

Men Worthy of Praise: Personal Reflections on My First Father's Day, 2002

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Abstract: None available.

Full Text: When I think of men worthy of praise, my maternal grandfather, Floyd Stone, is the first man who comes to mind. Floyd Stone was no saint, nor was he a great man in the traditional sense. He never wrote any books or held positions of importance in the great scheme of things. But if we can write a man's memory with a special pen capable of recording his feeling for others and theirs for him, and express the value he added to our lives, my grandfather left a legacy of love stretching around the world through his beloved Spain and back again. I saw that love all about him-in his siblings, his wife, his daughter and grandsons, in his many friends at the Lions and Toastmaster's Clubs, in his students and colleagues, in his close friends. Floyd donated his time generously to work with little girls in the Brownies. He was a grand father to my mother. When my father became sick, my grandfather, already in his late 80's, started showing up on Fridays at my mother's house unasked, with provisions for the weekend. "Go," he would say to my mother, "take the weekend off." This was one of his innumerable gifts. All we can do once a loved one is gone is to try to rekindle and perpetuate his spirit by bringing his lessons into our own lives. My grandfather taught me "how to walk like a man," not an easy lesson but an invaluable one. If we're lucky, no matter what chronological age we come to, we never stop being kids inside; I know my grandfather didn't. Maybe all that we can do that truly matters in this life is to trust and love each other. And to keep on trusting and loving even if we're hurt, even though it's hard, again and again, whether it makes sense or not. My grandfather trusted in others and loved without fear, walking like a man, and teacher that he was, taught me how to do the same. For this simple, wondrous gift, I will carry my mother's father in my heart forever. What about the other men in my life, most obviously, my own father? My father, Clement Ludvik Svoboda, like his father Clement Vladimir Svoboda (my other grandfather), was a man who had a hard time enjoying life or relaxing. Habitually grouchy and repressed, my father devoted much of his energy to obsessing over small matters that seemed unimportant to me. Matters that I think were unimportant compared to the textured levels of life that almost entirely passed him by. Are there seeds of my father in myself? I would be kidding if I tried to pretend there weren't. It's important for me to see that in moderation, my father's attention to detail and containment of his own emotions are actually positive characteristics for which he deserves praise. As I grew older, my youthful anger and resentment toward him gradually transformed into a mixture of compassion-for all the love and passion and enjoyment that he missed in life-and gratefulness for what he did teach me about financial responsibility, lessons about boundary-setting, and being who I am even when it's unfashionable. As we praise men (and women too), we praise the potential we all have to create a balanced, successful partnership and provide a fertile soil in which to plant the seeds of a healthy family. In my own life, since the birth of my son, Eli, on February 4th, I have been settling into a brand new and continually evolving role as a father. If I was still in some ways enmeshed in an absurdly extended adolescence three years ago when I met my wife-to-be, now that I am married and have a son, all this has forever changed. No longer will I have the luxury of being the young, wild one. My new position in the middle generation-sandwiched between aging parents and new arrivals on this planet-call on me to take on a more conservative role, passing on whatever wisdom (and folly) I have gleaned from my parents, grandparents, and other mentors. I am cheering Eli on to new challenges and to stepping out in the world in new ways. At times I am even restraining him from activities that might endanger him, encouraging him to learn about self-care as well as self-challenge. Certainly, as he grows up, I will also be called to grow up further. In doing so, I will be stepping closer to a mainstream society from which I often exiled myself as an adolescent, due in part to my identification of the main stream

with my father. This process definitely accelerated for me this past May 8th, when my wife returned to the workplace and each morning I became my son's sole caretaker. I am sure there will be many troubles and challenges along the way, but I'm confident the trip will be worth the price of admission. And, finally, I am pleased to be taking along for the ride my two grandfathers and my father. I may be able to show them some new territory, and I'm sure they will still manage to teach me a few more tricks. Since I know none of them would ever sing their own praises, I hope to sing a song or two about them myself so their memories can continue even though their physical bodies have long ago passed on. And if I'm lucky, as I sing, I too can walk like a man.

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