

THE DAY WE BLEW UP THE CAT

And other stories from a normal childhood



The Dad Story Project: Volume I

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**For my wife, Karen,
my children, Jeremiah and Amanda,
and my mom and dad**

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

The stuff in the front of the book

THE STORIES

Just Being There

Animal Husbandry of the Fowlest Kind

The day we blew up the cat

Barn Boots

Thankful for what matters

A barn, two boats, and a boy

Confidence in a can of latex paint

If we could choose forever now

Storing up treasures (a parable of sorts)

I see my father running

Amidst a downpour of mallards

Journey back to the Secret Place

The red knife

No matter how hard he tried

Waving at the offspring

THE END (SORT OF)

This is just the beginning...

The stuff in the front of the book

Why I wrote this book

Because *I* don't have time.

Let me illustrate. In the photo below, my son Jeremiah is practicing for the soon-to-be day when the training wheels would come off and he would be free on two wheels. I ran alongside him and gave him a little shove and then I knelt down and raised my camera and quickly focused and snapped the shutter—and in that twitch of an instant I caught him, leaning bravely, legs churning, racing away from me. I can still taste the pungent sweetness of that early spring day, still feel the chilled air rushing in and out of my lungs after my little run, still feel the prick of the sharp gravel stinging my knees. But if you look carefully you'll notice that the photo isn't perfectly sharp; there is still just the tickle of a blur. For even in the most finely split second there is yet a tiny bit of movement. And my son's been moving ever since. He's thirty now, yet somehow I took the photo just three weeks ago...



Why you should read this book

Because *you* don't have time.

Read the paragraph above again. Whether you are a parent or a child, life is racing past. It seems like tomorrow will never come (the training wheels will never come off) and then today has become yesterday's long ago.

“How did it get so late so soon? Its night before it’s afternoon. December is here before its June. My goodness how the time has flown. How did it get so late so soon?”

—Dr. Seuss

How I was even able to write this book

I have only been able to become my wife’s loving husband and my children’s loving father and to live these stories and get all these words lined up properly because of a dramatic intervention a long time ago. My wife and I were in our mid-20s, with a newborn son, and our marriage was dying. The combination of two very dysfunctional childhoods had collided and we were imploding in pain and resentment. We knew we were self-destructing, but it hurt too much to really care. Make a mental list of all the ugly, poisonous, bitterness-spawning, trust-crushing, love-destroying problems that young couples face. Use your imagination and don’t hold back. We lived that list. And then God intervened and overwhelmed us with his great love and mercy. He turned our heart toward him and gave us new life. He healed us, individually and together, and he beautifully restored our marriage and our very lives. He changed everything, and gave us the only real hope there is. If you’re curious about how God transformed our lives (and how He can transform yours), please read our testimony on [The Dad Story Project](#) website.

How the stories first saw the light of day

Most of the essays in this book first appeared as columns in our local small-town newspaper, *The Bridgton News*, published weekly in the foothills of the White Mountains in western Maine. I’d been a technical writer and editor most of my adult life, typically working on esoteric subjects that appealed to the more lunatic fringes of society (e.g., mountain climbers, treehouse builders, emergency medicine providers), but in the spring of 2006 an old itch came back, an itch to write about things closer to home, things closer to my heart. My time as a day-to-day, moment-by-moment, hands-on dad was coming to an end—our son Jeremiah was nearly finished with college and our daughter Amanda was a high school freshman. They would soon be gone and on their own.

Growing up alongside my children had been the greatest privilege of my life, and I wanted to write about the delights and successes and joys and laughter, and even the challenges and frustrations and failures and tears that go along with doing this thing called “dad”—one of the top three most important jobs a man will ever have. I wanted to look way back through my memories to see my own childhood, and then look out our living room window into the front yard of right now. I wanted to pull out those simple, precious, ordinary moments of Everyday, and squeeze the wonder out of them. So I practiced my spiel and then pitched the idea of a column to the editor at the News; and he politely thanked me and said no. And then a week later he called back and said, “I’ve been thinking. Sure, we’ll try it.”

Over the next eight years I wrote my heart out and the column prospered—gaining not only a loyal local following, but also by being chosen as the best weekly column by the Maine Press Association every year from 2007 to 2013 (a 3rd place award in 2013 was just an aberration, and in my own prideful defense I claim it was caused by a single misplaced semicolon).

For fifty-five years I've awakened each day as a son. Each morning for the last three decades I've climbed out of bed each morning and stepped into the shoes of a father. And since 2006, I've been writing about those days.

The birth of The Dad Story Project

Here then is Volume 1, **THE DAY WE BLEW UP THE CAT—and other stories from a normal childhood**, a book of some 15-odd essays (my wife would say some are very odd) selected from a collection nearing 200, all originally published as columns in my local paper. I am very grateful to my editors for enthusiastically encouraging me to turn the columns into books.

And this is the first of six books which will form the core of an exciting new venture called [The Dad Story Project](#) (TDSP). The premise behind TDSP is simple: encouraging fathers through storytelling. If you pause and think about it, stories are the bricks in the building of our lives, our string of days, each day layered upon the one before. Some of the most powerful things in the world are stories. So, I will prime the pump with some of my newspaper essays, but the heart of TDSP will be stories submitted by others: fathers mostly, but kids and moms and wives and grandparents will contribute, too—anyone with a positive, encouraging story about the wonder of childhood and fatherhood and the things we do to help each other grow up. My hope and great expectation is that TDSP will morph into a giant, collaborative, interactive movement, a vast community of people with just a single goal: let's learn from each other how to do this thing called “dad.”

“Yeah, so who died and made you the world's expert on all things dad-ness?” I hear many of you asking. Hey, I never made that claim. (But I do have an enormous Father's Day card in my office from my 22 year-old daughter that says pretty much that.) And while the essays in this book and the books to follow are typically happy and positive, that's by choice because I want this series to be encouraging and affirming and hopeful. I didn't do the dad thing perfectly; I bumbled my way through like everyone else. But God was gracious and I did survive (and so did my wife and kids) and we love all each other more in spite of our own stumbles. And I hope that's enough. Please visit [The Dad Story Project](#) website to find out more about TDSP—and then write your own story and join the movement!

Other stuff

Are all the stories true?

Absolutely...except for the ones that are ridiculous. Seriously, yes, all the stories about me and my family are true. My childhood, my kids, my wife, our lives. Just how it happened. Pretty much. Occasionally I'll squish the timing a little to fit everything in, or rearrange things to make a point more clearly—but you won't notice. And I may take small real event and let my imagination run away with it to see where it will go; but such flights of allegorical fancy will be obvious. And the chronology may seem weird now and again, as if tomorrow showed up late for yesterday, but you know what, being a father and a son at the same time sometimes feels like that. To help keep track, just remember that you're reading the stuff *now*.

First person/third person: make up your mind

Most of the essays are written in the first person singular using the ubiquitous “I” rather than the newspaper-speak of the “editorial we.” But some are written in the third person, often starting a bit

mysteriously with “the man.” The third person grammatical tense is a deliberate diversion that puts a little distance between me and the subject, which is a useful storytelling technique. It also makes it a little less likely that I will drip tears onto the keyboard while I’m typing. I choke up easily and am prone to rampant sentimentality. “You’re such a sap,” my daughter says.

A note about the title of this book...

I hope you’re not offended by the title. It’s a reference to one of the stories in the book, a true story; but it was an accident and our cat (Oscar) came through perfectly unscathed and the story makes a good point in the end. The house did smell of burned cat hair for a few days, but...well, you’ll just have to read about it.

I went through a number of title ideas when designing the book, all of which were adorable, if a little boring. Anyway, my research helped me understand that regardless of the deepest and most admirable intent (and the most endearing content), a book needs a snappy title and a provocative cover image so it can sell itself. It’s pure marketing. It’s probably where the term “catchy” comes from. And it certainly worked, because, um, here you are reading these words on your screen.

...and what about that ridiculous cover image?

The illustration of the traumatized cat is just a doppelganger—Oscar himself would not pose immediately after the explosion because he was under a stuffed chair, smoldering. But that wouldn’t have made a good illustration anyway, because all you would see would be a black rectangle and two yellow eyes glowing fiercely. And after the smoke cleared, so to speak, he still declined to be photographed (on the advice of his attorney, or so he claimed). And so we went with a stock illustration by a Shutterstock.com artist from Martinique who goes by the mysterious name of “bluedarkat.” We took some Photoshop liberties with the image, since the original didn’t look quite sooty or disheveled enough; and in the end it seems to have made an impression on you to the tune of just a few bucks, so everybody wins.

