

Reflections at Sixty
by Johnnie Broeckel

Something about turning 60 makes a man sit back and take a long look at his life. As I reflect over the years, I have discovered that my life had been almost equally divided into two. The first thirty years were spent thinking that I knew what life was about. The second thirty years was a journey of love, discovery, and joy, pure joy, the joy that only fatherhood brings.

I thought that a defining moment in my life would be dangling my boot-clad feet from a helicopter high above the lush, but foreboding canopy of the jungles of Viet Nam, waiting to be dropped into an uncertain war. Not so. I thought that building 1,000 foot ore haulers in dry docks so cold in the winter that my mustache, grown for warmth, would freeze from my expelled breath, and so hot in the summer, that you could not touch the steel without gloves, made me a man. Not so.

My life really began in my thirty-first year of life when my beautiful daughter Tara was placed into my arms. I was overcome with joy. Aside from marrying my wife, my daughter was my greatest accomplishment in life and this was just beginning. Nothing from the previous thirty years even mattered; life was new for me.

I learned so much from my daughter. In fact, the first year of her life, I had knee surgery that required a whole leg cast and a long recovery period. I spent that summer regaining the use of my leg behind the wheels of her baby stroller. I

would walk Tara every night, using the stroller as a walker. My steps at first were feeble baby steps, soon turning into long, strong strides. As my strength increased, so did her love of the time we shared together. These were some of the most memorable walks of my life.

I learned that it is alright to have pink and purple plastic hair clips placed into your hair by your two-year old daughter. I learned that when teaching your four-year old daughter how to fish, you would get the biggest lesson in the end; the perch were named and put into a blow-up swimming pool, instead of a frying pan.

I learned responsibility, the hard way. I would pick her up from kindergarten on days when my wife worked. The school was two blocks from our home, and I would be there waiting for her when she came out of the school. We would then walk home with her telling me what she learned. One day, I fell asleep on the couch. I was awakened by Tara, who was shaking me and saying "daddy, where were you? I needed you. I had to walk home all by myself". This was the first time that ever I saw disappointment in her face. I had let her down and it was my fault. I silently vowed to myself that day that I would never cause her to be frightened at my expense.

I taught her the love of music, and she taught me how to enjoy the music. I attended every school concert that I could, all the way through college. I

remember her looking for me in the audience as she stood on the stages or risers. When she spotted me, our eyes locked momentarily, and a look of contentment filled her face. Her dad was there. I'm sure that the same look was on my face.

I still carry in my wallet, the rudimentary picture my daughter drew of me when she was four. It is more valuable to me than a Rembrandt, or a van Gogh.

My daughter is now a grown woman, and married. Amid my tears of pride and joy, I passed her to a wonderful man on her wedding day. She is a playwright and an English instructor. But, little does she know that it was me, her father, who was her first student. My daughter taught me all that was important in life.

