

My Father's Ghost: A Story of Encounter and Transcendence

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Abstract:

This autoethnography is about my personal search for my father, who was an early presence in my life, but who gradually became a palpable absence. In many ways, I have been searching for my father all my life, and somehow hoping to rekindle a relationship that I have experienced mostly as something I lost early. As my search progressed across a span of more than fifty years, I found my father in the one place I least expected. In this article, I begin to write my father in a new light, one that offers insights into his legacy for me, and for my sons. In the end, I hope to write our lives in a way that captures just a bit of the spirit of my spirited father.

Keywords: autoethnography | family | fathers | memory | sons

Article:

Ghosts

My father's ghost . . . haunts me.

Oh, the man he *became* is still alive, though perhaps not for much longer.

But part of him slipped into the shadows, long ago.

Once upon a time, he was my Daddy. We played together. We enjoyed each other's company. We ate ice cream cones and played pitch and laughed.

There was a spark between us.

And then something happened. Somewhere along the line, my father changed.

Or, perhaps our relationship changed.

Or both.

Anyway, I remember a day when I was about five, when my dad told me, rather gruffly, that he was too busy to play.

Over time, the spark between us began to flicker and fade.

And it eventually went out.

Perhaps it was the circumstances of his life. Or perhaps, it was unfinished business from his youth. Somehow, he moved from lighthearted and fun to formidable, scary, angry.

And, gradually, his anger petered out, and he fell into depression, into despair.

That was over forty years ago.

He has not surfaced much since that day.

But it's not who my father became that bothers me, though at times this man has brought pain and strife to our relationship.

It's his lingering *ghost*—lurking in the shadows on the edge of our memories—that haunts me, every day.

Really, it's what he only briefly was—and what he might have been—that rattles me.

It is the *missing* trace of my father (Levinas, 1969)—the father who is no longer here, who has been gone these long years—that I have to wrestle with.

Every day.

And often, I lose the match.

I lose—or maybe I just give in—to the longing, to the sadness, to the grieving for that which might have been.

I miss that spark.

And my tears flow for the father that is missing from my life, has been missing for so many years.

Still, today, I find myself hoping I can write my way toward a new beginning.

If there is anything I believe about life—and about autoethnography—it is that it offers the possibility of deliverance from the past. In writing, in the present, we reconstruct memory, and thus write our way toward a new narrative trajectory.

And that, my friends, is real redemption.

And, as I rewrite this remembrance of my father, aiming at redemption, I seek a way to move into a new form of relation with him.

Meanwhile, there are some ghosts I need to tend to.

Traces

I imagine Kierkegaard's (1980) ghost, standing on the edge of a cliff, shouting into the abyss: "Get possibility, get possibility, possibility is the only salvation!" (p. 38).

And then there is a long pause. And slowly, an echo of sorts comes back, unexpectedly transformed by time and distance: "Possibility is relation!"

Søren Kierkegaard was, as far as we know, the first among a string of existentialist philosophers to offer a story of the self as a *relation*—a self-as-becoming in and through relation to an other—a self that is established, defined, developed, built and rebuilt, through interaction with other selves, most particularly, our "significant others" (Mead, 1934)—those whose engagement means the most to us.

And one of the primary significant others, for most humans, is the father. The significance of, and the need for, the father is particularly acute for young boys, who are, from a very early age, seeking to find themselves in and through identification with their fathers (Burke, 1969; Osherson, 2001).

To be sure, the father–son bond can be joyous and loving and full of sparks. Naturally, what every young boy seeks is that sort of relationship with his dad that basks in the joy of loving, positive acknowledgment.

Yet, the relation between fathers and sons is often troubled (Adams, 2012; Bochner, 2012; Patti, 2012; Pelias, 2012; Poulos, 2012). Fathers and sons, can, for whatever reason, find their relationship teetering on the brink of uncertainty, danger even.

The story of strained, or absent, father–son relations has been around since humans gathered together in caves, I imagine. Certainly, my own forefathers, the Greeks, made much of the crisis (the split, the rift) in father–son relations. The sons of the Titans overthrew their tyrannical fathers. Homer's *Odyssey*, read one way, is the story of an absent father and a bereft son. Telemachus stands alone on the shore, ever looking outward, searching for his father, always wishing that somehow, someday, his father would return, and teach him how to be a man. His father-mentor, Odysseus, was off on some grand adventure, and Telemachus was left powerless, unable to save the kingdom from interlopers (Poulos, 2012).