What people are saying (about the original newspaper columns)

“I’ve worked with Peter Lewis off and on, and in various capacities, for over 20 years. He’s a pleasure to know, and a pleasure to read. And the Peter Lewis I know and the Peter Lewis I read are precisely the same person. Very genuine. Very enthusiastic. Very funny. And very full of life. These are the qualities that come through in his writings. In this hardened, cynical world, his columns truly are a breath of fresh air.”

—Bart Bachman, Managing Editor, *The Conway Daily Sun*, North Conway, NH

“Peter Lewis is a thoughtful, perceptive observer. His wise columns make us all think of our own lives, of similar experiences or memories half-stirred. If his column was in my newspaper I would read it every time.”

—Alison Osius, Executive Editor, Big Stone Publishing, Carbondale, CO

“Peter Lewis’s essays elevate everyday events and objects—mowing the lawn, puttering about the house, barn boots, sump pumps, a loop of string—to poetic ruminations on rural and family life. He

brings a sense of fun to his personal narratives, but beneath this amusement is a depth of understanding and sensitivity about the seemingly mundane that stir the heart."

—Nancy Heiser, Associate Editor, *Port City Life*, Portland, ME

"As the editors of Peter's "local paper," we were pleased to hear that he wanted to write a biweekly column planning to place it with us. Peter Lewis pieces are often amusing and always insightful. Readers are invited inside a place (the back yard, the treetops), inside an experience (doing chores around the farm, cleaning out the barn) or even inside another person's heart and mind (those of a daughter or son, or a neighbor, for instance). We're all invited to rattle around in the shared experience for a while. The end result is always worthwhile and entertaining—and, that is exactly what we want a local column to deliver."

—Mike Corrigan & Wayne Rivet, *The Bridgton News*, Bridgton, ME

Another thing before we get started...

In this first volume I've tried to mix things up. There are stories about my kids and me growing up together, of course, but you will also hear about my childhood as well as about my dad and my wife. I look backward and forward and occasionally sideways. And there's at least one parable. And while I will most often write from the viewpoint of a father, I am also a son and a husband, and those roles and perspectives have helped shape me into the man I am today; so I write about those things, too. Okay, on to the stories...

A final request and a reward

If you enjoy this first book, please go to its page on Amazon and write a review—and if you do, as my way of saying thank you, **I'll send you the next book for free** before it goes live on Amazon. To find out more (and to make sure you get your free book), please [click this link](#).

Okay, on to the stories...

Just Being There

I drove three hours through horizontal sleet the other day just to sit in a room and do nothing. But it was worth it, because as each slushy mile ticked by and with each passing minute I was that much closer to my son, who needed me.

My son, a college senior just a few weeks shy of getting his marine engineering degree, had been challenged. Something had happened and truth, justice, and accountability hung in the air like smoke—real enough, but hard to grasp. His honor and integrity were on the line, and although he held the high ground, he still wanted me there. So I drove on, slipping along the Interstate at 45 mph, passing cars in the ditches, sucking down coffee, and splashing a gallon of wiper fluid on my scummy windshield.

When I got to the school, I met my son and we walked together into a plush office. I sat quietly way in the back of the room, taking notes, peering over my glasses at the key players, and listening to my son's strong and confident voice as he fielded tough questions and lobbed tougher ones back. I said almost nothing. I was just there.

At the end, after the tape recorder had been turned off, after the handshakes and mutual promises, my son and I went down into the tiny coastal village where his school was and sat on round stools at an ancient lunch counter. He ate a hamburger while I watched the man on the Weather Channel tell me I shouldn't travel today unless I absolutely had to.

I've been a dad for almost a quarter-century and have pulled double-duty for the last 14 years (my daughter was born in 1992). It's been the hardest, most wonderful, frustrating, fulfilling, painful, rewarding, draining, uplifting, challenging, and joyful job I've ever had. I wouldn't trade it for anything.

Each morning since 1984 I have risen, washed my face, fired up the coffee pot, and stepped into the shoes of a father—shoes I've been expected to know how to fill. Some days I've nailed it and gotten the job done with ease. Other days I've been so baffled I couldn't be certain the sun would come up the next morning.

I hung out that night at my son's house with his roommates and friends, watching movies and eating cold Chinese food. I spent several minutes scraping crud off the cleanest fork I found in the sink. We sat on folding chairs and wrapped ourselves in blankets because the boys had set the thermostat just high enough to keep the water in the sink from freezing. Later, curled up in a sleeping bag tossed onto the floor of my son's room, we talked long into the night, the room lit by a glowing globe he got on his tenth birthday. We just laughed and laughed until we both fell asleep.

The next morning the roads were clear. My son was headed back to campus and I was headed back home. It was awkward standing there at his front door, both of us saying silly things to keep the conversation going, secretly wishing we could ignore our responsibilities and just spend the day together. But we were grown-ups, father and son, and we both had things we had to do.

"Thanks for coming, Dad," he finally said. And he smiled.

And that was it. I had never been more proud of him in my life. He was going through a tough time, but he was going to come shining through. He could handle things from here.

Being a dad takes faith, prayer, wisdom, tact, a sense of humor, self-discipline, empathy, stubbornness, the ability to say, "I was wrong," and "I'm sorry," and "Forgive me." It takes insight and

intuition, kindness laced with firmness, humility, late nights, early mornings, and every minute in between. Being a dad takes a pair of arms that open wide and pull a kid in close no matter what and with no strings attached. It can be the hardest work.

But this time all I did was sit in the back of a room—a quiet presence in the corner of my son's eye.

Sometimes being a dad means just showing up.

Animal Husbandry of the Fowlest Kind

A good enemy keeps you alert and brings great clarity to life. I had an enemy once. Our relationship began in innocence and ended in murder. I think.

It started one spring day with a little yellow order form from the feed store and a few dollars. After pouring through books, and picking the brains of experts, my daughter Amanda and I finally decided: there would be six each of Araucanas, Rhode Island Reds, and Plymouth Rocks. We were to be chicken farmers.

Ours was a practical and endearing plan. Practical because for the price of the eggs you get the birds which give you the eggs; and endearing because, well, all farmyards with chickens scratching about them are endearing.

So we handed in the form, plunked down our money, and waited—our little fluff-balls would arrive on May 24.

When ordering chickens, you hope to get all hens—sweet, passive, stupid hens. But sexing chicks, like parallel parking, is a tricky business; it's hard to see what you're doing, you're always in a bit of a rush, and close enough isn't always close enough. Sometimes you scrape the curb or end up with a rooster.

Enter Rusty, a fine, proud, heavy-shouldered, 100% male, Rhode Island Red. My new enemy.

Rusty first took charge of the hens, which seemed fine and proper to us. Then, a few weeks later, he took charge of the cats, which struck us as odd. After that, with great fearlessness, he began to direct traffic, strutting up and down the yellow lines, pecking at the wheels of passing logging trucks.

Rusty, like God, was no respecter of persons. But, unlike God, Rusty hated everybody. He became sinister and nasty and began chasing dogs.

By fall, Rusty had grown to five rock-hard pounds of sinew, gristle, and malice; and I began carrying around a busted canoe paddle. Rusty would stalk me from around corners, then come roaring at me, throwing his great bulk into the air and thrusting out his three-inch spurs. It was like getting hit with a sack of wet cement wrapped with barbed wire.

With the canoe paddle I at least had a chance.

As the months went by, Rusty slowly went feral. He became a rogue chicken, sick in the head, unpredictable, and much feared. He walked with a limp, for effect. When he crept into the dooryard, leering, the birds in the trees would fly off.

As the end drew near, there were signs.

The neighbor's dog disappeared.

Tires on the car went mysteriously flat.

A machete went missing.

The last straw came the day he chased my son Jeremiah up a tree. Jeremiah was seventeen and could bench press 220 pounds.

So, Rusty, enemy of the free world, was sentenced to death.

Holding no grudge, and with no cruelty in our hearts (Rusty's behavior was simple instinct after all), we formed our plan. It was to be a humane, quick, and dignified execution. After trapping him in a small cage, I would simply put a bullet in Rusty's head.

