
Life Lessons Learned Along the Way: Lessons I Did Not Know I Learned

By Richard M. Mitchell

We continue our series of personal, impactful stories that have shaped how we practice law.

I felt deprived when I was a kid. The other kids' dads coached their little league teams, took them fishing or camping on weekends. My dad did none of that. He couldn't. His body was ravaged. The particular illness is unimportant, but I resented the way it affected me. Me.

As I travelled through my teenage years and began to think about college, I realized all the other things I did not have. Sure, my dad was literally a genius, and the most spiritual man I have ever known. He tried to teach me a value system, how to be a man, that how you treat others really does come back to you. Still, he could not teach me to drive or throw a football. He could not or maybe would not, teach me the best way to talk to a girl. As an only child, I would have to learn on my own. These were the things that were truly important in life. I knew because my friends, the television, the other kids told me so.

Mark Twain once wrote "The older I get, the smarter my father becomes." I do not recall when I first came to appreciate this statement, but eventually, I did. I went away to college, but returned home regularly. Dad was there, just as he always had been. A funny thing happened around that time. I began to understand what he said to me, not just hear the words, but truly believe them. Another strange thing happened, too. I realized the lessons of my father were there the whole time. I was looking for something I thought I should have, the same thing I thought everyone else had. I did not realize the uniqueness of my situation. His body may not have worked, but his mind and spirit exceeded anything else I knew. I was focused on what I thought I should be looking for while he was trying with calm desperation to tell me what was truly important.

When I look back, I realize that life with my father made my upbringing quite different from that of my peers. I spent a long time resisting that, wanting to be

exactly like everyone else. I thought what all my friends had was how things were supposed to be. It was only when I finally embraced these differences that I truly appreciated them.

Dad has been gone ten years now, and I miss him every day. Though I was too hard-headed to understand at first, he taught me lessons I still carry with me. He just did it in his own way. My greatest hope is that I can impart at least some of that to my own kids. You know, when they get a little older and I get a little smarter.

My dad's experiences and his perspective on them allowed him to teach me lessons that none of my friends would ever hear. I try to incorporate those lessons in my life and practice. There are often similarities in each case, each client, each problem. Seeing what is special about each takes some effort. It requires listening and careful examination. Only by understanding what is unique about a problem can an effective solution be achieved.