

Wallered

My Daddy was not a strong swimmer, but he could keep his head above water.

I have vivid memories of him wading into the water at Carolina Beach, calling for us to follow. He was conspicuous: his were the whitest of all Caucasian legs and torsos on the beach. He never wore shorts and he never ever went shirtless, not even when we were at home. He rarely wore a hat, so his head and his arms were the dark brown of a man who worked outside during the summer. The contrast was alarming.

He'd beckon us with a wave of a two-toned arm and we'd splash through the tide with our pre-teen or teenaged bodies to precisely the most tumultuous site, the place that the waves broke most energetically. The challenge was to resist being knocked over by the crashing waves. We'd crouch and position our arms and legs for the best leverage against those ferocious forces, thrusting arms upward in victory poses when we manage to survive. But sometimes, in fact quite often, despite our best efforts to resist, we'd get displaced by swirling currents. A body would disappear beneath the white foam, emerging seconds later as a tumbling tangle of arms and legs and butt washing ashore, sputtering for breath. We rushed to get back on our feet as quickly as possible to return for another battle with the relentless waves. Daddy's term for this was "getting wallered!"

I don't recall any other families that intentionally placed themselves right in the midst of the breakers, taking on Mother Nature in such a way as to allow Her the advantage. We did, and we loved it! Rather than going a little further out and enjoying the gentle rise and fall of the waves before they broke (which is what sane people do) or staying closer to the shore and allowing each wave to massage only feet and ankles (which is what toddlers and elders prefer), we relished the most physically challenging adventure, one where losses were embarrassing and conspicuous, and where success meant surviving until the next aquatic onslaught. Ours was the most exhausting beach activity, and we probably slept better than any beachgoers except perhaps those who combined too much sun with too much alcohol. Alcohol was never an ingredient in our family recipe for fun at the beach.

As the years passed, Daddy's time in the water shortened, but he never lost interest in watching us battle the waves from his position of safety on the warm dry sand. He seemed to enjoy seeing us get wallered. He'd laugh or grin and shake his head once the wallered one resurfaced, regained balance, accepted the ritual ridicule of other participants, and returned to the breaker zone. He must have known with some certainty that our bodies could withstand even the greatest displacements, and that serious injury was safely improbable.

When we'd join him on shore, he enjoyed watching others as they encountered the crash zone, intending to pass through it to calmer deeper waters beyond. He most enjoyed seeing inattentive waders get battered by the waves and expelled to the shore, tumbling, disoriented, tugging on swimsuits, and staggering to their feet.

Battling the crash zone at the beach has remained a family tradition. I beckon my three children and now my grandchildren to join me at the very spot where catastrophe lurks wave after wave and we face the physical challenge, each one providing the possibility of a satisfying survival, or a humorous debacle.

Perhaps there is a life lesson in this activity. Could it be that Daddy intended for us to learn that we can take on the greatest challenges in life, often remaining stable and balanced, but occasionally being knocked off our feet. Did Daddy want us to learn that armed with resilience and determination, we can return to live more confidently, having enjoyed successes and endured failures?

Onward,
G.R. Davis Jr.
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Daddy watching for people to get wallered.

Upon reading "Wallered," my brother David contributed this:

Daddy would always go by Jimmy McLean's tire store and get all the old inner tubes (the bigger the better,) take them home, use Monkey Grip patches to repair what he could, and take them to the beach to ride the waves. Daddy always enjoyed seeing who could make it over the top of the next oncoming wave without flipping over backwards.

By the end of the day if you didn't wear a tee shirt while riding the tubes, your nipples would be so raw you couldn't touch them.

A couple of times when he invited the Sunday school kids down for the weekend, there would be 12 to 15 people riding tubes at any one time. Daddy loved it.