

Daddy: A Title to Last a Lifetime

By Leon Scott Baxter

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I can't think of anything that can single-handedly warm a man's heart like the day his baby first calls him, "Daddy." It instantly brings tears of pride to the burliest, sideburn-wearing, tattoo-covered, Harley-riding dad on God's green earth.

I'm a proud pop of two incredible girls, a four year old, and a three month old. The little one hasn't gotten around to talking yet, but when my big girl calls me "Daddy", I feel as though the baton of fatherhood has been passed down the generations and I'm running the next leg of this prestigious race. I ceremoniously hold in my lap the responsibilities of being my girls' protector and provider. I'm their hero, the Keeper-Away of Monsters, the Kisser of Boo-Boos, the Lap of Cuddledom.

As most fathers, I watch my little ones and wonder where the time has gone. They grow like bean plants. How much longer will they need me? When do the monsters disappear? When will they put on their own Band-Aids? When will my lap be too small? When will I no longer be "Daddy", and instead, just "Dad"?

I have a frighteningly strong, thick-skinned, fifty-three year old mother. Last summer on a trip to San Diego, I got the news that her father had passed away, my grandfather. I left my wife and my, then, only daughter to attend the service in New York, where I met up with Mom. Although she loved her father dearly, she was very practical when it came to his passing. He'd live a full life. He hadn't suffered. He was ready. She told me, "I'm not so sad for Dad, but more for Mom."

The service was very emotional. The casket remained opened during the funeral. My grandmother cried. My cousins shed tears. My uncle wept. But Mom held it together. My mom is the paragon of strength. Always has been. Through her strict determination she raised me single-handedly. She put her life on hold for me. She protected me and provided for me. I never imagined that she ever needed to be provided for, that she needed to be protected.

At the funeral's conclusion, we were given the opportunity to pay our final respects before the coffin lid would be forever closed. I looked at the shell of my grandfather, a man who had always been "old" since the day I was born. I saw a fragile man, whose false teeth fit poorly in his mouth. His bald head was adorned with a few gray hairs, like the webs of yesteryear's spiders. I was going to miss him.

My mother paid her respects last. She did not see the same man I saw. When she looked down at the person in the new, blue suit, she saw the man who had taught her how to bait a hook, the man who took her boysenberry hunting on the side roads of New York's summers, the man who held her with merely the strength of his toes.

She whispered her final words to him: “Good-bye, Daddy.”

In all my years, I’d never heard my mother call him “Daddy”. And, it touched me deeply that morning that they put my grandfather to rest, more deeply than any other event that took place that day. As I slumped in the limousine driving out to the cemetery, I wondered why those three words I overheard affected me so strongly. I thought back to my wife and little girl three-thousand miles away... “Daddy”.

When my mom said good-bye, she was no longer that stoic fifty-three year old woman who’d raised me alone, who provided for me. She was her daddy’s little girl. She’d lost her Keeper-Away of Monsters, her Kisser of Boo-Boos, her Lap of Cuddledom. She’d lost her hero.

As fathers, what we do today with our children will stay with them a lifetime: the ways we interact with them, the time we spend together, the games we play, the stories we read. No matter how old they become, what career they choose, or their level of success, our children, like ourselves, will not only need their fathers, but also their daddies.

We need that man who keeps us safe when we are scared, who makes us laugh when we are sad, who explains the world, when we are confused.

When are we no longer “Daddy”?... We’ll always be Daddy.

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