For much of my life before I came of age and left home, I was Telemachus, ever looking outward, searching for my father, wondering at his absence. He was an enigma to me, wrapped in a cloud. What was I seeking with the eyes of Telemachus?

Acknowledgment.

Love.

Care.

Like others before and after me, I sought a father who would affirm my worth. For it is in the father that the son can find the possibility of the life-giving, self-affirming, world-shaping gift of *acknowledgment* (Hyde, 2006). But also available there is the despair that comes from negative or no acknowledgment. As Michael Hyde (Hyde, 2006) puts it so poignantly, “Acknowledgment is a significant and powerful form of behavior, one that can bring joy to a person’s heart and also drive a stake through it” (p. 2).

Communication can be life enhancing, or it can be toxic. Too often, in families, it is the latter. Indeed, the kind of “social death” instituted by toxic, abusive communication is painful and can well be overpowering.

Sometimes, a third option emerges: Communication fades away, and negative acknowledgment morphs into absence, abandonment, and lack. The father ignores (or dismisses) the son, and the possibility of relation fades away. All that is left is a lack, a gap, a hole . . . a whisper of what once was, or what might have been, a longing—a *missing* father, a ghost, a fading apparition of a receding memory. And so, perhaps the most poignant story is not the story of the father who attacks but of the one who leaves—the missing father, the absent ghost who might have been, but never was, or who was, and then was not, the loving, affirming, acknowledging father.

Mostly, after a certain moment in my life, my dad tacked back and forth between these archetypal possibilities. He was daddy (the loving father). He was predator (the devouring father). He was abandoner (the absent father). But once I passed a certain age, the loving, caring, caressing father rarely showed his face.

Sure, we were bound together, as father and son, as are all fathers and sons. But we rarely acknowledged this bond, or did much to strengthen it. We were, as it happens, bound together by our blood, by our genes, and by a thin, somewhat frayed, narrative thread. The thread was frayed because we were *afraid*. We did not always know it, but we were afraid—afraid of getting too close, afraid of loving and losing, afraid of change, afraid of chance. We were afraid of ourselves, and of each other. We were afraid of the frustrations we felt, of frustration morphing into anger.

Dad and I were afraid of our narrative inheritance (Goodall, 2006) that was bound up in the ancient, archetypal story line of broken relations between fathers and sons.

My daddy became, for all intents and purposes, a ghost, a missing trace of a father.

What I needed was a relationship with my father, one that was as mutually delightful—and life-giving—as it once had been.

What I needed was a father who was there for me.

What I needed was a father who knew, unequivocally, that he lived *for* his son.

That is what a father is *supposed* to be.

That is what humans are supposed to be: For each other.

The problems in communication that we regularly experience can likely be attributed to the fact that many of us do not recognize that truth.

I imagine the ghost of Emmanuel Levinas, standing at the gate of the camp at Hannover¹ at the end of World War II, shouting back toward his invisible captors: “We are *for* each Other!”

And, slowly, a mere whisper of an echo returns:

“Other?”

“Father?”

In his philosophy of relation as risky (for-the-Other) communication, of relational communication as transcendence and responsibility, Levinas (1969, 1981) lays out a pathway for understanding at least the possibility of the kind of relation between humans that builds new worlds—a relation that is animated, alive, mutually engaging and invigorating, life-giving and world-changing, filled with possibility.

This philosophy would position the father–son relationship as an adventure—as the hero journey, in which the son-hero and his helper-mentor-father meet the challenges placed before them and emerge from the trials of life with a gift to give back . . . to the next generation (Campbell, 1973).

This is relation of one human to, for, and with an Other-relation-as-risk, relation-as-adventure, relation-as-fire.

The heroes emerging from the fire are changed.

And the world they inhabit will never be the same.

This is the risk.

And the reward.

Son faces challenge.

He calls out to Father.

Father responds.

Together, they change the world.

Or . . .

Son calls out to Father.

Father walks away.

Or is already gone . . .

And . . . there is an emptiness, a lack, a loss . . . and no world-changing gift. There is an absence, a ghost, a whisper of what might have been, but never came to be.

And so, relation is dangerous, risky.

Relation, as we know, is always constructed in and through communication—that which is said, and that which is not said, that which is present, and that which is absent—indeed, the whole array co-constructed meanings that emerge from human encounter.

For Levinas (1981), it all comes down to “an adventure of subjectivity” (p. 120). In the encounter with another human, we find the possibility of a dynamic, dangerous, invigorating, and ultimately ethical (responsive and responsible) relation.

