

As a writer and a journalism teacher, I have always had difficulty with titles, mainly because it's so hard to find the right one to encapsulate the whole piece. I think we can all agree that the titles we used for my father never quite captured his role, either.

Let's start with "sports fan," as he was referred to in an old newspaper clipping I recently found. This guy lived and breathed sports. Over the years, he played golf, softball, tennis, handball, football, basketball, racquetball, and of course, his favorite, baseball. But to say he was a "sports fan" suggests he looked forward to games and knew the team's record, and this is true. But it went further than that. He could tell you the starting lineup of the 1964 Red Sox, or who made the last out in the fourth when the Cardinals conquered the Tigers on September 12, 1976. He loved sharing his knowledge of the game with the younger generation, often taking neighbors, like Brendan Chisholm, or friends' children, like Steven Gargan, to games with him. When I would accompany him to games as a kid, I was slightly embarrassed by but also completely impressed with the depth of his knowledge as he talked sports with the spectators sitting around us. If anyone challenged him with a sports trivia question, they soon ended up owing him a beer.

To say that my father was your dentist suggests you saw him a few times a year or so and he would work on your teeth and send you on your way. But those of you who are patients know that he knew more about your lives than your neighbors probably do. Blessed—or sometimes, we thought, cursed—with the gift of gab, my dad had a way of talking to people that made them comfortable. He delivered painless Novacaine shots, probably from the years of practice he had giving himself insulin injections. His rapport coupled with his soft, gentle hands allowed people to relax in his chair and let him "work his magic," as some patients would say. And if you couldn't pay for that magic, he found a way to help you out.

The title of "Boss" didn't quite cut it, either. A boss is someone to whom you report for work, or the person who owns the company. But as his dental hygienist Jenna told me, my father made it clear that the people in the office worked *with* him, not *for* him. He went to their weddings, their children's special occasions, and he knew all their dogs' names. He loved learning new techniques and going to workshops and talking about new innovations with his staff. They were his friends, yes, but really they were his second family.

Being an only child bugged my father enough to make my sister and I promise we would have more than one child. As with most things in his life, when my father faced circumstances not of his choosing, he changed them. In this case, he created a large family for himself. In lieu of blood siblings, my father made bond siblings. In my conversations over the past couple of days, people admitted that the term “friend” isn’t quite accurate when talking about Tom Pesola. The titles “like a brother” or “second father” are more fitting, and I can tell you that the feeling was mutual. He spoke so fondly of his college pharmacy days with Jimmy and Joe; his dental school days with Skip, Stan, and Leo; and, more recently, the friendships he developed with Louie, Ernie, and Tony. In fact, for an only child, my father had a bigger family than the Kennedys.

The matriarch of this clan is my mother, Joni, who has been my father’s counterpart for the last 36 years. My parents showed my sister and I what a real marriage is—it requires work and forgiveness and, above all else, a commitment to the vows you took, even if it means, as it did for them for nine months, time apart to renew and strengthen your bond. My father always told me that the best gift you can give to your children is loving your spouse, and boy did he.

My father took an interest in my mother sophomore year in college in their anatomy class. My mother, the studious goody-two-shoes she was, always sat in the front. My father, often late for class due to the early hour, slipped into one of the back seats. At the urging of his friends, he finally wrote a note to my mother requesting a date. If she agreed, she was to wear a yellow dress to class. She did. But the story does not end there. Though I remember my father for his punctuality, this was not always the case, particularly for these morning classes. On the day my mother wore her yellow dress, my father overslept and was late to class. My mother worried that the whole thing had been a joke, but my father apparently redeemed himself because...well, here I am decades later.

My father had to ask my mother three times to marry him. He stipulated to her that she would have to learn how to pronounce Pesola correctly...it was a long courtship. My mother gave my sister and me the best gift a parent could give to a child by selecting such a wonderful man to be the father of her children.

To say that Kara, Brendan, Scott and I have lost a father and Avery and Owen have lost a grandfather does not do justice to my father's involvement in our lives. Your stereotypical father is a hands-off kind of guy who provides for you and cares for you from afar. This was NOT our dad. Our father wore his heart on his sleeve most of the time, but especially when it came to us. He always told us how much he loved us and how proud he was of us—he truly was our biggest fan, and I think we all miss the daily ego boosts he gave us. If everyone loved his kids and grandkids and children-in-law as openly as he did us, the world would be such a beautiful place.

