

June 4, 2016

Happy Father's Day!

I would like to start off by wishing Father Juan Salas a most happy Father's Day. Juan was ordained a priest on Saturday, June 4, at the Cathedral of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Dodge City.

For Father Juan, fatherhood means the sudden accumulation of a family of hundreds of people, each with their own struggles ... joys ... weirdiosyncrasies. (There's a reason why priests go through years and years of education. Imagine finding yourself in that situation without a bit of education behind you!)

Each person—you, me, that person sitting next to you—houses a list of reasons why we could use some one-on-one time with a priest. But, we are notoriously bad at admitting we could use a bit of help. Know that Father Juan is there for you. He cares, big time. It's in his job description.

Happy *Father's Day*, Father Juan!

. . .

We were driving along the rolling hills of rural Missouri taking in the beauty: the spectacular spring greenery of the pines, boxelders and flowering dogwoods; the lush grass carpeting the hills; lackadaisical cattle grazing lazily, and an elephant lumbering in the distance.

Wait. What?

"*Did ... did ... did you see that?!*" I asked my wife as trees suddenly overtook our field of vision.

We were cruising along Hwy 44 in Missouri after having spent a four-day vacation at Lake of the Ozarks. Charlene was lost in her book, and I was lost in thought as we drove through Ozark country. Off to my right I saw several cattle romping through a hilly field; the one chasing them playfully was as large as a camper and had two big floppy ears and a long trunk.

"An ... an ... elephant!" I struggled to say once the thought finally processed. "In that field! I saw an elephant!"

Charlene looked up and saw only trees. *Uh, huh. Suuuure, Mr. Comedian. Hilarious.*

Oh, c'mon, man! I screamed silently. I mean, who was going to believe me? It was an elephant! In a field in Missouri!

Suddenly the trees parted. Were we too late? No! There it was! For the briefest moment Charlene saw what I had seen. Not the same view, but still. No north-bound animal has a southern view that large.

"Um ... and what did you have for breakfast this morning?" my dad asked on the phone later that day. (I have yet to tell my co-workers. I would never live it down.)

Oddly enough, seeing an elephant in the middle of a Missouri pasture at what must have been some sort of wild game preserve made me think of my dad. Elephants don't generally remind me of my dad. He has neither a big nose nor large, floppy ears. But with Father's Day approaching, I couldn't help but think about Dad's experience as a geophysicist managing an exploratory crew in the Sudan, where seeing an elephant wouldn't necessarily make you choke on your gum.

His work in Africa is just one of the things he's done in his life that is so far beyond anything I could imagine myself being able to do. If it were me encountering a war party of Dinkas—as he really did back in 1977—the Dinkas would have been presented with a strange sight: "It was this bizarre looking white dude!" the Dinka leader would later tell his wife. "His eyes nearly popped right out of his head! Then he started to run, but his legs were moving so fast that he just dug a hole in the sand! Then he fainted! It really freaked us out!"

Instead, my dad, with his trademark smile, simply approached the lead Dinka (all of them were carrying a sheath of spears), told him his name and offered his hand. The Dinka smiled back and offered his hand in return.

Dad spent his nights in a tent in the African bush, watching carefully for scorpions, listening to the distant (hopefully very distant) roar of a lion, and one memorable night recording on tape his African crew singing an ancient song while one played the thumb piano. It always reminded Dad of David playing the lyre for Saul to ease his troubled spirit.

It's a glorious picture, the means to which is far beyond my reach. I could never begin to imagine doing what my father did. My idea of adventure is driving to Liberal for an interview and a quick stop at a thrift store. (I could get a flat tire! I could find an item I really, really want but is super expensive! The challenges are never ending.)

What's left is pure admiration.

The picture doesn't end there. When my dad was 20 years old, he was leading a group of men on a ship in the north Pacific during World War II. When I was 20, I couldn't lead myself out of an empty tool shed. My life was a riddle wrapped in a fog inside a tortilla made of fly paper.

Later, he worked for Hospice of Peace, volunteering to be friends to people in the last stages of life.

Again, pure admiration.

Thank you, Dad, for a lifetime of awesomeness. For changing my life, and for affecting the lives of so many people, known and unknown. *Happy Father's Day!*

