

Reflections on a father's enduring influences

I've got an important obituary to write — on deadline, of course — but first, some quick reflections on the Rev. Ed Stewart, preacher, veteran, counselor, author and my dad, who left us Sunday at age 88.

An early mentor in column writing gave me sound advice to write rarely about yourself and your family, deferring to topics people care about. It's served me well. Indulge me this week for one of those rare occasions.

Of life, Dad always said he'd "live to be 100 or die in the attempt." And what a grand attempt it was, with few opportunities missed along the way.

When we lose our parents, we tend to focus on the ways we were like them. That's a long list for Dad and me, but I'm struck in recent days' reflections by the ways we were different.

Dad was, in a word, uninhibited. He'd tell a corny joke to a total stranger, hug (harmlessly, in his uniquely gentle way) a

cute waitress he'd just met, share his Christian faith in the grocery store aisle, or don a Santa Claus suit and greet children outside Walmart — not because he was asked or

paid to do it but because it was the second Saturday of December, Santa was nowhere to be found, and, well, every kid deserves a wave from Santa. As a kid, I'd regularly be embarrassed by his public displays of joy. Today, I'm thinking life would be more fun if I were a little less inhibited.

Dad was also firm in his convictions, whether about his faith, politics or who should start at quarterback for his favorite football team. Some say that doggedness, on both sides, is the problem in modern politics. I'm sure I've written the same in this newspaper. But as one who struggles with the shades of gray in life, I sometimes envied Dad for sleeping soundly at night, never losing a wink over the possibility that the other side just might have a valid point or two.

Dispatches

from Wharf Hill

By Steve
Stewart



Though we were more different than alike, Dad instilled in me important life lessons that stuck early and will carry me to my finish line.

If there's an alternative to hard work, I never knew it. One spring Saturday morning in the '70s, Dad said to get in the car, "we're going to TG&Y," one of several department stores in my hometown of McComb, Mississippi. TG&Y sold toys and bicycles, among other fun stuff, so such a trip was exciting for a 12-year-old.

Instead, we left the store that day with a push mower and a "bargain": Dad fronted the money for the mower and I would pay him back in installments over the course of the summer from the money I would earn mowing yards. I can't recall if he charged me interest.

On the way home from the store, Dad stopped the car in front of every house with tall grass so I could knock on the door and ask if the owner wanted the yard cut. I quickly booked enough regular customers to cover the monthly payment to Dad and have some spending money left over.

Dad, like me, was a fierce competitor. Other dads and sons hunted and fished,

but we played ball. Did we ever play some ball — baseball, football, tennis, basketball. Had soccer been a thing in the South in the 70s, we'd have played that too.

Our one-on-one driveway hoops games were epic. Most dads let their sons win at least occasionally. Not mine. My record in the "rivalry" was probably zero wins and 200 losses before I beat him for the first time around age 15 and thought I was Larry Bird.

Later in life, he was fierce over the Scrabble board, relishing wins over his wordsmith son. Long past 50, he won his church ping pong tournament with no age divisions. He beat the church's teenagers in a jump rope contest.

Dad scored his ultimate victory Sunday over the pain and suffering that left him a shadow of his former self in recent weeks. Of all his firm convictions, none was more certain than the eternal life that awaits those who believe.

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Old hymns stir memories of revivals past – and some Elvis trivia to boot

A delightful performance by the Flatland Bluegrass Band at a recent installment of the Downtown Smithfield Summer Concert Series took me back to the church revivals

temporary” services. Just give me a piano, a songbook and a choir that can belt in four-part harmony.

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of my childhood as Southern gospel hymns like “Just Over in the Gloryland” and “When the Roll is Called Up Yonder” had hands clapping and toes tapping.

I dearly miss the old classic hymns in this modern age of praise and worship, when “choruses” whose lyrics are displayed on big screens have pushed hymnals from the backs of pews, what few of them are left with padded chairs now the seat of choice in many churches.

This preacher’s kid understands fully the reason for the evolution of church music. The worship experience must stay fresh and current to attract new and younger congregants. Yet, as membership and attendance continue their steady decline, I wonder sometimes if churches have outsmarted themselves with their drums and sound machines and more “con-

bank, well, all shook up for those of us of a certain age. Times reader Tom Allen recalls the King’s handful of visits to the Peninsula, including a little-known, or perhaps simply forgotten, piece of spaceship (Hampton Coliseum) trivia.

