

Patriotism & Pater

A man's father teaches him to declare his independence.

By Bill Harby • Photos courtesy of Bill Harby

When I was growing up, every Fourth of July, my dad, a career Army officer, would put the flag out in

the United States of America. Through these mostly civilized debates, however, Dad taught me the true meaning of democracy.



Clockwise from above: Harby and Harby during a recent meeting of the minds; Dad, 10-month-old Bill and his sister Hope on Christmas morning, 1952; Lt. Harby in Germany in the closing days of WWII.

front of our house. But it isn't the flag that has come to signify Independence Day for me. It's Dad. The word "patriotism" derives from the Latin, "pater," meaning "father." In that sense, I am one patriotic guy. I love my dad.

Which is not to say that he and I haven't had our little civil wars of words. We have not always held similar opinions about the gleam or tarnish upon the breastplate of

He showed me his distaste for many of my convictions—and his willingness to seriously reconsider them, and even change his mind once in a great while.

This is how he taught me to declare my own independence.

As his son, born in 1952, growing up in the '60s, it was my patriotic duty to rebel. When Dad caught me skipping out on a

Friday night Boy Scout meeting to go to an Elvis movie, he was sorely disappointed, but, I think, not altogether surprised. This was not our first clue that I wasn't cut out to wear a uniform.

But he sure was. He fought the Nazis (he doesn't know if he ever killed any of the enemy, but he knows of one whose life he saved); then he stood guard at the 38th parallel against the North Koreans. During the early '60s, he was a professor of military science at the University of Akron in Ohio. In 1962, we—Dad, Mom, older sister Hope and I—got transferred to Hawai'i, from where Dad took periodic trips to Southeast Asia to inspect indigenous troops being trained by U.S. forces in places like Vietnam, Thailand, Cambodia and Korea.

Dad retired from the Army in 1966 as a full colonel, and returned to work at the University of Akron, no longer to teach ROTC boys military history, but to persuade alumni to donate to the university. It was strange to see him in a business suit instead of his uniform. But he adapted well, and was soon breaking fund-raising records at the university.

That was the year I was on the peach-fuzz cusp of draft age—1969, the year after the bloody and demoralizing North Vietnamese Tet Offensive. Dad and I had several long talks about the duty of American boys to serve their country. I told him I thought the war was wrong, that I would not accept induction, and that I was applying for Conscientious Objector draft status. If that didn't come through and my college deferment didn't keep me out, I might go to Canada. He asked me to think about the

boy who would go in my place. I glibly parroted the clever question then being printed on posters sold in hippie head shops: "What if they gave a war and nobody came?"

Two years later, Mom died. They'd been married 29 years. Her funeral in church is the only time I've seen him cry.

Pop and I always kept talking. Sometimes he changed my mind and sometimes he let me change his. He challenged my ethics, my thinking and my rhetorical skills. (We could go "further" with the line of thought we were on, he'd correct, but not "farther," unless we moved into a different room.)

Only twice has the colonel laid down the law unilaterally, in flagrant violation of the Harby Conventions. The issues were predictable for the early '70s: hair and sex.

Mom always said that I came out of the womb needing a haircut and have needed one ever since. During my senior year of high school, dress codes were relaxed and we cool guys wanted hair like John, Paul, George and Ringo. Let it be!

But every so often Dad would order a haircut. I'd whine and wheedle as long as that worked, then go to the barber and pay my \$2.75 for him to pass the clippers near my long, wavy locks that the girls loved so much. One time Dad said I hadn't gotten enough taken off, and made me go back. I refused. I was grounded indefinitely until I saw the error of my ways. That went on for about a week until he said do it, and do it now.

With searing contempt in every step, I swaggered to the barber that afternoon, got a haircut that made me look like Prince Valiant after a bad swordfight, and swaggered home feeling completely vindicated.

By the next day, Dad and I both felt bad about how we'd treated each other. Which turned out to be good because it eventually brought us closer, like two old enemies scarred by the same battle. Since then, we've always seen more of the other's point of view.

The next time was a year later. By now Dad and I had survived the haircut war and the draft debates (diffused by my high draft lottery number). So, without really realizing it, I set to challenging his open-mindedness. I was 19, and in love with Patty, my first true grown-up girlfriend. She and I did what nearly every couple our age did then: it.

And I told Dad. And I bragged to Patty and friends that I had told him. "We have that sort of relationship." They were in awe.

But this was a cruel thing to do to Dad. He'd been raised Methodist. Nearly every Sunday as I was growing up, Dad dragged Mom, Hope and me to church, even when it was clear that he himself would have rather stayed home to watch football or turn the soil under the tomato plants.

So me having sex outside of marriage was a direct affront to his moral code. But, he was too smart to just tell me I had to stop.

I had stalemated him. On the one hand, Dad had to be true to his religious ethic; on the other, he dearly wanted to respect his young adult son's honesty for having volunteered this troubling information.

We debated the right and wrong of sex outside of marriage. He even asked me to spend an evening discussing the matter with his pastor. I agreed, and right there in the suburban living room where I'd grown up, right in front of Dad and Mom, the pastor asked me if my girlfriend

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and I truly cared for each other and respected each other. I said, yes, which was true. He asked if we were taking all proper precautions against getting pregnant (AIDS didn't exist). I said, yes, which was true. He finished by asking us to remain caring and careful. Then he smiled at poor Dad, as if to say, "Get used to it."

That was Dad's last alternative before he had to exact his final say. Because Horace Harby will always be a military man. He knows the art of war and its cost—you avoid combat when you can because it is always terrible, but when you must fight you fight with decisive force (he thought we should bomb the hell out of Hanoi). So, finally, he told me straight out: "Stop sleeping with her or I won't pay for anymore college."

The next day, I came to him very contrite, and said I now realized how much this meant to him, which was true, and that I would no longer sleep with Patty, which was not true.

I knew I was lying (and I think you did, too, huh, Pop?). That's just the way it had to be then. We'd come as close as we could, then pull our forces back, knowing the fight would be too bloody. Since then, Dad and I have marshaled opposing forces a number of times—sometimes doing battle and sometimes not.

Dad, you're a patriot's patriot and you're what the Fourth of July is all about. You're a 21st century father of our country. You taught me the ideals of our nation's forefathers, which I will now quote from the Declaration of Independence. Because recently, thinking of you, I read the whole document for the very first time.

I now know that, beyond the famous "We hold these truths to be self-evident," and those "certain unalienable Rights," including "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness"—beyond these affirmations, most of the declaration is a list of grievances against King George for being a deadbeat dad to his colonies.

Tom Jefferson and the declaration's 55 other signees made grievances against King George that would ring true for most any boy and his dad:

He has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to harass our people ...

Son's translation: That's too many chores!

He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution ...

I hate liver. Besides, I'm a vegetarian now.

For depriving us in many cases, of the benefits of Trial by Jury ...

Why won't you listen to my side?

In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms ...

Please can I not be grounded anymore?

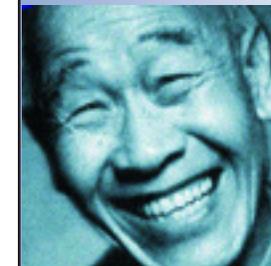
These are all things I've said to my dad. And almost every time (nearly), he's responded fairly, which is why the final phrase from the Declaration of Independence sums us up pretty well:

... we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.

Happy Independence Day, Dad. 

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