

# This Christmas: A Letter of Thanks to My Dad



By Frosty Wooldridge

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This Christmas, I am sending a letter to my Dad for his gifts to me. I hope this letter inspires you to call or write a letter to each of your parents to appreciate them for their loving and caring for you every day of your life. In America, all of us enjoy SUCH enormous blessings not found in places like Africa, Asia, Mexico, South America, Middle East, Indochina and numerous less fortunate places in the world. Your letter to your parents will be received with joy, tears of happiness and much gratitude.

Dear Dad,

It's been 58 years since you drew your last breath on this planet. That moment you left; my heart stood still. With your passing, my mind dropped into a lower gear. My spirit, usually "up" because of your guidance and constant encouragement, deflated. My sense of the world became senseless. There was no question that my life became a slow slog through painful emotional swamp.

A person in a military uniform Description automatically generated with medium confidence

(MSgt. Howard Wooldridge, United States Marine Corps, WWII, Korea)



(As a side note, my father was umpiring a baseball game from behind the plate in Albany, Georgia between Valdosta and Albany High School. At the top of second inning, he called, "Strike Three! Take Your Base." The batter turned around, confused. At that moment, my father clutched his chest plate, fell forward over the catcher and died on home plate. His death at age 46 changed the life-trajectory of my entire family.)

How did it happen that life chose to take you away from our family? You had four boys and a daughter to raise! You attended all our sporting events from baseball to basketball to football. You taught us how to swim. You taught us how to scuba dive. You taught us golf. Oh, and that sport called, tennis! I loved walking onto that court.

But then, you were gone. What? Why? At the funeral, I stood in a trance at seeing your lifeless body in that casket. Everybody walked by saying how handsome you were at your youthful 46 years. Yours was the last open-casket funeral I ever attended. I would have rather remembered you umpiring behind the plate. I would have rather remembered playing a round of golf with you.

But what really distressed me was when the preacher giving

your eulogy said, "God decided that Howard Wooldridge needed to be called to heaven much earlier than expected."

I sat there in the pew, stunned! Why would God pull you, our father, away from our family to be in heaven...when you, our father was needed MUCH more on Earth to take care of your wife and kids? At 17, that was the last time that I ever thought God made any sense. Especially since you had attended church every Sunday of my entire life! You put money in the basket when you didn't have money to put in the basket. You and mom were good, wholesome, kind and loving couple. To take you away made no sense, whatsoever.

Later, I didn't blame God, but I really questioned preachers who had no idea about what they were talking about.

That day of your burial still resides in my mind. What did I take from it? Your death totally undercut the foundation of my life. With no counseling or help, I staggered forward not knowing what to do or what to say or how to act.

Honest to God, Dad, I finished my junior year in high school in a total blur. Nothing really made sense. Playing sports didn't mean much without you cheering Rex and me on from the stands. I never got to walk off the field again with you waiting to shake my hand, "Son, you played a hell of a game out there, tonight. I'm proud of you."

Of all your gifts Dad, I miss that praise, "I'm proud of you, son!"

Years later, when I see a father and son skiing, rafting or biking together, I feel such envy. I've even gone up to them and complimented their activities together. I even tell them how lucky they are to be sharing a father-son adventure. Some look puzzled because they have no idea of what I am talking about. They took it all for granted.

I remember most of the things you taught me like, "Son, if you

start something, you finish it. You need to maintain confidence in yourself. At your lowest points, and those moments will come in your life, look up, stand up and be counted. Always tell the truth so you will be respected by all you meet."

"I can tell you this, son," dad said. "You'll face different adversaries in this life. Meet them head on with integrity, honor and confidence. That way, you can always hold your head up high."

Honest to God, Dad, I didn't begin to regain myself until I attended college. I became the vice president of my floor. Later, secretary of the dormitory. Our Head Resident Advisor, Gary North, saw something in me. He asked me to be a Resident Assistant in a new dorm on campus. He unknowingly inspired me to my highest and best self. I became an excellent R.A. for three years. I earned the Dean's List my last six quarters in college. I sure wish you could have been there when I graduated from MSU. Oh, and by the way, I visit and maintain contact with Gary North over 50 years later. You said I would meet good men and women in this life. Gary and Marty North are the finest in my life.

It shows you that all of us need someone to be proud of us.

Yes, I became an ROTC U.S. Army officer. Served to the best of my abilities! Made it through the Vietnam War in once piece!

Then, two more years in college at GVSC in Allendale, Michigan, and a teaching degree. Like many foolish young men, I married a lovely lady, but we were totally incompatible. She liked five-star hotels and I would rather camp out next to a blazing fire. We divorced with no kids. That's when I used my three months off from teaching to bicycle across six continents in my lifetime. It's been great, Dad. I KNOW you're proud of me because you've been watching my progress across South America, Australia's Outback, Europe, 15 times across

America coast to coast, the South Pole, all of Asia and so many countries.

You know what I want to thank you for Dad? Thank you for giving me the confidence to strike out on grand adventures...many times alone. I simply used the confidence you gave me, and I made it my companion. So far, so good.

For certain, through the years, when I've ridden up ski lifts, or biked some lonely road, or sat by a campfire, or played tennis, you're there with me. I've had conversations with you in my dreams. One thing is for sure: I wish I could just have one day to talk with you, man to man, about what kind of a son you raised for the world. I'd proudly tell you about all my exploits around the world. I'd bring pictures.

With all of that, I'd love to hear your story, your life, your dreams. I know that what was inside you as a man, was what you bequeathed to me. Thank you from my heart, mind and spirit.

Also, each morning when I walk into my office, the first thing I see is an 8" X 10" photo of you in your U.S. Marine Corps uniform. I greet you. Sometimes with a salute, and sometimes with, "Good morning, Dad." Additionally, I carry your picture in my wallet. You've been all over the world with me. You've stood on the Great Wall of China, the South Pole, Machu Picchu, the Himalaya, scuba dived most of the oceans of the world, ridden across the Outback, won some tennis matches, skied deep powder, canoed the Mississippi River, written 17 published books, and another 100 great moments that we've shared in this life.

For the love of God, I can't thank you enough, Dad.

Finally, in the latter part of my life, I met a fabulous gal named Sandi. She is a fantastic dancer. We meshed like two peas in a pod. It took me seven years to ask her to marry me. Being a romantic, I asked for her hand while on the dance floor with Elvis Presley's "Can't help falling in love with

you.” She said, “Yes!” And so here we are more than 20 years later still dancing, laughing, sharing and romancing. Like you with Mom, I feel like a very lucky man.

When I finally breathe my last breath, I want you to know that I made you proud. I honored you in my daily life. I know that you were never a famous man...and at the same time, you’ve been the highest towering figure in my life. I sure hope you’re still umpiring behind the plate in Heaven.

You and Mom, the best a son could ask for in this life!

Finally, Dad, I’m proud to be your son.

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