It is a relation lit by holy sparks, emergent from dialogic encounter, taken up in the sharing of the spirit-fire that animates us (Hyde, 2001). It is relational communication as “a spirit in transit made manifest in voice” (Goodall, 2005).

For Levinas, by its very nature, the act of communicating—this sharing of spirit-sparks—implicates the participants in a realm of uncertainty, a life of risk. In communicating with another, we risk the uncertainty of transformation and transcendence of the self that resides here and now. Indeed, we are always in a state of being-asbecoming, an unfolding that is both intensified and attenuated by our encounters with others.

It is in and through human encounter that we move into a new realm, an open, infinite realm of opportunity. This opportunity is our freedom—the capacity to author—or, to be precise, to co-author—our own paths in life. This human capacity to act, to shape ourselves, to shape our relations with significant others, to shape our very lives, is born in the moment we begin to encounter significant others (Mead, 1934). And it continues to unfold across the span of our lives, as we continue to encounter a range of others who speak into our being, and to whom we respond. In other words, our very freedom as humans is written into being by the responsibility

we hold for one another, even in the face of the total uncertainty we face in each moment of encounter.

The adventure of subjectivity in encounter is as uncertain as any human activity. You never know what might happen! That is what makes it an adventure. As Levinas (1981) puts it, “Communication with the other can be transcendent only as dangerous life, a fine risk to be run” (p. 120).

Fine risk indeed!

It is the risk of change, of growth, of love, of transformation. It is also the risk of potentially toxic, heart-rending abuse, of pain and trauma and tragic narrative trajectories. Or abandonment. Or any of the many points in between.

And yet, the lure of relation is irresistible. For it is in this ethical bond we share that we humans, as Kierkegaard (1980) puts it, “get possibility” and thus transcend despair (p. 38).

And, for a son, it is often the father who becomes the gatekeeper of possibility.

At least, that is true in my story.

Memories

When I was very young, my father was a pharmacist at a local drugstore. In those days, drugstores had “soda fountains” where you could sit on a stool and order a hot fudge sundae or a grilled cheese sandwich or a basket of fries. Some of my earliest memories are of going to visit my dad at work. He would see us coming, and would come around from behind the pharmacist’s window, and sidle up behind the counter at the soda fountain.

I am just barely four years old, but I remember it as clearly as if it happened yesterday. My brother (who is 18 months older than me) and I climb up onto the silver stools. Dad smiles down at me. I like his white pharmacist’s coat and his silver nametag.

“What’ll you have young man?”

“Hey, daddy!”

“Hey son. What can I get for you?”

“Can I have grilled cheese, and a Cherry Coke?”

“What’s the magic word?”

“Please, daddy.”

My dad would always grill the sandwich himself, turning it gently on the flat grill. And he would cut it diagonally, the way I liked it, and carefully place a pickle slice on each half of my buttery, melty, cheesy friend. He would mix the Cherry Coke from the syrups behind the counter, adding just the right amount of Cherry, just the right amount of Coke, just the right amount of soda.

Man, that was a meal to remember!

And, in my memory, my dad is smiling at me, and chatting, in a muted voice, nearly a whisper, with my mom. My mom says something, and he laughs, quietly, happily, and leans over to kiss her, softly.

Later that day, dad comes home. I rush to greet him.

“Daddy!”

“Hey, son!”

I jump up into his arms, and he hugs me tight.

“Hey, you wanna play catch?” he says.

“Yes, please, daddy!”

I run toward the back door and barrel out into the big, flat, green yard. We toss the ball around for a while. I’m good at catching things, and my throws are straight and hard. Dad is impressed.

“Good job, Chris!”

And I smile. A few minutes later, dad says,

“Hey, sport. How about some ice cream?”

“Yes, please!”

And I run into the kitchen.

These are bright spots in my memory.

It’s funny how an image of your dad can be so powerful. He was young. He was strong. He seemed happy. He worked hard.

He was devoted to his family. He smiled a lot.

That image has stuck with me over the years, I suppose because it is an image of my dad as a happy man.

It’s funny how something like that can haunt you, when intervening events change a person.

It’s funny how I’ve been searching for my dad—*that* dad, that happy young father—ever since that day long ago.

Changes

Somewhere along the line, my dad decided that pharmacy wasn’t really his thing. Today, he says he felt a “call” to become a priest. I’m not really sure what led to my dad’s religious conversion, but when I was nearly five, we moved to Sewanee, Tennessee, so my dad could attend the Episcopal seminary at the University of the South.

