

A Place For Love:

The story behind *Where Is Grandpa?*

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On the day my dad died, I came home numb. As the screen door banged behind me, I barely heard it. Nor did I take much notice of the plate of cold spaghetti on the kitchen table, nor even my wife and kids standing nearby, unusually quiet. To the degree I felt anything, it was the warmth of my father's hand still inside my own.

But he was gone. And with him, his warm hand; his easy laugh; his rugged leather boots he wore around the Colorado ranch; his love of a good walk and a strong embrace; his pockets always full of chewing gum; his playful practical jokes; his caring for children and grandchildren; his resolute belief in hard work; his wonder at the beauty of the world that still seemed, in this man over eighty, as fresh as if he had been newly born.

Gone.

And then, right there in our kitchen, a little miracle happened. My five-year-old daughter started talking about her favorite moment with Grandpa, when they had sat together watching a tumbling stream. “He told me,” she recalled, “that the stream has many voices. And he also told me that if you listen to those voices, listen your very best, the stream will tell you all the places it has been, and all the places where it's going.”

Her words rang in my ears like the sound of a distant bell. For on a day long past, that same man had sat by that stream with me and spoken those same words. And I knew that my daughter understood, in some unfathomable way, that the man we both loved had died.

Then her two younger brothers piped up, each describing their own favorite memories of Grandpa. By the kitchen door, several pumpkins in his hands, and another on his head. By the old Jeep, ready to go bouncing around the ranch. By the cottonwood tree, dreaming about a treehouse—a treehouse he never had the chance to build.

At that moment, as we sat encircled by so many images of Grandpa in so many places, my five-year-old asked, “So tell me. Where is Grandpa now?”

That was the very last question I wanted to hear. “He's with God,” I muttered, staring down at my mound of cold spaghetti. “And where is that?” she pressed. “In heaven,” I replied numbly. She cocked her head, wondering, then asked, “And where is that?”

I drew a deep breath, glanced across the table at my wife, and tried to find the words. How to answer, in a few brief seconds, a question that I had been pondering for many years? “Well,” I replied, “heaven means different things to different people. But I suppose you might say that heaven is...any place where two people have loved each other.”

She considered this idea for a few seconds, then spoke again. “You mean places like the ones we've been talking about? Heaven is in all those places?”

“I guess so,” I replied, not sure where this was leading.

“And God is in all those places?”

“I suppose so, yes.”

“And Grandpa is in all those places?”

In that instant, a doorway opened in my sorrow. Not more than a thin crack, of course, for I still had plenty of grieving left to do. But it was enough. Enough to change everything.

For I finally understood something that had eluded me before: that, even when we have lost someone we have loved, it is possible to find them again. To hear their footsteps, to feel their presence, to know their love. And, thanks to the persistent questioning of a five-year-old girl, I had some idea at last where to look.

It was two full years before I could share this experience with anyone else. Now, thanks to my editor, Patricia Lee Gauch, and a gifted artist, Chris K. Soentpiet, it has become a book, *Where Is Grandpa?*. And although I have chosen to tell the story from the perspective of the five-year-old child, rather than the befuddled adult that I was on that day, the underlying ideas remain the same.

One of those ideas is the wisdom of children. Young people, if their imaginations have not been squashed, are brimming with wonder, and honesty, and the open-hearted search for understanding. And something more: the intuitive awareness that visions, and stories, carry many levels of truth. So the power to imagine is truly the power to create. And the ability to remember is the ability to renew.

Another of those ideas is the power of place. My first memory of my father, the Grandpa of the story, was of being carried on his shoulders out to an old chestnut tree near our home. I remember him lifting me up to peer into a dark hole in the trunk. To my surprise, a family of baby raccoons, their eyes as bright as lanterns, peered back at me. Whenever I think of that man, I think of all the places that we shared. And the memories, like the eyes of those raccoons, are lantern-bright.

Small wonder that, for me, place is far more than landscape. Indeed, in my own writing, I think of place not as merely the setting for a story, but as another character. For places

have all the rich dimensions, as well as the contradictions, of human characters. My earliest compositions, in fact, were nature writing. (At age nine, I wrote a little biography of that old chestnut tree.) If the imaginary worlds in my novels-places as diverse as Fincayra in *The Lost Years of Merlin* and Lost Crater in *The Ancient One*-feel true to the reader, I am certain it is because of my own grounding in the natural world. And a good deal of that grounding I owe to my father, a man who knew how to hear the many voices of a stream.

It would not have surprised him at all that these reflections, like so much else, have spun a full circle. For while whatever we hold may be lost, whatever is lost may be found again. And a good spot to look, as both he and his granddaughter knew, is that remarkable nexus between the people we have loved and the places we have shared.