

The Story Of Dan Stone
A eulogy by his son, Brad Stone
February 2024

On September 3rd, 1939 England's prime minister somberly announced that World War II had begun. At nearly that exact moment, the young wife of an oil field roughneck prepared to give birth. A west Texas doctor positioned my grandmother on her well-worn dinner table, and turned up the volume of the radio so he could hear the news from overseas. Doc Little had lost two of his fingers in the *First* World War, and Dad would later joke that this was his first introduction to mathematics – start with five, remove two and you're left with three. My grandfather asked the doctor to pay more attention to mother and child, but with half his mind - and two of his fingers - across the Atlantic Ocean, the good doctor delivered a ten and a half pound rascal that would brighten so many lives.

It's as if the universe's response to a world gone stark raving insane, was to give birth to a person who was kind and optimistic and devoutly honest - hands down the most intellectually curious person I've known. Interesting puzzles and places waited for Dad around every corner, and by God he was going to find them.

You see, contrary to both religious and scientific opinion – it was my father who hung the moon. Dad taught me how to ride a dirt bike. And how to think of others. And how good a campfire feels on a cold night. He showed me how to give structure to lumber, and instructions to computers. He did these things with neither a raised hand or voice, but through example and easy-going discourse; always with a smile that showed he was as turned on by the conversation as I was. How lucky was I to have had a father like that?

People of all ages were attracted to his disarming intelligence and confidence. Children seemed to sense a playful curiosity in him that rivaled that of their own, so they immediately trusted him with all of their perfect little hearts. And he ate that up.

Dad was a generous soul. He helped others pay for school tuition, and buy homes, and pieces of art, and to take trips all over the world. And then there were all those wonderful meals he bought for others. You could argue 'til the world looked level and you weren't going to pay a dime, not even the tip. Just think of all that inheritance going down our throats.

Dad wrote tender poetry as easily as he wrote clever computer code, and he drifted to sleep each night with either an open book on his chest or a creative idea in his head – like how to build an intimate outdoor structure by pointing its sides to the solstices; thereby creating a platform whose only purpose in life is to gather humans so that we might share a moment together.

Dad was the least petty person that I've met – nothing rattled him. He believed that life is so short, so there's just no time to be moody or irritable; or to make others feel small during *their* short existence. I only inherited a couple of Dad's better traits - along with his hairline and poor short term memory. But if you want to see all of his best traits in one package, look no further than his remarkable daughter. If you've never met my sister, TJ, do yourself a favor and say Hi to her and to her amazing family after the service.

After I stopped working with Dad a dozen years ago, we still saw each other three times a week – every week – and we talked on the phone the other four days. So I shared much of my life with him. But what I'm most proud of, is that we shared our friends. My friends, and you know who you are, became his. And his became mine. As our friend David Hood recently said, I don't know of another 80-year old person who had so many 50-year old friends. I loved that.

So I have a 226-acre hole in my heart. But in my stronger moments, when I'm able to once again see the color in all those gorgeous rocks Dad collected, I find comfort in the indelible marks he left on dozens of places, and on more people than that.

Dad's fun-loving spirit was stimulated by his diverse childhood in Wichita Falls. He grew up going to soda fountains and drag races. But he also trained horses, and plowed hay fields with his granddad who drank a Dr. Pepper every morning and lived to be 106.

Dad's fourth grade teacher saw her fence-post-thin student spend his quarter each day on books instead of the cafeteria food for which it was intended. So this saint of a person gave free books to the self-motivated child, so that he could devour Mark Twain and Jack London along with the school's mystery meat.

If I could go back in time I'd kiss that woman, because she helped kickstart one of Dad's great passions in life. Reading books was a gift that lasted a lifetime. And believe me, I know of what I speak. I recently discovered that his house contained over 2,100 books. It was like those things had begun spawning. And besides reading books, he also had subscriptions to half a dozen science and math and outdoor journals. Every time I saw him he would hand me two or three articles that he had cut out for me. I sure miss that.

Along with the thousands of books, I also stumbled upon other interesting things in his tightly packed house. On his computer was a folder of over 300 poems and essays that he wrote over the decades. Some I knew about, most I didn't. All of them amazingly insightful. And then there's the dozens of fun educational science gadgets. I actually found a legally bought vile of radioactive uranium ore. Only Dan Stone. I can imagine him excitedly using his Gieger counter, and yes he had a Gieger counter, to see which household materials would block the detection of the uranium, and at what distances.

We'll never know for sure; and that's okay.

Dad graduated with honors with a math degree from Rice University. And at Florida State's graduate school he programmed computers far less powerful than your smartphone to do things like model the weather on Venus. Try doing that on your iPhone. Two years later he was the boy-wonder in charge of General Foods' entire Operations Research Department in New York.

