

Between Fathers and Sons
Critical Incident Narratives
in the Development
of Men's Lives

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Chapter 8

On Coming to Understand My Father: A Personal and Professional Journey

William McKinley Runyan

What is an appropriate way to write about a close personal relationship with a much loved father? How much to be personally expressive, to be analytical, or to be evaluative? I want to be “objective” in the sense of not telling untruths, of not distorting the facts, yet at the same time, I do not want to feign a cool neutrality that doesn’t exist. I begin with the emotional-expressive side, which preceded all the others, and is still probably the most relevant. This is followed by a brief intellectual analysis of aspects of his life that might not have been pursued without the invitation to contribute to this book. Finally, I will begin exploring how my experiences with him are related, if at all, to the kinds of work I have done and would like to do.

In proceeding, I do not want to claim any full or final understanding of my father or our relationship. There are many issues touched here just on the surface, with ideas leading to other thoughts and feelings swimming to the surface behind them, in a seemingly unending procession. In laboring over this chapter for a number of months, I have been struck by how much these thoughts and feelings about my father are a contingent historical process. While there seems a relatively stable core of positive emotions and feelings toward him, my thoughts and interpretations are shaped by a surprising array of observations, experiences, comparisons, theories, and conversations. I see a mother from India walking down the street in Berkeley carrying an infant over her shoulder, and see the placid face of the child bobbing along, and am reminded of having such a feeling of being safe, secure, in relation to my father. Or Frank Sinatra dies, and I am struck at the dramatic contrast of his tough guy bravado with the style of my

father. Or I hear a talk on intellectual historian Isaiah Berlin raising questions about the origins of his unusually sweet temperament, and about his avoidance of conflict, and am struck by how both of these features ring true in trying to understand my father. As part of this contingent process, I would like to thank those who shared in thinking and talking about my father in recent months, and who raised valuable questions and insights, including my mother, my brother John, Aunt Martha Conrad, Patricia Byrne, Stanley Renshon, Karl Engelhardt, Mary Coombs, and Nancy Unger, as well as helpful discussions with Ted Sarbin about other chapters of this volume.

THE EMOTIONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH MY FATHER

How did I feel about my father? As a child, I don't remember talking much about my parents to classmates in grade school, although I was pleased to have friends come over to my house to play or for a birthday. By high school and college, as adolescents talked more about parents and how difficult they could be (as well as vice versa), I would simply say I had a good father, a kind father; it was distressing to hear of the terrible things that some kids experienced with their parents. Here, however, I'd like to convey two later expressions of my feelings about my father, one from a letter written to him in 1987, and the other, excerpts from a statement prepared for his memorial service in 1995. The context of the letter was that after visiting home in Hudson, Ohio, for Christmas, I had gone to a professional meeting in Chicago, where my parents had met each other as students at the University of Chicago in the fall of 1938.

May 3, 1987

Dear Dad,

After I left home this Christmas vacation and went to the American Historical Association meeting in Chicago, I was hit with a flood of thoughts and feelings which started while I was walking around the big Marshall Fields store on Michigan Ave.

The essence of it was that I was flooded with the feeling that you've been a wonderful father. . . . I feel like a gift has been given to me, which it is now my opportunity to pass on to others. Sometimes when I do something kind for someone else, I think

this is how my father would have done it, or I learned how to do this from him.

I hadn't appreciated so forcefully what you meant to me as a father, and got choked up thinking about it. (I was touched that before I'd left, besides gifts for Christmas, you'd even shined my shoes. My feeling is that I ought to be shining your shoes.)

From big things of care, considerateness, unpretentious love and kindness, financial support, respect and good humor down to the smallest things of even shining my shoes before I left, I wanted to let you know that this occasionally does get through my thick head, and I appreciate it.

Your loving son,

Mac

I wrote a longer letter to both of my parents in 1994 expressing in more detail a number of things I remembered and appreciated about our family upbringing, but I don't have space to go into that here. By the early 1990s, my father, who had been extraordinarily healthy until then, and remained active playing tennis, platform tennis, and taking long walks with my mother, had started to suffer from Parkinson's disease, which affected his ability to get around, and eventually his memory and cognitive abilities as well. In December 1993, they moved out of the house in Hudson, Ohio, which they'd built in 1961, and moved to a retirement community, Kendal, in Oberlin, Ohio. My father died from a stroke on September 24, 1995. His memorial service on September 26, 1995, at Kendal, gave me a chance to try to convey a brief account of his life and what he meant to me, parts of which are adapted below.

