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### Fathers, Sons, Loss, and the Search for the Question

**Citation for published version:**

Wyatt, J 2012, 'Fathers, Sons, Loss, and the Search for the Question' *Qualitative Inquiry*, vol 18, no. 2, pp. 162-167., 10.1177/1077800411429093

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1177/1077800411429093](https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800411429093)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Author final version (often known as postprint)

**Published In:**

Qualitative Inquiry

**Publisher Rights Statement:**

© Wyatt, J. (2012). Fathers, Sons, Loss, and the Search for the Question. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 18(2), 162-167doi: 10.1177/1077800411429093

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# Fathers, sons, loss and the search for the question

Jonathan Wyatt

## Abstract

As part of his continuing inquiry into fathers and loss, the author weaves between – felts together – stories from several sessions of working with a counseling client, ‘Terry’, and stories of the author’s relationship with his father. Through these narratives he explores the experience of relating to and losing a father, not necessarily in that order. The particular focus of the piece is on areas of relational dissonance, which he finds are often more difficult to surface and are certainly more problematic to articulate publicly. Suspicious of writing, writing, however inadequate, feels the only response he can make to these as, *pace* Cixous, he searches for questions rather than answers. He is not sure whether this is a hopeful essay; nor whether this writing ‘helps’, either the writer or the reader/witness.

**Key words:** fathers, sons, loss, counseling

# Fathers, sons, loss and the search for the question

Jonathan Wyatt

I ask Terry to take me through it, frame by frame:

He describes walking into the ward, seeing between the curtains partly drawn around his father's bed the medics attempting to resuscitate him; the nurse steering him gently towards an office nearby where his mother was waiting; his siblings arriving; and the doctor telling them that they had been unable to save his father.

"And then?" I ask.

"We went to his bedside. I sat by him. I found myself saying to him, over and over, 'What have you done? What have you done?'"

## Beginnings

I finished my most recent essay about my father (Wyatt, 2010), addressing him in the second person, thus:

"I write... not because of your 'absence' but because your new, becoming presence makes demands upon me... You are asking questions of me. I hear you say: 'What now, Jonathan? Where will your experience of losing – and gaining – me take you?' ... (T)his writing takes me into mystery. I do not know what I have lost in losing you (Freud, 1917), what it is in you, exactly, that I have lost, and you are calling me to search my ... inscrutability (Butler, 2004)."

If Judith Butler is right that the experience of loss leaves us with this question of what it is "*in the other person that I have lost*" (Butler, 2004, p.28), and if Derrida has a point that loss means that we can never again create distance between ourselves and the lost, that the lost, once lost, is now always *there* or, better, *here*, albeit as a presence

often laden with pain, anguish, regret, relief, or more, then my father's death eight years ago presents me with the continuing task of finding ways to respond to a questioning, persistent, not always comfortable awareness of him, a still new and surprising presence.

Two sets of experiences draw me to writing: mourning my father (Wyatt, 2005, 2008, forthcoming, 2009); and the people whom I meet in my work as a counsellor in primary care within the UK's National Health Service (Gale et al., 2008; Gale & Wyatt, 2007).

Occasionally, like here, I explore both (e.g. Wyatt, 2008). I offer something of my work with a counselling client, 'Terry', whom I find I cannot but write about<sup>1</sup>; and my encounter with him has taken me again into my experience of my father. Terry re-writes my father. I find our stories becoming felted (Deleuze, 1993).

I think of myself as unobservant. I don't see. I don't notice. Details escape me. They're wicked, or mischievous, or hyperactive, these details, and as soon as I'm not paying attention they're off. I struggle to recall the colour of our living room carpet. I wouldn't know the song of a blackbird. I wouldn't recognise the taste of a cardamom. I know the colours of some objects, I know the sound of some bird life and I know the taste of some foods, but there are many, obvious, sensuous experiences that I could not describe or recollect. I would know that they were familiar but their details would be elusive.