In many ways, this idyllic setting—a 13,000-acre college campus perched on the top of a mountain rising out above the Cumberland Plateau of south-central Tennessee—was the perfect playground for a little boy of the mid-1960s. Thick forests surrounded our home. There were caves and creeks and rock formations and many, many pathways to explore. Kid heaven! I was thrilled.

One of my most lasting, vivid memories is of the first time it snowed. Being from the Deep South, snow was not a familiar or common occurrence in my early life. This particular snow—well, it was breathtaking.

It started in the evening, as winter darkness descended on our little mountain. Fat, fluffy white flakes began swirling in little circles. Gradually, the snow began to fall with urgency, as if Mother Nature herself was determined to cover our mountain with a thick blanket of the frosty stuff. We were so excited we could barely contain ourselves!

The next morning, we awoke to a world of wonder. There is something about snow that muffles the sounds of the world. It was very quiet. I leapt out of bed. I ran to the back door, shoved it open, and found myself standing on our little back stoop, completely awestruck. Three feet of snow had fallen overnight.

Our little dachshund, Heidi, followed me out the door, took one look at the snow, and dove in, disappearing quickly. At first, she attempted to jump and bound across the yard but apparently thought better of it. She disappeared back under the thick white blanket. I had no idea where she was going, but apparently, she had a plan. Dachshunds are diggers—this was a dog built to tunnel, and that was just exactly what she did. A few minutes after she disappeared from sight, there she was, climbing up on top of the old stump that stood at the back edge of our property. She pulled herself up, shook dramatically, causing a flurry of flakes to fly in all directions, and stood, happily surveying her territory from her perch just above the snowline. She was queen of all she surveyed, perched haughtily on her new throne.

The kids in the neighborhood spent much of that day sledding down the hill on the street behind our house, having snowball fights, and building half a snowman.

I do not remember my Dad being present that day. In fact, what I remember is his absence.

Was this a portent of things to come?

During spring and summer, the world was our playground. We had an entire mountaintop to explore! I spent countless hours tearing through the woods, with or without friends at my side. Much of the time, we were lost, but we did not care. And we always seemed to find our way home.

In the autumn, when the world turned Technicolor, I remember walking down to the football field for home games of the Sewanee Tigers, whose colors were purple and gold. I recall one

game that first year. My dad lifted me up and perched me on top of a stone pillar, and handed me a stick with a purple and gold pennant on the end. I waved that pennant wildly, cheering for my team, though I had only the vaguest understanding of the game. “Let’s go, Tigers!” Everyone was excited, and laughing and cheering. And I knew what it was to feel happy! And there was dad, standing right beside me, having a good time.

But, gradually, something started to change. My dad grew more serious. He studied—a lot. To support our family, my mom took a teaching job at the local elementary school, and my dad worked at the drugstore in town. My parents became very busy. My games of catch with dad became more and more infrequent, and eventually stopped. And I began to notice—and to *feel*—his absence, more and more as time unfolded.

After three years of seminary, my dad graduated, and received his first “call” to a job—in the suburbs of Atlanta. Our lives were about to change again, quite dramatically. We were moving from a tiny town in rural Tennessee to a growing, bustling metropolis. And my father was embarking on a new career.

This new career was, it turned out, consuming. Very quickly, my dad worked seven days a week. He actually had a day off, but he spent that working at a drugstore, just trying to stay ahead. I never saw him. When he finally arrived home, he seemed exhausted. He would collapse into his chair in front of our TV and quickly pass out. When he was around, he seemed to be grouchy. His tolerance for the noise of children and dogs was wearing thin.

And then one fine Thanksgiving day, his brother died (Poulos, 2006). And shortly thereafter, his father and his sister followed. A family of five reduced to two. My anguished father and his deeply distraught mother were all that remained of his vibrant, boisterous, volatile family.

My dad tumbled deeper and deeper into his unprocessed grief, into unspeakable sadness, into a dark place. He fell into silence. And the cloud of depression began to settle in.

More often than not, he failed to engage in relation.

He was fading away.

When he was present, his patience quickly wore thin.

And so did mine.

Living with a person suffering from depression is not easy. The illness is unpredictable and uncanny in its persistence across time. Often, you feel as if there are two people inhabiting one body—one that can muster a measure of good cheer, the other wrapped in a dark cloud of pessimism and pain. The problem is, you never know which you will encounter until it’s too late (Sheffield, Wallace, & Klein, 1999). As the years rolled by, the tension in our house grew.