A Few Moments in His Life

My father was born in 1916 and grew up in South Haven, Michigan. He graduated from high school in 1933, where he was valedictorian and president of his class. He was an excellent athlete, being quarterback of the football team and star of the basketball and track teams. He was voted Most Athletic, Smartest, and Best All Around. The caption next to his yearbook photograph is "We know him well—no need of praise." (Not bad for a high school yearbook.)

He played football at the University of Chicago when they played major college football, having a career-ending knee injury returning a

kickoff against Ohio State, and also playing against ex-President Gerald Ford when he played at the University of Michigan. After graduating from the University of Chicago in 1937, where he was president of Alpha Delta Phi fraternity, he received his law degree there in 1939. He volunteered for the Navy in World War II, and served as an officer for four and a half years in both the Atlantic and Pacific theaters, and survived having his ship torpedoed and sunk early in the war. In 1943, he married my mother, Elizabeth Runyan, who had met him on a double date while she was a freshman at the University of Chicago. They had two children; I was born in 1947, and my brother John in 1949. After working briefly in the New York area, he began a thirty-five-year career as an attorney with Goodyear Aerospace and then Goodyear in Akron, Ohio, from which he retired in 1985. Some of my personal impressions of him, written out late the night before the memorial service, are as follows.

Some Personal Impressions

What kind of person was he? I feel like one of the most fortunate people in the world to have had him as a father. He had a truly extraordinary degree of goodness, honesty, and kindness, even innocence in a way, and an extraordinary lack of egotism, vanity, or selfishness.

As a psychologist and professor at the University of California at Berkeley, I'm supposed to see things as complex and multi-layered, but I seem to have such uncomplicated feelings toward my father: pure affection, pure respect, and pure appreciation. I don't seem to find any dark hidden layer of anger or resentment toward him, and I believe that is because of who he was.

The book *Golf in the Kingdom*, by Michael Murphy, says that sports is a way that men can express their love for each other. And that is the way that it worked in our family. At the beginning, I remember him playing catch with me with a football and baseball on the sidewalk in front of our house, moving back one square at a time until able to do so at ever greater distances. After that there were endless hours of playing, coaching, attending our games, and discussing each play and player. I felt support and encouragement, yet no pressure to perform, not even being aware until much later of what an athlete he had been in his own right.

Memorial services often have laudatory comments about the deceased, but it has long seemed to me that it would be good to express these feelings directly to the person, which I've tried to do in recent years to both of my parents. I feel I received an enormous amount of love from my father, that I appreciated it and expressed that to him as best I could, and that he received my love and respect. In some ways, the circle was completed. Sometimes, I think such goodness can spread in waves through the people it touches.

In conclusion, by the time my father moved to Kendal, he had somewhat declined physically and cognitively. However, he accepted the impositions of old age with grace and dignity. My mother, who was central to his life, did a heroic job in caring for him in recent years. No matter how impaired he became, his kind and gentle temperament remained. . . . He taught us, or he taught me at least, something about how to live, and how one might die. Reflecting on him raised questions in me about what is most important in life, because his life demonstrated so much that seems of value to me.

I love him, and will miss him.

A Few Aspects of His Life Related to My Own Development

In an effort to be more objective and analytical about my father's life, a great many topics could be useful to explore, such as his childhood and psychological development, education, athletics, law school, years in the Navy in World War II, marriage and parenting, his career as a lawyer, leisure interests, and his participation with my mother in the Christian Science Church. Given the constraints on space, I will comment briefly on his involvement with athletics, marriage and family culture, adult interests and priorities, and finally, on my own inclinations to idealize him.

Athletics

By the time he was in high school, organized athletics seem an important part of my father's life, as he was a star of his school's football, basketball, and track teams. My grandmother kept a detailed scrapbook of his accomplishments and newspaper clippings, which I didn't see as an adult until after his death. Davis Baer, coach of foot-

ball and other teams, seemed a significant person for him. I learned recently from my aunt that my father had some inclination to become a coach but (perhaps with some family pressure) pursued a career in law.

