don't leave anyone behind that loves us still, then we've truly died. Love endures; possessions don't, although some of our own artifacts may.

My short answer is this: we're here to learn our lessons, to "fix" ourselves, and hopefully, help the world at large somehow too, to live with love, humility, yet integrity, standing for the "right" values.

Consider commitment. The story goes that if you want to know the difference between involvement and commitment, look at breakfast: the chicken (eggs) is involved, but the pig (bacon) is committed.

So consider Jesus' level of commitment: pretty big. As an ideal it's unparalleled. Or is it? Either way, dying for others is as altruistic as it gets. Some public servants who die in the line of duty pretty well fulfill it.

Nearly all of the rest of us lack the courage, fortitude, godliness, etc. to even consider such a voluntary act on behalf of others. Even so, most of us are also firmly, though at some indeterminate and unconscious level, hooked up with the "moral giants" of our time: Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi, perhaps even Anwar Sadat are contemporary representations of some sort of archetype. Joe Campbell would probably say so.

Each of them knew that their actions might well lead to their death at the hands of opposition fanatics, but they did what they felt was right anyway.

Again, they're examples to all of us of the virtue of giving of oneself to others. The public servants who died in the 911 response team are a realtime reminder of that ideal.

Other Giants of History

Schweitzer and Pasteur are a couple of examples of lives spent in pursuit of actively helping mankind. Emerson and Thoreau laid out a moral and ethical set of guidelines for all of us; interestingly, they had pretty direct impact on Gandhi and M.L. King, Jr.

Ben Franklin, philosopher, scientist, inventor, diplomat and author was perhaps ultimately the altruist. He let Washington, Jefferson and the others take the limelight, but undoubtedly was a most significant actor in the Revolution, the Bill of Rights, the Constitution, but acted mostly behind the scenes. He never patented any of his inventions!

Each of these major figures, at least in some minor (probably) way, contributes something to our own personal opinion of what constitutes an ideal person. Again, it's a "forest and trees" kind of situation: you are amongst the forest, so you lack perspective on the forest as a whole. In other words, it's like it's part of our "cultural mindset or stereotype" or frame of reference, our personal perch, from which we observe reality going by day by day, so it's hard to see it.

So in a conscious sort of way, it's not surprising that Ben Franklin was the only one from the "giants" list to take on a personal guidance aspect for me. Trying to be like Franklin I could handle intellectually; trying to be like Jesus is so unthinkable as to be beyond the realm of possible actualization.

Except in some ways, so achievable: golden rule behavior, reap as ye sow, love God, love thy neighbor, turn the other cheek. Or is it? Pretty hard for most of us.

The challenge is to be "in the world, but not of it."

So try. That's our job here.

Mea Culpa

I admit here beforehand, to a certain amount of editorializing (and editing of course) in the telling of these stories. On the other hand, maybe that is real point of this whole thing: what I have learned, what it has meant to me, etc. All of which is translated (of necessity; how else can I?) through my own personally tinted prism of awareness; inevitably what I try to relate objectively is colored to some degree.

So if I am too blunt or opinionated in some way, please try to understand that my intent is good, and try to forgive me.

I'm only human.

Summary

So here then, are a number of my personal rules for navigating through the jungle of life, with somewhat of a story about how I learned the lesson. Maybe they'll help you too. Included at the end is a cookbook sort of recipe for doing this exercise yourself, the prize at the bottom of the box hopefully.