

# Model train was father's special gift

**C**hristmas time evokes memories of the antique model train my father used to set up under our tree. It was a 1936 Lionel and there was something awe-inspiring about it. Metal wheels clickety-clacking, smokestack puffing, the engine's headlight piercing a bright shining beam across the living room floor as it rolled along the miniature rails.

By age 4, I had fallen in love with that train. It was more than just a piece of machinery that appeared each Christmas. It was a living spectacle that captured my imagination and inspired a love of railroads. But it was never really mine.

That '36 Lionel belonged to my father, who controlled the transformer. He said it was for my own safety, but I knew better. It was the most treasured gift his father had ever given to him, reminding him of the genuine love they felt for each other. I would continue to be a fascinated observer.

When our first son, Tim, turned 2, my wife and I bought him his own model train for Christmas. It was Thomas, the cheeky little tank engine brought to life by Ringo Starr and George Carlin on PBS. Tim fell in love with the little wooden train and its two passenger cars. He'd carry them everywhere, even to bed.

Each evening we would play together, reconfiguring the tracks, giving each train its own personality and indulging in imaginary conversations. It was, according to my wife, a "man thing" — a special bond between father and son.



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# Opinion

Two years later, my wife gave birth to a second son, Peter. We knew we would have to pay special attention to Tim. We were careful to give him his own time. But he realized he wasn't the only child anymore — and it hurt.

At Christmas time, aware of Tim's predicament, my father brought over a large, heavy cardboard box.

"Where's my big guy?" he exclaimed as he walked in. Tim came running.

"Tim, you're my No. 1," he said. "You will always be very special to me."

Placing the box on the floor before him, he added: "I want you to have this."

Inside was the most prized possession of his own childhood, that 1936 Lionel train.

I'll admit I was jealous. My father had just handed over to my 4-year-old son a timeless object of personal fascination he wouldn't share with me as a child or an adult.

At the same time, I was deeply moved by his loving gesture. I guess I realized that grandfathers have their own way of knowing what a new father learns only slowly — that model trains sometimes take a detour, but you can always count on them to arrive on time. Kind of like a father's love for his son.

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