At the University of Chicago, he overlapped with some of the history of college football, as the former coach was the legendary Amos Alonzo Stagg, and a teammate was Jay Berwanger, first winner of the Heisman Trophy as best college football player in 1935. At Dad's invitation, Berwanger came and spoke to the football banquet of his former high school team in South Haven, Michigan. In later years, my father even took notes at the father-son athletic dinners at Western Reserve Academy. My sophomore year, he wrote down what soccer coach Tien Wei Yang had to say about every member of the team, including myself, which was recorded as "Runyan—slow as molasses, quick reactions, small boy, tremendous heart, Cranbrook best." Cranbrook was one of our opponents, so presumably that was my best game. To me, and probably to a father, "tremendous heart" sounds good, although "slow as molasses" sounds ominous for a soccer player. I got bigger, although not much faster, and became captain of the soccer team my senior year, and cocaptain of the freshman soccer team at Wesleyan and varsity soccer at Oberlin. Thanks to my father, I was able to take advantage of relatively modest athletic talents, and enjoyed playing soccer, basketball, and tennis on high school teams, which was a central part of life at that time, and later enjoyed playing basketball and running for another thirty years.

For my father, important human virtues were expressed through athletics, such as concentration, teamwork, treating teammates and opponents with respect, regardless of level of ability, striving to do one's best, and learning to live with the outcome, whether winning or losing.

Marriage and Family Culture

He was married to my mother, Elizabeth, for fifty-two years from 1943 until his death in 1995. My sense is that they had a solid marriage, with many shared interests, values, and activities, although perhaps without the lengthy talks about one's emotions more common in later generations. While my brother and I were completing high school, she went back to school, receiving a PhD in English from

Kent State, and teaching at Kent State and Akron University in subsequent years. They had different temperaments, with he being more calm, secure, retiring, and optimistic, while she was more intellectual, cultured, anxious, critical, and socially outgoing. (If there was one Great Depression, which she had experienced, couldn't there be another one, at any time?) I can imagine them standing in a meadow in Switzerland, where they loved to travel, looking up at the sky after a rainstorm, my mother saying, "Looks like it's about to rain again," with my father observing, "I think it's starting to clear up." Their personality differences seemed complementary in many ways, although must also have grated at times. Their marriage seemed unusually secure, as the possibility of their divorcing never occurred to me growing up, and according to my mother recently, was not something they had ever considered.

One value they shared was expressed in a family culture of frugality, of being as economical as possible in order to save money for more important things like education or travel. In taking a walk through Marshall Fields in Chicago, there was no chance I was going to actually buy anything. If necessary to stop to eat at a fast-food restaurant, the strong expectation would be to get the basic plain hamburger, not the cheeseburger, not the double burger, not a bacon cheeseburger, but the simple hamburger. Only a barbarian, only an economically irresponsible spendthrift would insist on the more expensive cheeseburger—someone like my younger brother, John. In spite of this early profligacy, he managed to turn out all right. He excelled in high school in academics, athletics, and student government, went on to Harvard, and then to a career as a management and learning consultant. He is married and has two children and was president of the Leadership Institute of Seattle, and cofounder of the Leadership Group, a consulting firm in Seattle. My parents were, I would like to add, unusually generous in supporting us through our education and afterward; this was possible, perhaps in part, through this culture of frugality.

His Adult Interests and Priorities

As I work so much in the study of life histories and psychological biography (Runyan, 1982, 1988, 1997), I wonder how to compare my father with the people I spend time reading and thinking about, often

those who affected cultural or intellectual history, or shaped social and political events. He seems to me at the opposite end of some continuum with "tormented genius" at one end and him at the other. He was bright but did not seem tormented, and not driven to change the world or overthrow the culture, and not needing to impress or win attention from others. My sense is that he was not driven by occupational ambitions, that working forty hours a week was enough, and that he was happiest to come home to be with his family, to play sports with us, to work in the garden growing tomatoes, corn, lettuce, or zucchini, to carefully manage family finances, to go on family camping trips, or later, trips to Europe, while reading about and planning them in advance.

