Regrets of a Son, Regrets of a Father

Breaking interwoven cycles of despair

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Original version published on Medium.com - 2015
Revised version - 2018

I was ten years old when, with no explanation, my father told me to get in the car. After a two-hour drive along small country roads we arrived at our destination – a picturesque town with no traffic light. We parked in front of a funeral home. My father sat silent for a long moment; "We're here to bury my father – your grandfather," he said while staring at the steering wheel. I was very confused; no one, not my parents, my aunts and uncles, not even my grandmother ever spoke a word about him. My imagination ran wild, "Maybe he was a famous criminal," I thought to myself, "Or a secret agent!"

I stared at the stranger in the casket. He didn't look like a criminal or a secret agent. He was very old, almost bald with just wisps of white hair. His face was sunken and the clothes he wore looked too big for his thin frame. Looking at his profile, I could see my father in the old man's face. There were no flowers around him and the only person there besides the two of us was the funeral director. In a moment of clarity I understood that he died alone. Overhearing bits of conversation, I learned that my grandfather died just two days earlier. He was 75 years old. We didn't stay very long and there was no sign of emotion on my father's face as he stood by the casket. It seemed like he too was staring into the face of a stranger. On the way out my father signed the guest book; without a word, he gave me the pen and pointed to the book to sign. There were no other signatures and the time was running out.

We left the funeral home to have a quick lunch while waiting to go to the nearby cemetery. Over a hamburger and a milkshake my father told me the story of his father. My grandfather's name was Adam. He was born in Europe and came to the U.S. as a teenager. He married Stella – my grandmother – then quickly had six children. One day, while working in the local steel mill, there was a terrible accident. One of the hooks on the overhead crane broke loose and landed on my grandfather, smashing his skull. His co-workers found him lying in a pool of blood with brain tissue flowing from his skull. After months in the hospital, doctors told my grandmother that her husband – though physically healed — would never come home. The brain damage was too severe; he would never be able to function in society.

The fall of the hook, the exact timing required for my grandfather to be in that specific place, and efforts of fellow workers as he lay near death on the floor all seemed surreal to me. My grandfather was after all, just a poor immigrant with no political or legal clout to leverage, and society was not as litigious as it is today. There was no compensation nor benefits from the company – it was after all- just *'a terrible, regrettable accident'*. My grandfather was moved to a mental institution out in the country. His memory was wiped clean by the accident: who he was, his wife and children and all those who he once loved were strangers. He was, in a very real sense, a *tabular rasa* – a clean slate. For reasons unknown, the only person he did remember was my father, who along with my uncle would visit occasionally, but by the time I was born, those visits had long ceased.

> *I wondered if he ever missed his father, if he still loved him, if he ever loved him*

At the time of the accident my grandfather was in his mid-thirties. He spent the next forty years tending the vegetable gardens that supplied food for the institution. My grandmother was left alone, burdened with raising and providing for her six children. My father, the oldest of three sons, dropped out of school in the sixth grade to help support the family. That accident set the tone for the rest of my father's life. For my grandfather, the complexities and responsibilities of life simply disappeared. No children to raise, no bills to pay; his life revolved around nurturing the garden, free from the burdens of everyday life. My grandfather could have served as inspiration for the Peter Sellers character – 'Chauncey' – in the movie *Being There*.

We drove up the steep hillside with tires spinning on barely-there roads and a 1,000 foot drop off just outside my window. The cemetery possessed a certain Olmsted-ian beauty with gravestones stair-stepping up a gentle, verdant hillside, culminating at a large crucifix that appeared to watch over all those souls. Walking up the hill to the gravesite, my father remained silent. I wondered if he ever missed his father, if he still loved him, if he *ever* loved him. As it turned out, I would never know. A few years after his father's death and now in his mid-fifties with four children to support while working at a low paying position with the government, my father began drinking heavily and when he was drunk he became violent. Short story: one day my father was gone, never to return. In the wake of his departure a cycle of abandonment, despair and poverty was repeating itself. Like my grandmother, my mother was faced with raising four children on her own with no financial assistance. To help, I postponed college and found employment, as did my sister closest to me in age.

When my father died I was 1600 miles away. I hadn't seen or spoken to him for several years. As I understand it, he was alone in his hospital room when he passed. Like his father before him, my father (a paratrooper in WWII) died alone and unsung. After a call from my siblings, I immediately jumped on a plane for

home. When I looked down into his casket, I saw the same face I had seen when I was ten years old. This time, however, the old man wasn't a stranger. Or was he? I wondered if I ever really knew my father and the totality of what he endured in his life to set him on a destructive path. I knelt at the casket and couldn't hold back tears of regret; tears for not knowing him as I became a man.

Kneeling alongside his casket I suddenly realized an unnerving truth about myself – I lacked the gift of forgiveness. Despite being raised in the Catholic faith, I found myself stuck in a selfish quagmire of toxic memories. I could neither forgive nor forget all those nights of violence; or listening to my mother cry at night because there was no food; or neighbors calling the police to our house. At that moment, however, I wish I had possessed the wisdom and maturity to reach out to my father in his later years. I loved my father when I was ten years old; as an adult, I loved that ten-year-old's memories of him.

> *Perhaps I lack the basic ability to understand that sometimes love fades, sometimes trust is broken…*

Fast forward several years and I am the father of a two year old son, but my marriage is splintering and there is nothing I can do to put it back together. My heart is breaking. When my parents' marriage fell apart, I promised myself that would never happen to me, I would never let my child be a product of a broken marriage, yet, here I was facing that reality. Sadly, some patterns of behavior are difficult to break free of – once again my heart remained hardened and I lacked the ability to forgive and forget.

Since he turned eighteen, my son and I have seen each other only a handful of times despite living in the same city; a harsh reality to comprehend. My father didn't know his father, I didn't really know my father, and now my son doesn't know me. While the reasons vary in each case, the end result is a profoundly sad, tragic cycle. Aristotle wrote in Metaphysics, *"All men by nature desire knowledge."* I wish that was the case in my life, in terms of father-son relationships. Perhaps I lack the basic ability to understand that sometimes love fades, sometimes trust is broken, and people are who they are, not who you want them to be.

People, both individually and collectively, are a big pile of dichotomies: love, hate; altruistic and self-serving interests; greed, generosity. Life is complex and constantly changing as we strive to understand ourselves and each other while chasing our own mortality. Occasionally we (I) neglect to understand and appreciate the miracle and richness of human life, focusing instead, on events that leave us feeling bitter, full of hate, and bereft of forgiveness.

The consequences of that steel mill accident hit my grandparent's family like a bowling ball smashing into a set of pins, scattering lives in all directions. It's been over three

decades since my father died, time enough it seems, for me to have developed a better understanding of his life. Ground down by the subsequent hardships he experienced, my father became lost in a world of anger, weariness, and despair. Overwhelmed by his life, my guess is that he was doing the best he could. Still, I can't help but wonder what motivated him to bring me along on that funeral journey; we rarely did things together. Is it possible he was using his father's life and death as a metaphor for the future? If so whose: his or mine?

Of the thousands of people I have encountered in my lifetime, my father remains the unhappiest man I ever met. I pray my son won't be able to say that about me. For the other men in my family, I pray my experiences mark the end of this tragic cycle and spare my son and my brother. Fortunately, unlike my father, I have found happiness again and rediscovered love. I'm still working on the forgiveness part. There's still hope.