If only killing a deranged rooster could be so easy.

The first shot rang out and feathers flew, boards snapped, and the smell of brimstone filled the air, and Amanda, Jeremiah, and I were all tossed off into the grass. When the smoke cleared, there stood Rusty somehow busted loose and a few yards away, bloody—pacing back and forth in the tall grass and plotting against us. Jeremiah grabbed the .22 and fired again. Rusty went down, then erupted back up and came at us, briskly, spurs loaded. Amanda and I spun around and ran southeast, waving our arms and screaming. Then a third shot echoed out across the fields and finally Rusty went down and stayed down.

We buried him unceremoniously in the meadow, covering the deep hole with a large stone. No words were spoken over him.

The next morning, Amanda and I went to visit the grave. We found only the hole. There were no tracks or evidence of digging. The soil was piled up in a ring as if it had been thrust up from below. The stone was gone.

Amanda slowly looked up at me. "He got out," she whispered.

I carried that busted canoe paddle around with me until winter.

The day we blew up the cat

Raising a son takes subtle pressure and good timing. If you yell, slam doors, or throw your weight around too much you eventually just end up with shaking fists, squealing tires, and the latent waft of marijuana from the dark corner of the garage.

So you walk with your son through time, carefully and respectfully, always on the lookout for opportunities to show your young charge how the world works—"teachable moments" in today's vernacular.

One day, when my son was seven, I was about to fry up some Spam when I discovered that the gas stovetop was occupied by our cat, Oscar (pronounced "oh-scar"). Wheezing loudly, Oscar had curled himself over the front-left burner and was happily catching warmth from the pilot light.

A perfect teachable moment.

"How can we get Oscar off the stove?" I asked Jeremiah.

"Just shove him," the boy said, eagerly holding the can of Spam.

"What if we wanted to get clever about it?" I said, raising my eyebrows up and down, for effect.

To make a long story short, I postulated to the lad that if we ignited the burner next to Oscar, the little whooshing noise and accompanying puff of heat would rouse him, and he would scamper happily off on his own. Jeremiah nodded gleefully. "It's like an experiment!" he said.

Well, Oscar was a very dusty cat and he blew up like an empty grain elevator. One moment there was the faint hiss of gas and the clickety-click of the sparker, and the next moment there was blazing feline chaos.

We lived in an old center-chimney cape at the time, and Oscar the Flaming Cat made several hot laps around the house trailing an acrid plume of blue smoke. He bounded room-to-room, from tabletop to sofa arm, from doorjamb to kitchen chair, slinging throw-rugs off into corners and caroming off walls. Amidst the crashing sounds I stood, holding the cast iron frying pan. Jeremiah stood holding the Spam. Mouths agape.

Yes, just like an experiment. Gone bad.

After three orbits, Oscar the Flaming Cat glanced off a picture frame, dashed into my office, darted under an overstuffed chair, and smoldered.

This whole thing took about twelve seconds.

A smoke detector blared.

My wife sprinted down from upstairs. "What's that awful smell?" she asked.

"Oscar," Jeremiah and I both said.

The joyful ending to this little conflagratory tale is that Oscar was fine. Sheer velocity had kept the flames from licking deeply, and shortly after his scorching run he lay sprawled atop the couch, out of breath but resting comfortably. He never smoked again.

I burned the Spam and we never did clear the stench of torched cat hair from the drapes.

Raising a son is like steering a huge ship among treacherous shoals. The dangers are jagged and many and you must nudge the rudder well in advance of each turn. Then you wait. Was your influence

enough? Was your timing correct? Will the bow of your ship—or the character of your son—swing through the correct arc and miss the rocks? It takes a long time for a ship or a boy to respond to the helm, and so you wonder.

And then, many years later, there you are, middle-aged and bewildered, fussing with some small mechanical challenge in the garage, trying to get Part A to slot into Part B, and you stand stymied, scratching your head and holding a rubber mallet.

Then your boy drives up in his truck and hops out.

“I can’t seem to make this work,” you say.

“Maybe you have to get clever about it, experiment a little,” the young man replies.

And he takes mallet from your hand and spins it around and raps something smartly with the handle, and just like that everything falls into place.

“Like setting fire to a cat,” the boy says, tossing the mallet back to you and walking briskly away.



Barn Boots

I walked out into our meadow on a recent morning to hear the news from the dawn birds and check the dew. I start most summer days this way and recommend it—goldfinches and robins spread unbiased cheer better than CNN, and droplets condensed out of the night sky lubricate the day better than drive-through espresso.

As I swished out through the tall, wet, green of the morning, I came upon a swathe of mowed grass that began near the barn and ran southeast for fifty feet before stopping dead at a clump of goldenrod. Later, while pouring milk over crackling cereal, I asked my family about this mysterious swathe. My wife, Karen, just shrugged, but when my daughter Amanda heard the question she slumped against a nearby wall and hung her head. “Oh, yeah, I tried to mow the meadow,” she said. “But it was too hard.”

“For the horse?” I asked.

“For *my* horse,” she said.

Five years ago, when Amanda was just eight years old, she asked us to get her a pair of barn boots for her birthday. I appreciated her request, since I’m a barn boot-man myself—sliding my feet deliciously into my black LaCrosse rubber boots most mornings between the opening day of mud season and mid-summer. Barn boots represent real work in a world where many of us (this writer included) earn a living by clicking a mouse. (At the end of most of my work days all I track into the house are stray nouns and dangling participles, but after hours in rubber boots I clump in mud balls, lawn clippings, and damp nasturtium blossoms—evidence of real toil.)

So, when her birthday arrived, Amanda opened an oddly-shaped package wrapped in the latest edition of the local paper, and her eyes opened wide and bright. She slid her feet into her new barn boots, hooked her finger at me, and said, “Follow me.” Out in the yard she pointed at the house and said, “farmhouse,” then pointed at the barn and said, “barn,” then down at her boots and said, “barn boots.” Finally she pointed at herself. “I guess I need a horse,” she said. Clever girl.

Amanda’s first barn boots led to a fine collection of animals living in practically every corner of our property, including fish, snakes (sometimes coming into the house one in each hand, “Dad, open the door, quick!”), hermit crabs, mice, rats, hamsters, guinea pigs, chinchillas, rabbits (don’t ever get two rabbits), cats, sheep, and finally, goats. With each passing year the animals in Amanda’s collection got bigger and required more attention, and every couple of years she outgrow a pair of barn boots.

But her dream of a horse didn’t come true. The barn needed renovation, fencing needed to be installed and a corral built; but money was tight and her great dream always had to be put off. Amanda is patient, and she enjoyed working in the barn with her menagerie, but I could see the longing in her eyes when she looked out at the old pasture next to the barn. And on the day she went out into the meadow with the mower and tried to conquer the long grass, I realized she was just trying to keep the magic arithmetic going: farmhouse, plus barn, plus barn boots, plus a mown meadow, equals horse.

Later that evening I took the mower out into the meadow and began to push. The grass was tall and the going was hard and sometimes my barn boots slipped on the damp ground—but little by little I extended Amanda’s swathe. Back and forth I cut, the soft, wet smell of progress hanging in the air, until

a bright green rectangle began to take shape. I looked up once and saw Amanda watching me from a window.

When I finished, Amanda came out to meet me and we sat together on the granite steps of our old farmhouse. "Gosh, Dad, you did a lot," she said. I took off my glasses and wiped my sweaty forehead with the sleeve of my shirt. "Someday you'll get your horse, Mandy," I said. "Until that great day, whenever you see your papa out there fighting back the goldenrod, you'll know that he hasn't forgotten your dream." My daughter smiled and laid her head on my shoulder and we just sat there for a few quiet moments admiring her future Arabian prancing out in the freshly mowed meadow.

Sometimes all it takes to keep a dream alive is to cut a little grass.

(Author's note: Amanda got her horse, two of them, in fact, about three years later. That's us below. I'm the one on the left.)



Thankful for what matters

The man knew he was dying.

Knew because of the tubes and the blinking monitors and the white-coated people who clicked in and out of his room with clipboards. Knew because of the plastic bracelet on his wrist and the pills and the bad food and the full-body hurt. Knew because his wife was sitting next to his bed holding his hand, and her hand felt oddly warm.

