

This article was a tribute to my dad, who was my "build it, fix it, paint it" hero. I learned those skills, and that can-do attitude, from him. He passed away in 2013, but not before he saw this published.

The build it, fix it, paint it gene

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For the Monitor

Did you know there's a handyman gene? It gets passed down to lucky children from the fathers and moms who know how to patch drywall, refinish furniture and get the lawnmower to start. While not yet identified in the human genome, I know it is there, because my father, do-it-yourselfer extraordinaire, passed a diluted version down to me.

Growing up, I was convinced my father could build or fix anything. He built our

house, for starters. In his modest basement workshop he tackled home projects, crafted furniture and brought broken appliances to life. When something in the house needed repair or improvement – and when you own a house, something always needs repair or improvement – he was on top of it. I do not recall a single time that my family resorted to calling a pro to come to our rescue.

My dad wasn't a carpenter or tradesman by training – he was a teacher and, later,

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administrator, in the public schools - but he clearly had that “fix-it” gene. Though I didn’t fully appreciate how remarkable his skills were when I was a child, I now marvel at his can-do attitude, self-taught abilities, as well as the tangible heirlooms he was able to create. I’m also pleased as punch that a bit of his mind-set, if not his considerable skill set, was passed down to me.

Like my father, “can-do” is my primal response when faced with peeling paint or a yearning for raised garden beds. Quite often my “can-do” turns to a more realistic “actually, can’t do,” but I like to give it the old college try before calling in the experts. The lure of the do-it-yourself project is great: If I can rise to the occasion, I get the pleasure of being immersed in a task that has a starting point, an ending point, and a tangible and generally appreciated result. With a house project I get to – or have to – take control over the process and responsibility for the outcome. It’s my baby, baby.

Part of my do-it-myself tendency, I have to admit, is based in frugality – also an inherited trait. But a larger part is the stubborn conviction that I can succeed on my own. There’s no shame in hiring an expert, of course, and I do it plenty. But there is something deeply satisfying about putting hands and mind to work and seeing a relatively immediate, tangible and permanent result for my labors: much more immediate and tangible than, say, raising children to be ideal adults or working in a job where yesterday’s accomplishments are, oh, so yesterday. When I paint the exterior doors, the doors look great and have a tendency to stay that way, which is more than I can say for my kids or my work assignments.

My father, now 90, doesn’t tackle projects like he used to, but I know he pines to. He eyes the door that needs new hinges, the cabinet that could use another shelf,

the porch that needs fresh paint. Not long ago he fixed the plumbing under the kitchen sink, which is no easy task for someone who uses a cane and has arthritis in his hands. The project was a struggle, and we, his family, were tempted to suggest that he turn the project over to someone else, except that we know how that handyman gene works – it allows you to lose yourself in a project, focused, tinkering, happy as a clam. How could we take that away? So he got down on hands and knees to tackle it. If I lived closer, I would have loved to have helped, because everyone knows that two handyman genes are even better than one.

I'm now eyeing a new generation of handyman genes: my two sons occasionally show promise. I'm sure hoping that gene is there. If it is, they have my dad to thank.