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## Dad's Heart, My Life

My Father Died; I Vowed to Live the Life He Didn't

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About two years before the heart attack that killed him, I told Dad that if he didn't clean up his act, he'd be dead in five years. Quit the smoking, get some exercise, stop nailing himself to the cross of his job. We were sitting at the kitchen table, he and Mom and I. Dad had already had one heart attack, in 1963, when he was 44. It had been such an obvious warning shot. How could he not have heard it?

He looked straight at me and said, "You're right."

I was just 14 at the time, but I wanted to reach across the table, grab him by the collar of the white dress shirt he always wore to work, and shake him.

All these years later, I still do.

Shake him for proving me right. Shake him for the cigarette cough my sister, Kathy, and I woke up to every morning of our lives. For missing my high school and college graduations, my wedding in 1978. For not being here for me and my wife, Noreen, to share with him the baby, Patrick, that we adopted in 1990. And for Mom, for being his widow for 37 years -- 15 years longer than she was his wife.

The truth? I think Dad gave up. I do. His father, my grandfather, Jack McKee, died on July 6, 1941, at the age of 53, of a "Probable Coronary Occlusion," according to the death certificate. Probable is wholly unnecessary here; we're talking McKee family history. My great-grandfather Frank McKee died on Nov. 26, 1913. "Apoplexy," says the death certificate. It was most likely a stroke, in keeping with the McKees' cardiovascular conundrum. He was 53 years old.

If Dad gave up, when I was still a teenager, I vowed I never would. If Dad wouldn't get in shape, I'd do it for him -- and I have ever since. College basketball, rec-league hoops and volleyball. I ran until well past 40, then turned to a rowing machine. When Patrick came to us, my past, present and future collided. I was now the father Dad never was, staying in shape for his son.

I brought all of this with me to an "executive physical" at the **Princeton Longevity Center** in [Princeton, N.J.](#), on tax day 2005. This eight hours of treadmill test, nutritional assessment and full body scan wasn't my idea. I was 52 years old. I was in great shape. I ate right. What was the point? But Noreen insisted.

The stress test put me in the 86th percentile for men my age. I had the aerobic capacity of a man eight years younger, the recovery rate of a man 20 years younger. In the diet analysis I was just a few points shy of an "excellent" score. The body scan rounded out the day, and then all that remained was the consult with the doctor.

I was ready for my lifetime achievement award.

### **Mixing With the Cowboys**

Dad was another story. Born on Jan. 21, 1919, he had grown up through the Depression, been a young man in World War II, and a married man with a family in the postwar boom. He'd worshiped in the church of the American Dream, a true believer in the up-by-your-bootstraps gospel. And he reaped what he sowed, in an unassuming, middle-class sort of way. I think he came to see a price to be paid for all that, and so be it.

About once a month on a Saturday morning, Dad used to go to the warehouse at Cole Steel, the office-furniture company where he was the general traffic manager. I often went with him. On these days Dad did not wear his shirt and tie. Paint-spattered khaki pants and flannel shirt sufficed. Once there, he'd throw his coat on the chair of his office and head to the floor and just walk around, stopping to talk with whoever was in picking up overtime. Dad ended his Saturday over at the loading docks to talk with the truckers.

"Modern-day cowboys," he called them, out there on the open road, their own boss. I think he envied that freedom, real or imagined.

I always sensed in Dad a certain yearning. A wistfulness that maybe his life could have turned out . . . not better, just differently. Some of this, perhaps most of this, was the product of his job situation. But not all of it. Dad never had the luxury of career options. Had he, he might have become a forest ranger. And he talked about starting his own company, even schemed with a friend on how to go about it.

I don't think Dad was dissatisfied with his life. What happened, I believe, is that he learned what we all learn, that no life turns out like we want it to. But you also learn -- if you're lucky -- that that's all right.

### **My Father's Son**

I understood his yearning -- and acted on it. I did have choices. Dad's years of sweating Cole Steel had provided me with options he never had. Though he died when I was a high school senior, the foundation was solidly in place for me to go to college. When I graduated from [Allentown](#) College of St. Francis de Sales in [Pennsylvania](#) in 1974, however adrift, there were few doors that weren't still open, if only I could push through them.

And I sprinted from the very idea of a career in business, the one thing that Dad was so grateful to run to. So grateful in fact that he was willing to work himself to death on its

behalf. And I cannot be convinced to the contrary. In college I disdained the economics majors. I was an English major. I walked around with a paperback book stuck in my back pocket, making sure the top inch was visible. I played on the basketball team; I appeared in student-directed plays. Yes, I fancied myself quite the latter-day Renaissance man. I was going to "teach"; I was going to "write." I aspired not to a career, but a calling.

For me the math has forever been unforgiving: Career equals death. No way I was going to kill myself packing boxes into a truck. Spend my life on the phone talking to [New York](#). Allow a boss to dominate the conversation at my dinner table.

I would not be my father.