He, a captain of industry, the man they called The Producer down at the firm because of his dogged determination and long work hours, the man to whom nothing was casual or frivolous (he always fastened every button on every shirt), this man who wasted nothing, was wasting away.

In the late afternoon, his two grown children walked quietly into his room, bent in turn to kiss his forehead, and then sat in chairs. His wife helped him sit up and he tried to put on an air of health and vigor.

“How are your stock investments doing, son?” the dying man asked, clearing his throat first.

“It doesn’t matter, Dad,” his boy said. Then he leaned forward. “Do you remember when I was five and you taught me to skip stones down at the lake?”

“No, I don’t. Hey, did that refinance go through on your home? You know, you just have to get that interest rate down.”

The boy shook his head. “I haven’t really thought about that, Dad. It doesn’t really matter. But remember the day when you taught me to ride a bike? I think my knees are still skinned.” The boy rubbed his knees and laughed, but the old man only scowled and the boy slumped back in his chair.

The man turned his attention to his daughter. “And you, miss,” he said. “You’re almost done with your master’s degree, aren’t you?”

“Oh, Dad,” the girl said, reaching into her purse. “That doesn’t matter right now, but I brought pictures of when I was a swan in my school play and you came to watch.” She held the photo out, her hands shaking a little, but her father just looked away.

And so the tension rose. The serious man at the end of his serious life asking serious questions to his children, his silly children who seemed drowning in frivolous sentiment.

Later, alone with his wife, the doubts crept in. Awkward questions hung in the air.

“I don’t understand,” the man said, taking a single breath between each fragmented sentence. “I’ve worked so hard for them. Given them everything. Paid for their degrees. Pushed them. Made them into successful adults. Now I’m lying here (he grabbed the rails of his bed and tried to sit up). All they want to talk about are the insignificant moments, the pointless times. They dwell on the trivial. Why? They have no idea what matters.” And his wife sobbed softly and held his cold hand while he drifted off into a morphine-induced sleep.

A snuffle woke the man. A tug at the bedcovers. A small voice.

“Daddy, I can’t sleep,” the little girl said.

And so he crawled quietly out of bed and took his young daughter’s tiny hand and led her downstairs. Passing a mirror on the landing, he caught in the reflection of himself the startled gaze of a

young man. The hospital, the tubes and monitors, the sappy nostalgic grown children, even the dying—all just a dream. As he poured the chocolate milk and arranged the cookies, the man thought deeply.

It hadn't been a dream, he realized. It had been a nightmare.

Then came a soft thumping down the stairs and the glowing play of a Buzz Lightyear flashlight on the walls.

"Hey, cool, what's going on?" the little boy asked, rubbing his eyes.

Hours later, the man's wife came downstairs to put on the breakfast coffee and found chaos in the living room. The furniture had been rearranged and there were sheets draped over everything. Cushions pulled off the couch. Crumbs on the floor. Spilled milk. An open Dr. Seuss book. And from under the makeshift tent, the dying glow of a child's toy flashlight.

She knelt and pulled up the corner of a dangling Beauty and the Beast blanket. "Honey?" she called to the biggest lump under the crazy-quilt covers. "You're going to be late for work."

The man stirred. Wiggled his toes. Opened one eye.

"It doesn't matter," he whispered.

And then, wrapped in the arms and legs of his small children and with his head on a stuffed giraffe, the man fell peacefully back to sleep.

A barn, two boats, and a boy

When we bought this old farm it came with the barn I always wanted. A huge, 180-year-old, lumbering, cavernous building with a great yawning maw in front, and lofts, crannies, and nooks inside. It was delicious; the perfect place for big projects and huge animals and loads of stuff.

And stuff it we did, especially my son, who collects big things. Some people collect baseball cards, Jeremiah collects boats and trailers.

Jeremiah bought a house not long ago, with a four-car garage, and I began gently urging him to consider moving some of his stuff out of the barn. I would drop subtle hints, such as, “When are you going to drag all your junk out of *my* barn and put it in *your* barn?”

Well, he came over the other day for the express purpose of dealing with some of his stuff. But I realized I was in trouble when he pulled in towing yet another trailer.

“I thought the idea was to move stuff *out*,” I said. “Don’t worry, Dad,” he said, laughing. So I worried.

The goal for the day, it turned out, was to hoist up Jeremiah’s houseboat, pull out the trailer that it sat on (which was in backwards, not sure how that happened), put a new trailer under it, (not backwards), lower the boat down onto the new trailer, pull it out of the barn, then yank out the boat and trailer that was behind it, then put the houseboat back in, then put the third trailer back in (not backwards). Simple, like playing chess using winches, pulleys, and a four-wheel drive truck.

And so the day went, the two of us clambering about, hooking chain-falls to chestnut timbers high overhead, rigging fat nylon straps, tensioning come-a-longs, swapping trailer hitch balls, moving ladders, laughing, looking for lost tools, and shouting things back and forth like, “You got three inches on this side,” and “Bring her a little my way. Whoa, stop! I mean a little your way,” and “Up, up, up, okay, good, now down” and “I need a little more not so much.”

In the middle of hoisting the houseboat up, we found ourselves both underneath the looming hull, its one-ton bulk swinging ever so gently over our heads from creaking beams. “I don’t think we should both be under here,” Jeremiah said. Then he quickly crawled out.

In the early afternoon, I was trying to pry off a recalcitrant two-by-four and wanted more leverage. “I need that blue-handled screwdriver,” I shouted from the beneath the bowels of the houseboat. Jeremiah, quickly skidded a framing hammer to me across the barn floor. Which is what I’d wanted, of course.

Later, when it came time to move the new trailer in, we both spotted the same problem at the same time and had one of those conversations that only fathers and sons who have grown up together can have; the kind with almost no nouns. The dialog went something like, “Oh, boy,” “Yeah, huh,” “We should have,” “Yup,” “So, umm,” “How about,” “And if we,” “Then,” “Sure, that could work,” “I’ll get a wrench.”

By the end of the day, we were covered with dust and grime, had greasy smears on our pants, splinters in our hands, and dried barn swallow poop in our hair—but the big job was finished and Jeremiah was ecstatic. “Gosh, Dad, we got so much done. Thanks a lot,” he said.

In the evening, long after my son had gone, I went back to close the big barn door. Looking in from the road, things didn't look much different. The barn was still chocked full of mostly the same stuff and the houseboat and trailers were still right where they had been that morning. The only difference was that some things faced forward now, instead of backward.

Life is like that. You look back through the big door at the end of each day and things seem pretty much the same. The same stuff in the same places—rearranged perhaps, but still there. You shuffle everyday problems around like chess pieces, towing one problem out, and then pulling another one in.

Of course, the difference on this day was that I had spent it with my beloved son. He works as a marine engineer fifteen hundred miles away on a drillship in the middle of the ocean, and I only get to see him every few weeks. But on this Saturday we'd been together, just the two of us, scrambling around like when we were little and he was still home and we had some fantastic project percolating away in the barn. It was joyous.

Just before Jeremiah packed up to head to his house after our big day, he went into the other room to say goodbye to his mom. I found his wallet on the kitchen counter and I dashed off a quick note on the torn-off corner of an envelope and tucked it deep inside: "You're the son I always wanted."

Confidence in a can of latex paint

I have a teenage daughter.

Amanda came to us in the usual way, all pink and wiggling, and within moments she held our hearts fast in her tiny fingers.

I wrapped her up in a blanket and brought her close.

“You can do anything, little one,” I whispered.

She was six minutes old.

Fast-forward fifteen years and she’s proving me right. Smart, assertive, charming, witty, tenacious—she’s got the world by the tail.

Ask Mandy what she’s going to be when she grows up and she says, “Whatever.” But it’s not the typical, flippant remark of a teenager, accompanied by the eye roll and toss of the hand. She really means it. Limits? What limits?

About a year ago, Mandy caught me into my office. “Dad, I want to paint my room.” A reasonable request, I thought, so I said, “Sure, sweetie, go for it.” But she wasn’t done. “I want to paint words on the ceiling, too.” I looked at her for a good long time, sizing up the situation, trying to figure out if this was one of those times when I should put my foot down, or let her go. I let her go.

The scheme was shades of purple, blue, and sea spray. Very aquatic. When you walked into her new room you felt like if you held your breath you might get a chance to swim with dolphins.

