

Palaima: Even in death, some fathers hold onto their secrets

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Ever since Oedipus tried to find out who his real father was and Patroclus set sail in search of information about Odysseus, the long-absent father he never knew, when we wonder why we are who we are, our thoughts turn to our parents. As Father's Day approaches, many of us ponder the mysteries of fatherhood too late to get real answers from parents who are no longer with us.

I became my father's second surviving son on Oct. 6, 1951, at 8:30 a.m. at Doctors Hospital in Cleveland Heights, Ohio. That was six years after my father returned from fighting alongside other soldiers in the 1st Cavalry Division in World War II and five years after my only surviving brother Michael was born.

You may wonder why I call us surviving sons. On my official birth certificate, acquired last year, appears a question: "How many OTHER children were born alive but are now dead?" The answer typed in on the form is "One."

I found out that I had a second older brother about ten years ago. On a trip back to Cleveland, I visited, as usual, Calvary Cemetery where my beloved paternal grandparents and my uncle Joseph are buried. This time I forgot to bring their plot locations with me. The clerk in the central office retrieved information for Palaima.

I was stunned when he said, "Here are your four plots: Michael, Sophie, Joseph and Baby Boy." My second older brother was born on

October 23, 1950, eleven and a half months before I was. He lived from 5:54 to 5:59 AM. He was buried the next day in the infant section of the cemetery.

When my brother and I asked my father, then in his late 80s, about our unknown brother, he replied that between our births, our mother had had a miscarriage and then lost a child right after he was born. Their doctor, Dr. Pasquale Ferrara, ordered them not to have more children, stressing the danger pregnancy would pose to our mom.

Our dad smiled and said something like, “But you know your mother.” We could see that he knew well his wife of 57 years.

We were left to wonder how the strong-willed, beautiful, devoutly Roman Catholic, anxiety-ridden woman who was our mother and our choir-boy father found it in themselves to defy the kind of authority figure they generally obeyed without question just as recruits in basic training snap to orders from their drill sergeants. I wonder now if Baby Boy Palaima had lived, would I be here.

My father still holds onto secrets, even seven years after he died at age 90. Like many kids our age, my brother and I had a father who became an adult during the Great Depression. The son of immigrants, he had seriously thought of becoming a priest. He remembered throughout his life the feeling of being at war far away from the woman he loved. He had the same strong, silent role models most fathers after World War II had: Gary Cooper in “High Noon,” Humphrey Bogart in any Bogart film. On television, Oswald “Ozzie” Nelson on “The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet” and Robert Young in “Father Knows Best” — but is rarely asked his opinion — were their paradigms.

Our fathers worked hard at jobs we knew little about. They kept to themselves their fears, troubles, doubts and emotions, positive and negative. They rarely talked to us about their views on life, their hopes, dreams, successes and failures. They were to be seen and respected, but, within the household, heard only when their sons were trying to work around the mother who ruled the roost.

If cultural icons and prevailing social norms did a good job of implanting such behavioral notions, the religious role model for Roman Catholic fathers made sure they were ineradicably rooted. St. Joseph, the husband of Mary, never says a word in the New Testament. He is wrapped up in the same obscurity that enshrouds most of the childhood of Jesus. We can deduce that he passed his profession as carpenter on to Jesus, a son who was not his son. Joseph may have had other children by Mary or by another wife, depending on scholarly interpretation of the gospel of Matthew 13: 55-56. But that was way before birth certificates.

If your father is still with you, find time now to say to him, “Hey, Dad, how’s it going?” And then, “No, really, how are you doing?”