

## What our father taught us

At his father's funeral, one of the nine adult children present stood up and described his relationship with his father in these words:

'I have a very clear memory – I must have been four years old – of Dad teaching me how to shower. You turn on the cold tap first and the hot tap second; then you reverse the order when you finish. That way you won't ever scald yourself. My Dad taught me how to butter a piece of bread. You start from the edges and work your way into the middle; that way you avoid tearing the bread. He taught me how to shine my shoes; you untie the laces and don't forget to do the heels. He taught me how to bait a fishing hook, mow a lawn and saw a piece of wood (I never quite mastered that one) and countless other things which became part of the fabric of my life.'

Of all the accolades delivered at his father's funeral, these words struck a lasting chord with me. As we race through life trying to master one big challenge after another, we probably don't take enough time to take stock of all the small things we have mastered as a matter of course. The everyday things, from tying our shoe laces to making a cup of tea, signify not only milestones passed and lessons learnt but also our relationship with the people who taught them to us: a parent, an older sibling, a teacher, a mentor.

The simple things appear to be minor tasks, and are easily passed over. Yet we notice when they are missing. The long term absence of the stability of a loving home is often manifested in a person's lack of knowledge of basic life skills: manners, personal hygiene, personal safety, and so on. It's not that they are 'bad' or careless people. It's just that no one has ever taken the time or interest to teach them. Perhaps they never had a father like the one my friend mourned.

After the funeral, amidst laughter and tears, children and grandchildren continued the storytelling of what their father and grandfather had taught them. 'He taught me how to drive a car...' 'He taught me how to hammer a nail...' Even his early years spent on a dairy farm came into play as a daughter-in-law recalled how 'he taught me how to deliver a calf!'

And in the midst of all the life lessons came the ones of faith. 'He taught us how to say the Our Father...', 'He taught us how to say the Rosary...', 'We still say grace at meals the way we learned it as children...' We can wince at times when we hear people bemoaning the fact that children these days don't learn to 'say their prayers'. It can all sound like old fashioned pedagogy. But here, in the midst of this man's legacy – a large family of believers – it made great sense. To learn how to 'say' a traditional prayer is as basic as learning how to read or write. It doesn't 'guarantee' a child's future faith development, but it

lays a solid foundation stone upon which so much more can be built. Most importantly, when instilled with love, such a lesson bonds us to the person of faith who taught us the prayer and to the people of faith (the Church) for whom this prayer holds perennial meaning.

Let me close this reflection with a simple idea for prayer and action: As you find yourself going through the motions of an ordinary day, give thanks to God for the person who loved you enough to teach you the particular task at hand. Then look for an opportunity to teach it, with love, to one of the children God has placed in your life. •