“Don’t you feel like you’re sleeping underwater,” I asked.

“Yeah, isn’t it cool,” she said.

And there, across the sloping ceiling, from wall to wall, were her words. Big, rounded, sweeping letters—bold pronouncements: Friendship, Passion, Optimism, Curiosity, Laughter, Love, Creativity, Hope, Loyalty, and Confidence.

Vibrant, colorful caterpillars strutted across the tops of some of the letters while huge, flamboyant butterflies flitted around near the walls. The symbolism was not lost on me.

“Gosh, Mandy, you’re amazing,” I said, pulling her in close.

Then, just three weeks ago, she said she wanted to paint her room again.

“Oh, but Mandy, what about your words?” I asked, trailing off into sadness.

Now she gave me the eye-roll. “Oh Dad, you’re such a sap. I can get more words, you know.”

So off she went with a fresh gallon of creativity, this time in flat white.

She appeared an hour or so later, sleeves rolled up, hair pulled back and held in place with a purple elastic, white splotches in accidental places, holding the brush with one hand cupped under the leaky end. There was no smile.

“Dad,” she said, bristling. “I just can’t get rid of my confidence.”

Sure enough, the white paint just wouldn’t cover it—that big, bold word kept oozing back to the surface. So I helped her and we put on another coat. And another. I tried going over the word with a stain-killing white primer, then another finish coat. “That ought to do it,” I proclaimed. Nope.

In the end, over the course of several days, we put over a dozen coats on that ceiling. On the last night, as Mandy prepared for bed, it finally looked like we'd won the battle. White. Everywhere, white. A clean, fresh start.

"What are you going to paint on the new ceiling, Mandy? I asked.

"Not really sure yet," she said. "But it's going to be great!"

When I came home from work the next day, there my daughter stood. Hands on her hips, toe tapping, shaking her head, and scowling.

"It's back, Dad. My confidence is back. *Ugh!*"

I put my hands on her shoulders and looked deeply into those determined eyes. "Daughter, life is full of troubles. Persistent confidence is just something you're going to have to live with."

If we could choose forever now

An insurrection of chickadees yanked my eyes open very early and I padded downstairs to peer out on the dawn. Morning glory seedlings were straining for the new sun from the windowsill, the sump pump was gushing leftover January out of the basement, and the snow was finally melting over the septic tank—April had sprung open the vault of winter and time ticked forward once again.

A sunny afternoon a few days later found me down in the village, running errands in the lazy manner of a man who no longer needed to pull his collar up and breathe through a scarf. Strolling, I had paused to watch peonies push up through black soil when a spinning flash of red pulled my glance leftwards.

The boy was about six, a rough-and-tumble lad in jeans and a sweatshirt, with his baseball cap on sideways, his sneakers untied, and bravery in his eyes. He sat aboard a flying red tricycle with his feet held out straight in front of him and multi-colored plastic streamers pouring off the handlebars. Down and down he flew on the little hill in his front yard, with the vacant pedals spinning wildly and spring roaring in his ears.

He skidded to a stop in twenty feet, his sneakers flinging winter's sand off the sidewalk, and let out a whoop. Then it was back up the hill and down again. Spinning, roaring, skidding, and whooping. And again.

As the warming sun shone down on this little boy, I couldn't help but smile. He'd found a moment he loved more than anything and was holding it in both hands. Time was not linear. No clock ticked forward. It was 11:37 on a Saturday morning, and it always would be. Up the hill and down again. Now, forever now.

Grownups have forgotten that clever trick, I thought to myself, and then I remembered that I was a grownup and I looked down at my watch and was annoyed to find it ticking. Forward, ever forward.

I pulled my baseball cap over sideways, closed my eyes, and imagined.

I imagined that it could be forever now and that a few minutes could last evermore, and if the magic was real, I wondered which minutes I would choose. The obvious ones jumped quick to mind—those days and times we would all pick: the first this, the first that, those turning-point days when life moved, most certainly, *this way*.

And one of those days rose up above the rest.

It's 1979 and I am a freshman in college on my way to earning a degree in forestry from a hands-on school where we students learn about the woods by getting pine sap on our hands. It's a Saturday morning and I am part of a work party out in the forest thinning white pine with chainsaws. We rode out on the back of a logging truck and soon we will climb back on for the ride back to campus.

Also in the work party is a beautiful dark-haired girl with big brown eyes who I desperately want to meet. But I've never had a real girlfriend and I don't know how to do it. But I plot and I scheme and hope-beyond-hope I get the timing just right and then there I am, in line right behind her, hopping up onto that load of sweet-smelling pine logs and sitting down right beside her. I can't look at her, don't know what to say, and anyway, she is laughing and talking to the boy on the other side, so I just sit there, vaguely jealous, every fiber in me acutely aware that I am mere inches away from a real girl, and

then the truck hits a bump and her left knee knocks against my right knee and she turns to me and smiles.

That's the moment I'd pick. That would be my forever now. And then I'd pick it again. And again. And life would most certainly turn *this way* and I'd marry the dark haired girl and we would be together still.

And that's exactly what happened.

Her name is Karen and she still smiles at me every day.

(Author's note: we celebrated our 32nd anniversary in October of 2014. Below you will find two portraits of Karen and I; the one on the left is from about 1982, and the one on the right is from 2012. I have no idea what happened to my hair.)



Storing up treasures (a parable of sorts)

We live in the age of stuff, the man thought.

He was staring at his barn from the dining room window. It was so chocked full that he recently had to build storage racks in his garage, to hold yet more stuff.

As Christmas approached, the frantic obsession with stuff really bothered the man: the commercials, the crowded parking lots, the platinum cards, the ridiculous fat men in red suits, and those inane songs with their shallow, temporal sentiments.

He shook his head. *It's a never-ending pursuit of things.*

And he just kept staring at the barn and wondering *Why do we do this? What's the point? How many cordless drills and coffee makers and broken DVD player does one guy really need?* And the answers didn't come. But the questions kept pounding in his head.

More, more, more—more things, bigger things, more expensive things. It didn't matter what the things were as long as they had more megapixels, more square-footage, more horsepower, and more cup holders; or came in colors like mulberry and mango; or could be financed for 72 months with no money down.

And we have to have them now! the man barked aloud. No waiting, no saving, no anticipation—just sign here please and then there's a jingling of keys and you reach for your pen and try not to drool on the contract.

And he listened to the imaginary jingling keys and sipped his coffee ferociously.

You can't take it with you, he heard himself say to the curtains, *So why do we have it at all?* And then he shook his head gently and felt a bit disgusted (as if he'd just gorged himself on three pieces of pie), and his eyes glazed over with embarrassment—embarrassment for himself, for his culture, for humanity itself, and for our endless pursuit of stuff.

His mind started spinning and the worthlessness began seeping in and it all made him a little nutty and the barn seemed to bulge before his eyes—squeezing stuff out of every window. *Three stories tall and it's not big enough*, he thought. Then his mind wandered back across the snowy road and in his imagination he peered at the new storage racks in the garage and into the rows of containers full of stuff he didn't really need that he'd bought with money he didn't really have and he thought *For crying out loud there's room for 58 plastic storage bins!* and for one crazy second he wondered where he'd put the matches.

He started to beat himself up. *Have I done anything that really matters? Do I have anything with any real value? Or is it all just plain stuff?* And then he thought of Matthew chapter 6, and of his barn so heavy laden, and he felt convicted and guilty.

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven.... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”

But then the man remembered how hard he'd tried, how many sacrifices he and his wife had made, all the time and effort they'd put in, and his dander got up and he took a stand and said, *Now wait a minute, hold on, this isn't all of it—this is just the stuff. There's more. Much more!*

Just then a pickup truck crunched to a stop in front of the barn. The door opened and a young man stepped out. The man staring out the window recognized the young man's broad shoulders, the tilt of his head, and the way he hitched up his collar against the cold.

The young man turned, caught the eye of the man in the window, and waved. *I could pick that wave out of any crowd*, the older man thought and he waved back and smiled.

And in that instant all the fretting about all the stuff melted away.

The young man leaned forward and started jogging across the road. The older man put down his coffee and trotted through the house toward the front door—toward his best friend, toward the rock-hard handshake, the clasp on the shoulder, and the long hug.

