

Stumbling into Relating Writing a Relationship with My Father

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Abstract:

Father–son relationships can be tricky, often fraught with tension or bogged down in painful shared histories. Writing about these relationships is similarly tricky, and fraught with various tensions. As an accidental ethnographer who follows the organic flow of my own emergent writing—and who wholeheartedly embraces writing into and through communication problems—I have written my way into some messy little corners while writing about others. But I have also stumbled into some intriguing, deep, and powerful relational turning points. In this essay, I stumble into writing my relationship with my father, and thus toward re-writing the terms of our relationship.

Keywords: autoethnography | communication | conflict | dialogue | family communication | narrative | father–son relationships | trauma violence

Article:

Dear Dad,

I have been searching for you all my life.

I have never been able to locate you.

You have, at times, seemed so distant, so absent.

*At others, you were all up in my face, demanding, controlling,
stepping on my toes.*

You worked a lot. Seven days a week, you were mostly gone.

You came home tired, and you collapsed in front of the TV.

When I was little, I wanted you to play with me.

I remember vividly when you stopped. When you were in seminary, we used to toss the ball around, play catch. Then one day, you were too busy. And I never saw you that way again, as my pal, as someone who would play with me.

After that, you just seemed mad.

And tired.

And sometimes, sad.

And through all of it, I just wanted to know you, wanted to feel close to you, wanted your approval.

Sometimes, I would wish for a new dad.

Sometimes, I would wish you would lose your job.

Sometimes, I would toss the baseball to myself, pretending it was you throwing me a fly ball.

Sometimes, I would wonder what it would be like if you sat with me, read me a story, hung out with me, wanted to know me.

Then, one day, your brother died. Soon, your dad and sister died too.

After that, you were sad a lot.

But we never really talked. I wanted to . . . you probably did too. But we never did.

When I was a teenager, I decided to do whatever

I wanted. You became irrelevant, though you didn't think so.

It was too late. I was growing up without you.

After that, we were both angry—for a long time, mostly

with each other. We fell into conflict, and we never came out.

Sometimes, I wonder if it could have been different.

Sometimes, I wonder what it would have been like if I

had found you.

Somehow, I never did.

Your son,

Chris

Background

The true tragic understory of Homer's *Odyssey* is not the trials faced by Odysseus, or the terrible loneliness faced by his wife Penelope. The real tragic, painful story is the story of Odysseus's son, Telemachus, who did not know what to do when faced with the dilemma of Penelope's suitors overtaking the kingdom Odysseus left behind when he ventured off into the world. Abandoned at an early age by a father he barely knew, Telemachus had very little to work with in his own quest to become a man (Homer, 2011).

The troubled relations between fathers and sons constitutes an archetypal form, carried across history and through literature, from the Torah (the story of Abraham and Isaac may often be read as a story of faith, but it can also be interpreted as the story of a misguided father) to the ancient Homeric epics to the Christian tale of Jesus' suffering and crucifixion ("Father, why have you forsaken me?"), to the tales of medieval knights questing after something lost (Johnson, 1989), and on into our modern literature and the so-called "men's movement" of the 1990s. Walker Percy (1999a, 1999b), for example, works out the problematics of a father who committed suicide. Robert Bly's *Iron John* (1990) and Sam Keen's *Fire in the Belly* (1992) both deal with the question of what it is to be a man, often with a conflicted father-son relationship, in our postmodern era. Meanwhile, Samuel Osherson's (2001) psychological study directly addresses the sense of loss many men feel in searching for their fathers, and coming up short. In our own qualitative circle, the torn or ruptured relationship between fathers and sons has been chronicled by the likes of Bud Goodall (2006), Ron Pelias (2004), Art Bochner (2008), and Tony Adams (2006). I have written about this problem myself, in my book *Accidental Ethnography: An Inquiry into Family Secrecy* (Poulos, 2009).

And, of course, there are the fine contributors to this special issue, each working out the father-son story in unique and compelling ways.

In this article, I want to trace the contours of a troubled relationship, with the aim of considering the notion of how we might write our fathers into our autoethnographic and performative works, while hoping to explore the possibilities of relational breakthroughs coming about in and through the writing itself.

Deep Background

“Quiet! You better behave, boy!”

“You’re crying? I’ll give you something to cry about!”

“Shut your mouth, boy!”

“Don’t do as I do, do as I say!”

“You will eat those lima beans. Or you won’t be going to bed.”

“Oh, hell. You haven’t worked a day in your life. You don’t know what work is.”

“Don’t cry, son. Be a man.”

“Gained some weight, haven’t you?”

“A ‘C’ in conduct? How do you get a ‘C’ in conduct?”

“What’s wrong with you?”

