

AN-FATHER'S STORY

By John F. Hall

Everyone has a story to tell about their life. Sadly, most grandparents do not leave their legacies of memories, faith, love, and life to their grandchildren. When she was an infant, I would rock my oldest granddaughter, Andrea to sleep in a rocking chair. I would whisper in her ear the word "Grandfather." I lost count of the number of time I did this. One day she called me "An-Father." So that is how I was given that name. My wife's name is Paula. My son's name is John.

An-Father lives in a two-story house that was constructed from poplar trees just before the start of the American Civil War. Many changes were made to the 161-year old house to include the removal of the portico, the fireplaces, and the lowering of the roof. The removal of the portico led to the construction of a covered porch across the front of the house and the addition of gutters that emptied into a former front cistern. The center of the house has a stairway that first leads to a narrow landing and then to another stairway which leads to a second landing. Prior to the renovation of the house, one could go from the second landing through a doorway and unto a portico. When Tom Vinson's mother was a little girl, about the age of eight, she would visit her friend Lula Jackson, who lived in the old farm house. They would play on the portico. She told me that they felt safe on the portico because it had a railing. In the summer time, the window on the narrow landing was opened and the door to the portico was opened to allow the breeze to flow freely. The house had no electricity until the late 1950s. It had no indoor bathrooms until the early 1960s.

In 1975, Paula's father, Andrew C. Oakley had changed from raising cattle to row crops. In 1977, Paula's grandmother, Ivy Oakley died and the old farm house was vacant for a year. In 1978, I was transferred from my assignment in Carlisle County to Trigg County. Andrew offered to allow us to live in the old farm house and he would reimburse me for any repairs that I made to the house. There was a coal strike in Hopkins County at that time. I managed to get a day off to move Paula and my son into the old farm house in the middle of a snow storm. Only two rooms in the old house were suitable to live in. In 1985, I purchased the old house and one acre of land . We then began to tear out and renovate one room at a time.

In 2009, a severe ice storm hit the area. All the trees surrounding the old farm house were damaged. The storm downed power lines. In two days, cell phone towers stopped operating. The old farm house has a vent-less fireplace fueled by propane gas. Three families gathered into the living room, to stay warm during that cold week. This writer's son loaned him a 5K diesel generator which kept the refrigerator, lights and well operating. Today, it has county water. The writer's grandchildren, Andrea, Heather and John-John lived and played in the old farm house. They loved running up and down the staircase in the middle of the house. Their laughter and their screams of joy once echoed throughout the house.

Paula's dad and her brother, Grover Oakley put out the crops and raised dark and burley tobacco. Grover continued to farm the land after his dad died. He had to rent it out because of the progression of his Alzheimer disease. Slowly, he lost all his memories and then died from the disease. I wonder, what is a soul without its memories?

For over a century and a half of its existence, the old farm house has weather the storms from Mother Nature. The Dyer's, the Jackson's, The Flood's, The Down's, The Calhoun's, the Oakley's and now, the Halls have made the old house, their home. In the summer, one can sit on the front porch swing and hear the crickets and the bull frogs in the two ponds and the robins high in the trees in front of the house. It is true that the land temporarily belongs to those who work it or live on it. Permanent ownership belongs to God who created this world. Many visitors have graced this old farm house. The Dyers were in the militia and they hosted many social events. There were flower gardens all around the house. The descendants of the Dyers, the descendants of the Floods and the descendants of the Downs came to the writer's Open House on June 29, 1980. Major General Lindsey Freeman came with another Army general to look at the renovations to the old house in the 1990s.

The descendants of the Jacksons came to visit the home place of their great grandparents in 2005. The writer's son held a prom reception for his date and prom couples at the old farm house. The writer's nieces Gabby and Bridget Hall, and his nephew Ron Hall and family came to visit. Until recently, the writer would sponsor the Easter meal. and Easter egg hunt with 36 family and kin in attendance. Now, just Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter and birthdays with the writer's family and next door relatives, Marsh and Roger Garner are celebrated in the old farm house. Andrea loves the tradition of eating at the large dining room table. Life should be accepted as it is. It is truly God's gift to us each day as we enjoy the sunrise and the sunset.

