

## YOUR VOICE

# A father's emotional roadblock to 'I love you'

By David McGrath

"I love you, Dad," Janet said.

She is the younger of my two daughters, and we were exchanging goodbyes at the end of a phone conversation.

"Me, too, honey."

"Me, too" was pretty easy to say. Occasionally, I have even been able to substitute, "Love you," for goodbye when any one of my three children is ending a visit.

But why do I find it so hard to say to them, "I love you"? Why does the English language's tiniest pronoun weigh 2,000 pounds when I try to insert it in that sentence? My difficulty likely astounds readers in the year 2023 for whom intimacy and declarations thereof are commonplace, which I envy.

Yes, I can voice the three words to my wife at the end of the day. But even with Marianne, it involves heavy lifting, such as first turning off the reading light. When speaking to the woman to whom I've been married for decades, "Love you," absent the first-person subject, is way lighter and easier as I'm hanging up the phone or leaving for an overnight.

Since Marianne can cut to the core of an issue faster than I can, I asked her the difference between the two expressions.

"I love you" makes a direct connection with one individual," Marianne said. "Love you" is something you just flip in the air. No real investment. Like 'love you, guys,' or 'love that song,' or 'love the White Sox.'"

"So why," I added, "is it easy for me to say, 'I love you,' to Summer?" Summer is our 6-year-old granddaughter.

"Summer won't think you're weird," Marianne said. "But our kids would probably think you are dying."

And that's the crux of it: There's no prec-



A young David McGrath with his father, Charlie, circa 1955. COURTESY

edent in our family because there was no precedent when I was growing up. My father never said it to me.

Certainly, we felt the love he harbored for all eight of his children, giving up so much to raise us. He performed selfless, sacrificial acts for each of us, like the day I wrote about in an op-ed last June in the Tribune when he left work to take me to Aqua Pool in Evergreen Park to help me overcome embarrassment over an unsightly scar on my side.

For men of the "Greatest Generation," stoicism was a coping mechanism for the horrors of world war. The only time I ever saw Dad drop his guard was after my brother Patrick was drafted and left home for the airport and the flight that would take him

to Vietnam. My father wept quietly on our front porch. (Pat made it back OK.)

Our succeeding generation saw our forebears' stoicism as a badge of manhood, perceiving it as an Ernest Hemingway/Humphrey Bogart ideal, not a shortcoming.

Like them, I am hesitant to make myself vulnerable, to tear down the wall I built to project a strong father image, but which my erudite children once characterized as "aloofness."

Though my mother did not similarly withhold affection, she bestowed it sparingly. Strategically. My older brother James reminded me about how, whenever we were angry over punishment or parenting that we considered unfair, she never failed to tuck us

in at night, saying, "I love you," melting any resentment and restoring our worlds.

Obviously, I need to change before it's too late, lest my children be saddled with the same lack I'm describing.

This past year, I went on a three-day fishing trip with my oldest friend, Tom Booth. Every year, since our first fishing/camping trip in Quetico, Canada, when we were 18, we have spent countless hours together in boats, talking about families, friends, dreams, discoveries, aging and everything else under the sun, during long periods when the fish aren't biting, which is often.

When I used him as a sounding board for the "Love you" versus "I love you" question, Tom offered corroboration, since his father of the same generation as mine never said the words either. At the end of our fishing day, when I tossed Tom the rope to hold the boat while I got the car and trailer, he said with a slight smile: "Love you."

He is wont to wear things out for the sake of comedy, so for the rest of the drive back, including when we stopped for something to eat, then later for gas, we alternated between "Love you" and "I love you," at opportune times, and inopportune times in front of strangers, up until the moment he left for the airport and his flight home.

Tom is not a psychologist. However, in his funny, inanely repetitious and ultimately clever fashion, he succeeded in reducing the weight of both phrases.

Mike, Jackie and Janet: I love you!

Yes, I can write it here. We'll see what happens later when the rubber hits the road.

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