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Male Bonding

▼ Bonding with Dad over golf and a love of invading Middle Eastern countries? Mission accomplished!



My Father, My Bro

Want a bona fide man-to-man relationship with your dad? For Father's Day, skip the steak-of-the-month-club subscription and actually spend some quality time with the guy who contributed half your DNA

→ In my largely Southern Baptist Arkansan family, we don't so much share our personal beliefs as cling tightly to the notion that they shouldn't ever be spoken aloud. Which is fine, since I know what happens when they are: At Thanksgiving several years ago, my sister announced that I'm in favor of gay marriage.

"I think that is sad," said my aunt, who sat at the table with her Shih Tzu.

I argued my side until a few women broke out in tears. At one point my 4-year-old nephew yelled, "You made my mom cry because you don't believe in Jesus!"

I looked to my dad. He had sat through the shit show, silently eating his turkey and sweet potatoes, and as he finished his last bite, he turned to me to say what I knew he would: "That LSU game is gonna be huge."

My father and I have only ever spoken one language to each other: sports. When I was a kid, he took me to baseball practice and coached me in peewee football. After my playing days ended, we chatted about the Arkansas Razorbacks—and little else. Talking to him gave me the same sense of calm as cracking open a beer and watching *SportsCenter*.

Then I hit my thirties, and I started to think about depressing stuff, like mortality, and my father, who was in his sixties. Like most guys, I realized that I didn't actually know the man—but I wanted to.

As I learned from every Wes Anderson movie, men need an experience, an adventure, to bond over. So last year I booked us a weeklong rafting trip down the Grand Canyon. He'd always wanted to go, and what better way to break from our routine than plowing through white water and sleeping under the stars? We set the trip for late August—outside of mid-February, the slowest few weeks in sports.

Turns out that the fully outfitted trip I chose used motorized boats, which meant no paddling to keep us occupied. There were rapids, of course, thunderous and pummeling. But they lasted for twenty seconds and arrived in fits and starts; we hit only seven that first day. In the long stretches between, my dad and I dissected the Razorbacks' freshman class, talked about our jobs, and told every joke we knew. With the small talk exhausted, we faced the prospect that we actually had nothing to say to each other.

That realization came on day two. Twenty-four hours of pure, uncut, awkward silence.

Day three I fantasized about our boat capsizing, our rations being scattered downriver, and everyone having to be airlifted out, which would get me home in time for the weekend. On day four, I asked a guy in the group to switch boats with me so my father and I could have a breather.

The next morning, I joined back up with Dad. But before the silence set in again, he broke character: He asked about my recent split with my girlfriend. I was crazy for her, but we always fought—we'd get into a screaming match about emptying the trash. He told me that he and my mom broke up a half-dozen times before marrying, which I never knew; they've been together forty-five years.

That was it. No therapy-session breakthrough or weepy bear hug. Just two guys who were so bored out of their brains that having a real conversation was the only option left. For the first time, he told me how he hadn't been able to fight alongside his friends in Vietnam (he had been drafted but rejected for his narcolepsy) and that he has no beef with two dudes getting married.

Dad and I didn't become BFFs after the trip; when we talk now, it's still about the Razorbacks or work. But there's a comfort in knowing that when the time comes to set my father in the ground, I can look down and not feel like I'm burying a stranger. At least once, we pushed past the trivial bullshit and shared something sincere. You can't force intimacy with your old man, but you *can* force yourself to sit through a few days of soul-sucking silence. For a lot of guys, that's the only way to get there.—DACUS THOMPSON

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