



ANDREW ON WEDNESDAY

Not just any dad

Probably one of the toughest yet most under-valued 'jobs' in the world is being a dad and you come to realise what a difficult task it is once you become one yourself.

I recall very clearly a teacher during my time at Sixth Form who would tell us that there exists no manual in any library in the world on 'how to be a good parent!' This is so true. Although being a father gives me plenty of satisfaction it still is a constant tussle to try and do and say the right thing. So naturally with no guide-books available, I had to turn to my own dad as a source of inspiration and guidance on 'how to be a good dad', a man I admire because of the way he has approached life, low-key but incredibly committed to whatever he engages in.

Well most probably, the first life lesson my father passed on was that in life the greatest and most important thing is not to seek success or to be irate when 'you' fail from achieving your objectives but that you are able to 'recuperate' whenever you fail, carry the responsibility of your actions and stand up to be counted.

But let's go one step at a time. My father has always been indebted to his roots. I have never ever heard him try to shun away where he comes from, what has made him as a person even if he was propelled to the highest levels in his career after 55 years in the banking sector.

Here is what he says about his roots:

I was born on 20th March, 1939, to Michael Azzopardi and Carmelina Scicluna. Waiting my arrival was the gorgeous Spring season, and, on the dark side, the beginning of World War 2. I was the third of eight siblings, six boys and two girls. My father was employed as a Customs guard with a salary equivalent to that of a police constable. Nothing to write home about, more so considering the size of the family. To supplement his income he worked long hours of overtime, which he eagerly volunteered for. Understandably my mother was a full-time housewife.

This is one of the characteristics my father drilled in me. He works hard for his family and puts everything into it. I have always known him to work long hours but at the same time almost ritualistically provide us with time to play and go outdoors. His 'Work-Life' balance was exemplary.

Another quality that my father valued was education. His belief in the value of education must be rooted here:

Strangely enough both my parents had an obsession for education. By my personal assessment father ranked as an individual just outside the illiteracy zone. I remember him reading (with some difficulty) the Berqa, a newspaper in Maltese, sister of today's Times of Malta. He knew how to write his name and sign in the space indicated to him. The buck stopped

there. Luckily mother completed elementary schooling, and as children, we relished her assistance in our homework and studies.

He continues to say what a challenge life was for his parents when success meant even more sacrifices for them;

I placed 19 overall thus entitling me to have first preference for the college of my choice. In those days tuition in secondary schools was not free, not even for a government institution, in this case, the Lyceum. The difference here from other church/private schools, was the fee exemption, allowed for families whose income fell below a stipulated benchmark. Needless to say, we qualified. Nonetheless students (parents) had to buy, from their own pockets the syllabus books and all other related accessories.

But I believe the central and most important part of the story lies here:

Secretly it came to my knowledge, that generally at the start of the scholastic year, mother used to pledge her gold items with, what is referred to, as the Consul, and progressively redeeming same through progressive regular payments, similar to a bank house loan.

Another value he gently tried to instil in me was that life is not just about 'me and mine' but about living with and for each other. 'Share' and 'give' were two words that I always got thrown at me. This is probably where dad has learnt the value of having and the value of sharing:

For example, when fruit was deemed expensive it was expected that an apple or a banana is split between two. When cheap, mother took the opportunity and bought, not a rotolo but a crate, getting you fed up of that particular fruit, since we had to consume it hastily not to get rotten. The necessities did not lack, but no luxuries could be afforded. Home breeding of rabbits, chicken and pigeons for own consumption helped. So did the growing of garden beans and patches of tomatoes in our back yard. Every bit was a bonus.

Another passion I got from my father is the love for politics.

He was never an armchair critic but sought to contribute in ways he deems fit. For him politics was and still is not just about favouring one party over another but about using politics for what it should be, that is to transform and improve our communities.

