

When You're Stripped of Everything but Still Happy

This is truly a story for the heart, so you may want to read it in a place where you are free to cry.

There was a song written by Neil Young that I used to love to hear as a young man. Some of you in my age group may remember it as well. It's lyrics always touched me deeply.

- Old man take a look at my life
- I'm a lot like you were
- I need someone to love me
- The whole day through
- Ah, one look in my eyes
- And you can tell that's true.

Now as an older man, caring for my aged parents in the final sunset of their lives, making a minor change to the lyrics seems more appropriate and meaningful. I know my dad would sing it this way:

- Young man take a look at my life
- I'm a lot like you'll be
- I need someone to love me
- The whole day through
- Ah, one look in my eyes
- And you can tell that's true.

Like so many in their middle years I am helping to care for my aged parents. In the past year I have gotten to know a side of my parents I never knew before. You see, they've been stripped of all that was familiar and predictable in their lives. My dad has said to me repeatedly that he feels like a bird in a cage. They are now living with my brother and sister-in-law. With their mobility now limited, they spend most of their days in the house.

Additionally, my dad has become my mom's caregiver, cooking for her and administering insulin for her diabetes through a needle four times a day. He is doing all this while having to deal with his own health issues, having been diagnosed with congestive heart failure, which includes poor circulation and shortness of breath. Over the past year he has become very tired caring for my mother, experiencing a loss of his normally healthy appetite and taking longer naps during the day.

When I observe my parents today my mind reflects back on the entirety of their lives, especially their younger and stronger years—how hard they worked, coming over as immigrants from Portugal and pioneering a new life on foreign soil. They learned a new culture, a new language, and a completely new way of life in their mid-30's with two young boys to care for. They've spoken to me often of those early years of struggle and disappointments.

My dad is a fighter. He had to fight for my mom who was often taken advantage of by relatives whom we lived with in our first year here. He had to fight for my brother and me, who were often denied privileges that our American-born cousins had.

For example, my parents tell the story of having our cousin's mini-go-cart hidden from us so we wouldn't play with it any more. You see, during our first year in America my parents had nothing. They lived with my dad's parents in a three-story

house that my uncle and aunt owned. My dad is a very proud man—in mostly a good way. In order to compensate for our lack, he worked sometimes 16 hours a day, losing weight and gaining stress all along the way. He made sure my brother and I got our own mini-go-cart and a new bicycle to boot. He wanted to gain the upper hand over his selfish relatives and prove to them he could give his kids good gifts, too.

The first few months in the new land were brutal. Our finances were slim. As a young husband and father, I'm sure my Dad had moments when he doubted his ability to provide for his family, and wondered if he'd made the right decision to migrate to America. I know my Mom reminded him regularly that it was his decision, and it was his side of the family who were eager for him to come, but now were singing a different tune.

I'm sure this caused my Dad to question his decision many times, but like the fighter that he is, he just kept plowing on ahead. But soon his hard work paid off, and with my Mom also landing a job in one of the local jewelry factories, they were able to purchase their first house at the end of that first year.

This all reminds me of a great story heart-warming story told in a wonderfully illustrated book written by Shel Silverstein called, *The Giving Tree*. The book describes the relationship between a family apple tree and a young boy. The tree is able to talk, and throughout the boy's life the tree refers to him as "boy".

The tree provided a place for the boy to climb and eat its fruit and swing from its branches. In his adolescence the boy wanted money, so the tree suggests he sell his apples. As a young adult the boy wanted a house, so the tree suggests he cut branches to build his house. Finally, in middle age, the boy wants a boat, so the tree suggests he use the tree's trunk, leaving only a stump. Each time the tree gave to the

boy, the text said, "And the tree was happy."

This is where the aged people in our society come back into view, especially those dear loved ones in our lives, whom we care for so deeply. In the final pages of the aforementioned book, the boy sits near the tree as an old man. The tree says he has nothing left to give. The boy who was now an old man said he only wanted "a quiet place to sit and rest." The book ended with, "And the tree was happy."

In the past year I've begun to observe and pay attention to my parents more closely. I've often witnessed them, especially my dad, weep the deep weeping of a broken man. I know he feels like that tree. He's been stripped of everything. He's become a stump. He's a bird in a cage watching his old tattered feathers fall off one by one. I've prayed over him and my mom many times, at times embracing them, hugging and kissing them, and pouring out my heart to the Lord for them because I know it hasn't been an easy adjustment for them. In this latter season of their lives, I've truly become a pastor to them and have learned so much about human nature and the cycles and seasons of life. It is painful to watch your parents age, but there is a joy and peace in it if you'll learn to see it through the Father's eternal eyes.

When my brother and his wife have gone away for well deserved breaks, I've spent an entire week and some weekends with my parents. As I just sat with them and communed heart to heart with them, I noticed something. Their bodies would respond to my love. They would sleep better. They would eat better. They would feel better emotionally. The Lord was teaching me something precious. Much of what most of our elderly citizens need is just love—to be heard, to share their hearts, to tell their stories, to have their necks squeezed and their cheeks kissed.

The other day when I took my dad in for a doctor's appointment he confessed to me secret sins and youthful lusts from his

past life. I assured him that Jesus had forgiven him of all of it, that he was now born again and God would not hold his sins against him no matter how serious his sins were at the time he committed them. As I listened to him rehash his past sins I began to realize that he was preparing his own heart for eternity—making sure all was confessed and cleansed, and that another trustworthy human being, whom he knew loved him deeply, was there to be a witness.

He also shared with me the demands put on him by my dependent mom. His concern was that she didn't realize how weak and frail he himself was getting, and he wondered how much longer he could care for her, and how she would fare if he died first. But he was committed to her, in sickness and in health, by life and by death. He made the decision long ago that he would go to his grave as a tree stump, stripped to the bone of all he had to give.

In that moment of heart to heart communication with my Dad, I knew what real love looked like, and it warmed my heart. For me life and success is no longer the fame of ministry, money or some fleeting definition of success. It is not in the degrees we've earned, the social status we've achieved or the material things we own. Our lives are simply summed up in how well we've loved.

Real love is allowing yourself to be stripped of your limbs, your branches, and all the fruit you've borne and become a stump for the cause of others and finally being able to say,

“And the tree was happy.”