Family and friends, the man thought, eternal investments—*And yes, thank you God, there are some things you can take with you*. And he heard the boots thumping on the porch and the gratefulness of the season flooded over him and he grabbed the knob and yanked open the door for his son.

I see my father running

I'm running.

It's August and it's the Berkshires and I'm having the time of my life thinking only of jumping into that deep blue swimming pool so I run as fast as my nine year-old legs can carry me through the lobby of the resort and then I turn and race through the restaurant where I see far off my cousins jumping and splashing so I pump my little arms up and down and dream of the perfect cannonball and I never see the sliding glass door.

I fly past a waitress and she sees the tragedy a moment before it happens and she screams and drops a tray of wine glasses and in that tiny instant I wonder why she would do that on such a nice day.

I hear glass shatter.

Feel glass shatter.

And I'm blown backward.

The images from that day are like snapshots taken with a camera flash—glints and fragments; disjointed, disconnected, hot, burning moments where nothing moves and everything happens all at once.

I see my bare feet in a sea of shining slivers.

Shards hanging like glinting daggers above me from the busted plate glass door.

Crimson, dripping.

Me, dripping.

Into the dark red carpet the drops disappear. Maybe they aren't real. Maybe this isn't happening. I just want to go swimming.

I hear shouts.

"Don't move!"

The sound of shoes, of crunching. Feel hands on me. Many voices, talking, calling out.

Then I'm sitting on some steps and I see white towels and I feel them being pressed all over me and they're all turning bright red.

More crimson drops disappear into crimson carpeting.

In the distance I hear a rotary phone being dialed quickly—*zzzip, clickety, clickety, zzzzip, clickety clickety clickety....*

A car horn blows in the parking lot. Then more horns. Then all the horns on all the cars. The horns scream out the alarm to my father who is across the valley hiking on an old ski slope, enjoying this late summer day.

Then I feel my Mom's voice at the back of my neck; her breath warm, soothing.

As I sit, dripping and oozing.

Sure, confident, and calm, she holds what's left of my ear to the side of my head with yet another white towel.

"You. Are. Okay."

She whispers each word by itself, each with its own ending period, as if by sheer force of punctuation she can make her sliced-up little boy whole again.

I'm being carried now. Voices shouting. Doors held open. Sliding into the car. I'm a gooey, slippery mess. But no one cares. There are so many towels.

Driving very fast.

Mom holds my left earlobe in her lap, wrapped in a tissue with an ice cube.

Then I'm lying on a stainless table.

Fluorescent lights buzz.

A big white sheet is pulled over me and holes are cut into it with scissors. A hole goes over each laceration—a patchwork of windows to see and stitch through. I stare out as if through Swiss cheese.

I'm at a tiny country clinic and the doctor is a kind lady and she talks to me so gently as she arranges her tools.

"I hear you have pet snakes!" she says, feigning great enthusiasm.

Numbing pricks of Novocain, then needle and thread—pulling me back together.

Quiet now. Very warm. No more shouting. No more pain. Just dull numbness. And I'm falling asleep, dreaming of the perfect cannonball.

Needle and thread. Pulling me back together.

I. Am. Okay.

Over forty-five years have passed since that terrible day. The fear and pain have long receded and I rarely think of the wine glasses and the towels and the shouts and the crimson drops. But sometimes, in the shower or at the beach, I catch a glimpse of white, rubbery scar tissue, and the images come flying back. But, like frames clipped from a film, they have no motion—they're just slices of time and try as I might I can't run them together. I can't play the movie. Except for one scene—a scene that, oddly, I never saw.

I am sitting on those steps, being held together by strangers, looking down and watching my own life leak onto the floor. And out of sight beyond the dripping shards, on that hill far across the stretching valley, sprinting through the tall grass as fast as his legs can carry him, arms pumping and racing toward the blaring car horns, I see my father running.

Amidst a downpour of mallards

I called home at the end of a workday last week and my daughter Amanda answered the phone.

“Hi, Dad!” she said, cheerfully.

“Hi Sweetie, what’s up for tonight?” I asked.

She told me that Mom was at work and afterward she’d be going to her ladies’ Bible study.

“So you’re going to be home all by yourself?”

“Yup, home alone.”

Suddenly my plans for getting my oil changed and doing some errands and then going for a long evening trail run after work didn’t seem very important anymore.

“Hey, do you want to do nothing together tonight? Like just hang out at the house and eat stupid food and watch chick-flicks? Just you and me?” I asked.

“Yeah, that’d be great!” she said.

And so we had ourselves a daddy-daughter date and I got in my car and rushed straight home and screeched the car into the garage and jumped out and ran into the house and there was my girl, waiting right in front of the door when I yanked it open.

“Hey, if this is going to be the full couch-potato deal, then can we go get Chinese takeout?” she said, rocking up on her tip-toes and giving me one of those “daddy-please” smiles.

And so it was back into the car for a quick spin into the village with all the windows rolled down and the sunroof open to the blue sky to grab a batch of chicken fingers, with honey sauce mustard on the side.

Returning home we quickly settled in: shoes and socks off, pillows and blankets procured, blinds pulled down, plates, glasses, forks and napkins arranged, TV remotes located (all four of them), and one cat (out of two) cajoled into joining us. Then we snuggled onto the couch, head-to-foot and all tangled up in each other, comfy against the soft pillows with a cat between us, and hunkered down for the long haul.

Hours later, with the dirty dishes on the floor and the cat long gone, Mom came home and found us dozing off in the near-dark and barely visible under the blankets. The movie *While you were sleeping* was just at the part where Sandra Bullock’s pretend-husband was waking up from a coma. Once Mom figured out that we weren’t just a pile of laundry, she just smiled.

“Oh, look at you two. Are you bonding?” she asked, giggling sweetly.

“I guess you could call it that,” Amanda mumbled “All I know is that my right leg is completely asleep.”

A few nights later, while in the bathtub enjoying a good book, I heard a faint knock followed by an inquisitive hello and then that same daughter creaked the door slowly open and chucked a hail of small rubber ducks up over the shower curtain to splash crazily all about me.

“I found these in my room and I thought you might be able to use them,” she said with obvious delight, and then she darted back out of the bathroom to tell her mom what she had just done.

Lying there with my drippy book, with soap bubbles in my hair and a miniature mallard bobbing happily in the surf next to my left elbow, I thought for about the ten-thousandth time what an honor, privilege, and blessing it was to be a dad; what a treasure my children were, and what a simple delight it was to grow up with them. And I considered the time, all those fleeting minutes and hours and days and weeks and months and years, all those collective moments that pile up one on top of the other to make a family; and I knew again as I'd always known—that if I could live it all over again I'd fill every second of my life with the small things of Everyday, with the laughter of my children, with spontaneous trips into town, with evenings on the couch under the covers, and with the random silliness of raining ducks.

It goes so fast, the time. Relentless. Without pause. It's soon and then it's now and then it's gone. My daughter will be gone soon, too—I have her for just nine more precious weeks and then she's off to catch a pre-dawn flight to a faraway city to begin her junior year at college.

Journey back to the Secret Place

The house stood empty. Dad and I stood exhausted.

With our backs against our overloaded trucks we stared at the home where time had knitted our family together since 1960. Mom was gone now, and we were packing up. Bright rectangles on the walls showed where hanging photographs had kept the world from fading. The house echoed and whispered with far off and long ago sounds, like a shell held to your ear, a gigantic shell where something wonderful used to live.

Dad looked down at his shoes. "I suppose we ought to leave," he said, quietly.

Neither of us moved. This would be the last time. This would be forever. We would never leave this place again because we would never come back.

"Dad," I finally said. "There's one last thing we need to do. We need to go back to the Secret Place."

Dad tipped his head, his eyes narrowing as he reached far back to a time when he had walked with his small son in the forest and discovered a precious place. I watched his eyes remember.

"Oh, Pete," he said, despair and joy mingling in his voice. "We'll never find it."

"Yes we will, Dad," I said. "I have the key."

Years earlier, I had snuck off to the Secret Place during a family gathering. I'd sat on the flat granite boulder that looked out over a swampy pond and let my mind wander back to the distant years, to dad and me together, making campfires and heating pots of tea, whittling sticks, listening to frogs, and talking.

