

## **DAD'S STORY**

**By Sue O'Halloran**

I.

My father taught me to dive. In the summers, one day a week, my Dad would give my Mom the day off and take my brother and me swimming. That particular day, I was going to dive off the third platform, the highest platform, the biggest challenge of my eight-year existence on planet earth. My father had told me, "You can do it."

"But I'm scared," I told him. "What if I freeze up there? What if I have to climb back down?"

"Then, you'll climb up again," he said. "It's okay if you're scared. Just do your best. It'll be good for experience."

My father said that phrase – "it'll be good for experience" - so often that, when we were older, my brother and I used to tease him and say, "We're going to put that on your tombstone, 'Dying - it's been good for experience.'"

I dove. I plummeted for what felt like forever. And, then, I sliced through the water and bulleted down for what also felt like forever. I'd done it! But there was just one problem. In my excitement, I'd forgotten to close my mouth. I didn't dive as my father did: perfect form, pursed lips, all concentration, making a tidy slit in the water. No. My naturally effusive self let out a scream, a dramatic, bloodcurdling "Ahhhhhhh!"

When I hit the water, I was still screaming and so when I finally emerged, I was choking, coughing, gasping for air. And, then, I saw my Dad's hand reach for me over the side of the pool. My father pulled me up out of the water like an army buddy who'd parachuted into a swamp,

like an equal who'd been through an ordeal but came out the other side, just as expected. He held my hand an extra second or two. His touch said, "Good job. You did your best."

## II.

Twenty-eight years later, when I was 36 years old, I was trying to do my best as I stood in a Florida hospital room and watched a machine clear my father's kidneys. But as I stood and looked at my father's normally slight body, now as thin as a sheet of paper under the white hospital bedding, my best didn't seem like near enough. My father had been living with the help of one kind of machine or another since his heart surgery had gone wrong the week before and he'd contracted an infection. If the kidney clearing didn't work, the doctors told us that my father, seventy years old, would be dead in 48 hours.

My father was awake, watching the TV without the sound on. I tried to feel useful, combed his hair for the third time that evening, and as I did I saw flashes of old newsreel footage from the sixties reflected in his glasses. John F. Kennedy, Neil Armstrong, Martin Luther King's "I have a dream" speech. My father struggled to take off his oxygen mask.

"Da-ad! You're not supposed to..."

"Martin Luther King," he said in a voice still raw from having had tubes down his throat. "One of the greatest men to ever live."

"Yeah, yeah, that's right, Dad." I helped him replace the oxygen mask. I mean, of course, I agreed with him. Dr. King had been one of my heroes growing up. I had had a poster of Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech hanging on my bedroom wall all through high school. It wasn't just what Dr. King said that I loved, but how he said it. We had

this old reel-to-reel tape player and I used to tape Dr. King's speeches and study how he did it – his cadence, his use of language and of pauses. My Dad knew I loved Dr. King, but why did my Dad need to talk right then when he was fighting for his life?

I transferred my concern and annoyance into trying to get the part straight in his thinning hair. I look back now and realize it was my father's way of attempting amends. His saying, "Dr. King was a great man" was actually saying, "Sorry I let you down. Sorry I wasn't the father you wanted me to be. Sorry I backed off the dive." Only I'd completely forgotten that there was any need for an apology at all.

### III.

Let me back up a bit and tell you that I grew up in the 1950s in an all-white neighborhood on the southwest side of Chicago. My neighbors were constantly running the Acts of Kindness Marathon. They watched each other's children. Cooked for each other when someone was ill. Literally built each other's houses - put the newest addition on, laid concrete for each other's driveways. But, when it came to race, racial animosity was a daily reality. My own grandparents who lived with us were two of the biggest contributors to the nightly racial bashings on the front porches of 84<sup>th</sup> Street. Only two men seemed to offer an alternative to my neighbors' racist worldview - John Kennedy, the first Irish Catholic President, who was *for* Civil Rights and my Dad.

My father worked two jobs. He taught high school during the day and, then, from four o'clock until nine every evening, he worked a second part-time job at a bank. My Dad taught at DuSable High School, an all-black high school on Chicago's south side. Because of his job at DuSable, when my Dad joined our neighborhood front porch

discussions, the racial epitaphs were automatically toned down. He quietly defended his students with: "No, they're not all bad," "No, my kids are good kids," "No, that's not true. Lots of the parents care."

It was totally in character because my father defended all us kids. I've kept a journal since the 7<sup>th</sup> grade and it's filled with examples of "Dad to the rescue." He defended us girls – said we should be able to play hardball just like the boys. This was way before girls were able to play Little League.

