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A Tribute to Dad

(on the occasion of the home-going celebration for Jesse Elverton)

When I was a little girl, Dad would say to me: “I wanted a boy, but I got a girl, and I would not trade her for the world.” He was my horise: “ride’em up straight up, good for the hiccups.” When I got my Annie Oakley outfit, we would play quick draw. As time passed he drove me to my various lessons—piano lessons and swimming lessons. He drove my friends and me to Washington University on Saturdays for music theory classes. He drove my friends and me—his other daughters—here and there until I got a driver’s license. Then he let me drive his car. Thank you Dad for being our chauffeur.

But, more than that, he encouraged us to dream big and to live our dreams. He never ever told me what was not possible for me to achieve because I was female. It was not until I was doing research on feminism and womanism that I recognized what a gift this was. All I am and ever hope to be I owe to God, my parents, and the African-American church where my parents saw fit to plant me in fertile spiritual ground that gave me strong roots reaching to the core of creation.

While Dad never told me what was not possible to me because I was female, he also taught that we achieve nothing of importance without a nose to the grindstone, shoulder to the wheel, pedal to the metal determined effort. And he was very proud of me and of all of our family when he saw the results of determined effort. He has happy to see us trying because nothing beats a failure but a try.

Dad not only encouraged me, but he encouraged us all. He and my mother welcomed my cousins to live in our house while they went to school. And he and Mom sent money. He was happy to see the progress in our family. Between the Elvertons and the Goffman-Pyes, there are two medical doctors: one doctor of dentistry; four PhDs, two attorneys; at least two masters of business

administration, at least two masters of divinity; at least two masters of education and a number of undergraduate degrees. Dad respected effort. He was also proud of those of us who served with honor in the United States military. He was proud of our family members who are skilled in the building trades—carpentry, electrical and plumbing. Dad wanted to see us working hard to be good at whatever work we are doing. He believed that it is important for one's own self respect to strive for excellence. Excellence on the job is something that no one can give or take from us. It is a gift that we give to God, ourselves, and the world.

The late French philosopher Jacques Derrida wrote of the pure gift. The pure gift is the gift given without expectation of repayment. When we give a gift with the expectation that the receiver of the gift owes us, then that gift is no gift at all. Rather, it is commerce. It is an exchange. For Derrida the pure gift is given and forgotten. The pure gift, very often, is not recognized as a gift.

Moving beyond Derrida, I say that the pure gift is the gift that we cannot pay back, but it is the gift that we pay forward. We can never pay Dad back for all he did for us. However, we can pay it forward. We can encourage others the way he encouraged us. We can see to it that our daughters have the same opportunities as our sons. With the passing of Dad's generation, it becomes more urgent now for us to assume responsibility and to be as prudent and wise with the details of our lives as they were so that we can be a blessing to others as they were a blessing to us.

Further, our tribute to Dad is not only what we say about him now and in coming days. The more righteous tribute is in what we do going forward. It is important that we live Dad's example of generosity. Many of us are doing that now. The imperative of this moment is to step up, to man-up, to woman-up and take responsibility to make our lives and our world better. There is no space, no place, and no time for jealous, vengeful, petty, small-minded thinking and acting. This moment calls us to be magnanimous. The moment requires us to be large because our challenges are large. However, the good news is that we serve an awesome God who is larger than our challenges and who is able to give us the wisdom and the strength to overcome.

There is no time for insularity because that is just too much to do. There are too many hungry people to feed; too many strangers to welcome; too many naked people to clothe; too many sick to care for; too many prisoners to visit; too many ignorant to educate; too many waste cities to restore; too much forgiveness to give; too much reconciliation to reconcile; too many wars to end; too much peace to make and to build, and to maintain. There is too much radical, agape, crazy, I'll be a fool for you love to love.

Thank you Dad for all you taught us and for the gifts you gave us. We can never pay you back, but we promise to keep your legacy alive by paying it forward. We promise to do our best to bring God's kingdom to earth as it is in heaven. We promise to live our lives as a praise to the glory of God.