Reflections on losing Dad 25 years ago

Contributed by Bill Webb
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Each year as Thanksgiving approaches my family is reminded of the death of Dad. It is hard to believe that it has been 25 years since Robert Que Webb, a lifetime resident of my hometown of Mt. Vernon, Ill., died on Nov. 8, 1988. Dad’s unusual middle name was derived from a physician after whom he was named.

Mom has missed Dad most, of course. She survived him and is still living. He was only 61 at the time. Earlier the day before, he had suffered a heart attack, was airlifted to St. John’s Hospital in Springfield, Ill., where my family lived at the time, but did not survive the night.

While Dad had been on disability for a few years because of heart disease, his sudden departure caught us off guard. He had left for his reward in heaven much too soon. I was 38 at the time; my three siblings were all even younger. Dad’s oldest grandchild was my 13-year-old son.

I remember thinking at the time that an ally in influencing grandchildren for good was going to be missing from the lives of my two sons and their cousins as they ventured into adolescence and adulthood because Dad had become a model for a caring father and grandfather. In retrospect, I wish I had been more diligent in seeking and following his advice in daily life, especially gleanings from his Christian pilgrimage.

In the many years since his passing, I have become much more aware of the loneliness my mother has experienced over the past quarter of a century without her devoted husband. Dealing with a debilitating physical disability of her own for the past several years, she has shown remarkable courage and perseverance.

What we have had is memories of a loved one — husband, father, grandfather, brother, brother-in-law and uncle — who still shapes our lives as individuals and as a family. Dad was nearly 30 when he discovered Christ in his life, and the relationship changed him profoundly and influenced his family and many others significantly.

Dad admitted he had made mistakes, especially as a young person, and in several ways he made up for those many times over. Limited in education, he had served for several years as the plant superintendent at Rend Lake College near the shores of Rend Lake, a man-made recreational body of water in southern Illinois, until his disability ended his career.

The college campus was brand new when Dad took on his responsibilities there. I recall him mentioning that he walked past a classroom in session one evening and noticed the adjunct professor smoking as he taught the class. As was Dad’s style, he politely interrupted the prof and reminded him of the nonsmoking policy at the school. The prof apparently didn’t take the reminder to heart and instead ridiculed my father in response.

Somehow, the college president received word about what had transpired, called in the adjunct and chided him for smoking in the classroom and for maligning my father in front of a classroom of students. He closed the conversation by informing the prof that when the term ended his services as an adjunct would no longer be required.

It meant a great deal to Dad to be so valued by the top administrator at the school, and I suspect the dismissed prof learned something. At least I hope so.

Years after Dad was no longer at the school, we learned that a former student who had come to know him and had since graduated from medical school had established a scholarship in my father’s name to benefit other students. Dad had learned to be a good listener and a good friend, and he kept his office door open.

This year — 25 years after his passing — a part of me wonders how our family has managed without him. Perhaps it is because the influence of a life well lived doesn’t die with the physical body. His life still influences us for good — and for God.

If we survivors do our part, the life of Robert Que Webb will influence family and others for generations, not unlike a perpetual scholarship will do for generations of students. The scholarship recipients realize that the grant they receive will help them toward a college degree, but they will likely not be aware it honors a man who did his best and even distinguished himself even with only an eighth-grade education.

Thanks be to God for my dad. I still want to grow up to be more like him.

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