“You’re wrong!”

“Be a man.”

“You’re out of the will!”

I have always had a troubled relationship with my father. Since my earliest memories, I cannot recall a time when I did not feel afraid of him. I have, for most of my life, lived under a shadow of threat. The words between us, though often hurtful, are really only a small part of the whole story. As I have claimed in my book, *Accidental Ethnography: An Inquiry into Family Secrecy* (Poulos, 2009), my “narrative inheritance” (Goodall, 2005) is caught up in a complex multigenerational web of brooding, anger, strained-heavy silence, dark threat, innuendo, physical intimidation, lost opportunity, alcoholism, depression, secrecy, stoicism, trapped or suppressed emotion, impression management, communicative rigidity, overactive face-work (i.e., heightened concern for self-presentation), harsh critical judgment of others, and pain. Much of the story of my family of origin has been an unhappy one. My relationship with my father is, I believe, emblematic of that unhappiness.

My father’s (probably) lifelong battle with depression (which remains largely untreated, though there were short periods when he took antidepressants) is both a central thread of his own narrative inheritance (I suspect his siblings and parents all battled with this affliction as well) *and* at the center of the trouble in *our* relationship. In my father’s family, the communication patterns involved the family in constant argument, baiting and “bickering,” and the open threat of disownment, pronounced readily by my grandfather, who had, in fact, disowned his own father. So the communicative enactment of the family affliction often took the form of violent conflict, with the so-called “silent treatment” as the ongoing, strained follow-up to the regular explosions of anger that took place seemingly over the smallest slights. Words (and hints, and looks, and variations in tone) have *power*.

Words (and their companions) have the power to harm. And to heal. And to harm again (Hyde, 2006).

The life stories that unfolded from the family legacy of depression, conflict, and violence have been deeply ruptured life stories (stories of crisis, or split). My father’s siblings both died before they hit midlife. His father died of “heart failure,” and his mother died alone and deeply

depressed, living out her final years in the urine-soaked glory of one of those fine establishments we euphemistically call a “nursing home” but which most of us recognize as a *dying* home.

My son Eli refers to these places as “God’s waiting room.”

Enough said.

On the other side of the family—the family my father married into—hovered the ongoing, often silent/secretive, killer affliction of alcoholism, a family disease that takes root and tends to spread both genetically and behaviorally across generations. They say that every family tree has fermented fruit; ours has more than its share. Some have been loud, flamboyant drunks; some were angry, raging drunks; others have silently sipped themselves to death. Most of the rest of the family has just stumbled deep into denial, rarely mentioning the disease.

All told, the narrative inheritance of my clan is a tale of extraordinary difficulties in that simplest and most important of human activities—namely, relating.

And it is not just in the father–son relationship that these difficulties arise, but rather in *all* relationships. Still, for whatever reason, it is in the relations between fathers and sons that the arc of the story achieves its greatest intensity. This is also the space in which the violence lurking under the shared anger actually springs forth from time to time. As for how this pattern began to emerge in my own family of origin, I suspect that, in some sense, the births of his two sons (my older brother Mike, in early 1957, and me, 18 months later), may have served as something of a “trigger” that deepened the hold his affliction had on him. As documented as recently as the May 19, 2010 issue of *The Wall Street Journal* (Wang, 2010), new evidence has emerged that men, as well as women, can suffer so-called “postpartum” depression, with men exhibiting an inability to bond with the child, as well as unchecked anger, and, potentially at least, abusive tendencies.

Intriguingly, birth itself—at least the two that I have witnessed, my own sons, both of which were “emergency” birth situations—is, from one perspective, a somewhat violent “tearing away” of the child from the only home it has known, the safe and protected haven of the mother’s womb. In my own case, what seems to have flowed from the moment of my birth is a series of early life incidents that I can only describe as conflicted, painful, and threatening. As a small child, I came to believe, very early on, that no matter what I did, I was under the threat of anger, violence, or retribution. I came to fear my father’s footsteps, and his words—and his belt.

Anxiety became my most constant companion. For whatever reason, it appears that my father could not accept me as I was. He could not offer the unconditional love that is due to each child from its parents. He simply did not have it to give. So he took it upon himself to try to control me, which was, for different reasons tied to my own personality, doomed to fail. I was rebellious. But at the same time, I also came to believe, at some point in my early life, that there must be something wrong with me. It seemed to me, that no matter what I did—if I did what I was told, or if I did not; if I was a “good” boy or a “bad” boy; if I performed well or made a mistake—all actions had similar likely (or potential) consequences, which might be summarized, in a word, as the disapproval of my father. Outwardly, these consequences ranged from outright physical punishment (some might say abuse) to angry reprisal to shouting to silent scorn to simply being

told, in subtle and not so subtle ways, that I didn't "measure up," that I was "less than" or that I was simply not adequate to the demands of being a human being. Inwardly, I came to believe that I was defective, that I somehow *deserved* my father's disapproval, that how I was being treated was a natural outgrowth of my own unacceptability.