Alone, I tried to lift out of all those years the wonderful something that had made this place special, but I couldn't do it. It felt like the world had a hole in it. I picked up a sliver of granite that had cracked off the boulder, slipped it in my pocket, and left.

Now that sliver of stone was back in my pocket and Dad and I were thrashing through decades of brush.

I found the place first, ran ahead, and jumped up onto the boulder.

"This is it," I said, spreading my arms wide.

Dad caught up and looked around.

"Oh, I don't know," he said. "It might be. But I don't think we'll ever be sure."

I pulled the sliver of stone from my pocket.

"I took this from the Secret Place a long time ago," I said.

Dad watched in wonder as I bent down and slid the stone key back into its void at the edge of the boulder, each corner, each crack, each notch and facet lining up perfectly.

He turned and sat on the boulder and looked out over the old pond, and slowly an enormous smile broke across his face. I picked up the sliver of stone and sat next to him.

We sat shoulder to shoulder, elbow to elbow, hip to hip, knee to knee, our shirts and jeans rustling together. We sat as if there were only one of us and we had never been apart. As if plain old living had never gotten in the way. As if time had waited for us. As if forty years ago was still yesterday.

The air filled with the quiet of time and the silent memories welled up. We imagined that we smelled wood smoke, sensed the hot tingle of tea on our lips, felt pine shavings peeling out from under our pocketknives.

Dad looked down through his fingers, down even through the leaves and soft earth, down through the layers of years to a time when a big man and a little boy sat here, sat on this very stone, sat with one pair of feet on the ground and one pair of feet dangling in the air.

“What was it about this place?” Dad finally asked. “What was it that made this place so special?”

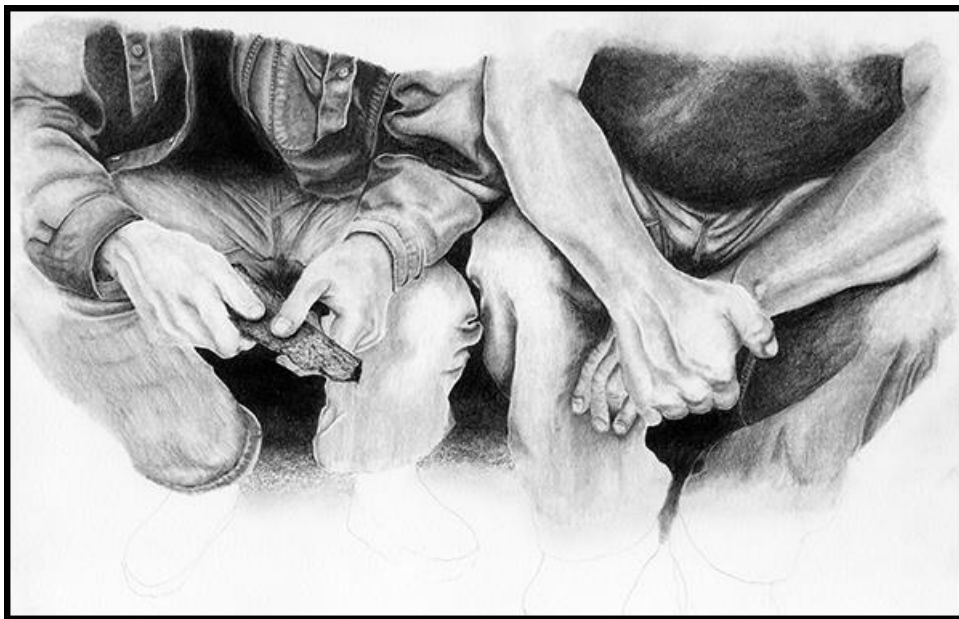
I turned the sliver of stone over and over in my hands while I searched for a way to say it, for a way to tell Dad that when I had come here by myself years before I’d felt disconnected and disjointed, and that now I knew why. I needed to tell him that it wasn’t this place that was special, but that it was us, that it was him and I, a father and son who shared so much more than molecules in their blood; that it was a love and a friendship so deep, so rich, so long, so steadfast that sometimes we had trouble believing it was true; a relationship more solid than the rock upon which we both now sat. I searched the quiet hole in the air for words.

“We were just together,” I finally whispered, barely able to get the words out.

For a few precious moments dad said nothing. Just sat there looking down through his old fingers. Leaves fluttered down from the autumn sky and we heard them tick against each other as they tumbled.

“That’s right,” Dad finally said, looking up at me with glistening eyes. “We were just together.”

And so a father and son sat side by side in the deep quiet of time, the only two people in the world. And they didn’t need any more words.



The red knife

The man and the little boy looked down through the glass display case and saw row upon gleaming row of shimmering stainless-steel spectacle. On a blanket of purple velvet rested knives of every imagination. Huge knives. Modest knives. Specialty knives. Knives with ivory handles. Knives for skinning, for whittling, for cutting rope. Knives for the sheath and knives for the pocket. And one stood out from the rest, tiny and red, its little blade scalloped and keen.

“That’s the one I’d want,” whispered the man, his hand on his boy’s shoulder. “Can you imagine having such a wondrous thing?”

“Yes,” the boy said, softly, his eyes never leaving the glimmering edge.

On a white tag tied to the handle with white string was the staggering price: twenty-five dollars.

The boy looked up, determined. “I’m going to save up for it, Dad,” he said.

For the next several weeks the boy scurried about in his off-time, bent on industry: mowing grass, helping his father build a shed, running errands for his mom, watching his baby sister; rushing from job to job, his pockets jingling with quarters and dimes, each night his jar slowly filling.

“What can I do today?” the bright lad would ask each Saturday morning, and then he would take his marching orders and hurry off to his tools and his toil. Always happy. Living in the dream of things wished for.

After a while, the man forgot about the knife. His work was hard and his days were long and filled with the troubles of industry and the troubles of others. He came home each night weary and quiet, bearing the invisible load of the hours on his shoulders, and fell asleep in a chair. In the next room, his little boy stacked quarters four-high and dimes in piles of ten.

One hot day the man came home from work early. He climbed slowly out of his old car and into the blazing afternoon. It was so hot he could smell the sun. And as he walked slowly and wearily toward the house and his chair and his nap before supper, his boy came running from the back yard, skipping and leaping and calling his name.

“Dad!” the boy yelled. “I did it!”

And the boy ran up to the man and said, “Hold out your hands,” and the man dropped his briefcase in the dust and held out his cupped hands and the boy gently laid in them the perfect small red knife.

“Oh, son,” the man said, the heaviness of the day magically lifting. “You did it.” And he turned the knife over in his hands and opened and closed its ambitious little blade and marveled at its craftsmanship. And then he marveled at the boy in front of him, craftsmanship of another kind, now happily wringing his little hands and rising up and down on his little toes as if about to fly away in a cloud of giggles and smiles.

“I am so proud of you,” the man said, folding the knife carefully closed and holding it out gently for his son.

But the boy didn’t take the knife. He put his hands behind his back. Looked down and scuffed at the dry brown earth. Wiped his dirt-smudged cheek against his shoulder. Then he looked up, and squinted into the blazing sun, his baseball cap on a little crooked.

"I got it for you, Dad," the boy said. Then he turned and ran off to climb a tree.

The man stood in his driveway holding the tiny gift in his trembling hands, his briefcase lying flopped over beside him in the dust of the burning day. And his tears fell through his fingers.

Almost twenty years later, the man tried to put down on paper the story of the little boy and the gleaming knife and the weeks of toil and the blinding sun and the weariness of a dusty afternoon; and he toiled hopelessly with nothing but words to describe how it felt to hold the love of his little son in his hands. And his eyes welled again as he remembered, and his hands trembled and his vision blurred, and he leaned in close and strained to see these words as he typed them.

And his tears fell through his fingers.

No matter how hard he tried

Many years ago when the man's son was little, the boy discovered the big red plastic cylindrical "twisty-turny" slide at the playground, and for everyone less than four feet tall time skidded to a stop. Up and down the boy went endlessly, giggling throughout, while his young parents sat hunched at a decrepit picnic table, aging before their very eyes. After an hour the man wandered over and pleaded.

"Aren't you sick of this yet? It's always the same, right?" the man asked.

"No! It's different every time! Just five more minutes, pleeeeeease?" his son said.