Over time, I became rebellious—defiant, some might say.

I guess, as a child rapidly morphing into an adolescent, I was not unusual in that regard.

What may have been unusual was the intensity of the tension between dad and me.

Once in awhile, it erupted into violence.

Once in awhile, the whole thing went toxic.

Battles

Although there were many incidents of conflict, large and small, that erupted in our home over the next several years, there is one Saturday morning that stands out in sharp relief in my memory.

Now, I am the first to admit that I played a part in all this, that I began early on to defy my father, whose authority seemed to be arbitrary at best, and quite often capricious and openly hostile. Because he was gone seven days a week— and many evenings too—my brother and I figured out ways to get along without him. When he was home, he seemed to me to be only partially present, usually only asserting his presence when one of us stepped over some imaginary line of behavior. Without due guidance from him on this to begin with, we were left, as children, with much guesswork in filling in the blank spaces of appropriateness. At first, I suppose, I trespassed just a little, probably because I just wanted his attention. Like many children, I sensed, unconsciously, that any attention—even negative attention—from a parent is better than none at all.

I was, quite likely, annoying.

Apparently, he thought so.

When I was eight years old, I became obsessed with baseball. If I could play ball, in any form, I was happy. If not, I was likely to be bored. If my friends were around, I could usually persuade them to play a game of street or yard ball, or to run with me down to the ball fields at Murphey Candler Park, about a mile from my house, to play some real ball. On those days when nobody was around, I would walk out into our driveway, with my glove and a ball, and start chucking the ball against the brick wall of the house, catching it on the ricochet, tossing the ball again. And again. And again.

“Thonk. Thonk. Thonk. Thonk. Thonk. Thonk. Thonk.”

“Chris, what are you doing?”

“Playing ball.”

“Stop.”

“But—”

“I said, STOP!”

“Yes sir.”

Somewhere along the line, I clearly became an annoyance.

Over time, our relationship deteriorated. Somewhere along the line, I found myself feeling a little resentful, and a good bit hurt, by these developments. I started to argue, and talk back, and, I suppose, step on the toes of his authority.

And somewhere along the line, I suppose, I became a thorn in his side. It's as if I came to represent something he did not want to see, or did not want to remember. He lost patience with me, more and more aggressively asserting his authority. I do not recall a single attempt at having a dialogue, or at engaging me as a human being.

What I do recall is repeated attempts to force his will upon me. And my increasingly defiant refusal to give in. Somehow, I was supposed to just acquiesce to whatever whim was motivating him at the moment. The trouble I had with this was that he was increasingly erratic, aggressive, unpredictable. I never really knew what might set him off, or why. His rules—and the violations thereof—seemed arbitrary, unwavering, unreliable. They were all over the place, yet there seemed to be an unspoken dictum that I should be able to read what he wanted me to do, before even he knew.

At this, I was (and remain) an abject failure. I have not been able to read his—or anyone else's mind—ever. No matter how hard I tried.

On the Saturday in question, I am sixteen years old. As is my custom in these salad days of my youth, I arise this Saturday morning around 10:30. (Lord. How long has it been since I slept that late?). I look outside. It is a beautiful, warm, sunny day. The flowers are in bloom, and the grass is thick. There is no season, anywhere on earth, quite like spring in North Carolina. (Did I mention we had moved again—this time to the central Piedmont of North Carolina?)

Anyway, spring in this part of the country cannot be fully described. Suffice it to say that the flowering trees and shrubs—dogwood, red bud, azalea, rhododendron—are nothing short of spectacular. Any place where the annual precipitation totals nearly fifty inches is a lush place indeed.

I stumble up the stairs, emerging from my basement bedroom, hoping for a glass of juice and a hearty breakfast. I wander into the kitchen, pour some OJ, and step out into the living room, half awake, trying to shake off the cobwebs. The living room has large windows on all sides. Outside one, I notice a butterfly flitting around the dogwood in the front yard. I stare, lost in thought, for a moment.

Suddenly, the front door bursts open, banging loudly against the wall, defying the wall-mounted doorstop. Dramatic. My father, sweating profusely, red-faced and angry-looking, storms into the room. I say,

“Hey, dad. What’s going on?”

“I’m doing your damn job for you. Mowing the damn grass.”

“Ah. I was going to do that in a few minutes.”

“You should have done it an hour ago!” he rages.

(Apparently, I should have known that he wanted me to mow the lawn at 9:00 a.m., not 10:00, not 11:00.)

