

MY DADDY

In an elementary school sharing time activity, I told my class that My Daddy had discovered the way to make diamonds. My teacher took me aside and said that this couldn't be true. I came back to school the next day with newspaper articles, pictures, and samples of synthetic diamonds, and the teacher had to admit that, indeed, my father did discover how to make diamonds. It's not surprising that the teacher was skeptical. After all, it's a pretty amazing thing to assert, and I have to admit I was always very proud to boast, "My Daddy makes diamonds!" But despite my father's many scientific accomplishments, awards, and public acclaim, to me he was always just My Daddy.

He was My Daddy who brought our large family together for family prayer in the morning; who read us the scriptures while his breakfast got cold; who was a faithful adherent of the Family Home Evening program when the church president suggested Monday nights for families. It was My Daddy who woke the family at 4:30 a.m. on summer Saturday mornings so we could be at the welfare farm orchards early enough to get in some cherry picking before the heat of the day; who took us to General Conference in Salt Lake to sit on the lawn and listen to our prophet; who answered the call for couples to serve missions and went to Zimbabwe and South Africa, and learned to love people of another race. Daddy lived the Gospel of Jesus Christ through his service to the church and his neighbors.

He was My Daddy who bought a piano when I was eight years old so I could begin to play; who would gently pat me on the cheek at 5:30 a.m. so I could get up and practice the piano before breakfast and school. Daddy would come down to the basement while I was practicing and, with his very presence, make me feel like I was the finest player there ever was. He let me use all his old 30s and 40s popular music books and I happily sight-read through all of them, playing, singing, and learning a delightful repertoire of music I never would have known otherwise. Dad sat through countless recitals, always rewarding my performances with ice cream sundaes at Price's.

Dad loved music and purchased a console stereo record player for our living room. He played all kinds of records: symphony, string chamber music, vocal—Joan Sutherland was a favorite, jazz, and his old record collection from the 40s. Dad bought himself a personal piano for the living room and it got a lot of use. He practiced and practiced his "oldies"—tunes he played in his early college days when he was in a dance band--and learned more recent popular music as well.

For the daughter of a scientist, I did poorly in high school algebra and chemistry classes. Daddy would sit patiently with me, going over and over homework problems, drawing pictures so I could "see" the answers, but I just couldn't visualize solutions like he could.

Dad had a curious mind and was always adding to his vast store of knowledge. He'd sit in his study and read the dictionary to learn vocabulary. Sometimes he'd just sit and think. He'd say that solutions to problems he was working on came to him that way. If I had a question about any subject, Dad was my first resource. On family trips in the car he would never pass by a historical highway marker. The entire family would unload from the station

wagon and gather round the marker while Dad read it to us and then we'd pile back into the car and be on our way. I still have a hard time passing by historical markers without stopping.

An early adopter of computers and electronic technology, Dad bought Apple computers and upgraded as new models were announced. Fascinated by all the new and different kinds of software, he bought it all. Dad set himself up with a keyboard and computer station, purchasing the first music software. He took a music class at BYU and composed a hymn.

Dad was a great surpiser. He often brought Mom flowers. He once came into the kitchen where I had spent a couple of hours deep-cleaning the refrigerator and handed me a \$20 bill, saying that he appreciated my going the extra mile in my chores. He liked to spontaneously treat the family to ice cream or a movie. One really BIG surprise was when he showed up at our home one day in the mid '60s with a brand new avocado-green, four-door Chrysler New Yorker, with electric windows, air-conditioning, and an endless back end. One Valentine's Day after I was married, I received a wooden heart in my mailbox. Dad had cut down a honey locust tree in our back yard, and when he realized the trunk had a slight heart shape, crosscut it into several three-quarter inch slices, painted and hand-printed on each an original "punny" poem to Mom, his daughters and daughters-in-law. Then he simply addressed the backs of the wood hearts and put them in the mail!

I sometimes had trouble deciding what to give Daddy for gifts. One year he said to me "I don't need anything. Just get me a shoe horn!" Well, I did. It was chrome-plated but I wish it could have been solid gold and engraved.

I recently learned I was named after Mom and Dad's first car which they had nicknamed "Old Betsy." She was an old, dark-blue Plymouth that had leaky brakes and leaned to the side, but nonetheless got the young family from Utah to Schenectady for Dad's first job at GE. I was the fourth child, and the first one born in Schenectady. Dad later wrote, "When Elizabeth was born, we decided if we wanted her to have a name to remind us of coming to Schenectady, we could name her Elizabeth for 'Old Betsy.' That is how our fourth child and second daughter got her name. We call her 'Liz.'"

Well, I guess it's not so bad being named after an old car. People usually hold a special place in their heart for their first automobile. Dad always made me feel special--right up to his last days. I visited Daddy in June 2008, a month before he died, and a few days before Marty and I were to leave the country to serve a mission in Albania. While Dad rested on a nearby sofa, I sat at his piano and played and sang several of the old tunes that were familiar to him--tunes like "Manhattan Serenade," "Melody of Love," and Irving Berlin's "Always." Afterward, I sat next to him and said my goodbyes and told him that he had been a wonderful Daddy and that I loved him. He smiled and replied, "I love you, too, dear." Ah, *My sweet* Daddy. It was a moment that diamonds couldn't buy.

Elizabeth Hall Neil, March 15, 2009