

GUEST COLUMN

Memories of a not-so-perfect dad

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With Father's Day having just come and gone, I've been thinking about my dad a lot. He passed away just recently — like last month on May 15, recently. Naturally, I've been trying to put things into perspective.

To say my dad and I had a strained relationship would be an understatement. We were polar opposites in a lot of ways. He was a staunch conservative and a bit of a racist.

The last few months of his life he must have sent me about a thousand e-mails trying to convince me that Barack Obama is the antichrist, the Clintons had hundreds of staff members and associates “whacked” to promote their political agendas, and that through Jesus Christ all things are possible, unless you happen to be Nancy Pelosi — and don't get me started on the crazy e-mail rants he sent about her.

People think I'm kidding when I tell them my father can only be described as a combination of a Tennessee Williams play and a Jeff Foxworthy joke.

My dad was a womanizing, abusive, drunk whose only wish for his funeral arrangements was that he wanted to be cremated and put in a Budweiser bottle. He was not joking. That's what he really wanted.

As of right now, I don't think my mother has followed through with the latter part of his request, but he has been cremated. Mom wants to scatter his ashes along the Wekiva River in Florida.

She says he liked to fish there, but, honestly, I think she would be mortified to explain to people why dad's ashes were in a beer bottle for all eternity. Personally, I think it is only fitting that he wanted his death to be spent much like his life: smoking, drinking and at the bottom of a bottle.

He died from complications after undergoing a treatment for emphysema. He was diagnosed with the lung condition back in 2000 or 2001 sometime, yet refused to quit smoking two packs of menthols a day.

The doctors also recommended that he quit drinking and spending so much time in smoky bars, and told him that he needed to exercise and walk around more to build up what was left of his lung capacity. He promptly ignored the doctors' orders, started collecting disability insurance and became a veritable shut-in. The only time he left the house was to go buy beer and cigarettes or to go sit in his favorite bar.

The last three or four years of his life, his condition had gotten so bad that he had to be on oxygen at all times. I don't know if the man had a death wish or was insanely stubborn, but even with the oxygen tube in his nose, he would still smoke like a house on fire. Not only did he refuse to give up the habit, but he also smoked inside. Holidays at my parents' house became very interesting. Nothing livens up a family function like the

threat of being blown to smithereens at any given moment.

As far back as I can remember, his behavior showed little regard for himself or others. He was selfish and reckless. He stayed out too late, sometimes all night. He drove my mom crazy. He wasn't much of a “family man.” But at the same time, I feel a tiny, dysfunctional sense of admiration for him. He lived and died on his own terms. He did whatever he wanted to no matter what, and there's a lot to be said for that.

Father's Day was June 15, exactly one month to the day after my dad passed on. All my life, any love I felt for the man was purely out of obligation. Yet, here it is approaching Father's Day and I can't help but feel the need to do something, whether out of obligation, years of habit or out of a selfish need to soothe my own psyche.

Usually for Father's Day I would just send him a card or maybe give him a call. This year, I can't. But if I could, I'd probably tell him thanks for all those crazy family road trips we went on when I was a kid and for giving my older brother and me zany vacation anecdotes to tell for years to come.

For instance, one time my mom and dad got into an argument just before an eight-hour trek down to Orlando. Out of spite, Dad played eight-track tapes of Slim Whitman the whole way down there just to irritate my mother. It's funny now, but trust me; it's a story that needed time to ferment before we could laugh about it.

Maybe that's my perspective. Be it good or bad, fortunate or unfortunate, my dad was a lot of things that I will never be — he is a “cautionary tale,” if you will. And love him or hate him, there is some comfort in that.

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