He so loved using math and creative thinking to solve problems that he actually turned down a job offer from famed rocket scientist Werner Von Braun. Luckily, a few of the scientists at the Redstone Arsenal saw something special in young Dan, and they told him that the rocket-building company did very little with math that was new or interesting. To protect that fun-loving, creative streak of his, they urged Dad to follow his bliss by taking the first rocket ship out of town. That advice changed everything. If I could go back in time, I'd kiss those guys too.

Because at the age of just twenty-eight, without having ever taken a business course, Dad founded a telecommunications company called Danray and then another one called Compucon. These two companies were the cradle for the Richardson Telecom Corridor. Among other things, Dad and his partners saw a need for a digital telephone switch, and soon the nation's calls would no longer be routed by room-sized mechanical machines or by snarky switchboard operators like Ernestine on "Laugh In". The computerized phone switch was a game changer, and it allowed for things we now take for granted like voicemail, a robust internet, and that idiot in the car next to you texting while driving.

Folks *still* tell me how meaningful it was to work at companies where principles trumped profits, and ping pong games were encouraged to recharge mental batteries. Dad was a natural leader whose encouragement and fairness inspired people to *want* to work hard for him. He never had a mentor himself, yet still only in his thirties, Dad mentored several talented minds. Many of them went on to become critical players at Digital Switch, Northern Telecom, Sally Beauty, CNet, and several others.

One of Dad's great loves, of course, was mathematics. He could tell you about math and statistics as if something exciting was about to happen – and it usually did. He had a special relationship with math, something I've not seen in anyone else. It wasn't about remembering, it was about *feeling*. So he could go a decade without touching, say, matrix algebra or a particular form of integration in calculus, yet when he needed it, it flowed effortlessly from him. It was beautiful.

And more importantly, it was *so fun* to him - whether he was working on complex engineering problems, or discovering a new proof of The Pythagorean Theorem, or answering important questions like "*Dad, how many plastic Easter eggs do you figure could fit in our septic tank at the land?*" He'd grin, hold a "gimme-a-minute" pointer finger in the air, and seconds later he'd have an oddly accurate estimate; in this case,

ninety six hundred - *and one*.

Dad was the Sundance Kid of problem solving – he had a gift at quickly spotting the best path forward. And he actually *enjoyed* that feeling of confusion when faced with a new problem. Oh, it makes *me* weep like a disgraced televangelist. But for Dad, it was when his adrenaline pumped and his anticipation peaked. He even had a name for this feeling. He called it, “*managing our ignorance*.” He knew that the right mindset leads to understanding; to finding harmony from discord no matter what kind of problem you’re facing in life. It sure feels good to be around someone like that.

I had the pleasure of writing software with Dad for 22 years at his third company, called Salinon. A Salinon being his favorite geometric shape – and who doesn’t have a favorite geometric shape? One morning I arrived at our office to find him stacking small wooden blocks in a single vertical column. He had sawed and sanded each block – and put a few light coats of shellac on them so they’d feel just right to the touch. He began shifting the blocks near the top of the column so that the tower resembled a free-standing staircase. To my astonishment, the tower soon listed to the side so much that it seemed to defy gravity. A devilish grin crossed Dad’s face and he said “*If you give me enough blocks, I could theoretically make this tower lean a million miles to the side, without it ever tipping over.*”

Well, at age 37 my initial reaction was “*nuh uh*”. Surely Dad was using glue or magnets; smoke and mirrors - *something*. The once-solid ground beneath me was trembling. But it turns out there’s no trick - it’s just how nature is. Dad explained that you just need to position the blocks so that their overhangs follow a cool sequence of numbers called the Harmonic Series. And that led to a delightful discussion about how the Harmonic numbers got their name because they describe musical overtones and thus timbre - which is why Chuck Mandernach’s well-cared for trombone sounds so different from Willie Nelson’s worn-out guitar even when they both play the same note. Harmony from discord. I hadn’t wiped the sleepies out of my eyes that morning, but Dad had already made playing with blocks feel as exciting as it did when I was three. That was his gift to us.

Dad traveled the country, especially spots west of the Mississippi, with that same love for discovery. It was always about the journey, not the destination. So along the way, he chatted with flint knappers, and Dutch oven cooks – anyone with a kind smile and a story to tell. He didn’t admire Nature from afar or speak with distant reverence about it like it wasn’t in the room; he wanted to be *with* it. And he wanted you there too. So he laid with us under those quaking Aspen trees, sat wrapped in packing quilts as meteor showers drenched the night sky, and he rode dirt bikes with us on scenic trails *all through* the Rocky Mountains. As Dad said in his eulogy to his good friend Don Hale, “these were more than places, they were shared *moments* – bursting with thought and feeling.”