And I remember one summer day when my Dad took a gang of us to Marquette Park to learn the game of golf, but a group of men complained that we kids would slow down the course. My father walked up to them and quietly said, "It's the kids' vacation, too. Let them have fun." The men never bothered us again.

My father even defended my face. When my mother tried to hold me, her redheaded daughter, prisoner to shade, sunhats and sunscreens saying, "A face full of freckles – who will want her?" my father calmly replied, "Let the girl live!"

So, for all these reasons, I thought he was a "cool" Dad. But on top of that, my Dad was extra "cool" because he was the one white liberal I knew of in my neighborhood and, therefore, in my whole growing up. I had him way up there - on the great Dad pedestal and on the good white people pedestal.

#### IV.

However, there was one chip in that pedestal. My father was not an emotionally expressive man. He'd come at you for a hug and stop an

arm length away. If my father puffed the air six inches above your shoulders – that was a big deal.

I rarely heard him raise his voice until the day we went to Riverview Amusement Park and my father met his match... the Bobs, the fastest, most treacherous roller coaster at Riverview Park. I sat with my father. My brother sat with a friend ahead of us. Everyone was screaming so much their tonsils stretched out a foot ahead of their mouths. But my father – nothing. We went up; we went down; we screeched around hairpin turns. Finally, finally, as we topped the highest, colossal hill, my Dad reacted with a sound. Only it wasn't a scream; it was more like a hiccup, a singular, one-at-a-time hiccup. My Dad went, "Ho!" Then, a second later, as we crested that hill, out seeped another, "Ho!" The Bobs thundered downward as I strained to fight gravity and turn my head sideways so that I would not miss the real thrill of the day: watching my father be so emotional. "Ho!"

No, he wasn't very emotional, but my father was smart. He was one of a few men on our block to have gone to college. And, when he became a high school teacher and taught Mechanical Drawing and other the vocational training courses, his neighborhood buddies crowned him with the nickname, "The Professor."

I remember the night he taught me how to draw. It was the first grade and I had been up all night with the stomach flu, sitting on the cold tiles of the bathroom floor next to the toilet, waiting to see if I would throw up yet again. My father sat on the floor through that night with me with a large drawing pad and pencil – to distract me.

He'd ask, "Do you know what shading is?"

"No-oo."

"Oh, Doll," – that's what he called me and he sort of talked like W. C. Fields – "Oh, Doll, you have to use shading. It'll make your drawings come alive."

So that night, in between vomiting, I learned how to make a ball 3-D round and a rectangle lift off the page with shading. My father taught me light and shadow.

## V.

My father loved teaching. But in the 1960s, during my high school years, things began to change at my father's school. My Dad worked at DuSable High School for 28 years and, when he first worked there, whenever he could, he'd stay after school to watch DuSable's sports teams play. We grew up learning the cheer, "Gobble, gobble! Go DuSable!" How could not love a school with a cheer like that? But, into my sophomore and junior years of high school, 1966, 1967, my father stopped going to any DuSable extra-curricular activities. He said it wasn't safe to be in the neighborhood at night anymore.

On top of that, kids from the neighborhood caused trouble during the school day. Several times a month, teens who were out of school and hanging in groups in the neighborhood would walk into the school - no metal detectors or security guards back then - calling other kids out by name.

These outside kids walked through the halls and if the students didn't leave with them, the students could expect a beating after school. So, if my Dad heard the outside teens coming, he'd signal to his class. They'd clear their desks, run and press up against the wall, the same wall that the door to the classroom was on. With the students standing up

against the wall and silent, the outside teens would look into my Dad's classroom and think it was empty. When the teens were gone, my Dad's "kids" could go back to work and stay in school where they wanted to be without recriminations that day.

I'd heard of the troubles he was having at school off and on, but the extent of the challenges he faced didn't really hit home until one day I was at a church-sponsored interracial meeting. For those who are younger than I am, it's hard to explain how unusual this kind of gathering was in Chicago in the sixties. This was an integrated group of about 200 kids from high schools all around the city. A friend came up to me, all excited, and said, "Hey, some of the kids over there. They're from DuSable!" She'd known that I'd been dying to meet someone from DuSable. I mean I knew my Dad was a great teacher, but I wanted to hear it from one of his own.

I crossed to the other side of the auditorium. "Hey, hi!" I said to the group of boys as I approached them. "I hear you're from DuSable High School. Do you know a teacher there named Ed Halloran?" My smile filled my face.

"Oh, yeah," a boy turned around and answered right away. "I know a bunch of dudes who would love to do that cat in."

"What?" I asked, not comprehending.

"Do him in," he repeated. "You know. Kill him."

I didn't have a second to think about control, the tears spilled from my eyes.