And he stomps toward me, fists clenched. I stand, bemused, in the middle of the living room, watching my father storm angrily toward me. At that moment, everything seems to slow down. It is as if I am seeing a movie about my life, and the film has been slowed for dramatic effect. My dad walks directly toward me. I stand my ground. Although there is plenty of room to go around me, he walks right *into* me, knocking me to the ground. This next part is unbelievable to me, even today, so many years later. He actually makes a point of stepping on my chest, grinding his foot in for emphasis.

The message is loud, though not entirely clear.

As I lie on the floor, looking up at the ceiling for a moment, I find myself intrigued by a little dust bunny that has somehow been swept up, perhaps by the ceiling fan, to a perch on the rough plaster ceiling. Its hold looks precarious, as does mine. I feel a sort of affinity with that dust bunny.

After all, being stepped on may indicate my general insignificance.

Or perhaps, like the dust bunny, I am no better than an annoyance.

Or worse, something to be eliminated.

That foot, grinding into my chest like that—says that I am, at the least, a crucible for his anger, that perhaps I *do* matter, though not in the way a son hopes to matter to his father. I matter as a target, as a focal point, as a whipping boy, as a foot scraper.

At this moment, I wonder what that foot is saying—what it says I am to him.

Am I, at this moment, a *son*?

Whatever it was that just happened, it was not the act of a father, not in the sense that I understand that word.

Father: One who exercises care for his progeny.

That is *not* what just happened here.

He walked right *through* me, over me, *on* me.

His tread mark sits squarely over my heart.

As I gather myself, I feel a sudden rage boiling up inside my gut. I jump to my feet, turn toward my dad's back, and shout, "Fuck you!"

He turns, still red in the face, "*What* did you say?"

"I said, fuck you, daddy! *Sir!*"

And I turn and stomp out the front door, slamming it behind me.

Searching for My Father

But what I felt more deeply, in the coming days and years, however, was not so much the *fuck you* of that incident but the *daddy* of it—or, rather, the *missing* daddy, the daddy who was no longer present but who hovered at the edges of my memory.

A year after the chest-stomping incident, having graduated from high school at the tender age of seventeen, I left home.

I did not look back.

My father and I barely said goodbye. In fact, the pain of that parting was masked by the sour taste in our mouths. The ties that once bound us had frayed nearly to the breaking point.

Soon enough, I did what any young man in my circumstances might do: I put distance between us. I exercised a "geographical cure" (Parker, 1995) for my existential ailment. Ever dramatic, I heard the clarion call of one Horace Greeley: "Go West, young man!"

And I got on a bus to Colorado.

Like I said, I did not look back.

The years rolled by, and I visited my family only occasionally at first. Gradually, I fell into a habit of seeing them once a year. And on each of these occasions, at some point, the tension between my dad and me became, once again, palpable. There were moments when it reached a boiling point (Poulos, 2012).

Over time, I also gradually became aware of certain communication patterns that my father had long engaged in—regularly, predictably, repetitively.

Most of them were toxic, involving insult, innuendo, or ill will.

Often, I would find myself wondering, "Am I a *son* in this situation? Or am I something else entirely? Or am I merely, well, nothing?"

As I grew into adulthood, I became more aware of him and his background. I slowly came to realize how toxic the communication was in his family as he was growing up. I saw how these patterns might have emerged, and how they continued to dominate him.

And, though I was hurt by his words and his actions, I was hurt much more deeply by his regular disappearances from my life, by his lack of willingness or desire to engage with me, to be with me, to work with me, to enjoy life together with me. I was haunted by my missing daddy.

Still, at times, it seemed that the rift was closing, that old wounds were beginning to heal, that we could, at least momentarily, lay aside the weight of our history, suspend the overt conflict, and connect.

But then the words would cut into me, and the pain would come rushing back.

Or, worse, the lack of words would cut me even more deeply. It was as though, to my father, I simply did not exist. And that was something I found it hard to bear.

In 2001, I moved back to North Carolina with my own family—my wife, Susan, and our two sons, Eli and Noah. Our new home happened to be located three blocks from where my parents have lived since 1977.

Over time, through living in close proximity, and through much hard work attempting to heal the rift between us, my relationship with my dad started to change, but only gradually, incrementally, imperceptibly.

As I began to explore my own part in our difficult history, I gradually became aware of the deep longing I felt to recapture those early days of our relationship. I also became aware of a deep well of sadness in me about this ongoing rift, and of my growing compassion for my father, who, after all, had a terrible, painful, troubled, splintered relationship with his own dad.

