

# Ten Lessons I Learned from My Father

*Delivered at Gordon Mar's Memorial Service, Palo Alto, 7/14/08*

Although the timing of Dad's passing was somewhat of a surprise, I didn't think long about what I wanted to say today.

I had recently seen the last lecture of Randy Pausch on the "Internets." He was a Virtual Reality professor at Carnegie Mellon dying of cancer who delivered his last lecture he called "How to Achieve Your Childhood Dreams" but was in fact the life lessons he wanted to pass on to his children.

Dad, of course, would be too modest to do something like that, but if you'll indulge me, I find it appropriate to do it for him. So here are ten lessons I learned from my father.

1. **Try your best.** Dad made a point of telling me that it was OK to fail if I gave things my best shot. Some people might think that could inhibit achievement. But for me it had the opposite effect. It let me set high goals without a desperate fear of failure, or being racked with self-loathing when the inevitable occasional failures happened.
2. **The corollary is #2: Be resilient.** Determination wins the day. The NBA says the same thing with their marketing slogan, *"Knocked down seven times, get up eight."* That actually doesn't make complete sense, because you start out upright. If you get knocked down seven times, you only have to get up seven times. But if you insist on making sense, they kick you out of marketing. Which is why I work in product. But I digress. Determination. Cousin Diane and I were saying the other night that we'd both take the determined person over someone lazy with more talent every time. That's the Mar way.
3. **Make your family happy.** You can change friends, but you can't change family. One of Dad's proudest accomplishments was seeing the look on his mother's face after he gave her a char siu bow he bought himself when the family was very poor and this kind of treat was out of the question. Another time in China, he bought his sister a gold ring when an opportunity presented itself. You can't change your family so it's important to make each other happy so you will want to be there for each other forever.
4. **Actions speak louder than words.** When I was in grade school, Dad was concerned because I was not a very social kid. I seemed to be more afraid of people and being looked at than drawn to it. So he pushed himself out of his comfort zone and became President of the PTA. He felt it would set an example for me. I don't have that problem any more. Another time, Dad had been talking about the importance of helping other people when you can. He said that his mother was known for going the extra mile to help others. At the time, I was a cynical young person, thinking that there was a healthy dose of mythology in his old China stories. Then Mom's friend Paula's car broke down and she didn't really

have the money to get a rental while it was getting fixed. So Dad said, "Why don't we loan her one of ours?" My Mom felt so good she cried. I'm still cynical, but it's a nice story, innit? I'm just kidding. I try to follow Dad's example, and as you know, he has a long history of volunteerism that's hard to match.

5. **How to learn a sport.** Dad taught me my first sport – baseball – in 1971, which was followed soon after with football and basketball. He showed me the importance of practice and repetition, and insisted that in every sport that I have good form. Form is the foundation of results. I took that philosophy to every sport I learned on my own, and it sure works. I may be short and slow, but I've got decent coordination and good form. As long as I stay away from the completely athletic sports like track, then the adage applies: "Old age and treachery beats youth and enthusiasm every time."

As you know, Dad took up golf in retirement. He practiced at the range for a full year, but was afraid to actually play on a course. Finally, I said, "Dad, we're going golfing next Saturday. You can pick the course if you want, but we're going."

So we went out and played Moffett Field, joined by a person who some of you know, but will remain unidentified. This is a person who fits the profile, "The best wood in his bag is a pencil." By the time he was up to his third mulligan, we were still on the second tee and Dad asked me, "What's he doing?" I explained to him, that mulligans are basically "Do overs" where the golfer makes believe that the previous try never happened. I told him that it's generally accepted on the first swing of the day, but not beyond that. Then I looked at him and said, "Mars don't take mulligans." And he never did.

Later on the course, Dad hit his typical drive at the time... OK distance, and right down the middle. He said, "I don't see what's wrong with driving 150, 175 if you can do it every time and put it right in the middle of the fairway." I said, "Yeah, you can do that. But I'm gonna have to get you a skirt." I'm pleased to say that Dad turned himself into the big hitter of his age group, with the reputation to match.

I told those stories for two reasons. The first is that I was thrilled to return the favor and help teach him a sport. The second is that it had long been annoying that Dad's view of fatherhood seemed to be that he was the teacher and I was the student and nothing I said about the world was considered truth until he heard it from someone else. When I gave Dad those two pieces of advice, he didn't give me any sign of recognition. But he followed both of them forever. So that meant a lot.

6. **Lessons from the auditor.** Dad's career in cost analysis taught him a lot of lessons about shopping that he passed on to me.

- o **Ask people questions you already know the answer to.** You can tell if they're any good if they give you the right one. If they don't, either they aren't any good or they're slimy.
  - o **Develop a sense of what someone will accept.** Dad's made offers I thought were crazy low-balling, but they were accepted. He understood what minimum profit a salesman would take in various situations.
  - o **If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.** That gold ring he bought for his sister I mentioned earlier turned out to be copper. But the lesson he never forgot was gold.
7. **It's not easy to get rich quick. But it's not that hard to get rich slow.** Mom and Dad have great retirement years because it was important for them to plan it that way.
  8. **Wanting nice things isn't a problem. Insatiability is.** He saw the dangers of competitive consumerism that America is so good at promoting.
  9. **I'm not your friend, I'm your father.** Dad didn't like the idea that fathers and sons were supposed to be best friends. Indian Guides had this slogan, "Pals forever." He believed that you only have one father, and his job is different from those of your friends. "I'd rather have your respect than your friendship," he said. At the time, I thought that was kind of cold, but I understand now that he was taking responsibility for me when it would have been much easier to just do what was most fun.
  10. **Go to people's funerals.** Dad would feel much worse about missing a funeral than missing a wedding. He felt that weddings were joyous occasions, but he'd see those people again. Funerals were your last chance to pay respects to someone, and even if the honoree has passed on, your presence means a lot to the family. And who knows... maybe he's present in spirit.

Your presence today means everything to our family. Thank you so much for coming to be with us. I especially want to thank those of you who came today who barely knew Dad, but came to support us. I feel that Dad is here in spirit and that spirit is smiling.

**Glenn Mar**