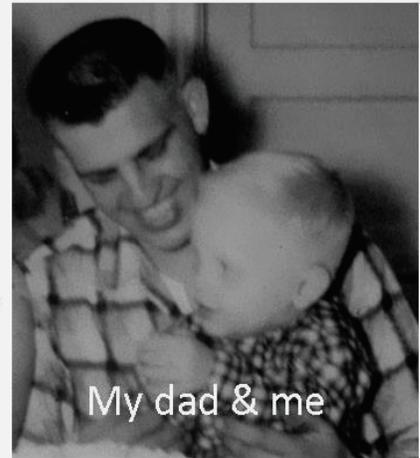


My father's son

"...the totality of all that I'd been thinking came rushing out—except now it had been condensed into two simple words, Thanks Dad."

(excerpt)



By Stephen Rusiniak

I watched him as he was walking away—another one of my home projects finally completed. Suddenly, unexpectedly, I felt this overwhelming sense of gratitude for the good fortune of being his son. I needed to tell him this too and so I called out, "Hey." He stopped and turned, and abruptly my love for him seemed to short-circuit my ability to speak. We looked at each other for a moment and all of a sudden, the totality of all that I'd been thinking came rushing out—except now it had been condensed into two simple words. "Thanks Dad." His face revealed the slightest hint of a smile as he silently nodded his reply and continued on his way.

I knew, however, that those two words, spoken from my heart, had meant more to him than his nonchalant response let on, after all, we understood each other; we were friends, but maybe, more importantly, I was my father's son. I watched him pull away—his taillights disappearing into the darkness. He died three days later.

Throughout my childhood and then as we became adults, my dad demonstrated daily his unconditional love for my siblings and me, but what I'd yet to learn was that his love came naturally; as if it were simply a part of his paternal DNA. One day I'd come understand this concept, but first I had to become a father myself.

Moments after his birth a nurse asked if I'd like to hold my baby boy. Overcome with a fear of doing something wrong—like dropping him, I was afraid to hold him, but once placed into my arms, I became more afraid of ever letting him go. I studied his tiny face—an exact copy of my own baby photos—except now they were in color. And then it hit me: I was responsible for this new life—one that was now more important than my own. I suddenly understood how my dad loved us unconditionally; after all, I was now a daddy too. We named him Michael.

The birth of my daughter only served to reinforce lessons learned concerning fatherly love.

Maybe it wasn't quite a panic but something was happening—and it wasn't good. When her brother was born, he cried—new lungs, first breaths, and the proclamation: "you have a healthy baby boy." This time, however, there was no crying, there were no sounds—except for the quiet but concerned exchanges between those who had been attending to her birth. I had a daughter, but something was wrong—terribly wrong. She was immediately taken from the room. I had yet to hold her, to touch her, to kiss her, but still, I loved her, dearly. Heartbroken and wanting so much to be her daddy-protector, I could do nothing to help my baby girl, my Tracy.

The crisis did eventually pass and today both she and her brother have become the responsible young adults that any parent would be proud of—especially me, but Dad had one more lesson he'd taught me that my two adult cherubs now needed to know.

My kids may not just yet appreciate this simple fact: I am their father, now and forever, and as such, my love and my concern for their well-being will never be bound by the restraints of time. My paternal position commenced upon my son's birth and shall remain my undisputed vocation until I am no more. Without a doubt I consider this to be the greatest gift my dad ever gave me and as such, the greatest gift that I could ever give my children.

On his next to last day, Dad called. He'd been working on a project for his neighbor and needed help lifting a beam into place. I had previous plans, but this was Dad, asking me for help—as well as my brothers, Paul and Jimmy. After we did what was required, and as I turned to leave, Dad called out, "Hey." I stopped and turned, and we looked at each other for a moment before he said, "Thanks Steve." I revealed the slightest hint of a smile, silently nodded my reply and then continued on my way. He knew that those two words, spoken from his heart, had meant much more to me than my nonchalant response let on. We were friends, and maybe more importantly, I was my father's son. And after all these years, I'm proud to say, I still am.

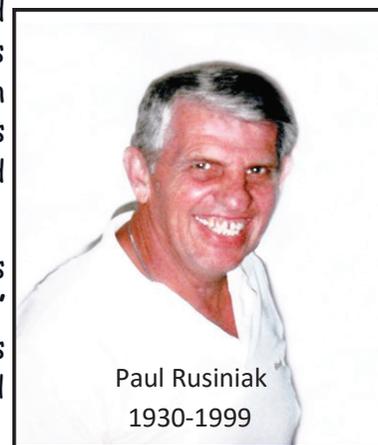
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the backstory:

A regional newspaper posted a call out for stories centered around the theme, "Lessons from Dad," and noted that those submissions selected would be featured in the newspaper's Better Living section the following month and on Father's Day. The only catch: submissions could not exceed 250 words. I had a piece already in an early draft tentatively called *A windmill builder* (based upon Dad and the 100 year old windmill he restored).

As I was whittling down the verbiage for the required word count, I couldn't help but think about my dad, and more specifically, about the last time we'd spoken. And as I continued working on the piece, I remembered something else too: unlike so many others who mourn the passing of a loved one, when Dad died, I'd no regrets of words we'd left unspoken, or of things that I'd wished we'd shared. I was confident that everything between us had already been said. When the *windmill* piece was completed, I needed to start another—this time, it would focus on his final days, our last time together and would touch upon paternal love—his and mine.

My father's son appeared in our local newspaper three days before the *windmill* piece (which can be found on my "**other pieces**" page as *Dad's windmill*) was published in our regional newspaper. I was humbled by the reception each received, but most of all, I am, and will forever remain, proud to be, my father's son.



Paul Rusiniak
1930-1999

Miss you, Dad