So, how can I tell of pain, loss, joy, delight, despair, love? How do I begin to describe the encounter with Terry? Or to tell more of my experience of my father? I am

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<sup>1</sup> 'Terry' is a pseudonym and I have changed identifying details in order to protect his privacy. In light of Adams (2008), Ellis (2007), and following helpful conversations with Tony Adams, Sophie Tamas, students and faculty at St Cloud State University, and others, about the ethics involved in this piece, I have taken the difficult decision not to consult about this essay the client on whom Terry is based. He may recognise himself in the piece but I am confident others will not. If he were to read it I hope that he would see the writing as a tribute to him; and a way of honouring both him and his father.

suspicious of my attempts, my suspicion compounded by mistrust of any attempt to write experience, “a valorised, regulating fiction” (St.Pierre, 2008, p.327).

Doubt therefore seems well-placed, but writing, however inadequate, feels the only appropriate response, the action that embodies the struggle to keep faith (hooks, 1999).

When Cixous says,

“Sometimes I think I began writing in order to make room for the wandering question that haunts my soul and hacks and saws at my body; to give it a place and time; to turn its sharp edge away from my flesh.” (Cixous in Jenson, 1991, p.7),

I begin to understand this writing as the search for questions; it is writing to make room, which sounds as if it might lead to release, but, today, is more like haunting.

### **Terry: Week 3**

He is tall, as tall as me but broader, bigger. He fills the doorway as he comes into my room. He wears a thick, thigh-length tan coat in which he wraps himself and which he keeps on as he sits. He’s 54.

His despair has not eased. He is preoccupied with who he is and how he has come to find himself here. He does not recognise himself. He does not know who or where he is.

Sometimes I am aware of the sheer physical ache of loss. I have sat with one woman who, placing her hand just below her ribs, spoke of the force of the pain there, and of her fear that her body would break, that it would no longer sustain her agony. With Terry, the pain of his loss is present but the disturbance to his sense of himself seems uppermost. Just as my previous patient’s pain felt unsustainable, so Terry fears that the violent disruption he is experiencing will be permanent. For him, I think that it is not so much the loss, but the sense of being lost, that is more troubling.

His father died a year ago. The anniversary was only weeks before his first session. Though his father had been ill for some years, neither Terry nor his three younger siblings, his mother, nor his father himself, believed that he was dying. His father was strong. He was fine. He would be fine.

Terry had looked forward to the time when he and his dad would both be older, when they would meet on Sunday afternoons, go to the pub, talk, become friends, just like his father and grandfather had done; they would be at ease and Terry would feel accepted. But instead one Sunday afternoon he took an urgent call from his mother at the hospital, drove there and entered the ward to see his father surrounded by medical staff. Disbelieving, Terry watched their vain attempts to revive him.

He made it through the funeral arrangements, felt strong enough to deliver the eulogy at the ceremony, and returned to work. He believed that his father's loss was one more challenge to overcome, one more problem to be solved, an approach that had always worked for him. Task dealt with; onto the next.

Until a month ago.

Now he sits, coat on, and tells me how he has lost motivation; how it is difficult to get out of bed, to dress, to wash, to help around the house. His teenage girls tiptoe around him, unable to comprehend the change. I imagine their leaving for school hoping that whatever is going on for their dad will pass soon enough and maybe today he will feel better and go to work and be back late as normal. This week, one of them commented to Terry how this was the first time he could ever remember his dad making a meal for them two days running. Terry told me this, staring first at the floor then briefly at me, his words trailing. He could not believe that he had been a father who had been there that little.

Terry's wife expressed exasperation with him yesterday. There is only so long she can cover for him, only so much of this she can tolerate. Each time we have met, he has

asserted how wonderful she is but I realise that this sense of her is new to him. The past weeks have brought this awareness to him.

I tell myself as I listen that these fresh insights about his family and how much they mean to him are positive, but they do not feel so now to him. They seem only to accentuate both his sadness and his sense of distance from himself:

“Am I this man? I do not recognise him. I have been *that* kind of a father, *that* kind of a husband and I know what they feel like. This – this father who cooks, this needy husband – I don’t know.”

