

-Linda Diane Feldt May 2008

My father can whistle. My mother never had it, my brother also never mastered the art. My sister and I do. I find myself naturally filling in missing words of songs by whistling. But my father always announced his presence by whistling as he came into the house, as he got into the car, when he was outdoors he was most often whistling but especially as he transitioned from one place to another.

And then he would whistle us home.

Playing outdoors was a spring and summer constant. In a neighborhood of safe streets, slow cars, lots of kids, trees and backyards, we were outside until dinner. The rule was, as dinner time approached, you could go as far as you wanted – as long as you could hear the whistle. That was our judge of distance, that was the invisible tether, we could only go as far as my dad could whistle and still be heard.

And only my father could whistle us home. My mother's call was no match and carried no distance, she never put much into it. But my father's whistle was long and loud and distinct. Two notes, our notes, our signal that he was home and dinner was ready.

At the time it was certainly something to resist, to be sorry to hear, it meant the end of the game or the fun or the mud piles or the fort building. It meant the time of play between school and dinner was over.

Now I consider the magic and the wonder of being whistled home. Of being called by those two notes, the communication that was uniquely ours, my brother and sister and I being summoned home by dad.

Sometimes we missed it – on purpose or we really had strayed out of the range of hearing “Didn't you hear me whistle?” would be the accusation when we finally arrived late for dinner. Hearing dad whistle was important, was a critical part of being in our family and being together.

I think now of that phrase, and hearing my dad whistle. His hearing is almost gone, he can't really hear his own whistle – his hearing aids distort the notes, he hears a different thing entirely than his audience. But he still whistles as he approaches my house. He still whistles as he searches for a tool to lend me. He still whistles as he relaxes and walks ever more slowly to and from his car.

“Didn't you hear me whistle?” he no longer asks the question, there is no penalty for missing his call, and in fact he no longer calls. I am no longer summoned home by anyone. But I love to hear his whistle, to hear him sounding tunes for himself no matter how distorted, a habit spanning over 70 years that has not faded with his ability to hear it.

Some time soon I won't hear his whistle, and it will be those simple clear two notes that I will miss the most. The notes that called us home.

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