"What I say?" the boy asked, his voice in a slight panic, realizing that perhaps his flip remarks weren't so funny.

I put my hand over my face and waved him away.

He tried to make it better. "It's just that lots of brothers don't think there should be no white teachers teaching the white man's drawing and



history and lies and such. You know, we need our own art, our own teachers, that's all."

I nodded, put my hand over my nametag and ran away.

## VI.

Later in my senior year, on the afternoon of April 4th, 1968, a single rifle shot through the window of a Memphis flophouse changed our lives forever. The dinginess of the room where James Earl Ray fired the shot that killed Dr. King - the bare light bulb swinging from the ceiling, the thin un-sheeted mattress - matched the despair I felt that night.

In my all white neighborhood on the southwest side of Chicago, neighbors either ignored the news altogether or called to each other, "Did you hear the good news? They finally got him!"

My mother had died my freshmen year in high school and my older brother was away at college. That left me alone with my grandparents who tried to tone down their glee in my presence. They said, "It's a shame they had to kill him, but I didn't agree with the man's ideas."

I wanted all the neighbors out on the front lawns sharing stunned disbelief as we did when John Kennedy was assassinated. I wanted to grieve as a community our overwhelming *common* loss.

I hid out in my bedroom and found solace in my journal. Sometimes, the journal entries weren't so polite. I wrote, "Shut up. Shut up your damn mouths. Everyone in this house and in this neighborhood, shut up!" And, then, over and over again, I wrote, "Hurry home, Dad. Hurry home. I need someone who will understand." Dr.



King was the only black leader I knew that made room for whites; and my Dad was the only white that I knew in my neighborhood that made room for Black people.

Finally, at about ten o'clock, I heard the familiar chirp of my Dad's Chevy Impala parking in front of our house. I was out on the front porch before he'd gotten out of his car. I stood barefoot, shivering in the cool spring night air. He came towards me with his nightly bundle - the same 7Up and Pretzels "treat" he'd been bringing home for my brother and me since we were six years old. I leaned down to take the paper bag from his arms. My eyes began to fill with tears. Finally, I'd be able to let down, express who I really was in this house, in this neighborhood, express who I was and have company in my grief.

My father looked up at me, pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and said, "Did you hear the good news?"

I froze, too stunned to even know I'd gone into shock, sure that I must have heard wrong.

"What?" I asked blankly into the night.

"They got him," he said and grinned. "King is dead."

Then his face collapsed. He couldn't have been reacting to my face or my body because I'm sure I didn't move. I didn't wince. I was beyond pain. Perhaps my utter stillness said more.

He began to stammer. "I, I mean, it's a shame, a shame, of course, that he's dead. A man is dead. That's horrible. It's just that things have gotten so bad with all the riots, the riots and the violence. And maybe without a leader focusing everyone, things will calm down. Maybe things will settle down now."

I don't remember walking to my room. I do know I stayed awake writing my disbelief and rage into my journal. "Dad, how could you say that about Dr. King? Anyone... but not from your lips." Finally, at some

hour of the night, I wrote my worst fear, "Is my father no different than everyone in this neighborhood?" I wrote out my feelings for hours, went to bed, couldn't sleep, woke and wrote some more. And, then, I tucked away those feelings and memories from that night for the next twenty years. I simply forgot it ever happened. How? Well, partly because of what happened the next day. Because of what happened the next day, I guess it felt like time to tuck scary questions away.

## VII.

On Friday, April 5th, the day after Dr. King was murdered, things did not "settle down" as my father had hoped. April 5<sup>th</sup>, 1968, the city exploded.

When I got home from school, I was surprised to find my father already there. He sprang off the couch and raced at me. He hugged me. "Okay. Okay." he said. "We're safe. Everyone's home. Everyone's here. And you'll stay in tonight, too." My father so rarely gave me an order that I was taken aback.

Then, he told me about his day at DuSable. Some kids had held impromptu, tearful prayer services throughout the morning. But, by noon, he'd felt the energy build through the halls, changing from grief to rage, great cannonballs of rage shooting through the halls. And he just...walked out. He didn't tell the principal, the other teachers, the students, anybody where he was going. Out in the parking lot, he saw a bunch of kids with knives and rocks trying to decide which cars were the white teachers' cars. Some tires were already slashed, some windows already broken. My father drove off without saying a word to any of them.

As he drove home, my father saw garbage cans were already on fire. And, then, hundreds of students poured out of other nearby schools. They walked down the middle of the street and, at one point, a group of them surrounded my father's car. They began to rock his car – back and forth, back and forth - and, then, where there had been angry faces in the driver's side window shouting at him there appeared... the knees of a horse! A mounted policeman!

