

Requiem for a Manic Hero



Like one of his better punch lines, the news of Robin Williams' death hit me right in the diaphragm, taking my breath away with the sorrow and brilliance of his life. To many, he was a frenetic comic genius and a fair hand on the movie stage. Fun, but difficult. For those of us who grew up in the 1970s without a father, however, he was a gentle hero and one of our best role models.

He got our attention with a bit part on *Happy Days*. I have no idea why we tuned in to that show every week, it was about as far from our world as we could probably imagine. As the happy child in the classic American nuclear family, Richie Cunningham embodied something that none of us with absentee fathers would ever really know. The safe archetypes of 1950s America, dripping with saccharine, appealed to us on some level. And then, out of nowhere, a fast-talking alien appeared and stopped us in our tracks.

The plot, the script, and the context fell away: we were transfixed by his energy, and by a stage presence that was unlike any we had ever seen. Despite the silly costume, and the awkward lines, we recognized a *real man* on the screen. His eyes, his voice, and the way he engaged the audience let us know that we should pay attention. He had something to show us about what it meant to be human, to laugh and cry, and to confront the vagaries of life head on.

On the street I grew up on, nobody lived with their father. My three best friends all lived with their mothers, and only one of them saw their father on a regular basis. It was just normal for us, we didn't think much about it. All four of us, however, paid attention to Robin's work as he moved into prime time as our favorite alien and then graduated to the silver screen in a bewildering array of characters. We didn't talk about him, but we didn't miss *any* of his performances, either.

Without quite realizing it, we wanted to live up to the standard he set for the modern man in our culture. We wanted to be just as funny, brilliant, sweet, sympathetic and most of all, as brave as he was in the face of a hostile audience, a bad script, or a difficult moment. In his work, we caught a glimpse of the transcendent, of the best that a man could bring to the stage of life. If he sometimes hid behind an ad-lib or a flashy impression, we understood. You can either *duck and laugh*, or you can *let the bastards win*.

After setting the gold standard for entertaining your fellow man, Robin gave many of us a model for how to act like the father we hoped to become. Those of us who grew up without a real dad wanted to do better, to give our children the wit, and the warmth of a true *mensch*. In his earliest film roles, Robin created three-dimensional characters that grew into the part of father with their foibles intact. You could not confuse T.S. Garp with Ward Cleaver. He made mistakes, but he kept trying, and taught us that is what we have to do for our kids. It can be done - and he showed us that it was worth the effort, both for the protagonist-dad and for the character-kids.

In kaleidoscopic fashion, Robin explored every facet of fatherhood:

- In *The World According to Garp*, he gives form to the lifecycle of the fatherless child, and accepts the burden of parenthood with an unvarnished humility.
- In *Seize the Day*, his character confronts the failed, missing father we all grew up with from an adult perspective.
- In *Dead Poet's Society*, he plays the surrogate father many of us wish we had found, and the ultimate English teacher.
- In *Awakenings*, his character tries to save De Niro's Leonard, a surrogate father and, ominously, the destiny he was faced with off-stage.
- In *Hook*, his character redeems himself after losing the spark of life, and the trust of his children, in a yuppie haze.
- In *Toys*, his character drives a fable illustrating the cost of failing to help a child grow up, and offers a useful lesson about arrested adolescence.
- In *Mrs. Doubtfire*, he brings the Jungian conflict into the open: effective fathers must find a way to reconcile, and draw from both the masculine and feminine elements of our psyche to succeed as a parent.
- In *Being Human*, his set of characters illustrate how easy it is to lose children, and how hard you have to work to win them back.
- In *Good Will Hunting*, Robin's character serves as parent, confidant, peer, foil and just about everything else a bright young man could hope to meet.
- In *What Dreams May Come*, the horrific loss of his character's children serves as the trigger for confronting all that follows this world.
- In *Bicentennial Man*, his character spends hundreds of years trying to escape the straightjacket of the mechanistic ideal.
- In *One Hour Photo*, he reinvents the eunuch as a stalker who uncovers the artificiality of the nuclear family archetype.
- In *RV*, the yuppie Dad is updated for the wireless age, and he once again walks the tightrope back to his kids.
- In *August Rush*, the problematic Dickensian wizard takes in the unwanted and shows them how to play for their keep.
- In *World's Greatest Dad*, we are invited to explore the many shades of grey between and beyond good and evil in the father-son relationship.

- Ironically, *The Angriest Man in Brooklyn* cannot find peace until he manages to reconcile with his son.
- We may be treated to one last laugh in *Absolutely Anything* when it finds a release. Robin trusted Terry Jones with it. A good choice.

We hope Robin has found some peace: he has earned it. In his work, he has left a treasure that young men may learn from, and young women can refer to.

In addition to his doctoral examination of fatherhood in modern America, Robin left us with a masterpiece in *The Fisher King*, perhaps his greatest performance. Parry, his character, illustrates the power of tragedy and comedy in our confrontation with life. In a fit of *pars pro toto*, Robin helps to bring the scope of myth into the walk of an average life, and we can honor his memory by learning from his humility and the effort he made to bring Parry to life. May we all find the courage to help those who are thirsty.

-- Steven Peterson, 2014

