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In Memory Of My Father

By Irving J. Zweig

(Editor's note: This tribute to his father was written and printed by editor-publisher Irving Zweig five years ago. It is reprinted in memory of all fathers who will be remembered on Father's Day.)

A man dies. His body, like the dead leaves of a tree, falls to the ground. And soon it is absorbed in the soil enriched forevermore.

But what of the man as spirit and as vital force? Where is he? Why has he gone? Why, even, has he come if only to battle life in a contest he cannot win?

Or can he win?

On a farm in the village of Nassau, N. Y., sits a house where my father lived and made his answer to life. Two mammoth colonial elms brood oppressively over its tin roof, casting dark shadows or weeping in the rain.

The trees know. They are of nature made and mourn for a kindred spirit.

For such was my father. Of nature made and nourished. And like them—as kind and as cruel as nature. But a man. A man, I say, a man as nature carved him.

Father was not a kind man as kind men are known by accepted standards. He never stooped to give. Like the soil in the fields, his bounty was given only to those who cultivated it. And because his giving was so selective, the fruits were often as beautiful and as bountiful as nature's own. Only after he died did people fully understand the essence of his "charity" and they came in overwhelming numbers to say, "I'm where I am today because he helped me."

I tell you this because he was known far and wide as a man without charity, a man who would give to no one.

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ganized cause, a miser who would not stand the sound of an electric pump because he counted its thumps in terms of thumps per penny.

Yet this newspaper is in part the product of those saved thumps. Father could be as lavish with a thousand dollars or five thousand dollars as the average man is with electrical thumps. But there had to be a cause and a man behind that cause. It simply couldn't be "charity," even to his own children.

Most of us are products of our home life, our education, our church and our friends. But father was orphaned at the age of nine, never had any education whatsoever, never attended church, and his friends, though many came and went with his changing moods and violent disposition.

Any psychologist can tell you that such a man could not bring up a "normal" family. And maybe the psychologist would be right. But father did not want to bring up a "normal" family. Father had nothing but contempt for the normal. If there were any man alive with the courage to tell him that he was a "common man", he would have spit in his eye and thrown him off his property.

You see, father was not a "common man" although his parents were peasants, his trade was farming and selling horses, his education non-existent. He was a man unique—different from all other men, past, present and future. He didn't want to be lumped together for security's sake or for whatever it is that makes men want to be collectivized in name or fact.

No, father was not a "normal" man nor a "common" man. He did not want to bring up a normal family. He wanted us to be better than normal—not only in our studies and our chosen vocations, but loftier in our ideals, better morally, better educated, more ambitious, more active.

He drove us physically, mentally, spiritually almost from the minute we were born until the day he died.

How can you explain a man who was not above lying and cheating in his daily work, yet to whom a lie on the part of his children was an abomination? An illiterate farmer who sent all of his children to college—three at the same time. A man of such terrible temper that the walls of his living room were always stained with the coffee that he threw against them in his blinding rages. Yet a man who was able to raise God-fearing children, all of whom (with the exception of this writer) are eminently successful in their chosen professions—and if we may say so, of good moral character. Tell us, oh you psychologists, why and how?

Most men remember their boyhood with pleasure and regret—with a yearning to return to its idyllic, care-free days. But although our memories of youth are green with pleasureable interludes, "Life with Father" was hard and bitter. Not only did early poverty preclude the toys and playthings that most boys had in those days, but father would not permit us to use them when we did. If we wanted exercise, he always had an abundance of work that kept us well exercised. There were stables to be cleaned, there was corn to be hoed, wood to be chopped, cows to be milked or vicious western horses to be broken, and, of course, at night there were books to be read—the Bible, Aristotle, Plato, Thackeray, Dickens, Scott—all the great literature of the past.

Father did not worry about our becoming juvenile delinquents because we had no time to learn delinquency. Nor would we have dared. And it never occurred to him that youth was a time to be enjoyed. He felt, rightly or wrongly, that if we grew up to be good and successful men, we would enjoy life the more for our early hardships.

Most of all, father was a capitalist. He was a capitalist when we lived on five dollars a week or less and when he labored in the brine and steam of a tanning sweatshop. He was a capitalist without ever knowing the meaning of the term when he was relatively wealthy. He knew absolutely nothing about the meaning of free enterprise except its practice. He asked nothing of any man nor any government but opportunity and freedom. He found opportunity and freedom in the United States and that's why he loved the United States. Love it he did, and if we learned nothing else from him it was love of country.

My father wouldn't want me to get emotional over him and thereby praise him falsely. But even if he did, it would not tell his story. And right or wrong, good man or bad man, he was proud of his life and would want it recorded as he lived it. This I have tried to do. And even though the tears blind me as this is written, not one word have I inscribed except as it might have been set down by anyone else who knew him.

Finally, let this be said. His body lies in the ground and his soul is in the keeping of God. But he will not soon die. He lived life so fully that he penetrated into the natural scheme of things and the people he knew. That's why the elms around his home cast a more mournful shadow now. . . . why all who knew him are still of him—forever.

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