

No Time to Say Hello, Goodbye—

by Alden S. Blodget

On the Friday night before my father's memorial service, our family gathered for a dinner that felt surprisingly normal. We sat around the old dining room table, eating quietly, without my father—pretty much as we always had, but with a more profound silence that magnified the occasional clink of knife or fork striking china, like a bell invoking a shadow's shadow. My father was always more an absence than a presence in my life. He was a businessman who worked long hours. He departed early in the morning, traveled a lot, missed many dinners.

When he came home in the evenings or on weekends, he often disappeared into his den to conduct more business on the phone. For hours his laughter rumbled through the house. His work seemed to be the source of great friendships and hilarity. My mother said he constantly approached strangers—in railroad stations, airports, restaurants—to introduce himself and leave his business card. "He wants lots of people at his funeral," she told us, laughing. He and my mother enjoyed a social life with these friends on the few weekends when he wasn't traveling, so even when he was home, he wasn't home. He was the personification of the work ethic. He was my role model.

Yet the role he modeled wasn't the source of much joy. I longed to spend more time with him. We never really talked about anything or did much together. The exhilaration of the one touch-football game he and I played with some other families when I was about nine left me ravenous for more.

And his work had an additional dimension: We were always moving to another town, another state. Every time he was promoted, we packed up, and in the chaos of movers and boxes, I always discovered my losses as we unpacked in a new house—a coin collection, a stack of envelopes with first-date-of-issue stamps, my friends. Our time in any one place was two to four years, and then it was off to another school and the challenge of making new friends. My childhood memories are tinged with loneliness

and sadness, but I realize today that, even as a child, I somehow learned to distance myself from these feelings. I worked at not feeling them, at shutting them off. I also stopped collecting coins and stamps and getting close to people in order, I suppose, to ease the pain of inevitable loss. I must have come to accept the importance of my father's work, of making money, and the unimportance of my unhappiness.

It didn't take long for me to follow him into the world of work and money. As far back as I can remember, in the small coastal town where we lived during summers, I spent many solitary hours at low tide happily scavenging the marshes for scores of discarded soda bottles that I could redeem for a couple of cents each. When I was ten or eleven, my father got me a job delivering newspapers. At fourteen, I was employed in the office of a local yacht club preparing monthly bills for members. Later, at the same club, I worked in the snack bar cooking hamburgers, hotdogs, and fries and serving ice cream. Eventually, I worked there as a bartender and dishwasher. During these summer jobs, I worked hard, didn't miss days, strove for perfection. I felt like Happy Loman, Willie's attention-starved younger son in *Death of a Salesman*: I'm making money, you notice, Pop?

And then I became my dad. I married and embarked on a career as a high school teacher and administrator, arriving at the office between 6:30 and 7:00 each morning and often not returning home until 10 or 11 at night, though I always tried to have a quick dinner with my family. I worked weekends. During the final two decades of my career, I put in regular eighty-hour weeks. Most of my friends were my co-workers, my colleagues. We talked about work; we joked about work; we argued about work—we laughed a lot, though for the most part, we rarely got close. By the time I returned home, I was exhausted and didn't have much else to say.

I had no clue about how to develop relationships with people outside of work—how to be a different kind of father or husband or friend. I followed my perception of my father's lead. Just as I imagined that he must have followed the lead of his father.

When I was very young, I visited his father a couple of times. My mother put me on a plane, asked a flight attendant to watch me and to make sure my grandfather met me at the gate in New York (no security screening back then). On each visit, I spent the three weekend nights with him. He was a stern, formidable man—an angular face

seemingly carved from stone, a steely mustache. He spoke in a rasping hoarse whisper, the result of the partial removal of cancerous vocal cords, and he had a wooden leg. He was prone to fits of rage when things didn't go as he expected, especially when frustrated that his impaired voice failed to attract the attention he wanted. Once, in a restaurant when he couldn't summon the waiter who had brought him a small, unopened bottle of soda water for his whiskey, he smashed the bottle over his wooden leg, stunning everyone at the surrounding tables.