And, as I became aware of my own sadness and longing, I began to recognize hints of it in him. Then, one day, I decided to try something new. It occurred to me that if we could begin to rewrite our shared story, we might be able to recover the spark we once shared between us. I called him:

“Hey, Dad. How would you like to go grab a burger?”

“Yes. That sounds good. Your mom won’t make them anymore. But I do love a good burger.”

“Good.”

So Susan and I took him to our favorite local burger joint—the place where they make them the “old-timey” way, fresh grilled on a flattop grill, just like my daddy’s grilled cheeses so many years ago.

As we sat down, I said, “Tell us about your childhood.”

And the stories flowed.

He told of how he worked for his dad, a shopkeeper, when he was a child. And he told of how his father had been both a relentless “angler” for a business deal, and at the same time, a demanding taskmaster, a hard boss to please—an obstreperous man with a strong will and very strong ideas about what he wanted.

“Pop was always at work. I figured if I wanted to see him, I’d have to go down to the store. I could never tell if he was happy to see me, but he would put me to work, that’s for sure. He had me rearranging merchandise, or running down to the store to buy something. One day a lady came in asking for milk. He didn’t sell groceries at all, really, but that didn’t stop him. He took me in the back, handed me a buck, and said, ‘Run out the back door, down to the grocery store. Buy some milk. Run!’ I guess he stalled her while I sprinted to the grocery store and back. Man, I was huffing when I ran back in. He sold it to her for thirty cents more than I paid. At the time, that was a substantial markup!”

“Crafty.”

“I’ll say. Sometimes, he would send me out on the street to sell fruit. The war was going on, and when the soldiers and sailors would come into town on leave, Pop figured he could make a buck. He used me as a lure—you know, the little kid selling fruit or whatever, big brown eyes looking up, and the sailor with a lady on his arm—how could they resist?”

“Yeah, I see that. Sounds like a plan.”

“Well, Pop always had an angle. He would buy the fruit down at the market, then try to sell it for a markup of ten or fifteen cents. He would tell me that he would pay me, but then, at the end of the day, he would always have a reason for taking all the money back. ‘Overhead,’ he would say. Or, ‘You didn’t sell enough for me to make any money. You need to work harder.’ So he couldn’t (more like wouldn’t) pay me. Sometimes I would work for hours and he’d give me a quarter. But I couldn’t say no. He was just too strong for that.”

“Were you afraid of your dad?”

“Not exactly. But I knew where I stood, and I clearly wasn’t in on the decision making.”

“No fear, though?”

“Well, when he got really angry, he could be scary. No doubt about that. But mostly he was a lot of bark, rarely any bite. Still, I toed the line.”

“Ah.”

“Like I said, he loved the angles. He had this big barrel of socks in his store. He would put a sign on it, only occasionally, just to see what would happen. The sign would say, ‘Socks: 10¢ a pair; two for a quarter.’ Like I said, he just wanted to see what would happen. He would laugh uproariously when someone would buy two pair and think they were getting a deal. But if they argued, he’d stare them straight in the eye and say, ‘Take it or leave it.’ He didn’t care if they bought. He just wanted to see if they would back down. That was his way.”

“Hmm. Sounds like it was entertaining to work for him.”

“Oh, yes, but I mostly tried to avoid the shop. He was so demanding, and expected us to work all the time for nothing. And he was quick to anger. You had to watch yourself.”

“Right. Did he ever just hang out with you, do something fun?”

“No. I always wanted him to. I played football, and I always hoped he would show up. But I never saw him in the crowd. He never really said anything, except when I blew out my knee in high school. Then, he said, ‘I told you not to play that stupid game.’ I was crushed. But I had to quit football, and, to be honest, I couldn’t wait to leave home for college.”

And so I heard the story of a child hoping to light a spark with his father, but somehow, always falling short.

And in my Dad’s stories, I found something of myself. I found the longing, and the missed opportunities, and the gulf of difference separating father and son.

I found the story of a man and his son, separated by time and space and worldviews.

I found the age-old tale of the father–son split.

And I found myself wishing it could be different between my father and me, and determined that it would be different with my sons, that I would not be that absent/demanding/angry father.

Coming Home

My father’s ghost has hovered at the edge of my consciousness for many years now. He was there, this daddy I remember from long ago—it’s just that the man who left him behind lost sight of the power of his presence, and the importance of his legacy.

