

for Chris Morrow

My mother is worried about the neighbors. You see, my father could repair just about anything, and did. He was in his glory keeping the appliances of our community alive. Fixing whatever was broken was a way he had of giving to people. And we watched him work and wondered how he knew the intricacies of so many different things. The secret is, of course, that he didn't. There's only three things you need to know to repair a washing machine: be gentle, so you don't strip the threads; be patient, so that your curiosity has time to burgeon; and, most importantly, don't be afraid of the task, trust that it will all come right.

I gave him quite a bit of practice repairing things as a small boy by taking apart everything in sight. Naturally, I have suppressed all memory of this, but I am told that I was much better at taking things apart than putting them back together. Through it all my father was gentle, knowing how small the threads of self esteem are in a child; and endlessly patient, trusting that the three of us would come right.

He gave himself to us in a thousand ways. He gave us band lessons and horses and college educations and confidence. Scoutmaster and little league coach, he took us camping clear across the country to marvel at the world's fair with a grin as big as Rushmore on his face.

It took me years to understand even the simplest things about him. My father would come to visit me, and I so wanted him to tell me what he thought of my friends, my work, my politics -- he built me a bookcase. I wrote a short story in which my father's younger self appears as a painfully shy radio experimenter, and after some hesitation showed the messy typescript to him. Would he be offended, would he be pleased? -- he retyped the entire manuscript on his computer so that I would have it on diskette, and, on a separate sheet of paper, corrected a couple of details about the radios. Over time it started to sink in how much love he held for me; he didn't need to approve of everything I did, he approved of me and wanted me to be myself, not a reaction to his reactions. He was patient and endlessly optimistic and wasn't afraid to trust when he didn't understand.

It wasn't just his family that he cared for, he loved everyone with the same gentle patience, the same enormous approval. He was the quietest person in a crowded room, but somehow the one everyone most remembered. He had a way of listening to a person was as mysterious as it was marvelous. He had a way of smiling that conveyed complete delight with the world. Though he liked contraptions and fishing and camping and singing in the chorus, it was always

other people that he cared most about, and what all these other things were for. My father was never lonely and never bored, because he lived in the world he wanted, and that was a world of people. He was kind to everyone, and they returned it in kind. He wanted a world that was gentle and we knew him as a gentleman. And he loved to sing with people, certain that life is more like a song than a sentence.

My father had a wonderful life not for what he had, but for what he gave away. He gave all of us his ear, and the help of his hands and the whole of his time. And his passing from us was without fear or regret or pain because he wasn't really leaving all of us whom he loved so much; he had already given himself away to us all. And if we are not afraid to be gentle with the world and we listen, we still have him here.

My father speaks the last words of that short story. The world is blacked out, the whole world is at war. We fear and grieve and wonder why those we love are removed so far from us. And through it all he has quietly and patiently built an enormous radio that can receive the entire world. The tubes glow in the dark, and he hands us the headphones, and says two words: "listen", he says, "music".

Glenn Morrow  
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