The policeman pounded his fist on the roof of my Dad's car. "Get out of here!" he shouted. "What are you doing here? Get out!"

My Dad sped off to the next intersection where he saw kids throw rocks at storefront windows, the plate glass cascading out of the storefronts like waterfalls. From then on, my father didn't stop at red lights. He gunned the motor and drove through intersection after intersection until he got into the white neighborhoods.

"Okay. Okay," he repeated to me as he paced our tiny living room. "We're all safe. We're here. We're all safe." I'd never seen him so visibly shaken. For the first time in my life, I saw my father as old. Perhaps, that's why I chose not to remember the betrayal of the night before. The world seemed too filled with losses. I didn't want to add my admiration for him to the list.

I know that can be hard to believe. Forgetting such a shocking moment... But the next few days were occupied with lootings, fires, shootings, and snipers. "Burn, Baby, Burn!" Death. The DuSable kid's threat seemed all the more real. I guess in my grief about Dr. King and my city, I needed my Dad. I don't know when exactly I slipped into forgetting. I just know I never mentioned that April 4<sup>th</sup> night in my journals again.

## VIII.

So that moment in the hospital room, when I was combing my Dad's hair and he said, "Martin Luther King, one of the greatest men to ever live" I didn't really register what he was saying - that he was apologizing for falling off of the "cool" Dad, white liberal pedestal.

My father made it through the 48-hour kidney crisis, but several weeks later, his body could fight off the infection no longer and he died. Later that week, when I was looking through my grammar school and high school journals for stories to use in his eulogy, I found the entry from the night of Dr. King's death, April 4th, 1968. "Dad, how could you say those things about Dr. King?" It might as well have been written in hieroglyphics. I stared at it but could make no sense of it. I truly had no idea what the entry meant. I put it aside to get through the task of burying my father.

Several weeks later, I found the memory of those confusing passages tugging at me. I found the journal again and read it over and over. It took days to sink in that the words were real because right after April 4<sup>th</sup> and into my adulthood, my father went right back to being the "cool" Dad again. He was the one friends of mine approached for loans on communal farms and other get-rich-slow schemes. When I was in college, a few of my friends were arrested for demonstrating against the Vietnam War, they called my father, not their parents, to bail them out of jail. When a girlfriend of mine "got in trouble," the euphemism back then for getting pregnant, and it was clear she was going to get the then illegal abortion no matter what, he offered money so that she'd get a "real" doctor, not "some hack." We were Catholic - this couldn't have been an easy choice for him. But he said the important thing was that she was safe and we'd let God take care of the rest.

These were the stories I had in my head as I read and reread my journal from the day Dr. King was killed. It took days for the memory of my Dad's "Did you hear the good news?" to slowly swim up through the layers of denial and disbelief.

I wanted a perfect parent. Perhaps, we all do. But, for me, there was an extra layer because my Dad was a white Dad with a white daughter wanting models of whiteness to be proud of. My Dad on the white liberal pedestal and, by inference, me up there with him, too. Me, the perfect white with never a racist thought or deed, lifting me from the centuries of atrocities in the name of whiteness.

But if my Dad could say "Did you hear the good news?" then, I had to admit, he also had other racist thoughts as well. If my Dad had those thoughts and feelings, how could I have him as my role model? Could I still love him? Was I the same? Maybe it's time to look at the scary questions.

I wrote in my journal that April 4<sup>th</sup> night, "Is my father no different than everyone in this neighborhood?" Today, I'd answer that question, "Yes and no." No, he was no different: he was a product of his generation and this racist society and so am I – with thoughts and feelings that go in every direction.

And "Yes, he was different." Day after day, in a tight community, not the estranged communities of today, he took stands. All of us know the fear of speaking up to colleagues, family and friends. He did it every day.

So, now, I try to remember all of it, plunge into all of it, the whole mess of it. Where we succeed and where we fail. The openness and the ignorances; the courage and the fear. No one can begrudge someone wanting to be safe, but without admitting all of it we can't tell what is concern for safety and what is seeing through the lens of privilege,

ignorance and fear. By guiding me up that diving platform, my father showed me that the fear and the ability to push past the fear are always there - together.

In the end, I see that he was a 3-D man made of light and shadow, and a man who never stopped growing. *I* suppressed the memory. *He* never forgot. He took off his own life support to say, "I'm sorry. I didn't forget that I let you down," letting me know that *he* knew he had backed off the dive.

But we can't give up on each other or ourselves when we back off the dive. If we wait to do a perfect leap every time, we'll never get rid of racism. We just have to be honest about all of it. Then, begin the climb again. That's what my father taught me. My father taught me to dive.

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# Susan O'Halloran

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