But he left a faint imprint (a trace) that I can now gather back into my life.

I must find the daddy and bring him back to life.

And so, I imagine my father’s ghost, one day in the not-so-distant future, standing on his porch, saying

“I’m sorry, son. I am sorry for everything that happened. And for everything that didn’t. I am sorry we lost what we once had. I have only one regret: That I was not the father I should have been. But I am still your father, and always will be. I just forgot how to be your daddy. And . . . I love you.”

And I imagine a long pause, and then, an echo, in my voice:

“I love you.”

And he replies: “Ice cream?”

“Yes. Yes. Ice cream.”

What I find most troubling in this particular father–son story is, as I said at the outset, the missing trace of my father. What I find troubling is what disappeared, the part of him that fell away as he fell into despair. What I find troubling is not what was but what might have been. What I find troubling is that the love I feel for my father may be attenuated by my experiences with this tragic loss.

The intersection of our stories is a narrative failure.

Or is it?

It is surely a story that needs rewriting.

What can we make of all this?

What can we make, in the midst of this tragic story of splintered relations, of the question of love?

What can we make of the natural, assumed, potentially unconditional love of a father for his son? Or of the deep adoration of a son for his daddy?

How does the word “love” speak into the darkness of this polarized relationship?

How do we reach into this story, and reconcile the possibility of “the caress” that is the tender opposite of a foot grinding into a chest (Hyde, 2006; Levinas, 1981)?

It seems we must reach back into the depths of memory here, to pull forward the possibilities inherent in the tender act of grilling a perfect cheese sandwich.

The funny thing about all this is this I still love my dad as fiercely as I did that day when I sat on the stool and he made me a sandwich. All the angst and the suffering and the pain and the conflict aside, I know we are bound together by

. . . the power of memory, and by deep, abiding love.

In the end, I must find my father, both then and now.

I must learn to link the memory to the now.

Over the years, I have spent much time writing through the problems in this relationship. I have agonized, I have wept, I have raged, I have talked with friends and family, I have sought therapy. Although I have felt a good deal of healing coming from these various approaches, I was surprised, in the end, by where—and how—I found dad.

Looking back, it now seems so obvious, so simple. It turns out he was here all along.

One fine spring day, I am standing in my kitchen, making a grilled cheese sandwich.

And the memory of my childhood washes over me.

Now, having returned to the beginning, I could see the trajectory of my life, clearly etched in my memory.

In my therapist's office later that day, I am angry. I am talking about how my father never accepted me, how he abandoned me, how he stepped on me.

And my therapist says,

“How long do you want to hold on to that anger?”

I am stunned.

I pause for a long while, just trying to catch my breath.

“What the hell do you mean? It's *him* that's the problem!”

“Maybe. But *your* problem is your *anger*. How long do you want to hold onto that?”

I pause. I am, simply, stunned into silence—for a long, long time.

And then, slowly, I say, “I do not. I do not wish to hold it any longer.”

“Then let go.”

And the rage boils up in a loud wail.

And a hole bursts in the dam.

I shout at the top of my lungs, blasting my anger toward the heavens.

And I crumple into a ball on the floor.

And the river of my tears flows freely.

I wail, I sob, I cry quietly.

A week later, I am staring out my window at work, writing this article about my dad. And a wave of sadness overcomes me. And wave upon wave of tears floods my eyes, rolls down my cheeks.

Again. Since I am at work, I cry silently, alone, feeling the depths of it all, feeling the wracking pain of it all, feeling the terrible, lonely loss.

When I get home that day, I look into the eyes of my two sons, and I *know*.

I am the father.

I am the father that I lost.

The father that I lost, and that my father lost, and that his father lost, is alive in me.

I am him.

I am the father.

I am the father of two boys, Eli and Noah, whose presence during each moment of their lives has brought me great joy.

I am the father of unconditional love.

I am the father I should have drawn in this card game of life.

I am the father who cares for his progeny, who engages his children, who lives in daily dialogue, who keeps the sparks alive.

Like Telemachus, I had been searching *out there* all my life—searching for my father, hoping he would come home one day.

And then, one day, I realized he was *already* home, that he was me, that I am Odysseus the protector, the husband, the father, the king.

I am the Odysseus who stayed home.

I am the father.

I am home.

I think I'll make a sandwich.

Or grab Noah and have a game of catch.

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Note

1. Levinas, a French soldier during World War II, was captured early, and spent much of the war in a POW camp in Hannover, Germany.

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