Back in the early 1970's while Dad was raising two kids and two companies, and reading three books at a time - I was tripping over my shin guards in the first grade. My youth soccer team gave birth to a beautiful, extended family, known simply as "The Group." The Hales and the Mandernachs sure added a lot of joy to Dad's life – and to mine too.

And it was around this time Dad noticed that the Dallas suburbs were missing the expansive fields and worn-out tractors of his youth. He wanted to fix that, and as usual he came up with the best possible solution. If he couldn't bring the country to Lake Highlands – he'd bring us to the country.

Brushy Land is where kids grow up, and adults play like children. And it was on those enchanting 226 acres that I saw firsthand what Dad had learned in his youth. He made cleaner cuts on lumber using a chainsaw than most could make with a circular saw. He would confidently cut down a dead tree so it landed just a foot to the left of his favorite ball cap. He could build, chop, cook, hammer, saw, and shoot. In my preadolescent, self-absorbed mind I wondered how he suddenly learned how to do all those things. Dad loved that land - but he loved sharing it with you even more.

While building those remarkable structures out there, Dad really would periodically drop a gloved hand to his side, take in the surroundings, and say out loud, "Isn't this great?". And he never worked from a set of detailed plans - the bliss of being in the moment meant the pleasure of figuring things out *on the fly*. For instance, when he first pondered building our rock-column entrance, I said with some trepidation that we had never worked with rock before. He grinned and said "*Won't it be a thrill to figure it out?*" And there you have it, the Tao of Dan in one perfect sentence.

When I was a boy, Dad and I saw two men leaving Brushy Land in a car. We reported it to the local sheriff who seemed utterly disinterested in our story. But as we were leaving the police station, Dad was asked about the trespassers' race. When Dad answered, a sense of urgency washed over the sheriff, and he began cussing a blue streak and using racial slurs. It frightened me. The lawman angrily asked Dad why he hadn't mentioned that the two men were black. Dad was intimidated by no one, so he leaned into the large angry man, and said with the strength of steel, "*Because you hadn't asked.*"

Dad had this wonderful Atticus Finch way of being a lens for you to see a better path. That sheriff suddenly looked small and foolish, and I was no longer afraid of him. Once again Dad had stopped the ground from trembling. Somehow at a very young age in 1950's Northwest Texas, he reached the only conclusion his restless young mind could make; we are at our best as a community of equals, with *every* member deserving dignity.

Dad enjoyed being silly; making *you* feel good. So he'd asked waitresses for watermelon juice just to see them smile. When Billie & Don Hale joined him on long drives, Dad

playfully re-named Billie “Road Noise.” At the top of a high mountain peak, he secretly placed a 10-pound rock in Jason’s backpack for the long hike down. He hung empty Pinch Scotch bottles in a tree at Brushy Land and would often declare in the hushed tones of a wildlife naturalist “*ahh, there’s the seldom seen Pinch Tree.*”

And we all had fun making Dad feel good too. He chuckled every time the normally-reserved Don Hale did some of that fancy trick riding of his. He always beamed when he told me about the conversation he had with his friend Philip during their weekly breakfast. Nancy’s clever holiday letters put Dad in stitches. And my sister’s tender stories about the kindergartners she teaches made him smile to no end. While driving to the Rockies for their annual dirt bike vacation, his friends Richard and Jim devised a way to drip motor oil onto their own exhaust manifold causing harmless smoke to billow behind their van at will. Then they used a CB radio to contact my startled father who was following closely behind, to ask him if their van was on fire. After several calls back and forth Dad eventually caught on.

I sometimes wonder what the world would have been like without Dad. Would the Richardson Telecom Corridor have existed? Maybe. Would Sears have sold as many out-of-style shirts? Doubtful. What’s certain is that without Dan Stone’s generosity and infectious spirit there would have been fewer businesses, fewer graduates, fewer smiles, and fewer visitors to off-beat gems like the top of the Old Pass in Red River, New Mexico or that quaint bookstore in Archer City. What a loss that would have been.

I admire how much of life Dad figured out largely on his own: the complicated business deals, the mathematics, the importance of equality & kindness, his enormously positive outlook on life – all done without a guru or mentor. He now stands as a monument to the pleasure of finding things out. So I’ll finish by relating five words of wisdom that he found out during his life:

One...never stop learning.

Two...be friendly, including at work.

Three...never pass up an opportunity to take a leak.

Four...give any child near you a few minutes of your complete attention.

And lastly...when building an outdoor structure, use a 4x6 even when a 4x4 would do, it just looks better.

Thank you for listening to me today, and for loving my father.