

A Life Cut Short

It doesn't matter who my father was; it matters who I remember he was.

Anne Sexton

My father died in the forty-ninth year of his life. It happened suddenly or so I was told. After I finally learned about it, it was hours before I could stop sobbing. To this day, it was the most shattering experience of my life. We were in New York when the information reached us. I remember the moment vividly. The hotel. The room. The time. The call. And then the never ending weeping.

I was twenty-two and had just finished the first semester of graduate school at Harvard. I was not happy there and so my wife and I had left Cambridge to visit New York for a few days. We were not really clear about what we were going to do next or thinking much about it. After the call, we immediately began driving back across the country to California to be with my mother. I never did make it to my father's funeral. All this was more than forty-five years ago.

I have always wondered if I was ever told the true story of his death. I have imagined that he might have taken his life. He was so deeply depressed when I left to go East and was once again living in a private psychiatric hospital. He had been through it all so often. I thought he might have simply had enough, enough of the wild highs and agonizing lows.

My father was born in 1909 in Hoboken, New Jersey soon after his parents immigrated to this country from Russia. A few years later they moved to Alhambra, California, not far from downtown Los Angeles, where my grandfather began practicing pharmacy. I never learned why they moved to Alhambra or much about my father's time there. The little information I have about his life begins when he boldly set off to Stanford, then a virtually unknown university in Northern California, in spite of the objections of his parents, who wanted him to attend a college close to home.

He studied economics at Stanford. I once asked him if it had helped him to be a better businessman. He confessed it hadn't. While there, he developed a life-long long love of Stanford sports. I recall the joy he took in recounting time and again one of the legendary victories of the Stanford football team. Those were the only tales I ever heard him tell, but at least there were those. When he died, a memorial scholarship for football players was established in his name at Stanford. Each year I receive a very kind letter from the current holder.

When he was well, we usually took the train to Palo Alto at least once each year to watch the football team play. This seems so utterly foolish to me now. Yet it meant everything to him and so it did to me when I was young. Throughout the time I was growing up, I was told I needed to do well in school so that I would be admitted to Stanford and, when it was time for me to go to college, it was the only one I applied to. In fact, I hardly knew that any others existed then. Can you imagine applying to only one college or university today? I think it is closer to fifteen or so for most students these days.

I do not know when my father's first bout of depression occurred. I recall hearing that it might have been during his freshman year at Stanford. It was the first time he had been away from home. The details elude me and now there is no left to answer my questions. He must have had similar bouts during the years before I entered high school, but I have no recollection of any. I find that puzzling, in light of the widespread view that such experiences usually leave a lifetime mark upon children. Instead, I mostly recall how outgoing he was, his generosity, and hardy laughter.

My father's name was Herbert, although I only heard his mother refer to him that way. It was said she named him after Herbert Spencer, the English philosopher of the Victorian era. That never made any sense to me since, to the best of my knowledge, she never learned to read English very well, nor did I ever see her reading anything in Russian, her native language. Most people simply called my father Herb or Herbie, as you would to a close friend or buddy, which is the way most everyone felt about him.

My brother and I were raised in the first and only house that he and my mother bought in Los Angeles—470 South Hamel Road.¹ They never found any reason to move from there, even though it was rather modest and a more upscale place was well within their means. It was in a quiet neighborhood of single-family dwellings, each one occupied by neighbors who were rarely seen or spoken to during the many years we lived there. I don't recall that my father spent much time at home, as each day, including the weekends, he would drive downtown to work.

He was a partner with his father and brother in a wholesale magazine distribution business in Los Angeles. In thinking about this business now, it does seem a rather odd thing to be doing. The Sunset News Company, as it was called, distributed magazines and paperbacks throughout the rapidly growing and geographically vast area of Los Angeles. Twice each week the magazines, paperbacks and comic books that were published in this country were shipped to the firm's warehouse. The order for each bookstore, market, drugstore, bus station, airport, etc. in the region was filled by employees who collected the items and placed them on a moving assembly line. Then the order was tied into bundles and hoisted on to one of firm's delivery trucks. Over the years, as the Los Angeles area grew almost exponentially, the Sunset News Company became something of a cash cow.

I recall the countless stacks of magazines and paperbacks (we called them "pocket books" then) that filled the warehouse, from one end to the other. On the weekends my father would often take me to work with him and while he was in his office, I would lounge about those bundles of popular magazines and books. Some people spend their childhood lounging in fields of wildflowers. Mine was spent amongst bundles of the Saturday Evening Post and Archie comic books.