As my therapist now informs me, so many years later, a natural part of the self-centeredness of children is to internalize the abusive actions of our significant others. After all, since it doesn't make sense that the person the child idolizes—the father—would treat the child that way for no particular reason, or that the father has his own issues, it must be true that there is something wrong with the son. So, I came to understand myself as worthy of loathing.

It may seem that I want to lament this relationship, or that I want to blame my father for the myriad problems I have faced later in life. But that is not true. What I want to say, however, is that I offer this story as deep, dark background for a brighter story that emerges from it—the crafting of a new narrative inheritance for my own sons. And, somewhat surprisingly, this project leans into a newly emerging narrative (a new chapter, if you will) in the story of my relationship with my father. But first, I must acknowledge that this family legacy does not have a pretty beginning, that it begins with a dark turn. My family is haunted by a multigenerational story of abusive, depressive, repressive, violent treatment of sons by fathers. That is *our* tragic understory. That is the narrative inheritance I have been granted. At least I have something to work with. I like a good story. And many good stories start with a conflict.

Stumbling Into Relating

My writing about this violates the family "rule" of silence and secrecy. We don't talk about things like this. We don't "air our dirty laundry." My ongoing contention, in doing this kind of writing, and in teaching about such issues, is that the rule itself is a reified structural component of the family dysfunction, that communication sheds light upon the darker contours of our being—and that, if we are to overcome the painful, destructive forces of family conflict, we simply *have* to talk and write about such things. To put it bluntly, the silencing rule is at the heart of the family's affliction.

Sadly, without intervention, the family is on its deathbed, fallen into a coma. If we are to ever revive the patient, we are going to have to do a heart transplant.

So, I determined long ago that I simply had no choice. I am *called* to write these stories into being. Naturally, I am keenly aware, every time I write, that my perspective on these matters is my own and only my own. Part of my family legacy is that disagreement about matters big and small is the central, most prominent dynamic that plays out in our communication. We have been locked, for many years, in a "conflict spiral" (Wilmot & Hocker, 2001, p. 52). So, it is very likely that almost *nobody* in my family would confirm any given characterization, portrait, attribution, or narrative line I would give to any given circumstance that arose. *My* story of my father beating me with his belt in a fit of rage may well be *his* story of an unruly child getting his proper comeuppance. That, of course, is the nature of narrative—and possibly even its *point*—a story is *always* told from a particular point of view.

So, I could simply claim that what I am doing is writing my own story, and that others should, if so moved, write their versions. And I am actually in favor of this idea. Indeed, I wish my entire family would write the story of our lives. I think it would not only be fascinating but also, very likely, therapeutic, as it has been for me.

But I don't think I'm off the hook here. I still feel a call to responsibility, to ethics, in crafting my autoethnographies. How can I write others into my story in ways that *show* what I profess to believe—that we ought to practice a dialogic ethic of care in all our relationships?

According to some communication ethicists (Dalai Lama, 2001; Hyde, 2006), the possibility of this happening, in conflicted or ruptured relationships, may be born from the twin energies of forgiveness and compassion. The capacity to forgive, and to feel for and with another with empathy and compassion, can seem like a tall order, especially in cases where abuse is part of the legacy. In my own case, it is a slow process—a gradual awakening—that has occurred over a period of years.

Three moments I stumbled into have opened new doorways for me in my quest to rewrite my relationship with my dad. These sorts of things always seem to happen in the kitchen.

Snakes, Checkers, and Photographs

The first moment was a major fight—which nearly came to blows—over, of all things, snakes.

Snakes.

It began innocuously enough. We were chatting pleasantly, or so I thought, about a place I love dearly, a deep glacier-fed high mountain freshwater lake in northwestern Montana—a place I have visited many times over the years, but which my father has visited only twice. Yet his limited experience does not hinder his profession of expertise in this situation. In the middle of this conversation, my dad says,

“Well, you know that place is crawling with water snakes. It's a big lake.”

“Yes, dad, it is big. But there are no snakes there. The place is too cold. They have a saying in Montana ‘ten months of winter, two months of relatives.’”

“The place is crawling with snakes, dammit! I went to the library and looked it up! Water moccasins everywhere.”

“Oh, now you are just lying. There are no snakes there, goddammit!”