He tells me his stories slowly, reluctantly, occasionally raising both hands to hold his face, as if there might be some way of wiping away this lethargy, this despair. Or maybe it is to give himself brief comfort, a touch that might reassure. He raises his eyes and says,

“I don’t know what to do. I have no idea what steps to take. I have never been like this before. I don’t know this.”

He stays looking at me, hoping that I might be able to tell him the first step. I want that too. I feel pressure to say something helpful. (Something like, “Well, if you go for a run each day and eat your fruit and vegetables, you’ll find that you’ll soon feel much better,” and he would reply, “Oh. That’s clear. That’s fine. I can do that.” Then the next week he would come and tell me how my prescription had worked.)

But I can only sit with him, returning his look, seeking ways to connect, to stay with him, to be with him.

“I’ve never been like this before,” he continues.

“This experience of losing your dad has thrown everything up in the air.”

I hear my comment sounding trite. I was trying too hard to fill the space, to be helpful, to give him something, anything. It is not enough, but it is something.

I sense a slight easing of tension. He tells me that, yes, that’s about right.

It's time to finish. He gathers himself, stands, thanks me and is gone.

Are the stories of my father running out (Wyatt, 2005)? I forget but my body remembers. I sometimes try to make myself remember, to will the stories to come back, but then, when I am not looking, when I am shaping my arms this way, or sitting that way, they appear.

My university work took me to Kenya. I was full of him. I grew up with stories of when we lived there (see Wyatt, 2009) and they have become memories. On the drive to and from Kilifi, I imagined him, all of us, and how that might have been.

One evening, I swam alone in a creek as the fishing dhows drifted upstream in the dusk. I floated towards the empty beach, looking over the surface of the water to the smooth, wet sand. In the shallows I reached my feet down and began to wade.

It was the sound of water lapping the beach.

Or the feel of my feet on the sand.

Or the sudden slight chill on my upper body as I stood.

Or the struggle to move my legs through the heavy water.

Or the gentle slope of the beach.

I could see him.

Remembering how when he swam he would return to the beach allowing the waves to carry him in until the water was too shallow, walking on his hands and then on all fours, his body and hair bedraggled, emerging from the surf; knowing, playing up to the humorous figure he cut, while around him children leapt waves, parents watching from the edge. A benevolent, hirsute monster surfacing in the shallows. This way, his leg was hidden from view for longer.

I enjoy such stories. They feel comfortable and welcoming. Like this one:



*Saturday mornings. He pulls the car off the main road into Wonersh Park, a comfortable estate of large detached houses. At the entrance he turns immediately right into a tree-lined crescent that arcs back onto the main road. He pulls up to the right, close enough for the lucky child on the back seat, clasping the letters, to wind down the window and stand to reach the opening in the red brick-set post box. Today, that lucky child is Nicola. As her brothers watch enviously, she pushes the clump of letters in, and he playfully instructs her to check that the letters have dropped.*

*“Push your hand in. Go on. Wiggle your fingers.”*

*The child withdraws her hand, sits down smiling, and he pulls away.*

But I find that I sometimes remember the stories I do not wish to write, the ones that cast him or me in too bad, too painful, too embarrassing a light. I wonder in whose interests it is to tell them.

*We're on holiday. We walk along the busy, cobbled street. The sea is to our left behind and between the houses. He leans on his stick each alternate step to take the weight of his lame right leg. I carry the bag of bread, milk and newspaper. He paid for these a few minutes ago. I watched him as he counted the coins, holding the shopping list in his mouth. (His mouth is his spare hand. When he travels to work he has his briefcase over his shoulder, stick in right hand and newspaper in left. When there are doors to open or tickets to show and he needs his left hand he carries the newspaper in his mouth. At home, he carries shoes, screwdrivers and books between his teeth like a retriever.)*

*As we walk we talk about high tide and when we might swim. He is asking me whether today I will swim over the seaweed with him. I hate seaweed, however deep it may be; I hate its darkness, its suggestion of menace. I feel embarrassed; I don't want*

*him to ask me this. I want him to leave me be, not tease. I hate the teasing. I don't want to swim over the seaweed. I won't. I don't want him to remind me that I won't. I hate the teasing and I hate him.*