¹ After my father died, my mother sold it and then a few years later it was put on the market once again. I learned that my girl friend from junior high-school days was living there. I imagined stopping by to see how she liked living in my home but I never have.

Of course, I was only able to experience this pleasure when my father was well. During much of my childhood he was not. Yet I do not recall that his bouts of mania and depression affected me adversely, even when as a high school student, I began to appreciate how ill he was. He was spending a fair amount of time in analysis then and I know my mother tried to explain to me why. I observed the countless disputes between them, the shouting matches, and the angry public displays. However, I was young and didn't really understand the full dimensions of what was going on. These hostilities never turned me away from him, as I sensed they did to my brother. More than anything, I think I was simply filled with sympathy for him.

In violation of all the canons of psychoanalysis, his therapist befriended my father. That always was a bit of a mystery to me. One night we were invited to join his family for dinner at their home. My father was deeply depressed then and it was a difficult evening of awkward conversation. I remember we listened to Schubert piano sonatas. Afterwards, the analyst gave me his copy of the record and signed the cover "Music for the soul." I replayed the record countless times and kept it until eventually it began to sound like sandpaper.

My father loved horse racing and each year that he was able he would take us to the Santa Anita and Hollywood Park race tracks near Los Angeles. Once he invited his analyst to join us. That was a much happier time. The therapist, in good Freudian fashion, carefully observed the horses as they were parading in front of the grandstand on their way to the starting gate. Those who pooped well were judged to be in excellent condition, whereupon he left to place his bets. I recall he made a good deal of money that day.

I liked bantering with my father's analyst. For some reason, we seemed to hit it off. It was my first experience of "clicking" with someone. This has been a rare experience in my life. I think I would have clicked with my father. Most everyone else did, including his analyst. But I never really had a chance to find out. This is true for most everything about his life. I was never able to talk with him about his childhood, his first marriage,

which I only learned about by chance, as I was thumbing through an old dictionary of his one day. I asked my mother about the bookplate with the name of Edith upon it. She told me it was his first wife and that their marriage had lasted less than a year. I didn't then or ever again pursue the matter further, although now it occurs to me I would have liked to.

My father drank heavily at various times in his life. It was difficult to be with him then, especially for my mother who had to bear the brunt of his emotional outbursts, although they were never violent or physically harmful. It was only much later that I began to study what was known about alcoholism and manic depressive psychosis, as it was known then. Most of what I read never helped me to better understand his torments or do anything to help him. Neither psychoanalytic therapy, the drugs available at that time, electroshock treatment, or the best private "rest homes," gave him any lasting relief.

Would the newer drugs and treatments available today have made a difference? Perhaps they might have made it easier for him to manage the furies more effectively or put them at a greater distance. However, I am not at all sure about this. I saw the world in which he grew up, the way his mother and father treated him and how he had to spend his working days in the family business. It was never a placid situation. There was no escaping the world he brought with him or the one he had to live through during his all too brief life.

In my naive way, I wanted to try to understand what could be done to help him. To some extent, and maybe more than I realize, a fair amount of my time in psychology was devoted to that task. Every now and then, I thought I had come across a useful concept. But by then there was nothing I or anyone else could do with the information.

The most illuminating insight I ever had about what he must have been going through came from an experience when I was recovering from sodium penathol, the anesthetic given to me when I had my wisdom teeth removed. Even though he was quite depressed then, my father was with me in the recovery room. In coming out of the drug, I went

through a prolonged period of uncontrollable weeping--apparently a not uncommon after effect of that drug. Yet all the while I was fully conscious of my state, and fully aware that no matter how hard I tried there was nothing I could do to stop. I recall saying to him in my stupor that I knew exactly what he was going through.

My father never knew what became of me. Perhaps he would have been a little bit pleased. Nor did he ever come to know my wife. He did meet her once before our marriage, just briefly, during a time when he was very ill and along with my mother had come to visit me at college to celebrate my 21st birthday. Afterwards I recall him saying, as he placed his hand over his heart, "She has heart." It was what he always said about the people he really cared for.

How much I envy the young men and women whose father has a continuing presence in their adult life. It has been said that a son's relationship with his father shapes in subtle ways his adult personality and the relationships he forms in adulthood. I have often wondered if I would have done anything different in my life or been a different person had my father not been so ill and had he been alive during my adulthood.

What happens to men who lose their father? I am not thinking of the fatherless young children about which there is so much concern and speculation today. Rather, I mean the young adult men, say between 20-30 years of age who, like myself, were raised by their father but then spend the rest of their life confronted by the gaping emptiness of his absence.

