

EDWARD KEEBLER



MY FATHER'S  
APPROVAL



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By Edward Keebler



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Dad sat watching in the stands as my second home run of the game sailed past the left field fence. Our team had just defeated the former Little League champions, and it was my hit that provided the margin of victory. I rounded third base and glanced up, hoping to capture a glimpse of him among the ecstatic crowd that pressed against the fence. My peek into the throng of onlookers lasted only a moment in real time but became a memory that replayed in slow motion in my mind for years to come. Dad sat at the end of the bleacher, leaning back with his elbows resting on the bench behind him. Among a fury of enthusiasm, he sat motionless, expressionless, as though he were watching a TV rerun he had seen countless times before.



When the game was over, the coach gave his final words of instruction, and the team was dismissed to an eager crowd of parents and friends. I had a great game – more than a great game. It was the game of my twelve year-old life. I belted four hits; two home runs, a triple, a double and made a diving catch. It was a day that most boys dream about before falling to sleep with their baseball caps still firmly in position on their heads. This was my day, one I would remember and retell forever.

I looked around for my dad and saw him out of the corner of my eye as he made his way toward the parking lot. The short walk to the car was filled with excitement for me as I relived every hit and catch I had made. This would be the day my dad would finally tell me he was proud of me, I thought. I had never heard those words from him before but was confident today would change all that. My teammates, their parents, coach, and my friends said I was the hero of the game. He had to be proud of me too.

Dad stood waiting while I ran to catch up with him. I looked like an anxious puppy next to him, wide-eyed and eager for his response. I had to bite my lower lip to keep a large, ridiculous smile from escaping. We walked a few silent steps before he spoke. "Don't get cocky kid, you have another game this Friday."

His piercing words shot through my heart and evaporated the events of the day. I could do nothing more than look up at him and force an agreeable nod.

A decade later I was playing baseball in college. Dad stopped coming to my games years before, but I never ceased my efforts to win his approval. "We beat State University today, pops. I had three hits."

He smiled and nodded while he read the paper. When I realized he was no longer listening, I made up my own story. With raised eyebrows I stated wryly, "Three hippos wandered onto the field during the third inning...one ate an umpire." Dad just nodded.



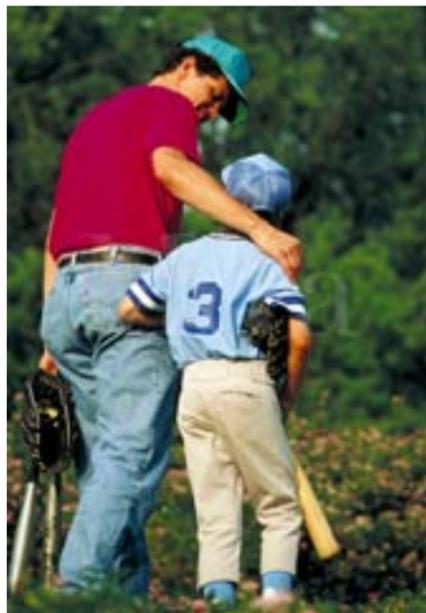
For years I kept trying to hit the ball further with vocational and personal accomplishments and new academic degrees, but the fence kept being pushed back and the endearing words never came. Perhaps Dad never hit a home run and had difficulty relating to mine. More likely, maybe he did hit a few home runs during his lifetime but his father was never there to acknowledge them.

I only saw grandfather once before he died. The family rarely mentions him, but I overheard a relative say that he left my grandmother alone to raise five kids during the Great Depression. Dad doesn't talk about it. Mom told me there were many nights when grandma fed my dad and his siblings from a single large can of beans. Grandma survived on what was left over, if anything. I imagine grandma was so consumed with keeping the family together and healthy that she had little time for anything beyond providing for basic needs. Dad was never given an opportunity to play baseball or even take a turn at bat.

Although Dad never claimed to be a perfect man, I think he tried to provide me with instruction and opportunity beyond what he experienced himself. For me to demand or expect more than what he knew to give served only to deepen my sense of futility. If I wanted more, I realized I needed to look beyond my dad's limitations and look to the only perfect Father.

After college I was given the opportunity to play professional baseball with a minor league team. During a night game, my third time at bat, I drove a ball deep into left-center field that flew past the fence for a home run. As I rounded third base, I glanced up into the crowd and smiled. Among the throng of ecstatic fans, I'm sure I saw a familiar face. Perhaps I imagined it, but if so its reality was certainly evident in a spiritual dimension. My Father was there. He was on His feet and pointing at me and nudging His winged companion. "That's my son – taught him everything he knows."

When the game was over, the coach gave his final words of instruction, and the team was dismissed to an enthusiastic crowd of family, friends and fans. Later as I walked to my car, I could almost feel my Father's arm around me. I felt Him say, "Good game son, I'm proud of you."



I laughed aloud and tried to restrain the big ridiculous grin that radiated from my face.

"Good hit but remember the ball you missed in the third inning? Father said with a smile. "Try getting lower to the ground next time."

"Thanks Dad...next game?" I asked.

"I'll be there," He spoke with assurance.

I've been a pastor for over a decade. Except for an occasional church picnic, my baseball days are now long gone. I'm not as fast, and I can't hit or throw the ball as far as I once did. But nearly every time I pick up a bat or ball, I think of the little boys and girls in the congregation. I wonder if they are aware of who is watching them from the stands. I wonder if they know that even if

Mom or Dad is there, or whether one lives on the other side of the country, the Father watches them with great admiration and pride.

As for my daughters, they're a lot like me. They're far from perfect, and they hit a lot more foul balls than home runs. I think I learned to cheer for all their hits and let them know I love them and approve of them just for stepping up to the plate.

