

PERSPECTIVE: All the Difference in the World

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Daddy,

Through the years I have come to understand you and appreciate the difficulties that you encountered. I am now able to see beyond the problems that you and I had and am very glad to have you as my father.

As my eyes open more, I know that the relationship between you and me shall continue to grow and strengthen. I am also able to say something that I don't remember ever saying to you, and that is: I Love You Daddy. Hope your Father's Day was a good one.

Your son, Dwight

I found this card when we were cleaning my dad's apartment in Williamsburg, Va., a year ago February after he died suddenly, probably from more than 50 years of excessive drinking. I couldn't believe that he'd kept not only that card but others as well that I had sent over the years. We had a great relationship at the time of his death; we were really good buddies.

But it wasn't always that way.

From the age of 15, we were archenemies and fought regularly, because he was an alcoholic and an abusive father. For three years, I physically challenged him and oftentimes had to stay with an aunt because he swore he would kill me if I stayed at home. I usually had to stay away at least a week before it was safe to return home.

My parents separated in 1968, my senior year of high school. And I continued to have a sour relationship with my father. I disliked him so much that I never asked him for one thing the entire time I was in college. Didn't want his help. Didn't need his help. Didn't want his money. Didn't need his money.

It wasn't until after I had graduated that things changed. I was visiting some of Daddy's co-workers, when a lady said to me: "John Roots is sure proud of you. All he does is talk about that son of his who graduated from college."

I sat there not believing what I'd just heard. There was no way he could be proud of me, because we hated each other to the max. That statement was probably the turning point that led me to take the necessary steps to change our relationship from a cesspool of hate, anger and violence to one of understanding or, more important, to one of father and son.

It was in the '80s that I started visiting and talking to Daddy whenever I went home. I often would talk with him about why he drank so much and, after many years, concluded that he and men like him were products of their time. They grew up during the Depression and in a period when the social climate of America molded everyone's behavior. There were few good jobs for black men then, few social outlets, and segregation was in its heyday. Black men were not "allowed" to be total men. Therein lies, I believe, a major factor as to why so many men of my dad's era acted the way they did.

In the late '80s, Daddy retired. Shortly after, his sister and her husband died within six months of each other. After his sister's death, I convinced Bubbie Dee (one of my dad's nicknames) to go to California with me to visit his nieces and nephews. On that trip, I received the Gohonzon and made the determination to build healthy, strong and enjoyable relationships with all my family members. That trip became the oil that put our relationship on the fast track.

After visiting California, Daddy and I were always going someplace together. As time went by, it became noticeable to others that our relationship was changing. My sister told

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me that Daddy would call her after I'd been visiting, angry with her that I had stayed with her instead of him. She also mentioned that Daddy enjoyed the time we spent together.

When I learned about my father's new feelings about the two of us, I was shocked. I had been unaware and was taking for granted our newfound connection. We had grown from hating to actually caring about each other.

Daddy was rushed to the hospital on Sunday, Feb. 25, 1996, when he had trouble breathing. At first, I decided to wait until the following weekend to go home and see him. But a friend convinced me to leave immediately.

At the hospital, I sat at Daddy's bedside and chanted and recited the sutra. I stayed about an hour and then made my way back to Washington.

The next day, Feb. 26, I got the call that Daddy had died. I had no sadness or regret, because I knew I had been courageous enough to look at our relationship from a different perspective. I had taken the necessary steps to repair and polish our relationship that was once shattered and jagged. We had healed old wounds. I had changed. I had grown. I had gained a father and a friend. Ultimately, I had a real sense of joy.

SGI President Ikeda once said: "It is important to take personal responsibility, not to feel that 'Somebody else will get it done.' To wait for someone else to take action is to give away control of our lives.... When we take personal responsibility we can advance.... Without perseverance, nothing significant can be accomplished."

By taking responsibility, I changed our relationship. In doing so, I came to know the person John E. Roots, who was not just the alcoholic I had experienced earlier in my life. Through faith and perseverance, I gained a better understanding of why my father behaved as he did. And that for me has made all the difference in the world.

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