The question has been puzzling me for many years now. How is it possible to find out about the effects of something that never happened? At times I have been ambivalent about my work and social relations. These feelings are sometimes said to occur in men who have not been close to their father. However, I always felt very close to my family and so this idea does not help me much. In addition, I know of men who are far more far more resolute than I am who often fought bitterly with their father.

My father was never there to pass judgment on what I did. Nor did my mother, for that matter. I used to go about my days rarely thinking of what they or anyone else might think about the choices I made. Occasionally it got me into trouble. But never enough to bother me. Yet many times in my life I have taken the easy route, aborted a chosen path.

After he died, I left graduate school for awhile before eventually returning for my doctorate. After receiving it, I resigned from the first job offer I had, only weeks before the academic year began. I also left the position I devoted most of my life to well before most academics do. Above all, I was never entirely satisfied with my work in psychology or the discipline in general.

Would I have been more decisive, less ambivalent if my father had been a presence in my life? We hear much doubt expressed today about the direct impact of parents on their children's personality and adult behavior, indeed, whether or not they matter at all or matter as much as their peers. It is said, for example, that parental influence on their children has been overestimated. Studies of identical twins (reared apart or together) are cited to show that genetic factors control about a half of a person's intellect and personality. Other studies of fatherless children are said to be consistent with this evidence. Rearing a child without an adult male in the household appears to have very little *particular* impact on children. Instead, factors associated with income, frequency of moving, and peer relationships are said to matter more.

My own feeling is that these claims say less about the influence of parents on their children and far more about the methods used to obtain the evidence, especially the methods used to assess adult behavior and personality. Frankly, I do not believe these methods tap the important dimensions of human personality and intellectual ability. Nor do I think the findings have a very high degree of generality. Do they apply to me? The question is unanswerable. There is simply no procedure for determining for whom the findings hold and for whom they don't.

I also believe whatever influence parents have on their children is not likely to be very specific. Instead, we learn from them *very general aspects of character and motivation*. We learn to value learning, not any particular discipline. We see what it means to be generous and helpful, not any particular instance of these acts. In short, our parents provide exemplars for those deeper aspects of human character and feeling that find are expressed in the sort of person we become.

By way of example, my father used a great many expressions that you rarely hear today. Like "ribbing," "honky dory," "okey-dokey," "lollapalooza" and "Let's put the show on the road." Every family has their own private vocabulary and those were some of his favorite expressions, expressions that have remained a part of my ordinary vocabulary to this day. I have come to believe that the indirect and quite unintentional way this occurs illustrates the more general process by which parents shape the behavior of their children.

Strangely, I find that the memories that I have of my father grow in clarity with each passing year, no doubt because they are often rehearsed. I recall the mornings we were together when he drove me to school on his way to work. I remember the many long afternoons my mother, brother, and I sat with him in the afternoon sun watching the Hollywood Stars play baseball at Gilmore Field. I can see him, bald and heavysset, smoking his cigar, my mother keeping score, and my brother and I munching peanuts, mitts in hand, hoping to catch a fly ball that might be hit our way.

My father was a great joker, yet the jokes he told never ended with a punch line. Rather they were short quips, quips that were unexpected and altogether original. They simply emerged while he was bantering or jesting with another person, not the sort that could ever be retold.

I recall how much he enjoyed the radio comedians of the day: Jack Benny, Fred Allen and Edgar Bergen. We would sit by the radio every Sunday night listening to their shows. And then when television came, doing the same with Milton Berle, Sid Ceasar and above all, Jackie Gleason, who he was much like in appearance and big heartedness.

Each Saturday night we would sit side by side in our living room armchairs, rolling with laughter at those remarkable Gleason skits.

I visualize him sitting at the head of our dining room table during yet another family gathering, joined by grandparents, numerous aunts and uncles and cousins. And I recall the times he and my grandfather went for a walk after dinner, both smoking their cigars, strolling along the streets of our neighborhood, chatting away the evening. I am grateful they asked me to come along, even though I'm sure I rarely said a word the entire time we were together.

I am often reminded of those times and know that, while they took place many years ago, they continue to play a role in my life. In recalling them, I am reminded of other experiences and times that we were together. They are mostly cheerful times, not the turbulent ones that I have dwelled on here. I did know him for awhile. He would have been over ninety now. That is impossible for me to imagine. I only know the robust, yet melancholy person in the memories that come my way each day.