

A Father's Tears

My father was born in northern Mexico, and his family migrated to this country when he was seven. In many respects he remained a Mexican male, growing up in what was essentially a Mexican home transplanted to this country. He spoke fluent English, was a good, hard-working, church-going citizen involved in local politics, and he loved this country. But deep in his core he remained Mexican.

Like the typical Mexican *macho* he was stoic about whatever hardships life threw his way. He almost never grumbled or complained about his lot but did whatever honest work it took for the survival of his family and himself. As a youth he sacrificed his dreams and ambitions to go to work to help support the family; as an adult with his own family to care for, the sacrifices continued.

Throughout his life, he never questioned the Mexican value that the individual, with his or her dreams, ambitions, needs, and desires is secondary to the needs of the family.

In the stoic tradition of the *macho*, he was very reserved in expressing his emotions, including the emotion of love. The *macho* does not use words to show his love, nor does he caress and dandle his male children; what he *does*—in my father's case, his whole adult life--is the expression of that love. The Mexican child in the Mexican culture knows this and does not feel this absence of words as a lack in his life. It is more complex for the Mexican child growing up in this country, however. I would hear other fathers boasting about their kids' accomplishments, but never my dad. I assumed that I had never done anything which caused pride in my father. It was a shock therefore when I overheard him

proudly telling a friend of his that I was an excellent student in high school and had just been awarded a scholarship to college. For the first time I realized that my father did take pride in what I did. Why did he never tell me? I was confused and resentful, but I recalled that on a number of occasions I had heard my dad speak derisively about parents who boasted about their children in the kids' presence. He thought it would make the kids self-centered and egoistic and cause them to think they were better and more important than their families. And nothing was more important than the family.

Three times in my life I can recall his stoicism falling away and seeing him break down in tears. Each time it was shocking, but the third time shook me profoundly.

I have a dream-like memory of when I was three or four years old, my father in a rage, crying

uncontrollably in the kitchen, taking plates, cups, bowls, turning them upside down, and if they were marked “made in Japan,” smashing them against the floor. My mother was talking in a low, soothing voice, telling him to control himself, that the children were watching and frightened at what was happening. We kids huddled in the doorway in terror. How could this man so out of control possibly be our father? He had been informed that his younger brother, Joaquin, had been killed in combat in WWII. We have a snapshot of Joaquin in uniform holding me in his arms just before being shipped overseas to die, the last photo taken of him. Joaquin was actually killed in Europe, but evidently we had nothing that was made in Germany, so Japan had to suffice. The impact this death had on my father left me with a reverence for the name “Joaquin.” I used to wish that I too had been named Joaquin.

The second time I saw my father cry was when I was eighteen or nineteen years old. He was sitting at the kitchen table when I walked in. “Well son,” he said, “your grandmother is no more. She died this morning.” His face twisted and he turned away, bursting into tears. I was embarrassed, mostly because I did not feel much sorrow or grief at her passing. I had never felt affectionate or close to her; she was too powerful, too much the matriarch, and as a child I was frightened of her. Mostly I felt guilt because I was not able to share in his sorrow or make any move to comfort him. So I stood mute until he was able to compose himself. I was young and self-centered and did not yet know the grief that comes with the death of one truly loved. And I too was too much the Mexican male to put my arms around him and just hold him in his pain.

The third time my father cried I didn't see it happen. I heard about it from a friend. Yet this is the one that has affected me the most. I was recently divorced and had dropped out of the doctoral program at the University of New Mexico. My life was a shambles. I felt like I had collapsed inside like an empty milk carton. I ran away from everyone and everything I knew. I got in my car and traveled west until I got to the Pacific, and then I traveled up and down the west coast until my money ran out and my car died. Nobody had any idea what had happened to me or where I was. My father was telephoning every friend of mine he could think of trying to get information on my whereabouts. He called the highway patrol and described me and my car and asked them to keep a watch for me. Finally, he called a friend in Arizona, and she told him that I had stopped for the

night on my way west, and that I was totally distraught. Suddenly my dad broke into tears, asking her, a stranger he had never met, why had I not come to him, my father, when I most needed his love and support. She, of course, had no answers. He was crying when he hung up.

She told me this many months later, after I had once again regained control of my life. I was devastated. The only other times I knew of him crying were when loved ones had died. I wondered if he saw me as dead to him at that time because of my rejection of his love. But I understood for the first time how much he loved me. In my selfish stupidity I had broken down the stoic barrier which had withstood so much other pain and suffering. How could I possibly repay such love?

I never told my father that I knew about his phone call to my friend, but after that knowledge,

everything in my relationship with him changed. I went to see him more often, and we began gradually to open up to each other and talk of our griefs and joys. Years later, as he lay dying, I was finally able to open up completely and tell him of my love for him, to tell him that he, more than any other person, was my hero and my model for manhood. He was the kind of man I aspired to be. For a moment he lay there, saying nothing, looking up at the ceiling. Then he turned his head to me.

“Touch me,” he said.

I put his hand in mine and we sat without speaking for a long time. I thought he had fallen asleep, but then he opened his eyes and looked up at me.

“Good,” he said, “good.”