

## The “Whup-Tilt” Language of My Father

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My mother and father always told us that they were too stupid to be parents. Hardly. My mother is one of the least stupid people I know. My father was much the same way. He died 25 years ago this June of heart disease: the heart attack didn't kill him, but a few weeks later he slipped away peacefully in his hospital room even while plans were being made for his discharge. My three brothers were already married by then, but I was still at university, my life's path not yet determined. So every year when Father's Day rolls around I can't help feeling cheated for both our sakes. No card from me and my husband and kids, no gift addressed in childish handwriting “To Grampa.”

But hold the Kleenex. The truth is, Dad wasn't a sentimental sort of father. A case in point: One year my parents needed a new garden hose, and my mother still tells the story of how she got half for Mother's Day and he got the other half a month later on his day, both of them completely content and, true to form, enjoying the shocked reaction of their more celebration-conscious friends.

My oldest brothers complain that our parents used up all their strict parenting skills on Number One and Number Two Son, so that by the time my other brother and I arrived, about 7 years later, Mom and Dad were too tired to maintain discipline and, therefore, let us get away with murder. I had the added advantage of being the only girl and the baby. Perhaps it's true, but I know that it wasn't hard to recognize when Dad was disapproving of some word or action. I slipped off to my room on many occasions to weep away my humiliation after receiving “the look”, or hearing him deliver with biting displeasure his famous phrase of censure: “I hear you. I hear you real good.”

I think he was a terrific father, despite his ability to embarrass me in front of my friends by calling out my hideous nickname (invented by him, of course) and greeting all my girlfriends with “Hello, boys!” He also had a habit of indulging his considerable musical talent by making up songs on the spot, or singing snatches of long-forgotten or obscure numbers at inopportune moments. “Oh, Suzanne was a funny old man,” he started to croon while standing in the lineup with me at Loblaws. At the time I was mortified. Now I realize that I do exactly the same thing, and it drives my kids crazy too. But I still do it. It's one of my father's legacies.

He had a unique language all his own, and I think this is the one thing I miss the most about him: his way with words. Children who were misbehaving needed to have their “rudders put on.” A situation with too many unnecessary details was dismissed as “all that folderol.” His exclamation when the milk spilled or he dropped the hammer was something that sounded like “whup tilt.” Who knows where that came from?

His father had died suddenly during the Depression. Dad was forced to leave school and find work in order to support his mother and sister, denying him the opportunity of

further education which probably would have involved some kind of engineering. This aptitude for the mechanical manifested itself in a few of his classic phrases, such as “Measure twice, cut once.” My personal favourite, however, was his technical term for fixing any appliance by means of a quick smack on the top or side: “Repair Scheme Number One.”

“‘We’re here’ the captain shouted as he staggered down the stairs,” Dad would chant as the car rolled to a stop in the driveway and he turned off the ignition, referring to some song or poem memorized in his youth. After his death, my brothers and I tried to find out where this fragment came from, with no luck. Maybe he made it up. We’ll never know, because these words, along with all his others, are gone now.

There’s research to show that learning a second language is much easier as a child than it is as an adult and I heartily concur. Why else would I have the language of my father still entrenched in my brain twenty-five years after I last heard him speak? It’s not just the words, either; it’s the inflection, the specific tone and pitch he used. I hear not only the phrases, but his voice in my head.

I use all these phrases myself, quite regularly, and I make sure to tell my husband and children whom I’m quoting. The kids both cringe when the car comes to a stop in the driveway and I launch into my father’s obscure chant about the captain staggering down the stairs. My husband smiles patiently when he’s installing shelving and I deliver the measure/cut instructions. Repair Scheme Number One is used frequently and it’s amazing how often it works, too.

But just once this Father’s Day, how I would love to hear my dad’s voice – and not just in my head, either - thanking me for the card and the gift.