

Ode to dad on Father's Day

EDITORIAL

When I was 11 or 12, my dad decided he was going to rent a Winnebago to take our blended family on a vacation. My parents had split when I was five and now Dad was remarried with two stepdaughters who were about the same age as me and my six-year-old brother.

While it's never any fun for a kid to watch the nasty business of divorce (and this one was nasty), I liked his new wife and her daughters, my new step-sisters. And like most boys, this very flawed man was a hero to me, much to my mom's chagrin.

Dad was a newspaper columnist in Montreal at the time, which, I guess, explains why I do what I do. As far as I recall, he wasn't handy at all, which also explains a few things on my end. I own a couple of screwdrivers, a hammer, pliers and a putty knife, none of which I use with any degree of skill. My wife gave up on any hope this would change the day I touched up some paint in our hallway with the wrong-coloured paint ? and didn't notice.

So Dad decided to rent this R.V. for a trip to Cape Cod with no knowledge of how to drive it or what to do if anything went wrong. He also brought along a bag of 8-track tapes of country music. This was the first time I had any inkling that he knew country music even existed, but there we were, rolling down the highway with Charlie Rich leading the way.

There was a lot of activity inside of that motorhome as the miles (miles still existed then) passed. We talked and laughed and fought and read every billboard we saw. I'm sure I'll sound like a dinosaur to young people when I say the best part of the trip was that connection we all had. There was nowhere to run. We were a family, like it or not, all in on this trip. Because cell phones had yet to be invented, we had to reply on each other for entertainment and that brought us closer, even with Freddy Fender and George Jones twanging away in the background.

Cape Cod is, or at least was back then, a lovely jewel of a place that looked and smelled just as you might imagine. Jaws was filmed in and around the Cape, so you get the picture. Salt water and fresh fish filled my nostrils and everyone sounded like they were saying, 'I'm going to pahk the cah.'

My Uncle Richard joined us there at some point and he immediately added to the fun by getting my little brother to do something that today would have been filmed and gone viral. On a summer day that was so warm the beach sand hurt our feet, he promised Brett \$1 for every seagull he could catch with his towel.

Poor Brett tried and tried as his hair matted to his head. He zigged left and zagged right, but he was never successful. Other beachgoers caught sight of him and roared with delight when he got close, only to lose it at the last moment. It is one of the funniest things I have ever seen.

To make it up to him, Uncle Rick took us to a new movie playing in town that evening. If memory serves, it was something called Star Wars and both Brett and I were knocked flat by it. After it was over and we were in the parking lot, Uncle Rick spotted a small train of grocery carts, each one pushed into the other in front of it. So he offered Brett \$1 if he could move them. The poor kid. He gave it everything he had. He huffed and puffed and turned all shades of red, but those carts ? maybe 20 of them ? wouldn't budge. My uncle, it turned out, had a wicked sense of humour.

I don't know if families experience memories like this as much anymore, with everyone staring at their phones. I hope so. In time, my dad and his new family would move to Florida and my brother and I would see him less and less.

Eventually, he would divorce his second wife and marry a third, who turned out to be the true love of his life. He died near Amsterdam, where he had gone to live with her, about 10 years ago.

I believe that trip in the Winnebago was the last big event we all did together, but thanks to social media being invented I'm still in touch with my stepsisters and Chandra, who though much younger, loved him and cared for him to the end.

I don't have kids, so sometimes Fathers' Day comes and goes without much notice. Once in a while, though, I think back to when my dad was my hero, Charlie Rich and all.