And so mom and dad slumped for another hour, composting. And the hour stretched into a blur of twisty-turny hours and seemingly endless twisty-turny days and the boy just kept on laughing. One warm November the family even missed turning the clock back to Eastern Standard Time, and the next day were shocked to be an hour early for church.

And the little boy grew up and went to college and got married and moved away and the man forgot all about twisty-turny slides.

Two-and-a-half decades after that first twisty-turny day, the man met a friend in the dim hours before the inevitable office to go mountain biking, to have fun and get their heart rates up over 140 for an hour, to work up a good sweat and (for him at least) fend off middle age. A warm thick salty fog had welled up and rolled in off the nearby sea and the leaves were down off the trees and the air in the boney woods where the two friends spun their wheels was sated with droplets and weeping. The man wore glasses which welled up with droplets and made his vision fuzzy, and so he had trouble seeing the trail. And no matter how hard he tried, he just couldn't wipe his glasses dry.

Rounding one muddy corner the man saw something slate-dark and flat through the gravy mist and tried to gain his bearing in the black skeleton forest.

"Is that a pond over there?" the man asked.

"No, that's the elementary school parking lot," his friend said.

And the two friends stopped at the playground and dropped their bikes in the wet bark mulch so the man could wipe off his glasses again. Slipping his glasses back on, he saw a twisty-turny slide and he instantly thought of his son, the little boy with the interminable twisty-turny obsession. And the man remembered and his memories were quickly laden by a far-off fondness and he was suddenly compelled to turn the clock back.

"We have to do it!" the man said, pointing.

And without hesitation the two friends grabbed the dewy rungs of the playground ladder and clambered up the apparatus until they stood on the plastic-coated steel mesh before the throat of the big red tube.

"I haven't done this since I was in my forties," the man said, and then he grabbed the lip of the molded plastic maw and flipped his legs up and flung himself inside and was gone in an instant, rumbling down around the glowing red curves.

"Are you down?"

"Yes, I'm down."

"It sure doesn't sound like you're down."

"Of course I'm down."

"I'm coming anyway, so you better be down!"

And his friend pushed off, suspecting. And of course the man wasn't really down. And of course his friend knew it all along, because the man's voice had echoed back up the tube as if from a locker room, but had slid anyway. And the man leaped out of the way at the last instant and the bark mulch went flying and giggling filled the foggy air.

Later, back in his car on his way to his office, sipping coffee and daydreaming, the man thought about his son and about the morning and about twisty-turny slides and about all the hours and the days and the years and everything in their lives that had since then twisted and turned. He swung the car over onto the shoulder of the quiet country road and his tires crunched to a stop in the gravel and the man turned off the radio and slipped his glasses off and laid them gently in his lap.

"You're right, son," he said into still the air. "It is different every time."

And the man loved his boy so much, and as he thanked God for him a new warm salty fog welled up from deep inside himself and he had trouble seeing. And no matter how hard he tried, he just couldn't wipe his eyes dry.

Waving at the offspring

I thought I was alone in the house that evening so when I went in to take a bath I closed the curtain around the tub but left the door half open. I'm lying there, gently simmering with a good book, and my 21 year-old daughter just barges right in.

"Oh! Hi Dad."

"Yikes! I'm naked!" I shout from under the suds.

"Um, considering where you are, if you weren't naked, I'd be concerned."

And then Amanda just sits down on the toilet lid and we spend the next twenty minutes talking about her day through an opaque plastic curtain with butterflies on it. And then mom comes home and she's all happy and her and Amanda go off into the kitchen to do something and I hear them jabbering away and laughing and pots and pans and utensils clattering and I forget all about my book and just listen; and then I climb out and dry off and get dressed and go out to join them.

Two nights later I'm sitting on the couch with Amanda and the TV is on but we're not even watching it. Our legs all tangled together. Just together. Just talking. It's about one o'clock in the morning.

"Oh, Mandy, after tonight this won't be your home anymore. From now on you'll just be a visitor."

I'm a little choked up because she leaves in just a few hours to go off to New York to get her second college degree and, well, that just seems like it.

"Don't worry, Dad, I'll be back."

And then my daughter smiles at me.

And I smile at her.

And we both secretly know that the other person's smile is probably pretend.

Seven hours later Amanda's car is choked full of twenty-one-year-old-college-girl-stuff and she is sitting in the driver's seat with her left leg out of the car and her foot still planted at home. I'm kneeling next to her on the garage floor with my right arm around the small of her back and she drapes her left arm over my shoulder. I'm telling her all sorts of important things, like how often to get the oil changed, and then we just talk about nothing for a few minutes and then we pray together and then I start to get up but she pulls me in and hugs me and we say "I love you so much" a bunch of times and then she lets me go and lifts her foot off the ground and backs her car out of the garage and drives off into her new life.

And I'd seen this little one-act play before. After our son, Jeremiah, graduated from college in 2007, he was home for just two weeks and then one day him and I are out on his boat on the lake and the phone rings in his pocket and he answers it and is just standing there holding his fishing rod and says, "Oh, wow, yes, I can do that!" And three days later he's off to the airport so he can go to his new job working the oil fields in the Gulf of Mexico. He visits us every month now, and brings his wife and new daughter.

You grow them up so they can go off on their own, and then you know they're ready and you think you're ready and then off they go and you find out in that burning instant that they were ready but you were not. And then you're just sitting there thinking about your kids and typing away as fast as you can

and trying to keep up with your pounding heart. But you can't. And so you just stop and sob a little. Thankful for the time. Wishing there was more of it. Knowing there can't be. Knowing that there isn't supposed to be, and full of the peaceful assurance that God knows what He's doing.

I've stood in the middle of the road twice now, waving my arms and jumping up and down until the glowing tail lights disappeared around the distant corner by the field where we used to pick blueberries when the kids were little.

That's just about all I can take.

My daughter, my son, my friends.

This is just the beginning...

Thank you!

Thank you for sticking with me, dear reader. And this is just the beginning! There's more coming—like I said in the opening pages, these are just a handful of my favorite essays gleaned from a pretty big pile. I will be publishing the remaining five books in The Dad Story Project series as soon as I can (hoping for two more in 2015), and you'll be able to track their progress by following me on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), and [Google+](#), and by visiting my website, thedadstoryproject.com.

A request and a reward

If you enjoyed this first book, please go to its page on Amazon and write a review—and if you do, as my way of saying thank you, **I'll send you the next book for free** before it goes live on Amazon. To find out more (and to make sure you get your free book), please [click this link](#).

And a great opportunity!

To all of you out there who are dads or moms or children or grandparents or friends—please tell me your stories! They don't have to be polished or professionally edited, they just have to shed a small beam of beautiful light on this wonderful thing called fatherhood. Go ahead, pour your hearts out. Let the happy tears fall between your typing fingers. You will find writing and submission guidelines here. Each selected story will be published on thedadstoryproject.com and the very best will be collected and published in more e-Books! Please help me start a movement that celebrates fatherhood and the joys of growing up!

Kickstarter: a great funding opportunity coming in 2015

[Kickstarter](#) is a crowdfunding company that helps raise money for all sorts of worthy projects and causes. For a guy like me, who is trying to ditch the 50-hours-a-week-for-the-last-30-years gig and go into the encouragement business full time, it's a wonderful way to get the word out and find people who will help share the dream. I expect to launch a fundraising campaign in 2015 to help get the next five e-Books published, and to make all the other parts of my dream for The Dad Story Project a reality. I would so appreciate it if you would consider joining me by supporting my Kickstarter campaign. I will post all the details and updates on my social media sites (see links above).

And a final hope

I hope my stories touch your soul. I hope they make you smile and laugh, maybe shed a tear or two (especially you sappy people, like me...you know who you are), and perhaps even motivate you to write your own stories. But even the best of our stories are **nothing** compared the story that made all this possible; they're **nothing** compared to the story that makes **everything** possible—that glorious true story of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, living and dying and rising again to satisfy God's perfect justice; and by His great mercy and sacrificial grace giving humanity the settled hope of salvation. Ultimately, this is the only story that matters. The gospel of Christ is the only hope any of us has; and I am not ashamed of that gospel, for it is the saving power of my life, and of the lives of my wife and children, and so many of my friends. You may read a short summary of our family's story of new life and hope and peace and

restoration and purpose and astounding joy by visiting the [website](#). And I pray that God does for you what he has done for us. If you ever have questions, please email me at speterlewis@gmail.com.