*My beginning, stammering response is interrupted. An uneven slab. A slight but unexpected incline. A mistiming. His right foot catches, he stumbles, loses his balance, and hits the ground, right hand and wrist taking the force of the fall. (In later years, his walking will deteriorate, his falls will become frequent and he will wear that wrist strapped.) Passers-by step forward to help, reaching hands to assist. I stoop and, knowing that he detests the attention he is receiving, I murmur quickly and discreetly,*

*“Are you ok?”*

*To both me and the others he smiles through the jolting pain and the humiliation,*

*“I'm fine. Thank you. How stupid of me! Don't worry. Yes, no problem.”*

*He gets up, we walk on and find somewhere to sit, alone and quiet, while he recovers. He's forgotten the seaweed. I am pleased he fell and feel ashamed.*

I forgot the most recent anniversary of his dying. 18 September. I was at an all-day event in which I became absorbed. That evening I went home, ate, watched TV, talked with those around me, responded to emails I'd missed through the day, went to bed. I did not register the day's significance until a text from my mother the next morning.

This is where I am now. I forget. And when I remember I sometimes wish I didn't.

When I ask, “Are the stories running out?”, it is as if there is a finite number. A stock, a file, a bucket into which I have dipped over the years, and now there are no more except those marked ‘private’.

But stories become rewritten each day. They are not static. New movements of my body, the feel of the covers of a book, unexpected encounters. Familiar stories become strange.

Loss written and rewritten.

Terry.

### **Terry: Session 5**

He begins by telling me that it's worse. Work has been on to him. They want more. They want to come round to his house. They want him to sign a form. He wants to rest. Just rest. He gets up after his wife and daughters have left for the day, has breakfast and returns to bed. Later, he might go for a ten minute walk and will become tired. He explains to me that he feels a failure and in telling me he feels a failure all over again.

We talk about his growing up.

As a boy he played basketball. He was good. His father managed the team and the weekends were taken up with matches. His younger brother and sister would sometimes convey their resentment at how much time their father gave to him. How lucky he was, how they envied him. But for Terry it was unremittingly testing because he never measured up. He never heard his father unequivocally praise his playing. He always had to improve.

He continued to play into his late teens and early twenties as he sought to make his way in the senior game. He describes the day he realised that he was not going to make it as one of his worst. His father never commented.

He followed his dad into the large local manufacturing company, worked hard, studied at college, and rose through the grades, always striving, taking on increasingly senior roles and greater challenges.

Today we don't speak about the loss of his father. We talk about the impossibility of ever feeling as if he has done enough.

I picture this dignified, talented, industrious man standing that short distance from his father's hospital bed as the medics attempt resuscitation. As he watches, I glimpse his hope recede of one day his father expressing pride.

*He sits on the floor amongst his papers at the foot of the double bed. They are organised in neat piles beside his list of things to do. He likes lists; he is slightly obsessive like that. (He never loses anything, can always lay his hands on the most obscure, long-forgotten item.) He is looking at my school report. He reads aloud each subject teacher's account of the term. Geography, as usual, is hardly fulsome, nor science. At the top of each page the teacher has written my position in the class. 17<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>, respectively. He reads, accepting, knowing I struggle with and dislike each subject.*

*"As long as you're trying your best," he reassures.*

*He comes to Latin and English, which are positive. In both I have come second.*

*"Second?" he asks. "Second? What went wrong?"*

*I am expecting this. It's a standard joke. If Mum were in the room she would say "Stop it, Paul. Second is fine. That's not funny." But she is not here, so I squirm and smile and say nothing.*

### **Terry: session 6**

We have not met for two weeks. He has had his hair cut. He looks brighter. He smiles briefly when he comes into the room. It's the first time I've seen him smile.

I had expected him last week but he left me a message to say he would not be coming. I assumed that something had arisen – a doctor's appointment, a meeting with his employers. But he tells me, instead, that he had needed a break from this.

His smile does not indicate improvement. He remains unable to stop thinking; he is weary, ground down by the constant dragging of the still-unanswerable question of how he has got to this point.

