

June 10, 2007
Life isn't fair, but it can be

My Dad died 19 years ago on June 8th. I don't visit his grave very often because he was in a coma for two months prior to his death and I would rather remember him during his better days. Reflecting back on my life with him, the most important lesson he taught me was to treat all people fairly, and with respect. I literally applied this fairness principle throughout my life and remember expressing, "That's not fair," many times in school, which always drew the retort from my teacher, "Life's not fair." As a "wizedened" adult I comprehend the significance of the retorts but still have trouble accepting it. I suppose I'm still a kid at heart.

During my career I always maintained the ideal that although life wasn't always fair it could be. I felt that hard work and perseverance were necessary ingredients for fairness and those who tried should be at least recognized for their efforts. After all, another failure is simply another step closer to success. Many times as a lab director lab I expressed my concern when technicians would correctly perform a procedure the first time, thereby missing the opportunity to understand why it worked because they didn't see why it failed. When they invariably experienced a failure it wasn't fair that they had to relearn the lesson. But if they were tenacious, fairness ruled the day.

I observed many unfair events in my life but always learned a lesson from them. It wasn't fair that my baby son burned himself when he first touched a hot stove, but he learned not to do it again. It wasn't fair that a manager excoriated a worker whom I supervised for being incompetent, even though the manager never visited the manufacturing floor. It wasn't fair that my guys were always blamed for undermining the manufacturing process because they had no one to defend them until I was hired as their supervisor. It wasn't fair that my boss accused my best manager of subverting an accreditation we were trying to achieve, despite the countless hours this person gave up to get it right. It wasn't fair that lack of courage by corporate executives resulted in my company being acquired. It wasn't fair that my first true love left me for Adam, but I learned to love again. It wasn't fair that my wife's best friend from childhood died of brain cancer. It just wasn't fair.

But it was. In the end, all these incidents were completely fair. As Sir Isaac Newton discovered, there is a balance between all matter and energy that results in equilibrium. For each unfair act, there is someone, somewhere performing an altruistic act. For every injustice there is someone being exonerated. For every act of greed there is someone doing an act of kindness. Similarly, my company is steeped in the tradition of using fairness, as expressed in the mission statements of clients, to deliver corporate values and goals throughout the organization. Coupled with recognition for effort, the reinforcement of the mission will result in companies, both large and small, becoming benevolent icons who will treat everyone - their employees, suppliers, investors, clients and community - with fairness and respect, resulting in increased return on investment, increased return on equity and increased margins.

Life isn't fair but it can be. It requires honest leaders to speak up and be heard and not be afraid of the consequences of their actions. As I was taught, life is all about being fair and being respectful; these are my missions that drive my very existence. Hopefully I can impart these ideals to many, many corporations, leaving behind a legacy that would have made Dad proud. Thanks, Dad, for teaching me the most important lesson of life.