During the days, I was alone, roaming the woods around his house, playing with his dogs, who lived outdoors and who, regardless of weather, never entered the house. We had an appointment to meet at 5 PM each day in his den, where I assumed he had been working. We would sit and labor through some fitful conversation and then have dinner together, mostly in silence. It was a glimpse into my father's life—the solitude of the free-range parenting of the time. In the working orchard of our family, the apples seemed to fall very close to the trees.

My father and I learned from our fathers how to make a living but not much about living. We learned the importance and skills of hard work, independence, discipline, stoicism, thrift, ambition, camaraderie, banter. First into the office, last to leave, take on tasks that no one else wants. We didn't learn how to talk to a child, how to listen to a child, how to play with a child or like a child, how to spend time with a family. Yet, ironically, as children, both of us probably longed for family—without any capacity for understanding that longing. And so, we became ingrained with the habit of work, not the habit of family. Work we understood; it felt familiar, safe, filled with activity and noise. Family was an alien, barren planet where silence reigned. Home frightened me a bit, stirred an uneasiness I always felt when trying to perform activities that I wasn't very good at.

The morning Dad died, I was in my office, sitting at my desk cluttered with textbooks, student essays, schedules, files of teacher candidates. My wife came to tell me. The news hit like a torpedo, blasting a hole in the hull below the waterline, but, by then, I had learned the drill: Slam the bulkheads shut and screw the doors tight against the flood of emotions. I nodded. "Okay," I said, "Okay." And I went upstairs to teach my class.

I was a good worker and, though I tried to be more accessible than my father, a terrible father and husband: distant, absent, silent unless talking about work. My daughter said it all when she asked me, "Why have dinner together? We never talk about anything." I remembered saying those same words to my father. How sharper than a serpent's tooth is truth.

Workaholism takes a toll, so I suppose I should have anticipated that my health would suffer. I developed Alzheimer-like cognitive symptoms. A few times, as I drove somewhere, I suddenly had no idea where I was or where I was going. I couldn't recall things that people told me I had said during conversations that I didn't remember. I realized I'd have to retire much sooner than I intended. My father died quite suddenly, accidentally, before he could retire, though I could never imagine him in retirement. He'd have been as miserable as Tennyson's Ulysses, unable to rest from work, to settle by a still hearth.

I didn't want to retire. My job was my identity. I have no hobbies, no other interests, few friends—and fraying neural networks that produce mostly static, though the most alarming of the Alzheimer symptoms dissipated with the stress reduction during the first year of retirement. I miss my office and the absorption of tapping at my computer, solving problems for others, so I still continue to disappear into my den for hours and sit at my computer, writing lachrymose essays or dyspeptic screeds or just playing *Free Cell*—a sort of methadone treatment for my addiction to work: the illusion of work.

At my father's memorial service, the church was filled with people--he got his wish—mostly the legions with whom he had worked during his three score years and ten. At the reception, people regaled me with stories of my dad—great guy, great sense of humor. And incredibly kind. I discovered how involved he'd been in so many lives in so many different ways. And I kept marveling at this stranger whom they had known—these people who had been his family.

I'm not sure what I'll do now—volunteer work, look for part-time jobs. I miss working. I am what I am. Although you can smash the pot, you can't deglaze and unfire it after it's been shaped and baked in the kiln of experience. Comfortable familiarity makes habits tenacious. Or ... I wonder: Now that I no longer stagger about in the

armor of a job, perhaps I could work to become a better father, husband, friend--grandfather.

What a terrifying idea.

Alden Blodget is a mostly retired high school teacher and administrator who now tutors, pro bono, students who want but can't afford a tutor. He has published many essays over the past forty years, mostly but not exclusively about education. He was lead author for *Neuroscience & the Classroom: Making Connections* for the Annenberg Foundation website, and he published a collection of speeches he gave to students during his years as assistant head of school: *Dead Man Talking*. He was co-founder and producing director for the Gloucester Stage Company (MA) and for eight years volunteered as a guardian ad litem in the Rutland County (VT) family and criminal courts, working with abused and delinquent children and with adults declared incompetent. His wife puts up with him in their home in Essex, MA.