

Some things my dad taught me

Dan Evans, 2001

This isn't meant to encapsulate everything my late father ever taught me. They are simply the most memorable and potentially the most entertaining for readers. The most important disclaimer I have for readers is, "don't try this at home."

Believe it or not, my most interesting memory of Dad teaching me something, was his purpose for the flat-head screw. Yes, the flat-head screw. I hope that the definition of a flat-head screw is obvious, but perchance it is not, I'll give it a shot. It's a small, tapered shank of steel that has threads for driving into wood (as opposed to a screw that has threads for a nut). Screws come in a variety of styles. Some have heads (the part where the screwdriver engages the screw) that are convex, others have a flat head that is meant to be flush with the surface of the wood once it's driven in with the screwdriver. I hope that explanation is sufficient.

First of all, and this is an important point for this subject, Dad was only semi-handy with tools and just a basic set at that. Hammers, axes, saws, screwdrivers, wrenches – that was about the extent of it. The subtleties (and there are many) of the differences between various sub-categories of those tools really escaped Dad. A hammer is a hammer and you pound anything that needs pounding with the closest one you can reach. Sometimes you even use the handle of the hammer for that purpose; whatever works.

I don't recall the exact circumstances, but I well remember my lesson from Dad on the flat-head screw, probably when I was around 10 years of age. We were working on a fixit project, probably something in the barn. Dad was attaching two pieces of wood together and I noticed that instead of nails, he was using wood screws with a flat head on them. I inquisitively asked him why he would hammer a screw into wood rather than use a screw driver. He replied that the head was flat just for that purpose; you hammer it in, the threads grip the wood better than nails, and if you ever need to remove it, you use a screwdriver. I thought that was a pretty good invention and for years that's exactly how I used it, at least until I entered wood shop in high school and my shop teacher explained the real purpose of the flat-head screw: you drive it in and you remove with a screw driver, you never hammer it. And, my argument against that silly approach noticeably amused the instructor.

This isn't directly related to something I learned from Dad, but it is comical and worth mentioning anyway. I'd been living in California for several years and returned home for a week-long visit one summer. Dad was working out of town and Mom suggested that she and I, my brother and his wife, all visit Dad one evening for dinner. However, Mom mentioned that her car had been running poorly and she was concerned that it might not make it.

I opened the hood and started looking things over. Indeed, it was running really rough, so I started pulling spark plugs. The car was an early 70's Rambler station wagon with a V-8 engine. The first couple of plugs I pulled looked almost new. But, upon checking, I discovered that the electrode gap was very out of spec according to a feeler gauge I found after an exhausting search among Dad's tools. I set the gap correctly and reinstalled them.

I was not surprised by that discovery. I had observed my Dad adjusting spark plugs for years by tapping them against the heel of his boot and holding it up to the light until it looked adequate. I'm not sure he really knew what a gap gauge was for; but I never saw him use one. The fact that

a plug that is gapped even a hundredth of an inch incorrectly will not function properly seemed of little importance in the grand scheme of things.

Then, the mystery started to unfold. One of the plugs I removed was of a different type or part number. I checked around Dad's work bench and found that it matched a set of spark plugs from his '63 Ford pickup. I laughed and just assumed that he'd mixed them up. The next plug I removed was correct; it just needed the gap reset. But, the next plug I pulled from the Rambler, was yet a different kind of plug. This one looked familiar and when I checked my suspicions, I discovered it matched the plug on the lawnmower. I searched and found another plug meant for the car and installed it. When I was finished, the car ran great and we drove it that evening to Oregon to have dinner with my dad. While there, Mom mentioned that I'd fixed the car and Dad asked suspiciously what was wrong with it. I tried to minimize the discussion and simply replied that he must have accidentally mixed up the spark plugs a few weeks earlier, because I'd found one from the pickup and one from the lawnmower in the car. Dad said, oh, they're all the same, you can use anything that's handy.

Another valuable lesson that Dad taught me (and that I'm surprised I lived to tell about), was how to remove stumps with a tractor. I and my brother were driving our old John Deere tractors long before we were old enough to drive cars. That's common on farms. One of our tractors had a front-end loader that was designed for very light work, such as cleaning manure from barns. It wasn't designed for major digging operations. But, to Dad, a loader was a loader and it would do anything he wanted it to do, or someone (including the tractor) would die trying.

Our farm had a lot of brush and old growth Oak trees. Within that patch of trees, was an impenetrable tangle of vines and scrub that a bull dozer would have labored to get through. But, it was Dad's dream (the reason he bought the tractor with the loader), to clear out all that brush so that grass could grow for cattle grazing. And, he thought I was of the proper age to be taught how to do it. Seemed like an excellent idea to me: drive a tractor, make lots of noise and see satisfying results. Dad spent a couple of Saturdays teaching me the ropes and it was an eye-opening, thrilling experience. I'd never been to Disneyland, but I was convinced nothing could top this ride. But, I soon learned why Dad wanted me in the driver's seat; his middle-aged bones could never have withstood the punishment. You see, tractors are designed to pull implements that are designed by engineers for specific purposes, like plowing and disking and pulling trailers. Fairly gentle tasks. They don't make good bulldozers. But in this 40 year old tractor with its 40 year old, rickety, light-duty loader, Dad saw a bulldozer.

I learned there are only two valid ways to remove small trees, tree trunks and brush: you either get a running start at full speed with the tractor and charge them like a train wreck, or you wrap a chain around them, and get a similar running start and attempt to jerk them out while going forward at full speed. Both events have the same effect: the tractor driver is lucky to stay on the tractor and the tractor is lucky to stay upright. Loss of life is a very real probability and had God not seen fit to send a posse of angels to protect me, I should have been a mortal victim of Dad's scientific approach to land clearing.

I actually got to enjoying the thrill of it all and would go out on Saturdays as soon as the sun came up and work 'til nightfall, slamming the tractor into trees and ripping them out on two wheels...sort of like Trigger standing on his two hind legs. I got real good at locking the hand clutch in and quickly grabbing onto the steering wheel with a death grip to keep from getting tossed overboard. I even got to the point where I could estimate how many charges it would take

to knock over a tree and when I thought I was getting close to the final attempt, I'd lock that clutch down and bump that throttle up to full power before we'd crash into it; sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't.

It was almost a weekly occurrence for Dad to have somebody weld the loader back together, but he thought he was getting his money's worth out of the deal and he wasn't having to ride the charging bull for 10 hours or more every weekend. Eventually, I actually managed to clear about 4 acres of brush using that routine and lived to tell about it.

Maybe someday I'll document other father-son instructional moments, but these stand out as the most memorable – and life-threatening.