From him, Kara learned how to delight in the little things in life. She and my father would exchange knowing smiles of appreciation when Avery or Owen did something particularly cute or sweet. My father would randomly comment to us, "I wonder what the poor people are doing right now." This sounds snobbish, but it wasn't if you knew its origins. Rudy, my father's good friend and surrogate father growing up was not wealthy—in fact, he only worked when he needed money, but he would utter this phrase to my father to show him that they were NOT poor because they could appreciate that the most important things in life are not things. My father took this to heart and made the little things special. Every time Kara went on errands with him, even well into her 20s, my father would get a grape lollipop for her at the bank. When he made pancakes for her and her friend Courtney, he would submit a bill to them with one of his trademark stick figure illustrations of himself, requesting their feedback on his service.

From him, I learned the value of education and a good book. He always told me that no one can take knowledge away from you, and he was hungry to learn new things and talk about them with me. My father is the first person I want to talk to about anything. I usually called him on my commute home from BC to tell him what we had talked about in class that night. When Avery said something witty or Owen said something funny, I would shoot him a quick e-mail to let him know, and those remarks became the highlight of his week, the stories he repeated ad nauseum to his patients and staff. Rarely a day went by when we did not talk.

This is why it's so strange that when Brendan came into the picture 14 years ago, my father did not speak to him for 2 years. It wasn't as though he rudely ignored Brendan, but rather just did not initiate conversation until he knew Brendan was an okay guy after all. He made up for his 2 year reticence in the

time since, and he came to love and treat Brendan like a son. There was nothing “in law” about the relationship—it was “in love.”

I have no doubt he felt the same way about Scott. He always commented on how Scott put family first, making it a priority to visit his grandfather regularly and treating Avery and Owen like a doting uncle. He may have teased Scott about his need for frequent naps, but he was so happy to see Kara with someone who valued the same things he did.

My father had a bumper sticker on one of his old cars that said “Sisu,” which is a Finnish term that translates roughly to fortitude and perseverance, and this term epitomized his life. He grew up as the only child in a poor, alcoholic family, and as a result, he always had this constant need to please people and be liked; it deeply disturbed him if he knew someone did not regard him highly. This desire to be liked drove him to be excessively kind to those he met, but there was nothing false about it; he genuinely saw the best in people and hoped that they saw the same in him. He would be humbled by the large turnout today...but I imagine he’s wearing his trademark shit-eating grin to indicate he’s probably not too surprised.

This personality trait helped him overcome a lot of hurdles. When he was in college, diabetics were not allowed to use the gym—it was considered a communicable disease, and he had a red dot on his ID to indicate this. My father did not let this stop him; he would put his thumb over the dot when he showed his card, and if the person at the front desk figured him out, he’d say, “Okay, thanks anyway,” and proceed to walk to the back entrance where his friends would open the door for him.

Part of his exam to get into dental school required him to carve a block of chalk. My father made the first cut incorrectly; in fact, he did the exact opposite of what the directions required. Instead of throwing up his hands and throwing away his future career, he continued carving. When he turned it in, he told the proctor, “I messed up at the beginning, so I just made the mirror image of what you asked for.” I’m not sure many people would have the mental capability to not only stick with the test after they screwed up at the start, but also reverse all of the other directions to make the mirror image of an object.

More recently, my father went to Spain with some fellow dentists. After he finished packing—the day of the trip, of course—he looked at his passport and realized it had expired the day before. If this were me, I would have said, “Okay, guess I’m not going to Spain.” Not him. With only a couple of hours before his flight and an hour before Boston’s passport office closed, he drove down there and schmoozed his way into a renewed passport and made the flight just in time.

As I mentioned, books and academia were a strong tie between my father and me. We both read Malcolm Gladwell’s recent book “Outliers,” which suggests that people like my father aren’t really self-made men, but rather the beneficiaries of hidden advantages and extraordinary opportunities and cultural legacies that allow them to learn and work hard and make sense of the world in ways others cannot. I sent my dad an e-mail asking how he thought the book’s principles applied to him. I displayed his entire response at the wake yesterday, but I want to close with his final words: “Smart enough” wins every time if it can be coupled with personality, social grace and respect for your fellow man. Love, Father

*- Kirstin Pesola-McEachern*