My father rarely talked about his feelings or emotions toward me, but expressed them in almost everything he did, from his pleasure at meeting me at the airport, to sadness at seeing me go, to watching an endless number of our athletic events, to talking over dinner, to putting his hands on my shoulders while I was watching TV, to cleaning my shoes, to sitting and talking outside in the evenings at Kendal. I had the feeling of being loved by a father who was devoted to my well-being. As a child, I don't remember him saying, "I can't. I'm too busy." In a talk at Kendal one evening trying to sort out some family matter, he said, "We really understand each other." I hope if he has a chance to read this, it wouldn't change his mind.

In summary, his priorities seemed not to be on career aspirations, nor on cultural creation or social change, but rather on family life and performing some of the basic roles at home, work, or leisure with unusual kindness, honesty, and human decency, in a way that touched many around him. I think of the movie *It's a Wonderful Life*, with Jimmy Stewart as George Bailey, who at Christmas, considering suicide, encounters an angel who helps him see how much better off his family and community are for his being in the world. We happened to see this on TV around Christmas 1992 in Hudson. He was clearly moved by it and commented, in a relatively rare cultural judgment, that Jimmy Stewart was a wonderful man. I'm not sure how much he was responding to Stewart as a person (who in real life was unusually likeable with a self-deprecatory sense of humor) or his role in this film, but I think of similarities between my father and the good-hearted, moral, sometimes innocent characters that Stewart played in films such as *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) or *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*

(1939), which provide as close a model for the dynamics of my father's life as I've seen.

My Inclination to Idealize Him

Given my strongly positive emotions toward my father, I expect I may also tend to idealize him. I still see him as a wonderfully kind, loving, nurturant father, yet I am trying to integrate these positive feelings with a better understanding of who he was and how he fit into the wider world.

In saying he was a wonderful father, this is not to claim that he was everything, or taught us all we needed to learn. He was obviously intelligent, but clearly not an intellectual, a cultural critic, an explorer of intrapsychic depths, nor a social-political activist (although he did participate in community chest activities and came to oppose the Vietnam War). One thing that may have constrained him was an anxiety or worry about interpersonal conflict. He sometimes seemed to feel that he was responsible for causing it, or for resolving it, even when this wasn't the case. I don't know how this developed, but guess it might be related to adapting to conflicts in his parents' marriage as a child. Independent of this, he also had an unusually peaceful and good-natured temperament. If the rest of us would start squawking or pecking at each other, he would remain relatively unruffled, and get us to calm down. Although not a major figure in the social-political world, nor on the cultural-intellectual stage, as a loving father and kind human being to those around him, he was hard to beat.

WHAT RELATIONS TO MY WORK?

Given my professional interest in the relations of personal life histories to the kinds of work people do, I would like to begin exploring what relations, if any, my relationship with my father may have with the work I have done and would like to do.

The ways in which personal temperament and experience are related to theoretical orientations in psychology has been a richly explored subject (see Atwood and Stolorow, 1993; Elms, 1994; Fancher, 1996). As I understand it, life historical experience is an omnipresent context for the development of psychological theorizing and re-

search. Personal experiences need not determine psychological interests and careers in any simple invariant way, yet, in interaction with scientific-intellectual processes, social-political contexts, and historical contingencies, they are often meaningfully related to the course of psychological theorizing, research, and practice.

A carpenter's work is not uniquely determined by the materials on hand, as wood, nails, and screws may be used to build a table, cabinet, or chair. Similarly, theoretical and research work in psychology is not uniquely determined by personal experience, yet personal experience is one of the resources that can be drawn on in a multitude of different ways.

What about the case at hand? What connections, if any, are there between my relationship with my father, and the kinds of intellectual work I do? My father felt like a safe and supportive base, from which a great variety of things might be done, depending on my personal interests or inclinations. Let me mention three possible connections.

First, with the assistance of my parents, it was possible to go to a liberal arts college, spending my freshman year at Wesleyan in Connecticut, and then transferring to Oberlin from 1966 to 1969 because it had a sociology department, but more importantly, because it was coed. At Oberlin, I was strongly influenced by sociologist J. Milton Yinger, (who later became president of the American Sociological Association in 1977), and whose book *Toward a Field Theory of Behavior* (1965) provided a conceptually sophisticated integration of social, cultural, and psychological levels of analysis, with a little biology applied to topics in the social sciences, accompanied by optimism about the uses of social science for social reform. In ways that look to me unrelated (although who knows), Milt Yinger was a friend of my father in high school in South Haven, Michigan, and they had kept in touch for years afterward, leading to our families occasionally having picnics together in Ohio.

