

“Looking for Bubbles”

June 18, 2023—Father’s Day

Romans 8:31-35, 37-39

My father was an excellent swimmer. I don’t know how old he was when he learned to swim, but he wound up as a teenager becoming a summer lifeguard. And it was easy to tell why.

On land, my father stood six feet, four inches tall with long arms and long legs. In the water, however, he looked even taller, and when he swam freestyle, it was impressive. His arms rotated in full circle like a waterwheel, from his waist straight up over his head before carving down through the water. And he could hold his breath for a long time, allowing him to breathe every few strokes rather than every single stroke.

My father kept his legs straight and they churned steadily up and down like pistons, creating a visible wake behind him as he swam. When my father synchronized his arms and his legs, it added up to a compelling mix of grace and power. Grace and power which enabled him to cover vast distances of water in a very short amount of time, even when he wasn’t trying very hard.

The only thing more amazing for me than watching my father swim on the water was watching him swim under the water. As I mentioned a moment ago, he had greater lung capacity than most people, so he could stay underwater longer than anyone I knew. And when he took a deep breath and dove off a board or pushed off from a wall, he glided through the water like a torpedo fired from a submarine.

When we were at a pool, we sometimes played a game to see how many times we could traverse the pool from end to end underwater without coming up for a breath. And he would invariably go further than any of us...sometimes further than I imagined possible. Although I never measured it officially, I don’t think it’s an exaggeration to say that my father could swim the length of a football field underwater in one breath...

When summer rolled around every year, our family would vacation for a week or two at my grandparent’s cottage on a lake in southern New Hampshire. And we spent the majority of our time during those days down on the dock and in the water.

Watching my father dive into that lake, especially when I was younger, was a very different experience than watching him in a pool. Because as soon as my father dove into the

lake, I lost sight of him. And I used to stand on the dock staring out in the water and waiting for him to finally emerge at the other end of his dive.

For the reasons I've already mentioned, it took a long time from the moment my father dove off the dock to the moment his head finally popped up. Long enough to make me a little nervous, wondering if he was ever going to break the surface of the water. And who was going to save him if he didn't break the surface of the water.

Over the years, though, I learned two things about my father swimming in that New Hampshire lake. Often when my father finally stopped swimming underwater, he would wind up sixty or seventy yards away from the dock. And then he would call to me or to one of my siblings and encourage us to jump into the water and swim to him.

Parents are really smart that way, it turns out. My father knew we would be so happy to finally make it to his arms and be embraced by him that our anticipation would outweigh whatever fear we had about swimming the distance between the dock and the spot where he was treading water. In the end, it was my father's subtle way of tricking us in an effort to help us become better swimmers.

The other thing I learned about my father was where to focus my attention when he dove into the water. If I looked way out on the lake and tried to anticipate where he would emerge, that's when I wound up feeling anxious. But when I looked across the water at various intervals, I could see telltale signs of my father, even if I couldn't see his body. Every so often, I would notice ripples on top of the water, which were clear indications that my father was moving his arms and legs.

Even more unmistakable were the small bubbles that would rise to the surface every ten or fifteen yards. Letting me know that he was exhaling along the way. Like a trail of bread crumbs or a row of runway lights, those tiny bubbles outlined my father's underwater path...

I'm thinking of my father today on Father's Day. And I will think of him again tomorrow on what would have been his eighty-fourth birthday. Many years, Father's Day and my father's birthday coincided, which made for a grand family celebration in his honor.

At the same time, since my father died in 2010, Father's Day isn't the day it once was in my life. As many of you can attest in your own lives with your own fathers, this is a day I will miss him more than usual. Yet, there is one practice I developed a long time ago on a summer

lake in New Hampshire that I still carry with me. It involves knowing where to look for my father.

I won't spend this day gazing into the distance and hoping to catch a glimpse of my father's head and face. Instead, what I will do is look for telltale signs of his impact on my life along the way.

So many things I learned about how to be a faithful, devoted husband I learned from my father's relationship with my mother. When it came to developing and nurturing and affirming a lifelong bond with my own children, he was my role model. How to work hard and live with integrity where you put into practice the values and morals you profess to hold. Those were my father's hallmarks and I took mental note.

How to get to the end of a workday and set all the stress and busyness aside in favor of fun and goofiness. How to grow in compassion by reaching out to sisters and brothers in need and how to live a life of service because that's what God calls us to do. How to persevere in the midst of life's struggles...both our own and those of others. Each of them important life lessons he passed on to me.

How to wait patiently for the pancake to turn golden brown on one side before you flip it over. How to ride a bike after he let go of the back of the seat with a gentle push. How to drive a standard shift car, even when I almost destroyed the clutch trying to change gears. How to welcome each new grandchild with open arms, even when those arms grew less steady and less reliable as his Parkinson's Disease progressed.

Big things and much smaller things. Those are the bread crumbs. The runway lights. Things I remember with gratitude on Father's Day...

Someday when I take my final breath here on earth, I wonder whether I will continue on out of sight until I surface on a distant shore. Where my father will be waiting by God's side with his arms wide open ready to embrace me once again.

“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

Until that day comes, my plan is to keep on looking for bubbles. Amen.