### **A Silhouetted Memory**

When he died, Dad left no unfinished business between us, so far as it went. We'd had 16 years together. What he left undone was the rest of my life with him. A friend told me once that he knew he finally had a complete life with his father when he bumped into him at a strip club. What are *you* doing here? What are you doing here? I can't imagine Dad at a strip club. It's been quite a while for me, too. But I understood exactly what my friend meant.

So without a life together forward, I look back, searching for him in details.

He could walk the fields all day in the fall, hunting pheasant. So there was a time when he was in shape. Or maybe it was just that he was younger then. Once, we were out in the driveway shoveling snow. I was maybe 8, 9 years old, making Dad 40, 41. When he finished up he came over to where I was playing and told me to hop on his shovel. I sat down. "Hold on," he said. I grabbed the wood handle, and with that he took off running down the street, which was still covered in snow.

He sprinted past four or five houses, ran himself in a wide circle and brought me around crack-the-whip style and started back up the street. From my vantage point behind him he was silhouetted in the dark, the steam trailing from his mouth like a locomotive's, brightened by the street lamps, his boots chugging on the snow crust.

Dad, indestructible.

### **The Enemy Within**

I have grown over time to consider the human heart -- or, more accurately, the specific fist-sized, 12-ounce-or-so, four-chambered, spider-webbed organ pulsing within me -- as a living, breathing entity quite apart from the rest of me. It has a personality, a life of its own. I can stand at a remove from my own self and look upon it. When I do, I see both a loyal friend and a distrusted enemy. It doesn't just beat in my chest -- lub-dub, lub-dub. It talks to me, LUB-dub, LUB-dub, continually reminding me of its presence, asking -- no, demanding -- that I attend to it. I listen and answer. You bet I do. Years ago I made my

deal with this devil: I keep you in shape, you don't attack me. We have been in long conversation ever since.

As for Dad, I have no idea. He never talked to me about any of this. About his father. About his first heart attack in 1963. About how it affected him, changed him, scared him.

I asked Mom if she could explain what Dad was like after his first heart attack. She didn't answer immediately. Instead, she tapped on her chest and looked past me, trying to find the correct words.

"He was," she finally said, and then she stopped talking but kept tapping. "He wasn't introspective," she continued. "He wasn't withdrawn." She was still tapping. "He was inner-directed after that first heart attack." That confirmed what I had long suspected -- that Dad was different after that first heart attack.

A coronary infarction kills heart muscle. Myocardium dies and does not come back. Dad didn't come back, either. I see that now. He could stew, no doubt about it. Mom talks of Dad spending a lot of time in the basement in the first year or so after his heart attack, sitting by himself, drinking a couple of beers, just . . . sitting. Not reading, which he loved to do, not watching TV.

"He was depressed," Noreen said upon hearing this, making a quick and likely correct diagnosis. We know that now. Many people who have had a heart attack confront the symptoms of depression. Of course they do. For some, the depression itself can become its own risk factor.

## **Dad's Legacy**

In his office at the **Princeton Longevity Center**, David Fein, a specialist in preventive medicine, turned my attention to the computer screen and its digital slides, in shades of black and gray. Then suddenly, there it was, a line of white, a bony old man's finger clutching at my heart. The blockage was in about 20 percent of my left anterior descending artery. There was about the same in my right coronary artery. My risk of having a heart attack in the next 12 months: 10 percent or more, according to the data. Left untreated, the risk would only compound, the doctor said, making a heart attack a near certainty.

When I left the center I was worried that I would never set foot inside a gym again, never get on the rowing machine, lift weights, anything. What was the point? I had failed. I was utterly devastated. It wasn't just that I had heart disease. No, what stung (the way I saw it) was the fact that I had become that part of Dad I had worked so hard never to be.

It was Noreen who dragged me through that first weekend, mainly by saying almost nothing. "You're still here, Steve," she said. To her it was that straightforward.

Fein had said as much. "There is basically no end to the ways that having kept yourself fit has improved your situation," he said. I'd lowered my insulin levels, improved my blood lipids, built collateral arteries in my heart around any blockages, to name just a few. The list, he said, was endless. I would probably already have had a heart attack by now -- at best. More likely, I probably wouldn't be alive to be getting this news. I was even paying forward, banking reserves on any heart attack that I might someday have. "The odds that you'll do well if you ever do have a heart attack are very high," he said -- the most left-handed compliment I have ever heard.

He talked of death. "It can be difficult to accept one's mortality," he said. But I didn't think then, and I don't think now, that this was about death. I faced my mortality on Sept. 30, 1969. The night I watched Dad die I watched me die, too.

My life began the night his ended. Learn from me, he said.

And so I did. I have become who I am because of him. I can't imagine my life without all that running and rowing and biking and all the rest. Day after day. It's who I am, because of him.

And I am alive.

*Steve McKee is the author of "My Father's Heart: A Son's Journey" (Da Capo Lifelong), from which this article is adapted. Comments: [health@washpost.com](mailto:health@washpost.com).*