
Father's Day 2006

by Stephen H. Segal

The direction of my life changed in September 2001. Not because of the massively traumatic, world-altering historical events that happened that month, but because of two relatively unrelated things that occurred in my own little world. One was that the newspaper I was editing got bought out and shut down by its business rival, interrupting what had been the steady arc of my career as a journalist. And the second was that, upon my father's suggestion, the two of us attended the World Science Fiction Convention for the first time.

Worldcon was a revelation. Unlike the Star Trek conventions my friends and I had attended in junior high and high school (also thanks to my dad), and unlike most of the comic-book conventions I'd gone to in college, this wasn't the assemblage of an audience to worship at the altar of paid guest stars -- it was a more equal, fraternal gathering of readers and fans who included among them the professional writers, editors and artists who build the worlds of science fiction and fantasy we all love. Interacting on a one-on-one level with these creators allowed me to reach Part Two of an important epiphany. As an arts & entertainment reporter who spent lots of time interviewing much-admired artistic celebrities, I had quickly come to realize: They're not gods, just great folks. And now, as a Worldcon member chatting casually over drinks with the science fiction elite, I finally not only understood, but believed: I can do this too.

That eureka moment solidified my determination to chart a science fiction-related path for my professional life. But a more important realization was to come.

In the five years since, Dad and I have gone to the convention together every Labor Day. To all our friends and acquaintances at home, at work, this seems a perfectly natural, if amusing, father-son ritual -- after all, hundreds of thousands if not millions of sports-loving dads and sons around the world travel every year to watch The Big Game together (whatever their game of choice may be), so of course the geek dad and son do the equivalent. That goes without saying, right?

Here's what I've come to understand: No. In five years, I've yet to encounter another father-son duo in all the hundreds of new friends I've met at the Worldcon. When I explain to other attendees that I'm there with my father, they often look at me with a sense of wonder as if we ourselves were a novel concept in a science fiction story. Just this past week, when I told my new colleague at Wildside Press, a fantasy writer and editor my own age, about our annual "family vacation," he was literally stunned into momentary silence.

Most people who grow up with this great love for things otherworldly, it turns out, aren't just considered weirdos by their schoolmates -- their parents think they're a little odd, too. And, in the other direction, when a parent is intensely geeky, their kids usually don't think it's cool, they find it incredibly embarrassing, and cultivate other interests.

As a boy and as a man who's always been inspired by science and magic, explorers and emperors, aliens and elves, I've been amazingly blessed. Not only did I go to public school with a class full of kids who never once, in twelve years, harassed or abused me for being a geek -- good-natured teasing was the worst it ever got, and I almost always felt respected, not despised, for my intellectual nature -- but at home, too, I had a father who gave me Asimov and Heinlein and Herbert to read, who shepherded me into caring about things that most people never give a thought to, who encouraged me to dream of impossible things, idealistic pursuits and cosmic visions. And then, to top it all off, he helped make sure I learned the things I needed to to connect dreams with reality.

Happy Father's Day, Dad. As you've often told us, you are indeed the greatest.

Stephen

P.S. Did I mention my father-in-law-to-be is a science fiction geek too? God, I should never complain about anything in life ever.