Legend has it that Elvis believed the walk from his limo to his dressing room to be far too long, so in preparation for a return visit to Hampton, coliseum officials had a special door cut in the well fortified structure. Known affectionately going forward as the “Elvis Door,” it gave him quick access to his dressing room – and a quick getaway from crazed fans.

Andy Greenwell, who managed the facility for many years, told journalists that the legend of the Elvis Door had nuggets of truth. Yes, Elvis was among the superstars who complained and would ben-

... Speaking of music, the Elvis Presley biopic currently playing in theaters has the memory



Legend has it that this door at the Hampton Coliseum was made especially for Elvis. (Photo courtesy of Tom Allen)

efit, but the door wasn’t installed at his command. Surely it would have been had the command been given.

... Elvis would be 87 this year and, like me, overwhelmed by today’s church music. He counted as influential the Southern gospel sounds he heard as a kid attending the First Assembly of God in East Tupelo, Mississippi. It was a lifetime love affair. Even after achieving stardom in rock ‘n’ roll, he still preferred gospel quartets as his back-

up singers.

Another Elvis tidbit that might surprise you: His only Grammy awards were for gospel songs.

“We do two shows a night for five weeks,” he once told a reporter. “A lotta times we’ll go upstairs and sing until daylight - gospel songs. We grew up with it ... It more or less puts your mind at ease. It does mine.”

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Getting around is getting harder in Isle of Wight

Spoiled by my three-block pedestrian commute to the office, I depend on Better Half for local traffic reports.

She'd been telling me for months that her daily drive down Route 10 to Suffolk – once a reliable 30 minutes – now routinely takes 40. And it's not the Suffolk end of the commute that's gotten longer. It's from Chuckatuck north to Wharf Hill, she insisted.

To the east, loyal Times reader Tom Allen emails me every time he's stuck in traffic on the James River Bridge. The emails have become more frequent. Much as I'd like to tell Tom I feel his pain, the reality is that I haven't, avoiding routes in and out of Smithfield during weekday mornings and evening commute times at all cost.

Until Friday afternoon.

A medical appointment in North Suffolk gave us no choice but to tempt fate on Route 17. En route back home around 4:30, we turned on to Brewers Neck Boulevard and within a mile came to a complete stop, cars as far west as we could see. "Must be a wreck," I told Better Half. Except it wasn't. We crept

for the next 10 minutes the 2½ miles to Bennis Church, never seeing a wreck or even roadwork to blame as we inched along.

This appears to be the new normal for Isle of Wight, a place many transplants chose to get away from traffic, not sit in it.

The problem will get worse. New homes will spring up on the old Mallory and Scott farms in the years ahead – some 800 when it's all said and done. Joe Luter's Grange at 10Main will add 250 more apartments and homes if it gains the Town Council's blessing as expected. Construction already is underway on The Crossings, which will bring 200-plus condos to Carrollton Boulevard.

For the record, I'm not anti-growth. Communities that attempt to maintain the status quo are rarely successful. My experience in four decades of com-

munity journalism is that towns either go forward or backward. Isle of Wight is fortunate to be a community on the move.

Successful communities are those that manage their

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growth, mostly because citizens demand it. Locally, my observation is that citizens who are sincerely con-

cerned about too much growth, too quickly, devote a disproportionate share of their energy to project-specific outrage. Mallory Scott opponents packed Smithfield Center for Planning Commission and Town Council meetings, and Grange critics will likely to the same.

More impactful would be heavy citizen involvement during occasional updates of town and county comprehensive plans. Smithfield is wrapping up such an update, and despite fairly aggressive efforts by the town to solicit citizen input, got relatively little. Parallel

debate about a new mixed-use zoning designation for large developments hasn't drawn near the citizen interest as, say, the Mallory Scott rezoning.

Having read the latest draft, I believe the town has done a good job on its comprehensive plan update. I'd like to see more discussion by city and county officials about road improvements sorely needed to handle upcoming growth. Bicycle and pedestrian paths are fine, but unlike in urban areas, they do nothing to relieve congestion in rural areas, where cars are a necessity.

Western Tidewater must become more assertive in securing funds through the Hampton Roads Transportation Accountability Commission, which mostly controls the purse strings for major road projects in the region. Rural communities are at a disadvantage in what is largely an urban, population-driven method of doling out funds.

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