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## A Father's Journey

By FRANK BRUNI

- 1 FOR a long while, my father's way of coping was to walk quietly from the room. He doesn't remember this. I do. I can still see it, still feel the pinch in my chest when the word "gay" came up — perhaps in reference to some event in the news, or perhaps in reference to me — and he'd wordlessly take his leave of whatever conversation my mother and my siblings and I were having. He'd drift away, not in disgust but in discomfort, not in a huff but in a whisper. I saw a lot of his back.
- 2 And I was grateful. Discomfort beat rejection. So long as he wasn't pushing me away, I didn't need him to pull me in. Heart-to-hearts weren't his style, anyway. With Dad you didn't discuss longings, anxieties, hurts. You watched football. You played cards. You went to dinner, you picking the place, him picking up the check. He always commandeered the check. It was the gesture with which he communicated everything he had trouble expressing in other ways.
- 3 But at some point Dad, like America, changed. I don't mean he grew weepy, huggy. I mean he traveled from what seemed to me a pained acquiescence to a different, happier, better place. He found peace enough with who I am to insist on introducing my partner, Tom, to his friends at the golf club. Peace enough to compliment me on articles of mine that use the same three-letter word that once chased him off. Peace enough to sit down with me over lunch last week and chart his journey, which I'd never summoned the courage to ask him about before.
- 4 It's been an extraordinary year, probably the most extraordinary yet in this country's expanding, deepening embrace of gays and lesbians as citizens of equal stature, equal worth. For the first time, an American president still in office stated his belief that two men or two women should be able to marry. For the first time, voters themselves — not lawmakers, not courts — made same-sex marriage legal. This happened on Election Day in three states all at once: Maine, Maryland and Washington. A corner was turned.
- 5 And over the quarter-century leading up to it, at a succession of newspapers in a succession of cities, I interviewed scores of people about the progress we were making and why. But until last week, I couldn't bring myself to examine that subject with the person whose progress has meant the most to me: my dad.

- 6 He's 77. Closing in fast on 78. Hasn't voted for a Democrat in a presidential election since Kennedy. Pledged a fraternity in college. Served as an officer in the Navy. Chose accounting as his profession. Remained married to his high school sweetheart, my mother, until she died in 1996, just shy of their 40th anniversary. He still mentions her daily.
- 7 She was the freer spirit, and I told her I was gay back in 1981, when I was 17. She implored me not to tell him — too risky, she said — and to let her handle it. A few years later, she informed me that she'd done so, and that was that. Dad said nothing to me. I said nothing to him. When I would come home to Connecticut from college in North Carolina, he would give me the same kind of hug he'd always given me: manly, swift, sincere. When I was in graduate school in New York City, he would swoop into town to take me to the Four Seasons for duck.
- 8 I was sure that he'd resolved simply to put what he'd learned about me out of his mind and pretend it didn't exist. I was wrong. He was mulling it over, trying to figure it out.  
“It was just so *unusual* to me,” he recalled, groping for the right word.
- He'd heard it said that gay people were somehow stunted, maybe even ill. But that made no sense to him, because he was confident that I was neither of those things.
- 9 He'd heard it said that peculiar upbringings turned children gay. “I thought about it a lot,” he said, “and I came to the conclusion that it had to be in your genes, in you, because I couldn't think how the environment for you was any different than it was for your two brothers.”
- 10 He said he worried that I was in for a more difficult, less complete life than they and my sister were. I asked him why he'd never broached that with me. He said that it would have been an insult — that I was obviously smart enough to have assessed the terrain and figured out for myself how I was going to navigate it.
- 11 IN the years before Mom died, I had my first long-term relationship, and I could tell that seeing me coupled, just like my brothers and my sister were, gave him a new, less abstract way to understand me. I just wanted what they wanted. Someone special.
- 12 He welcomed the man I was with effusively. Took the two of us out to eat.

Then Mom was gone, and all the parenting fell to Dad. He tapped reserves I'd never imagined in him. When I broke up with the man he'd been so effusive toward, he must have told me six times how sorry he was about that. It was a message — that he was rooting for my happiness, no matter how that happiness came to me.

- 13 What he struggled most with, he admitted to me over our lunch, was his worry about what others would think of me, of him, of our family. His Italian-immigrant parents had been fanatics about the face a person presented to the world — the “bella figura,” as Italians say — and when I would write candidly about my life, as I did on occasion, he’d flinch a bit. Still does.
- 14 But he has decided that such writing is necessary. “There’s prejudice out there, and it’s good to fight that,” he said, adding that visibility and openness are obviously integral to that battle. “I’m convinced that people who don’t accept gays just don’t really know any of them.”
- 15 He’s increasingly irked at his political party, which he thinks is signing its own death warrant with its attitude toward gays, toward guns, toward immigrants. You have to bend to reality. Evolve with the times. Be open-minded. Be fair.
- 16 His evolution continues. Same-sex marriage is a tough one for him, as it is, still, for no small number of Americans. It’s as exotic a proposition as my being gay once was, a challenge to the way he understood the world and its traditions for so very long.
- 17 But he’s not prepared to say that what two committed men or two committed women share is anything less than what a man and a woman do. In any case, he noted, society is moving in only one direction on this front. And he’s O.K. with that.
- 18 As our meal ended he asked me — first time ever — if I wanted or planned on kids. I don’t. He said he was sad that I’d never be a father, because it was an experience with such deep satisfactions and so much joy.

Grabbing the check for once, I confessed that I’d long felt a measure of guilt about the extra burden I’d confronted him with, the added struggle.

He shook his head: “I almost think I love you more for it — for being what you are rather than what was expected of you.”

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