

THE LABORS OF OUR FATHERS

By Kelsey Timmerman

Harper, my three-year-old daughter, holds the metal square, and with all the seriousness of a seasoned carpenter, she seems to be considering what's right and what's outta whack.

She makes a few scribbles on the 4x4 lying in our driveway before looking up to me. I hold the dummy end of the tape. I look up to Dad putting marks where marks need putting. I'm not good at angles and inches. I work in the less finite world of words and stories.

Dad has turned wood into barns and homes, careers and educations. At nineteen he started his own construction company. When I was a boy I told people, "Daddy doesn't live with us." That's how much he worked. He was gone before I got up for school and often not back before I went to bed.

When I came into the world, it was just Mom and me at the hospital. Dad was at home recovering from surgery. He had fallen off the roof of a building and ruptured his spleen. The surgeon had to remove it, but Dad had a second spleen. Leave it to Dad to bring an extra organ.

I lift the 4x4 and put it on the sawhorses. The saw screams to life and Dad's mark disappears. He grabs the router. The sharp corners of the board are made round—a little safer for running, laughing, falling grandchildren.

He returns the router to the bed of his red pickup. It's the last of a long line of red company trucks. Dad bought this particular one twice: once from the dealer and once from the bank at the

auction where everything Mom and Dad had worked for was sold to the highest bidder in an afternoon.

Mom and Dad had grown their business, then switched from construction into wood truss manufacturing in the 1980s. Less than half of businesses in the United States last five years. Mom and Dad's lasted thirty-six. A few years back they came to a crossroads: Expand or retire comfortably?

They chose wrong.

We chose wrong.

I was in on the meetings, and I can't help but think their decision to expand was made, in part, to build a business for me to run. I had no interest in running the business, but I loved it because I loved Mom and Dad. I cared about the sixty employees, some of whom I had started working with when I was fourteen. The business was infused with Dad's work ethic, and by working there, I had it instilled in me, too. Up at 5:30, splinters and stitches a nuisance for a moment, and then back to work. I swept floors, inhaled hot plumes of sawdust, and drove forklifts into below-freezing temperatures. I learned the dignity of work.

The most valuable thing a man has to give is his time to another.

Dad runs the electric sander across the 4x4. We can't have anyone getting more splinters. Harper already had one in her thumb. Dad watched as I pulled it out with my fingers. There was a little blood, but she didn't cry. I was so proud of her.

"Now I'm a schmuck." Dad says all too regularly, after years of not being able to find a good job. "Who wants to hire a sixty-year-old failure?"

On the first leg of the many flights that would take me from Dayton, Ohio, to Dhaka, Bangladesh, I flew right over the thirty-acre property and half-built steel structure that became the business's

undoing. I traveled to Bangladesh, Cambodia, China, and Honduras to meet the people who made my clothes. The experience led to my first book and launched my career as a writer, speaker, and author.

I had a few assignments but no book deal then—nothing that covered the travel expenses. The trip wasn't the kind of thing you'd think a practical guy like Dad would support, but he did. He supported it all the way.

In Bangladesh I met young women and single moms who were struggling to support their families. I encountered organizations such as the Grameen Bank and CARE that have programs mainly focused on women. Economists and development experts believe that the best way to lift families out of poverty is to educate and employ women. NIKE even sponsored a viral video called “The Girl Effect” that highlights an alarming statistic: When you give a man a wage he spends 30-40% of his income on his family, and when you give a woman a wage she spends 90%.

One question kept going through my mind: Where are all the fathers?

The very first garment worker I met was a guy in Honduras named Amilcar. I met him for 10 minutes and didn't learn anything about his life other than he was 25, lived with his parents, and liked to play soccer. I continued my travels and eventually ended up back home. Not knowing what Amilcar's life was like ate at me for seven years. So I went back to Honduras to try to find him. I called the number I had for him and an old woman answered.

“Oh, Amilcar. He's in California.”

I spent the next week meeting Amilcar's family. His mom was sick and on medication bought with the money that Amilcar sends from California. His brother runs a business out of a car paid for by Amilcar. I traveled back to Amilcar's home village where I met the mother of his children and his three daughters living in a home and receiving educations courtesy of his work at

the counter factory in the U.S., shouldering heavy slabs of granite for wealthy Americans to eat off of.

He had considered his life as a garment worker in Honduras, and it wasn't enough. He wanted to provide lives for his family that couldn't be supported on his wage. So he took a bus through Guatemala, crossed illegally into Mexico, and rode thousands of miles on top of trains to the U.S. border. He was robbed and chased by bandits. He nearly froze to death crossing the mountains into Mexico City. Eventually he made it, and his labors have changed life for his family in Honduras.

“Are you a good dad?” I asked Amilcar at a mall in Indio, California, where we were talking about his journey.

“I don't think I am, because I'm not there to help the girls. I'm there mentally, but not physically... When I go back, I'll tell them I'm failing them.”

Dad makes the impossible happen.

We've finished building both A-frames and only have to connect the horizontal 4x6 from one to the other. The only problem? This isn't your average swing set; it weighs hundreds of pounds. We bear the burden together.

I'm having one of those “someone is going to get hurt” moments that I've become so familiar with after years of working with Dad. I felt that way when we moved a piano into a basement, cut down dangerously angled trees in his woods, moved a multi-ton generator the way ancient Egyptians would have done it. Dad always gets the job done.

Before Mom and Dad lost everything, my brother and I stood to inherit a lot of money. In fact, one of Mom and Dad's financial advisors recommended that my brother and I have our fiancés sign prenuptial agreements.

Now there's no money, but we've inherited so much more.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. It's a text from the little brother I have through Big Brothers and Big Sisters. He's asking whether I can take him back to juvenile detention tonight. That's where he lives during the week, and now, after months of good behavior, he's allowed a twenty-four-hour home-visit on weekends.

He has never met his dad.

According to National Fatherhood Initiative, one in three American children grow up without their fathers.

I'm insulted when Dad says that he is a failure. That he worked for all of those years and has nothing to show for it. He taught me to throw a bounce pass and how to drive a stick shift. How to curse and how to have backbone. Doesn't he realize that we were his life's work?

He regrets expanding the business, but I don't think that's his biggest regret.

"You guys were never this cute," Dad says, when he holds Harper or my baby boy, Griffin.

"Yes they were!" Mom corrects him.

He reads to my kids; he didn't read to me. He changes my kids' diapers; he didn't change mine.

We don't just learn from our fathers' strengths. We also learn from their flaws and regrets. We learn from their labors.

Harper has been waiting patiently for us to finish. She wants to swing so badly that she's quivering. I set her in the swing and give her a push and she squeals with delight.

The swing set is imperfect but solid. Mom says my grandkids will swing in it and she's probably right.

The swing will last forever.