

Growing Up In Gaithersburg

Fathers

By Marien Helz



My father told of the morning ritual that took place on our street. He would first hear Mr. Walker's pickup start—he was a farmer whose wife wanted to live in town, so he got up to go to the nearby farm at 4:30am. Then he would hear Mr. Federline, who had a plumbing business, start his car. Then my father would rise at 6:00am to commute to his job at the Geological Survey in Washington. The routine went on month after month, season after season, year after year, decade after decade. It seemed as eternal as the stars in the Cosmos.

When something that steadfast ends, it seems sudden, inexplicable. The regimen appeared to be above temporality and mortality, yet once gone may as well have occurred a thousand years ago. A boat that disappears moves from being a short distance away to being far away gradually, but a second that is gone is as forever gone as a past century. Mr. Federline died prematurely when the eldest of his five children was just old enough to take over the business. My father eventually retired; the Walker farm was sold and is now Lake Forest Mall.



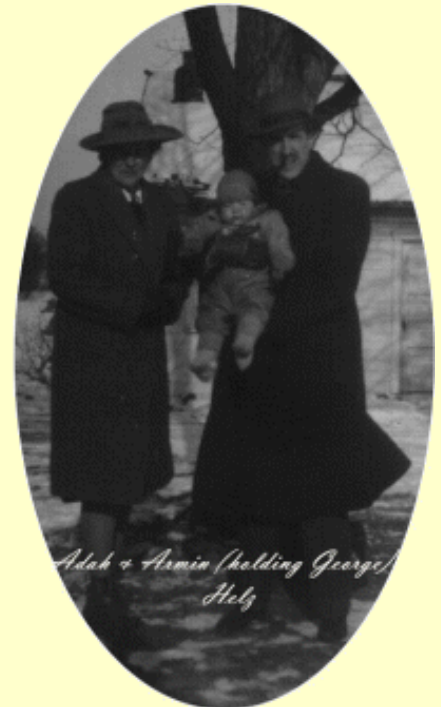
The concept of what a father should be, when I was growing up in Gaithersburg, was in the transition of moving from the Victorian idea of the father as being the distant disciplinarian or the farm father as strict guide and mentor to the more flexible idea of fatherhood today. Both women and men have talked and written endlessly about the changing role of mothers, about what mothers should and should not do, about good mothers and bad, but comparatively little has been

written about the role of fathers despite the vast change in our perception of what that position ought to entail.

I learned what the previous idea of *father as disciplinarian* was like when I went over to watch television at the home of a family who briefly lived next door. The girl, Marsha, was a year older than I, and the boy, Skippy, was a year younger. Both had curly, ash-blond hair. When their father came home from work, they rushed to kiss him hello, and he surlily said, "Wait a minute," as he adjusted his hold on the briefcase he was carrying. Shortly, he and the children's mother sat down for dinner while we watched TV, and the two year old scampered around.

I thought that the two year old was a bratty little nuisance, but that was just because I was in the second grade and toddlers got in the way. I was vaguely aware of the mother saying something to the father, then the father calling the toddler over to the dinner table, slowly unbuttoning the straps of his shorts as the child smiled up at him, and then swatting the child hard on the rear.

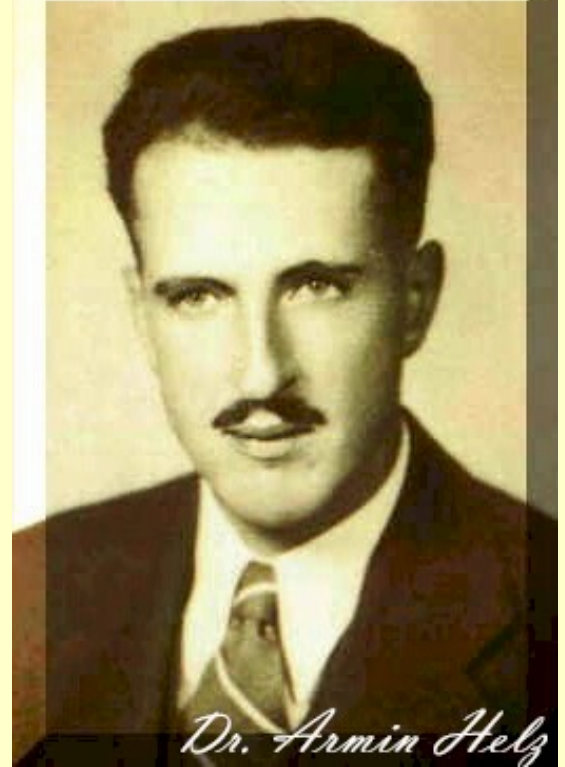
The toddler went screaming upstairs holding his bottom with both hands. Skippy said with great urgency, "Don't laugh! Don't even look at him!"



The urge to laugh was not what I had felt. I was astounded and revolted. I think that I learned something about the concept of sadism at that moment even though it would be years before I would learn the word. I knew of no other family who endorsed the *wait till your father gets home* concept of parenthood. Most fathers at the time believed that spanking was occasionally warranted, but few would be willing to dispense corporal punishment some time after the infraction, and I knew of no others who would have been willing to allow it to include humiliating their child by punishing in front of others.

In my family, it seemed that the more serious the transgression, the more restrained the punishment would be. Since matches were forbidden, they were attractive, and one time my brother snuck some into his dresser drawer. Fires were no less dangerous then than now, and when my parents found the matches, my father sat on the edge of my brother's bed, and talked to him directly about the danger of fires. "These aren't even safety matches," he explained as he showed how they could be lit by the heads rubbing against each other. The solemn tone in his voice struck such a cord, that none of us played with matches again.

Although we didn't think of fathers as disciplinarians in those days, they were none-the-less somewhat distant. They went off to work for long hours and came home tired. When they said something, they usually meant now. When they were home, they worked on the house and yard or on the car—and they could, it seemed, do anything. My father made bookcases and speaker cabinets in his shop; he fixed the plumbing; he finished the floors, laid bricks; he planted and transplanted trees; he changed oil and tires and filters—what he could not do was ride a bicycle, skate, ride a scooter, ski, run, play baseball, play football, or do anything that required strength in both legs as his left had been crippled by polio when he was an infant. His lameness, however, never stopped him from doing a job that he felt he ought to do.





My mother, smiling, once told about a family in town that was applying to host a foreign exchange student, and when the father was asked what his role in the family was, he wrote, "Daddy will fix it."

Yes, that was the fathers' role. And they could fulfill it.

It wasn't until recently that I realized that while my father worked, his car was parked all day in a lot under the blazing Washington sun. Few cars were air-conditioned, and he didn't get one that was until the 60's. For two decades, he had to open the door, crank down all the windows, start the car and hurry to move so that the air blowing through the windows would cool down the car as soon as possible, and then drive with conveyor belt precision as he and the other commuters rolled their way home.

I wonder how hot those cars got in the summer months standing more than eight hours in the sun—hot enough we now know to kill a living thing in them after a few minutes.

Yes, whatever it was, Daddy could fix it. He would be there, and he would fix it.