Second, ever since college, I have generally been more attracted to subjective, experiential, and holistic traditions in psychology, such as humanistic psychology, the psychodynamic tradition, culture and personality, and particularly, the study of lives (Runyan, 1982, 1988, 1997, 1998). Does this preference have any relation to my relationship with my father? Probably not in any direct one-to-one causal chain in which people with particular childhood experiences will necessarily have particular theoretical orientations. However, my re-

lationship with him may be one element along with my temperament, kinds of intelligences, cultural exposures, professional relationships, social-political contexts and values, and historical contexts that have led to and sustained these preferences for approximately three decades. While receiving a PhD in Clinical Psychology and Public Practice at Harvard in 1975, I was attracted to the romantic and experiential interests of Henry A. Murray, and admired and idealized him in some ways, although developed greater critical distance over the years (Robinson, 1992; Runyan, 1994). The kind of warm and nurturant relationship I experienced with my father may have made it easier or safer to explore personal and developmental experiences than might otherwise have been the case. This alone does not determine anything, but is one element that could be assembled into a preference for experience-oriented psychologies, and thus may have affected my interactions with experiential versus natural science psychologists over the years.

A third and final example to be discussed here is my exposure to the history of the science world in recent years. As a visiting scholar at Harvard from 1995 to 1997, I learned a good deal about social-political critiques of science, the sociology of scientific knowledge, postmodern and Foucauldian critiques of science, and cultural, linguistic, and material constraints on the history of science. However, biographical and psychological approaches to the history of science were dismissed by some as little more than return to a discredited "Great Man Theory of History." Something in me rebels against this view, which seems severely one-sided. Yes, social, economic, political, linguistic, cultural, and material conditions can all shape the course of science, but so too do the personal, experiential, and cognitive processes of individuals, groups, and populations.

My father died in September 1995, and I sense there was some aspect of my relationship with him that made me react against what seemed like purely "critical" positions, whether of neo-Marxist or progressive critiques of science, or Foucauldian historicizing and constructivist critiques, which, in Foucault's words, could be seen as tools used in dismantling the system. Rather than dismantling the cultural or social system as a general program, it seems to me important to differentiate between structures that are humanly helpful versus those that are destructive or oppressive. A general deconstructive program doesn't appeal to me, I suspect, for intellectual-analytical reasons, as it

seems insufficiently differentiated, and I suspect also for personal-experiential reasons, including my relationship with my father, which gave the experience that some structures can be helpful, supportive, and beneficent.

CONCLUSION

In summary, I've tried to convey something of the emotional-expressive side of my relationship with my father, to more objectively analyze several aspects of his life, and finally, to begin thinking about what relationships, if any, there may be between my relationship with him and the kinds of work I do.

The problem presented for me by this chapter was how to construct a conceptual space in which to attend to and to honor the experience of being with my father, and also to value the intellectual-analytical world on its own terms (with social-political concerns also important, though given less attention here), and to at least begin exploring the question of how they may or may not be related in my own life. In doing so, it seemed important to reach the view that each can be valuable even when largely unrelated to the other. This idea seems obvious in retrospect, but was difficult to reach. Even if a relationship with one's father has no particular "scientific" value, it can have great value in its own terms. Even if personal experience and science are not related in some cases, I simultaneously hold the view that personal-psychological-experiential factors, along with social and cultural contexts, often have far more relevance for social scientific theory or research than commonly recognized.

On the side of my father and our relationship, let me end with a dream from August 25, 1997, nearly two years after his death. I was descending some steps with a landing, as in front of my house or going down to a beach, and was surprised to see my father walking up. I said, "I didn't expect to see you here." He was pleased to see me. I was delighted to see him. He, in turn, was happy that I was glad to see him. We hugged, and the dream ends.

On the side of psychology, the point I'd like to make is that psychological theory and research can be shaped by cultural contexts, by social-political contexts, and by personal-experiential factors, with all of these coevolving in a complex and fascinating variety of ways.

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