



## Editorial columnists

[Comments](#)  3 | Recommended  8

# Stuart Vyse: He did the best he could

01:00 AM EDT on Thursday, May 6, 2010

By STUART VYSE

STONINGTON, Conn. My father died in March. He lived in California, and I was able to see him a couple of weeks before his death. I sat by his bed. We exchanged expressions of love and gratitude. We also shared an unspoken understanding that this might be our last time together. Despite the sad occasion, it was a pleasant visit, and I flew home knowing that I had fulfilled a son's obligation to pay his last respects to a dying parent.

There was a time when an ending like this might not have been possible. My parents' marriage came apart in 1962, when I was 11, and in those days, before our contemporary era of shared parenting, many divorced fathers, my own included, were rarely heard from. He was a Navy veteran, and I became a college student of the late 1960s. Our political views quickly diverged, and after visiting my apartment and finding it decorated with symbols of the anti-Vietnam War movement, he wrote my mother a letter expressing great displeasure with me.

As I grew up and established myself in life, our relationship improved. The philosophical divides between us could never be bridged, but we learned to avoid those topics and enjoy the things we shared. He had a wonderful sense of humor and was always interested in what I was doing. We found ways to strengthen the bonds between us by focusing on what we had in common.

In the weeks before his death, my father suffered a final humiliation. As his battle with emphysema wore on, he had to move to a nursing home, at which point his financial circumstances came to light. Dad had always presented himself as if he lived a comfortable lifestyle. A former business executive, he dressed well and displayed all the outward indications of a modest but solidly middle class life.

When the crisis hit, he was forced to reveal that he drew a small pension, owned little of value, had no savings, and had tens of thousands of dollars in credit-card debt. After a life spent complaining about taxes and denigrating government-run social programs, he found himself completely dependent upon those programs and died unable to pay what he owed to his creditors.

When I heard this news, I struggled to avoid reversing our old roles — becoming the critical son leveling judgment against a disappointing father. Because he was in his final days, I could never have said anything

to him about my displeasure, but for a time, at least, it was hard to avoid feeling let down.

But I quickly recovered from this initial reaction. In recent years, I have tried to adopt the philosophy that, at any given moment, we are all doing the best we can. Perhaps, if we had greater encouragement or lived under different circumstances, we could achieve more and be better people. But given things as they are, we are all doing no better or worse than we are able.

It is easy to stand in judgment of other people. On talk radio and cable news, it is something of a national pastime to cheer on the heroes and rail at the villains, but in the real world of ordinary people, we are all equals. Even an attitude of forgiveness, with its flavor of religious authority, is something I try to avoid. Instead, I strive to accept people as they are and recognize that there, but for a cosmic roll of the dice, go I.

My father's obituary concentrated on his military service in World War II and Korea, his successful business career, and his community volunteer work. When I think of him now, I will remember him in a similarly positive light. He loved me; I loved him; and I will always be grateful for what he gave me. He did the best he could.

Stuart Vyse, an occasional contributor, is a professor of psychology at Connecticut College.