

How bittersweet a smart kid's lot

Bill Hall/Lewiston Tribune

One night some years ago, I was driving across the Northwest listening to the Grand Ole Opry on the radio when a new country music talent ambled out on that legendary stage for the first time. He promptly sang his socks off and wowed the crowd

As the cheers and prolonged applause wound down, one of the seasoned stars of that venue could be heard to say, "Enjoy this moment while you can because you will remember it for the rest of your life."

"I just wish my dad and mom were still alive to enjoy this," the singer replied in wistful words.

I didn't catch his name, but I've never forgotten what he said as I drove through a night sky as dark as death but dappled with stars as bright as a melancholy man's yearning for his parents' approval.

I wonder if there is anything in life more bittersweet than triumphing in a way that would have thrilled your mom and dad if they had only lived to see the day. Many a parent has exited too soon, costing a child the parental approval he had most hoped to hear.

Consider, for instance, a young man named Barack Hussein Obama. His mother, Ann Dunham, died 13 years before her son became president of the United States. For all her confidence in her son, she could hardly have expected him to rise that high.

And then there was Madelyn Dunham, Obama's maternal grandmother and eventual mother substitute. She died two days before her grandson was elected president. But at least she would have been fairly certain that he would win. He visited her on her deathbed and undoubtedly told her he was soaring in the polls.

By contrast, my parents lived to see me fail to become president of the United States. But they knew as early as my teen years that I would spend my life doing what I sit here at the keyboard doing today. And they were glad that I found work.

But I would have hated it if I had become editor of the New York Times and had not achieved that pinnacle until after my parents had expired. Where's the pleasure in amounting to something if your parents aren't puffed up with pride and given the bragging rights to yell, "That's my son" to everyone who will listen.

I was reminded the other day by a football game of that country musician I heard that night on the Grand Ole Opry who was saddened his parents didn't live to share his moment. After all, if the two people who made you don't get to see you up there in the bright lights, the blessing is mixed.

That's what happened to Russell Wilson, the Seattle Seahawks' young quarterback. Few children have had a parent as devoted as Wilson's father, Harrison Wilson III. Not only did the father drill his two sons daily on passing and catching a football, but he pressed them to excel at their studies. He even taught them how to answer press questions in the big time if they ever happened to make it to the Super Bowl.

Russell has now achieved that almost impossible goal. But his father did not live to see it.

Or so backsliders like me might think. Russell Wilson believes not only that he looked like a strong possibility to succeed one day in the NFL but that his father would be a proud witness, dead or alive.

Before he died, the father was virtually certain that Russell would play in the NFL. Technically, Harrison Wilson III is gone from this life. But Russell closes each game by pointing skyward, thanking both his god and his father.

It is the character of a kid that determines what that child or grandchild will achieve. And character reveals itself quite early in life. So a child doesn't need to succeed early in his life's work before an elder dies for that elder to have the rational hunch of knowing that the kid is going to soar one day.

Russell Wilson believes his father watches him play in the NFL. He says of his parent, "He's got the best seat in the house."

If that proud father truly is up there in the stars, from that seat he watches one of the most talented, decent and mature young men ever to play the game.

Hall is editor emeritus of the Tribune's Opinion page. His email address is wilberth@cableone.net.