Feeling the heat, and knowing I have gone too far, I leave the room, walk upstairs and cross the kitchen to get a drink of water and cool off. I hear something behind me, and turn to see my father, a large man in his sixties (I am in my late thirties at the time), advancing toward me, face

red, fists clenched. It looks as if his plan at that moment is to punch me, probably in the face. It has been years since I have tolerated him hitting me. So, I say,

“Dad, are you going to hit me?”

And he stops in his tracks.

“Because if that’s your plan, we should probably take this outside.”

I walk out the front door, into the front yard, and wait.

He follows me.

So, I say,

“Dad, what’s going on? Are we really fighting over snakes? Neither of us knows anything about snakes, or cares about snakes, or has ever read a book about snakes. And we both know it. What’s this really about?”

“Well, I read a book. And it said there were snakes in that part of the country.”

“O.K., dad. Have it your way. But what’s this really about?”

After a long pause, my father says, “You have never listened to me. You always argue with what I say. When you were fourteen, I tried to coach your baseball team, tried to teach you how to hit, but you wouldn’t listen. You had to have it your way. You always questioned my authority.”

And I say, “I’m sorry, dad. That’s not what I meant to do.” A month later, now in graduate school, I am confronted by the need to write a paper on leadership. Part of the assignment is to interview three leaders we respect. My father, an Episcopal priest, has been the leader of various congregations for over thirty years. So, I call him and ask him if I can interview him. I can tell he is pleased.

And, in that simple conversation, a new perspective emerged: I saw my dad in a new light, as a man with a need to be a respected leader, and with some measure of a gift for this role.

And I realized that *my* story of his insistence on having his way was *his* story of an obstreperous child who needed to be taught something.

Respect, perhaps.

The second moment occurred quite by happenstance— or so I thought.

Several years after our legendary snake-fight, I wandered into my parents’ kitchen, and there, at the kitchen table, was my son, Noah, about six at the time, happily playing checkers and laughing it up with his grandfather, my dad. And what came to me in that moment was the rule we invoked in nearly all our childhood games in which a dispute over what happened arose: The

sacred “do-over” rule. If, for example, one side in a game of street baseball thought the player was thrown out, but the other side was sure he was safe, a bit of argument would ensue. But when things got close to heated, someone would call out, “Do-over!” This was, as I said, a sacred invocation. We did not question the do-over. We just proceeded.

So, as I watched my dad and Noah playing checkers, it hit me. Maybe he wasn’t such a great father. But at that moment, he was being a pretty good grandpa. So maybe, I thought, he’s getting a do-over.

And a wave of compassion entered my heart.

The third moment, also in my parents’ kitchen, is a story I tell in the opening of my book. The gist is that I happened upon a photograph, which, it turned out, was a picture of my great grandfather, who I had never seen or heard a single word about. His story was the revelation of a dark family secret, a story of abandonment and betrayal and retribution—the story that ended in my grandfather “disowning” his father, and, in turn, passing along the threat of cut family ties to the next generation whenever anyone got slightly out of line. This legacy was translated into my father’s ongoing (to this day) (only half-joking) threat: “You’re out of the will!”

But as I learned the story behind the photograph, I saw my dad, somewhat surprisingly, begin to really enjoy telling the story. A secret held for over fifty years, revealed spontaneously like this, seemed to lift a weight from his shoulders. His face began to light up, and he started chuckling as the story unfolded. What had been, for so long, a forbidden topic of story or conversation, was suddenly fair game. And so I began to see how I might begin inquiring about other family stories, and secrets, and patterns of interaction. The result has been a few nearly magical conversations with my dad, conversations that began to pave new pathways toward the possibility of our relating in a different way. In these three moments, I find hope. In these three moments, I find openings to possibility.

In these three moments, I find a new tone, and possibly a new chapter, in the story of our relating . . .

And then, there are my sons, Eli and Noah, who have been great sources of joy in my life. We began with clear, unmitigated, unfiltered, unconditional love and deep attention. And what has unfolded is genuine dialogue (Poulos, 2008), and abiding, mutual, unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1980). We have rarely had conflict, and there is much joy in our relating.

A do-over, indeed.

All of which gets me to thinking: Perhaps, if we are open to it, we may find ourselves stumbling into new ways of relating.

Perhaps we can craft new narrative trajectories for troubled relationships via the simple act of seeing the other in a new light, or sharing a story, or asking a question.

Perhaps we can find our fathers by granting a “do-over.”

Perhaps I can come to know my father in a new way, by honoring him for who he is, rather than who I expect him to be.

Perhaps compassion and forgiveness can, in the end, take us by surprise.

Dear Dad,

There you are . . . I am glad I found you—or at least, part of you—before it was too late. Maybe we could hang out a little. Maybe we could go do something, like go to a ballgame, or maybe you could tell me some more stories about your life. I would like that.

Love,

Chris

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Bio

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