

Why I Got a Tattoo

In 1979, our son Jon, on active duty in the U.S. Marines, got a tattoo. It wasn't the kind of tattoo that hid coyly under his tee shirt or trousers, but rather, a black panther clawing bloody marks on his upper arm. He would forever have this macho mark for the world to see unless he was wearing a long sleeve shirt. The first time I saw it I was very disappointed and wondered how Ruth and I had gone wrong. How could this son of ours do such a dumb thing. A year later, Jon died under some very tragic circumstances, and of course, we just wanted that tattooed young man back with us again. Tattoos seemed so insignificant...life so important. We were so numb that the tattoo thing didn't even enter our minds. Grieving became a full time, if semi-temporary, job for quite some time. I felt guilty when I thought about how much that tattoo had bothered me. It seemed so unimportant.

A year or so passed and one evening Ruth and I were having coffee after dinner and she said, "I have something to tell you...you'd better sit down." She slowly worked up to telling me that Jill, our seventeen year-old daughter, had got a tattoo. Using a bit more discretion than Jon, hers was of a yellow rose (Jon's favorite flower) and was on her abdomen, near her thigh. Ruth said that the only time it could be seen was when she was naked or in a string bikini, and that Jill was afraid to tell me because she knew how upset I had been when Jon got The Panther. I just shook my head, and Jill, who had been waiting for the outcome of her

Mom's announcement, rushed into the room to show me her tattoo.... a very tasteful, two inch long yellow rose. She explained that she had done this in honor of Jon and didn't ask permission because she just knew we would not approve. Jill never does anything half way, and instead of counting her blessings that we hadn't disinherited her; she then suggested that I get a tattoo as a way of paying tribute to Jon. I said that I was "not a tattoo kind of guy" and that I wasn't angry with her and was touched by her action to honor Jon. She said, "If you won't get a tattoo now, when might you get one?" I said, "I probably wouldn't get one before I was fifty-five (almost ten years hence)!! Everyone laughed and I didn't hear any more about tattoos for years!

On my fifty-fifth birthday, Jill got me a gift certificate for a tattoo! She had called my bluff! I guess the rest of the family knew that she was giving me this gift certificate... and waited to see how I would handle this unusual gift. I said, "I said I would get one when I was fifty-five and I will." No one believed I would do it!

A week later, Jill and I went to the tattoo parlor. She took her son, and my grandson, Andrew, five, along, but promised me he would stay in the car with his toys and one of her friends while I had the tattoo "installed." We had an appointment and met with an artist to decide what kind of tattoo I would be getting. I said I only wanted one the size of a fifty-cent coin and that it had to be on my hip. The artist pulled out a book and we looked at pictures in my gift certificate price range. I had a million choices. I eschewed the snakes, motorcycles, cartoon characters and Panthers...

and selected an Eagle with his wings spread wide, about to soar into the sky. I was asked to lie on my side on a barber chair type recliner. I pulled my pants down to expose the section of my butt where the tattoo would be inscribed and the artist draped me with sterile towels. It was like being in surgery...sort of. I felt very comfortable but was ready for the addition to my body. She sketched the eagle on my skin and started the actual tattoo, using a vibrating needle contraption, which she dipped in various colors of ink. I have been asked how it hurt and I must say it didn't. It felt like someone was making small marks on my skin with the end of a paper clip...annoying, but never painful. The whole process took about thirty minutes and only one thing happened that bothered me. While lying comfortably with my eyes closed, I heard a cough that I recognized. I looked up. Andrew had got bored with his toys and came in to see what was happening. I didn't like the idea of him seeing this procedure, but the artist said he had been there most of the time already. I just closed my eyes and acted like it didn't matter to me. (Note: He is now twenty-two and doesn't have a tattoo, so I guess this traumatic event in his life didn't impact his decision making or scar him for life!)

