



My Relationship With My Dad Was Never Found in Father's Day Cards

As a gay man, my view on my rocky relationship with my father has changed with perspective

By [Scott Gerace](#)

June 14, 2021

"It's the one day you wait for all year . . . "

That trite sentiment leaped off the front of the greeting card, every time I stood in the Hallmark store.

". . . when someone takes your place mowing the front lawn" sprang out when I opened it, along with a pop-up cutout of a dad holding a beer, laughing at his son pushing a hand mower over tall blades of grass.



Credit: Getty

I always dreaded selecting Father's Day cards for my dad. When we celebrated Mother's Day, I easily choose two cards – one telling her what a wonderful human being she was and the other a humorous account of two siblings battling it out to give Mom the biggest bouquet of flowers.

Moms were easier to love via Hallmark sentiments. I agonized before Father's Day to find a suitable card for my dad. Nothing in a greeting card captured our relationship, which from an early age played out like a bad TV movie about a son never quite living up to his father's wishful potential.

My dad, "Lou," lived almost his entire life in our small, working-class Pennsylvania town, except for a stint in the Navy during the Korean War. Soon he settled into a career as an auto body painter, leaving the house each morning carrying his silver lunch pail and returning that night with an array of colors splashed across his hands and seeking a hot supper.

He was what we called "old school," and my love of singing Disney songs and idolizing [Dorothy from "The Wizard of Oz"](#) certainly challenged his expectations of raising a son.

Trial and Error at the Plate

When I was 10, he set out to show me how to play baseball. "Now just swing at the ball," he bellowed, puffing away on his corncob pipe.

Each time, I swung and missed, Dad moved closer infield to heighten my hitting advantage and create the illusion that a homer might be within my reach.

"Come closer," I said. I became so nervous that occasionally I soiled my pants – the art of holding it in eluded me for another year.

I promised to let one soar past the outfield fence, so he moved within 20 feet of me. In my valiant attempt to be the hero, I swung so hard that the bat slipped from my grasp and belted him across the jaw. That year he received a new pipe for his birthday.

My Dad's Confusing Driving Lessons

By the time my 16th birthday approached, I was eager for my father to teach me how to drive.

"You won't be going on joyrides," he warned.

I didn't know how to tell him that driving a Ford station wagon with wood paneled doors wasn't a teenager's dream ride.

We practiced in a deserted parking lot. "Watch where you're driving," he said. "Don't you see the yellow lines?"

"There's no one here," I said.

While I longed for the open road, I spent our "lessons" deciphering his cryptic and confusing instructions.

"Go down two spots, then back up three," he said. "Park in the space directly in front of you, and then pull forward four spaces and turn the ignition off."

It was another year before I secured my license at age 17. And I rarely drove, thanks to Dad's plethora of excuses:

"Weatherman says partly cloudy today, so you better not take the car."

"There's a bad accident on the highway, and I don't want the car going anywhere."

Dad and I never communicated our feelings, the basis for our soured relationship.

For every raindrop, highway collision or foreshadowed snow flurry, he denied me the freedom to get behind the wheel. I drove so little that even now [I'm not the best driver, fearing unforeseen roadblocks](#) and still smarting from my former instructor's less than favorable ratings.

His strict delivery and stern demeanor clashed with my sensitivity and awkwardness, upsetting any hint of balance that might have existed between us. Our relationship mirrored the "set-up" scenes that played out on the front of two-dimensional greeting cards before reaching the effective punch line inside.

I nearly knocked him off the roof with a broom handle trying to assist him with cleaning out the gutters.

I ruined the car's front tire driving around town with a flat for two hours until a cop flagged me down. "Oh, *that* was the thud sound," I later told Dad. He arrived on the scene, fuming for having to leave work to collect me.

I tripped in the driveway and crashed into the grill, spilling barbecue chicken onto the hot asphalt and ruining the dinner he'd been preparing all afternoon.

Finding Clarity in Our Relationship Over Time

When my father passed away in his early 60s, I felt grief, but ironically, also a sense of relief.

While he showed great pride in my adult accomplishments – graduating from college, getting a job in a big city, earning my own money – I didn't like the feeling of disappointing him, even with silly cards that made no sense of who we were.

Dad and I never communicated our feelings, the basis for our soured relationship. Only after his death did I come out as a gay man and settle into my own skin. Time and distance gave me the clarity to replay events back in my mind. Suddenly I saw *our* ending scenes missing inside the Father's Day cards I had failed to find for him. All the humor, sentiment and fatherly warmth existed for us in real life when I looked closer.

I never did hit a homer, but I did prevent one while manning left field as I dove up over the fence to catch the ball in my mitt, with the sounds of my father screaming his enthusiasm from the crowd.

I almost failed my driving test the year I turned 17 until I spotted my father signaling me in my rearview mirror to put on the brakes and stop backing up before hitting the pylons.

We still ate that barbeque chicken that splattered all over the driveway with my father loudly chewing on it at the dinner table and smiling over at me as he said, "It still tastes pretty good."

We were never close, or as close as other fathers and sons were. You can't change the past. But if I had the chance, I'd rewrite it . . . one homemade card at a time.

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