Andrea, Heather and John-John were students at Heritage Christian Academy (HCA). I was always impressed by the graduation ceremony that the school held at the Bruce Convention Center. At the end of the commencement ceremony, the school held a reception for the graduates, parents and guests. This year, the graduates stood about 20 feet apart, on the sidewalk, in front of the school, in their caps and gowns. Family and friends could drive by and wave at them. I try to make it to all the graduations. But I missed this one. There were no hugs or tears of joy and no reception. Tradition was held ransom by the pandemic.

Three years ago, I was at the HCA commencement. One of the graduating students came up to me. Her name is Ellen Thomas. I volunteered in the HCA lunchroom for about 10 years and most of the students called me An-Father. Ellen told me this story. She said her biological father deserted her and her mother after she was born. Yet she wanted him to be a part of her life. Somehow, she located him living in Tennessee. On graduation night, Ellen walked up to me and said that I was an important part of her life and that I had helped her. I asked how I was able to help her. She said that when all of her peers condemned what her dad did, I was the only one that did not condemn him. Ellen introduced me to her dad.

If we cannot forgive others, how can we expect Christ to forgive us? There is this story in John 8:7, about a woman caught in adultery. The crowd wanted to stone her to death. The scribes and the Pharisees wanted to test Jesus and they asked, "What do you say?" Jesus bent down and began to write with his finger. They continued to ask the same question. Jesus stood up and said to them, "Let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." We know they all walked away. Jesus told the women that He did not condemn her, but He told her to go and not sin anymore. I wonder what Jesus will write in the dust about us? I try not to judge people because I do not want to be judged by anyone but Christ.

I have three other students that consider me to be an important part of their lives. The first student is Jade Hakes. From the first Sunday that her godmother, Trish Cunningham, brought her to church as a baby, until now, nearly 17 years later, I've played a role in her life. Two other students, Skyler and Lexie Crisp, also consider me to be an important part of their lives. I was a friend to their grandparents that have passed away. I would come to HCA on Grandparent's Day and be there as their surrogate grandfather. These three students are a part of my extended family and one of the reasons for my writing stories.

The pandemic of 2020 has created social isolation and loneliness. As I was writing this, Andrea texted me and wrote, "I feel like I have not seen you in forever..." Young adults and teenagers are being stressed out by not being able to visit grandparents. Usually, I pick a song to enhance the theme of the story. There is an old song that may apply to both my older and younger readers in this stressful time in their lives. The song was written by Greek composer Manos Hadjidakis and Arthur Altman and Loannis Loannidis. The title of the song is "All Alone Am I." These are some of their lyrics: "All alone am I since your goodbye, all alone with just a beat of my heart . People all around but I don't hear a sound, just the lonely beating of my heart. No use in holding hands, for I'd be holding only emptiness. No use in kissing other lips, for I'd be thinking of your caress. No other voice can say the words, my heart must hear to ever sing again. The words you used to whisper low, no other love can ever bring again." We are not alone. We have Christ. Open the door and let Him in!

I first heard Brenda Lee sing that song when I was in Army basic training in 1962. She is six months older than me. She charted more hits than any other female singer. Her family was very poor. As a child, she shared a bed with her two siblings in a series of three-room rented houses that had no running water. As a young child, she would sing solo in church every Sunday. One way to combat loneliness is to start your day with a prayer. Stay connected with Christ first. Then stay connected with family and friends on a daily basis by cell, text or email. Reach out to them and let them know you care about them. I look out the second floor window in this old house on Dyers Hill road. I look at the green waves of grain. I stand in awe at the majesty of Christ's creation. I humbly give thanks for all those that Christ has put in my path. My prayer, for anyone who reads this story, is that Christ will bless you and keep you safe in his care.

John F. Hall

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