This is how he describes his affinity to politics:

From my teens I got very much interested in politics. Being a medical doctor or a lawyer were the best ingredients to contest an election, especially on the ticket of the

Nationalist Party. This is accepted to this very day since these esteemed professions allow you to come in constant contact with the village locals. Therefore being the type not to go for a goal unless I have more than a fair chance to succeed, I decided that, rather than contesting, I play an active backstage role. I was never good in accepting failures. In general, those were ugly years. We talk about the eighties, but what we experienced then had been slowly but steadily building up since 1958, when the Malta Labour Party government resigned in block because of litigation with the British government. In the sixties followed the struggle with the Church and mortal sin. In the seventies and eighties, among the many conflicts we went through came the suspension of bank employees, in which I was directly involved and the war against the church schools. It is a pity that the social benefits introduced in the early seventies by the Labour government with emphasis on the eradication of the old type of poverty, were overshadowed by the mishandling in governance we had to endure in later years. I must say that for my principles I had the courage of my conviction and when duty called, I together with many other thousands, stood up to be counted, whatever the consequences.

A pivotal chapter in my father's life was obviously getting married, having children and grandchildren, who till this day adore him and affectionately embrace him. This is what he says about us;

I met my then future wife at our place of work. It was around late 1961 or early 1962 when Lina was transferred from Merchants Street Branch to the one at Hamrun, where I was still posted. For what occurred subsequently we have to take joint credit where merited, and joint blame where our performance failed the test. No need exclaiming that the happiest moment for a happily married couple is definitely the birth of their child, and in later years that of grandchildren. Thank God all came safely in this world and moreover in the best of physical health. Thank Heaven for this.

My children Stephen and Andrew were born on 27 August, 1967 and 18 June, 1970 respectively. Each one for 3 years in succession i.e. 6 years at a stretch, opted to switch day for night and vice versa. The result, sleepless nights were the common factor. Both attended elementary schooling at St Joseph School in Rabat and subsequently entered St Aloysius College following a public entry exam.

The responsibility for guiding our sons in their studies fell with my wife, given that work kept me away from home for long hours. Without going into detail I can say that she accomplished this task

with flying colours. We did our best to keep them company the most time possible. Whether we felt like it or not, we regularly took them to the sea and in the evening to the Sliema Front in summer; picnics and the Marsa Club in winter, to vent their explosive energy. Even in our house they had a feast day roaming about with their bicycles and go-cart. The corridor and kitchen furniture still show the marks in remembrance.

What beautiful words indeed, what fond memories. But I think this last part sums up the character my dad has.

I will not even try to say that I have in anyway managed to emulate him - I wish I will be able to one day. He inspires me and I will keep reiterating to my kids that they need to look at their Nannu when they are faced with dire moments in their life and pray that the resilience that he has shown will help them draw strength.

The first... a few years after my mothers' loss, my younger sister became fully dependent on others. I was invariably looked upon by my siblings as the one to come out with solutions and take the decisions. I never shirked responsibility.

The second... a few years back I was diagnosed with a malignant tumour - Lymphoma. You can imagine what thoughts passed through my mind among which, the commonly uttered "why me". But then as I calmed down I said to myself that after all I should consider myself overall lucky that in all my life I never had to undergo a simple intervention or stay a day in hospital. I realised the reality that in life there are the good, bad and ugly moments and became fully resigned to whatever had to happen to me. The cure was far from easy going and the side effects of the interventions I had to undertake I wouldn't wish them on the worst of my enemy, though I must say I have none. My appreciation is directed primarily to the closest in my family for their solidarity and support during those difficult twelve months of 2011. As for me, I tried all the way, to pull a brave face and endure what was thrown at me in silence.

So little to add to the story of this man. A dad, a granddad and an inspiration.

And as his favourite song goes (Frank Sinatra's, My Way):
*I've loved, I've laughed and cried
I've had my fill, my share of losing*

*And now as tears subside, I find it so amusing
To think I did all that
And may I say, not in a shy way
Oh, no, oh, no, not me, I did it my way.*

PS This column is inspired by my dad's own work; 'The story of my life'.

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