

My Father was John Wayne



My father was John Wayne. Not the actor. He was better than the actor. He was the ideal. He was a real cowboy. A rancher who road the range, mended fences, and drove cattle. He also graduated from Cal-Berkeley in 1940. He never wanted to be a cowboy, but we had a family ranch and he was the only son in an Italian family so ranching chose him. Dad was a naturally spiritual man. My first 4-year-old memories of him were kneeling at my bedside just as I pulled my covers up and praying his guts out for me and my brothers, sister and mom. Then he prayed for rain and finally to know what to do if it didn't rain. Then he would smother me with kisses. His day-long bristly beard would rough my little boy skin, but it didn't matter; I felt so safe being loved by such a strong man. My dad was a cowboy and nothing could be better.

Being a cattle rancher was a financial high-wire act. When I got older I realized that every year Dad borrowed the money to buy cattle so he could fatten them on the grass we needed the rain for. If the market price was right at the beginning of the summer he could sell the cattle, pay the bank, our taxes, and I would get back-to-school clothes in late August. If we didn't get rain or the cattle market was down, we would keep the cattle another year, mom would sew patches on the inside of my pants and we would all pray a little harder. Dad never worked for anyone. He'd rather wrestle with the unpredictability of nature than conform to the "man". He was a cowboy.

My mother was Katherine Hepburn. At least my dad thought so. Every afternoon at about 3 o'clock she'd take a bath and put on a dress and make-up and start dinner. Just before dinner he'd open the kitchen door wide and flash a big smile at all of us. Then he'd



make a beeline to Mom and sweep her up in his arms and kiss her on the lips like a sailor home after a year at sea. This happened all the time. It was their love ritual. My brothers, sister, and I

all looked away and made throw-up sounds but out of the corner of our eyes we saw genuine, passionate, loyal love expressed. Dad always told Mom how beautiful she was and how great her food tasted. He was wildly enthusiastic and mostly uncensored. One Thanksgiving during my first year of college he proclaimed to my mother at dinner, “If you weren’t such a great cook, I’d chain you to the bed!” My roommate spit his food out. But this was genuine dad. He always referred to sex as being healthy. Dad was completely unrehearsed, passionate, opinionated, and most of all an advocate for all of us. He knew who he was, what he believed, what he must do.

When I was 14, a down-on-his-luck drifter drove his beat-up station wagon up the ranch road. It was dusk and Dad went outside to meet him. I snuck out and watched through a shed door. The stranger was a rough looking character, and he threatened Dad. He said he would kill him and take what he wanted. Dad calmly asked him if he had any skills. The man said he sharpened knives. My heart was pumping faster than a squirrel dodging cars. Dad said we had lots of things that needed sharpening. He paid him \$50 to sharpen our lawn mower and every kitchen knife we owned. He spent an hour talking to the man while he worked. Dad never said anything about it except that the man was “just doing the best he could.”



Well that’s the kind of man who raised me. I have no excuse. Dad really mattered to me. Throughout my life there have been so many times I asked myself, “What would Dad have done?” But today being a father, a real one, not just a biological one, is increasingly rare. According to the Center for Health Statistics, nearly 30% of white children, 50% of Hispanics, and 71% of black children are born out of wedlock. And today more than a quarter of our children have no male in their homes, father or not. This has all happened in one generation.

And it's not fair. 40% of single moms live in poverty. And being a child without an everyday father makes life much riskier. Risk of not finishing high school or college, becoming addicted to drugs and alcohol, becoming obese, suffering from chronic illness, going to prison, getting divorced, or even going bankrupt are all much more likely to happen to children who grow up without in-the-home fathers.

Is this the best society we can create? Being a father is a choice. It's a sacred life long commitment. I have no excuse. I had a truly great father whose memory I strive to live up to. Being a male is a matter of chromosomes; being a man requires courage; being a father is an act of life-long integrity.

Our world needs fathers.

Will Marre

American Dream Project