

INTRODUCTION

My first memory involves being slapped in the face. I think psychologists put some measure of meaning into your first conscious remembrance. When people who know me read about this first memory, they are probably going to say, "Okay, now that explains a lot." Well, I can't blame them for that because in many ways I feel the same.

I had just finished my lunch and was watching Sheriff John, a local Los Angeles daytime TV show for kids. I'm guessing I was only a few years old at the time because I remember still sleeping in somewhat of a crib contraption. Sheriff John was not an actual law enforcement official, but he wore a uniform that looked real to me and worked in an office that seemed pretty legitimate. However, his primary role was keeping kids like me company during lunchtime by providing good advice and playing cartoons for us to watch.

There was one particular cartoon where the main character, Elmer Fudd, was very bashful, particularly around female characters. When they paid attention to him, he would blush, and say, "Aw, shucks." This registered with me as the appropriate thing to say when experiencing any type of female attention.

After Sheriff John was over, it was time for my nap. My mom picked me up and placed me into the bed. As mothers often do with their young children in putting them down to sleep, she stroked my face and said some loving things. I felt this was the perfect time to employ my expanded vocabulary, and so I said, "Aw, shucks." This was met with a slap in the face. Not a real hard one, but enough to send a message, which was that I was never to say those words again.

As you might imagine, this threw me for quite a loop. Certainly, my trusted friend, Sheriff John, would not allow cartoons to be shown that would get a young boy into that kind of trouble. My mom had not been abusive to me that I was ever aware, either before or ultimately after that incident. I was left alone to nap and ponder how I had come to experience this kind of humiliation, but I couldn't really come up with an answer that made any sense to me.

Looking back on this situation, now fifty years in the past, it is quite clear what happened, and it can be summed up with the old movie saying from *Cool Hand Luke*: "What we've got here is failure to communicate." Although I'm still sure I said, "Aw shucks," there is no doubt what my mom heard was, "Aw, fucks," and she reacted accordingly.

Although I didn't get hit very often as a child, or spanked, as they often referred to it, I did get a bum rap on that one. I can't complain too much as there were many times when I either got off the hook altogether or had my penalty softened.

As a boy, I smacked my father very hard with a large, iron cooking spoon, dead square on the point of his elbow. He howled like a hyena, and once he recovered, it was decided that corporal punishment was in order for me. As he positioned me to take the swat, my mother watched from the sidelines. As he drew his hand back, she screamed, "That's enough," and grabbed me into her arms. My father was left with the only reply possible: "I hadn't even hit him yet!" I don't know why I whacked my father with the spoon, but he probably had it coming.

When I was a little older and stronger, my dad and I were sitting in the living room of his bachelor pad, watching TV, side-by-side in chairs. He accidentally knocked his drink over onto the floor. I have no idea what made him decide this, but he had the bright idea that because I would have been punished for such an infraction, he should receive sanctions as well. I'm thinking that his impaired judgment, in this case, may have had something to do with what was in the glass.

He took off his belt, gave it to me, and told me to let him have it on the backside. As was to become part of a pattern throughout my life, my father never really knew me or understood me. He thought that I would give him a little baby tap, and we'd have a good chuckle out of it.

Instead, I laid into him like there was no tomorrow, and he pleaded with me to stop. As he moved around the room to try and evade me, I gave chase, hitting him with the belt anywhere I could, with everything I had. He turned to face me, and that's when I got him right in the "tooger." Tooger was the name I had developed for my peeing equipment.

He was finally able to get the belt away from me and end the mayhem, but I have to say he looked at me in the oddest way after that. It was kind of like if you thought you had a little kitten, which turned out to be more of a wolverine. To his credit, he took his medicine like a man and did not retaliate.

My mom and dad hailed from the southern part of the country, and in the fifties, like a lot of people, they made their way out to southern California. My mom already had a son from a prior marriage when they tied the knot, and I came along in the early sixties. I was really too young to remember much about my mother and father as a couple, as they divorced when I was a small boy.

My last memory of them together in the same house was when they were in the kitchen one morning. It must have been a Monday morning because my dad was bemoaning the fact that it was, "Blue Monday." I didn't know what that meant at the time, but I came to learn it was a saying to denote the third Monday in January, supposedly the gloomiest day of the year. However, I tend to think he may have meant it more generically, in that the weekend was over and it was time to head back to the grind of work.

It is my understanding that my parents' marriage was very volatile and tempestuous. I think there must be truth in this, because as I came to know them in later years, it was hard for me to imagine them coexisting peacefully in the same home, much less the same room.

Divorce was not something that was taken lightly back then. Couples tended to tough it out and stay together even when they couldn't stand each other. A common refrain heard was that they were staying together, "for the sake of the kids." My parents could not sustain that philosophy, if they ever possessed it, and they divorced in the mid-sixties when I was about four-years old.

I think their decision ended up shaping me in many ways, as I became just about the only kid in my neighborhood or school that did not have both their mother and father under the same roof. This led to me, among other things, having a bit of a chip on my shoulder, which I feel I still carry to this day. I felt that because I grew up as a boy without a father, I always had something to prove. Whether this was true or not, this perception became a furnace throughout my life that powered me to achieve, with an "I'll show you" attitude.