Well, I have now had this tattoo for seventeen years and it hasn't changed my life very much. Most folks don't believe me when I say I have a tattoo. The only folks who have ever seen my eagle are the ones who have been around while I was swimming ... I only have to lift my boxer swim trunks about two inches for someone to see it. I am really glad I got My Eagle. I have never named it...it is just My

Eagle. I suppose Jon laughs that his Dad got a tattoo, in that I made such a fuss about his. Mostly, the whole tattoo thing just put “what is really important for me into perspective.” Jon was important...tattoos really have little importance. I am sorry I made such a big deal about his. I could envision employers seeing his tattoo sticking out from under his short-sleeved shirt and wondering what kind of guy would be wearing a panther tattoo...I was focused on the practical, and then he was gone and the tattoo meant nothing to me, except that I wish I could see it again. I think of Jon nearly every day and remember how much fun he was, how smart he was, how funny he was, how talented he was, how free-spirited he was, how his flaming red hair was like mine when I was his age, and how it would be so good to have him around our family. His memory will live on in each of our family...we talk about him nearly every time we have a family get together...about how great it would be to have him around. I just hope that Jill and me getting our tattoos brings a smile to his face and that he knows he did the right thing when he got his.

August 2008

Postscript (2017):

Twenty-six years ago, when I was fifty-five, I got the tattoo described above. I am now eighty-one. Over the years, ‘My Eagle’ had lost its colorful beak and talons and looked more like an ink blob than a bird of prey.

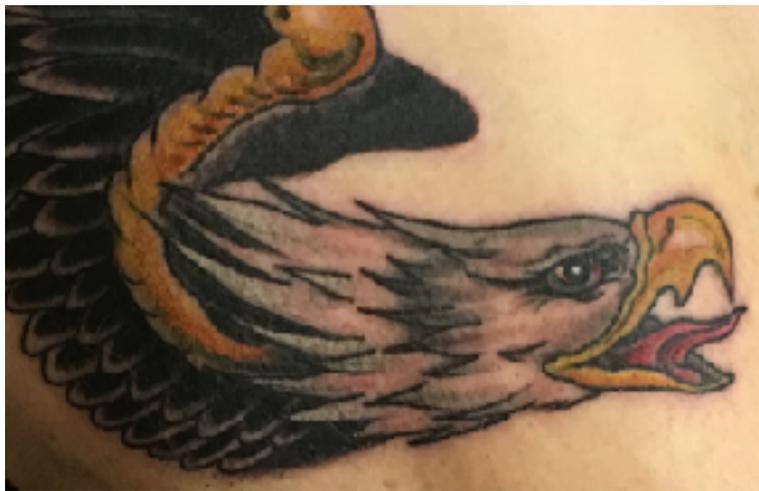


For several years I thought of getting it a “tune up,” but had never got around to it. As Ruth and I had decided to stay in Ohio this winter, I decided that this was the time for the overhaul. I imagined that a tattoo artist would

add a few colors to the existing tattoo and that would take 15-20 minutes. No, that isn’t the way a tattoo is “tuned up.” The new tattoo would need to be large enough to hide the existing tattoo! I met with Ryan at Defiance Tattoos in Kent and he described the process we would need to follow. He said that he would sketch a new larger eagle for my approval. I scheduled an appointment with Ryan...he said if I approved the design, he could complete the job in about an hour. At first I thought I would keep this a secret (I only had to keep the secret two days), but decided to tell Ruth, Jeff, Andrew and Jill. The moment I told Jill she said she

planned to be there as she had been for the first one. Ruth said she would skip the procedure, which I kept calling, “my plastic surgery.”

I arrived for my appointment, approved the design and signed the papers giving Ryan permission to do the art work. He escorted me to a small room with a table much like my physician has in his office...black leather. He affixed the paper with the design to my hip, leaving the outline on my skin. He said, “Are you ready?” I said “Yes.” He started. He mentioned that he didn’t do many tattoos for eighty-one year olds! I wondered why! I remembered the pain level as a paperclip scratching my skin but quickly revised this to an x-acto knife cutting grooves into my skin. I took a deep breath and realized that the initial shock was wearing off and that I could take it. About then, Jill arrived and kept a narration going which not only distracted me but



kept me informed as to what was happening. She kept saying, “this is awesome... your’e gonna love it.” One and one half hours after we started the new eagle was completed. It is

bigger than I had expected (six inches long and five inches high) but I really like it. I said, “The first one lasted twenty-

six years...I hope this one lasts that long.” Ryan said, “It will last longer than that!”

I’m really glad I did this! Jon is laughing, Jill is proud of me, Andrew said it is cool but he would never want one... and Ruth still loves me. Everything is just fine.

January 2017