He reminds me that last time I had commented that the loss of his father had seemed to have become less present. He had concurred but on his walk home, he says, he realised that he had not been honest. He had agreed for the sake of agreeing. He tells me how, on the contrary, the scene of his father's dying preys on him. He replays it endlessly.

I ask him to tell me about it again. Frame by frame. The walking into the ward, how the curtains were drawn, where he stood, his mother and siblings arriving, the doctor's announcement, and the later gathering around the bed.

"I sat by him. I found myself saying, over and over, 'What have you done? What have you done?'"

Pause.

"I don't know why."

He leans forwards, places his elbows on his knees, cups his head in his hands and briefly, quietly, he cries.

At the end of the session, with Christmas and New Year due to interrupt our work for three weeks, he tells me that he will let me know if he is going to attend his next appointment. I say that this will be fine.

Butler, writing in the context of a post 9/11 world, proposes that we are, from our beginnings, "already given over, beyond ourselves, implicated in lives that are not our own". (p.28). What she terms "this sphere of dispossession" confronts us with our "unknowingness", our primary and unconscious indebtedness to the other. This is therefore what grief may bring to us: awareness that we are always not only beside

ourselves, with or without grief, but beside others – and inside, and they in us, and between, conjoined. On this basis she goes on to ask whether such an insight might “lead to a normative reorientation for politics”(p.28), our given connection with others impelling us to view differently our global as well as personal relationships.

For Derrida, when someone dies the issue is less that we lose them but that, as he puts it, “we can no longer lose them; they who were once so distant become all too close, too close because now only within us – in us as a part of us and of history and no longer as the singularity that called us out of ourselves and first made us responsible before them.” (Derrida, 2003, p27). When I left home, eventually, having tried to do so a number of times, I moved from the soft, warm south to the hard, frozen north-east of England. My father, on my occasional sojourns at home, would, as a matter of course, ask why I didn’t move nearer. He missed me, he said. Even when, with a young family, we later did move closer (but not too close) he would ask me the same question; being within an hour-and-a-half’s drive was not enough. Initially, he knew that he was being mischievous, because he was aware that my moving to the other end of, admittedly, only a small country was not an innocent act. His imploring became less ironic as he aged and became ill, and I became less comfortable at my geographical distance from him. But now, as Derrida would have it, I can no longer put any distance between us. He is always here, as he never was.

### **Still searching for the questions**

“What is it in him that I have lost?”, Butler exhorts me to ask. Search your inscrutability, she instructs.

When he was alive I could distance myself from him by relocating. In doing so I imagined I could dissociate myself from the father and the man that I perceived him to be. He was not me and he was down south. I was not quick-tempered, nor right wing,

nor over-wrought, nor insecure, nor needy, nor tied passively to a job I hated. I was not argumentative, stubborn, intimidating and a tease. I was not contrary – gentle and generous but harsh and rigid, a lover of words who no longer read, a man who sang but did not listen to music. I was not disabled, nor, in later years, living with a degenerative disease, nor getting old. No, no. He was all these things and I was none of them.

Now that he has gone, now that he is always here, I can no longer neatly ascribe all these qualities to him and none of them to me.

When I search my inscrutability, when I search for the question, I find the inquiry as to whether writing about him over the years has been about finding out what is mine and what is his, a struggle with and for authority (Jackie Goode, personal communication). His and mine. Fathers and sons. Writing about him is my attempt to authorize myself.

### **Terry: postscript**

Terry does not return in the New Year. I sit in my room at the doctors' surgery, hear the sound of faint rain on the hedge leaves outside, see the empty red cushioned chair.

I hear echoing the question to his father, the "wandering question" that seemed to haunt his soul: Father, what have you done?

What have you done?

You have withheld your approval.

You have taken your anointing with you.

You have held on to your blessing.

I know you had them to give me. You were biding your time. Until we were older. When we were in the pub alone, one Sunday afternoon, and you would have said to me:

“You know, son, I’m proud of you. I never told you, and I should have done, but I am.”

We’d have smiled, I’d have bought the next round, and, as the day’s sun was dying, we’d have walked home.



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