

My Dad is as nice as a

fish

By Stephen Rusiniak

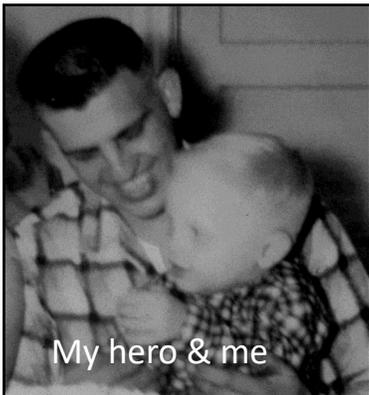
"I wanted to be like him, after all, he was more than just my dad; he was my hero."

One night a father overheard his son pray: Dear God, Make me the kind of man my Daddy is. Later that night, the father prayed, Dear God, Make me the kind of man my son wants me to be."

~Anonymous

I still remember the sounds of my dad beginning his day: the ringing of his alarm clock, the running water as he shaved, the coffee maker, and the rattling of the cupboards and dishes in the kitchen. The sounds of leather straps against cowhide told me he was lacing up his work boots while his coffee was cooling. His quick breakfast was followed by the thud of the kitchen door closing, his old pickup coming to life, and the crunch of gravel under tires as his truck left our driveway.

Only then would I tiptoe downstairs, grab his still-warm mug, fill it with milk and add a couple of spoonfuls of sugar—just like him. While my pretend coffee was pretend cooling, I would lace up my pretend work boots—Keds high top sneakers. After consuming the horrible milk and sugar concoction with coffee grinds floating on top, I'd quietly sneak outside and climb on my bicycle—now magically transformed into a truck. As gravel crunched beneath my two wheels, I'd ride off to the pretend house I was building. In the make-believe world of my four-year-old existence, I wanted to be like him. After all, he was more than just my dad; he was my hero.



My hero & me

I suspect the vast majority of young children view their fathers, as I did, in awe—a real life super hero able to do anything. During my early years there was nobody bigger, stronger or more important than Dad. At the end of his workday, when he'd come home, he'd pick me up, rub his day-old whiskers against my giggling face and then launch me into the air above his head. The thrill of momentary flight coupled with the knowledge that his strong arms and calloused hands would always catch me and keep me safe remained a metaphor for all he would become to me.

As I grew older, his hero status began to diminish as my world expanded. I started seeing him as a man with foibles like the rest of us mere mortals. I also began seeing less of him as my life took me in different directions. But on occasion, our paths did cross as he coached my baseball team or volunteered with my Scout troop. Sometimes we'd even see each other across the table during dinner. I was entering my teenage years and, at the time, I was certain it was my dad who was changing. And losing ground as my hero.

By the time I'd reached my twenties, his status had been fully restored. It remained a comfort and blessing to know that no matter where my life took me, his strong arms and callused hands would always be there to catch me and keep me safe should I fall. By the time I married, his hero status was cemented, but he'd become more than just my dad and my hero—he'd become my friend and would remain so for the rest of his life.

When my own son, Michael, was seven, he completed a classroom handout for Father's Day. His fill-in-the-blank answers to the incomplete questions afforded me a peek into the state of our father/son relationship. To the question, "My Dad is special because," he wrote, "*he cares for me and listens to me.*" I was moved. "I like to make him smile by," "*doing my best at school.*" I was pleased. He noted that I looked at the things he did and that I taught him how to catch a baseball, but one answer puzzled me as much then as it does today. To the question, "My Dad is as nice as..." he wrote, "*a fish.*"

I was confused. I asked him what that meant and he just smiled—and gave me a hug. He never did explain his answer, but his hug required no explanation.

A few years later he had to compose a short piece about someone who was his hero. Many of his classmates picked sports figures, celebrities, and cartoon characters to write about. Michael picked me. And so it goes—like father, like son. I'll forever remain thankful for having been a fortunate recipient of my dad's love and friendship, and I can only hope that as Michael's teenage years are winding down, he will still feel the same about me. If he does, I'll promise to do my best to live up to that honor. And to remain as nice as a fish, whatever that means.

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(Note: Photo not published in book)

the backstory:

My dad is as nice as a fish, now that's an awesome title for a story and one I found on a Father's Day worksheet that my son had completed when he was in the first grade. Included in the "fill in the blank" questions was "My dad is as nice as..." Of course, you already know Michael's answer! When I stumbled upon this worksheet many years later and when I saw that question and its curious answer, I knew immediately that I'd found a title just waiting for a story I'd yet to write.

When I was asked to contribute a Father's Day piece for a local parenting magazine, I immediately thought of this worksheet and of something else that Michael had written about me while in the second grade. Those two assignments, coupled with a few memories of my dad that I'd previously shared while speaking at a parenting conference some years before (glad I always saved copies of my "talks") quickly became the basis for this story.

The local magazine published the piece and later on, so too did the folks at Chicken Soup. It also went on to become my first story to go viral after an inspirational site posted the piece.

Several other sites, parenting blogs and newspapers did likewise and published my "fish" piece as well.

by the way:

This story almost appeared in a second book. Another publisher had read the piece and asked if it could be "tweaked" specifically for Father's Day—an ironic question, to say the least, as it was originally written for that very same holiday!

I tweaked the piece as asked and changed the name of the story to **My Dad is special**, which happened to be the title of the worksheet that had inspired what I'd originally written in the first place. The book was ultimately cancelled but the reworked piece—now containing a slightly different and more updated ending may very well be submitted someday somewhere for consideration.

You never know!

and the worksheet that inspired this piece:

My Dad is Special!

My Dad is special because

he cares for me
and listens to
me,
looks at all the things
I do.

I like it when my Dad

My Dad can do many things! I think he's best at
teaching me how to catch a base
ball.

My Dad has a great smile! I like to make him smile by
doing my best at school.

My Dad is as nice as a fish

My Dad is smart! He even knows to be a
detective and catch kids with
guns.

Signed Michael R Date June 16, 1996