

## Narrating a Life, Translating a Father

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Winnicott suggests that to live life “alive” each individual must create his or her found world, which means, as I read him, that each “alive” person has to walk the bridge from the factual narration of his or her life to its personal translation. Creating one’s life not only involves translating one’s experiences into the language one is born into, the metaphors of one’s culture, it extends to the rewording of one’s memories, as well as one’s perceptions of and reactions to the world. Erikson (1959) speaks to this point when he writes: *Such a sense of identity, however, is never gained nor maintained once and for all. Like a “good conscience,” it is constantly lost and regained, although more lasting and more economical methods of maintenance and restoration are evolved and fortified in late adolescence* (p. 118). If, alternately, one’s sense of self is frozen, if one does not have what Winnicott (1965) speaks of as *an ongoing continuity of being*, one is in

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the land of neurosis, the home of transference.<sup>1</sup> The following will describe my life in such a land. My sense of self, in relation to my father, was, for many years, frozen.

This is essentially a very personal communication – interesting, hopefully, as a personal dream might be, self-referential, as well, as some of the elements of a personal dream must be.<sup>2</sup> Self-exploration, as Freud discovered in analyzing his dreams, can be a way of finding the universal tucked within the particular. I hope that this recounting will have some general significance beyond the particularities of my experiences. I will be taking a few bits and pieces from my memoir *Broken Fathers, Broken Sons*, the writing of which was essential to finding level ground with my father as well as revisiting the mishaps of my childhood, as a preface to a final goodbye. The father in one's childhood, the father narrated in a personal analysis, the father – when one is oneself a father – and the father grieved for and remembered are all the same, but also different; each must undergo translation. It was only in the writing of my memoir when memory and experience, love and anger, understanding and grief revisited each other again that such translations were finalized.

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<sup>1</sup> Winnicott, D.W. (1965) p.47ff.

<sup>2</sup> For a more extensive discussion, see Gargiulo 1998.

My personal analysis was, in the best sense, *good enough* since, after its formal termination, I have been able to experience new meanings for my life; meanings that I did not achieve while in therapy, meanings that have not broken trust with the child I was and the experiences I had.

But before I get to such meanings, such translations, I need to do some narration.

A self-preoccupied and narcissistically enraged father is not uncommon. But little children don't know that, particularly if they sense that an older brother seems to have fulfilled all of what one's parents may have wanted. An older brother, who, I complained from my earliest years, was getting all their attention. Wrapped in depression and chilled by anxiety in a household I simply could not make sense of, I decided, somewhere deep within myself, that I would have no intercourse with this world that had given me such a disconnected family.

With our porous edges, so to speak, we humans are able to cross-identify. It was my sense of a lack of such cross-identification that left me feeling so isolated in my childhood. My mother's hovering and ever-anxious attention to whatever my father wanted confused me (she was a bright, competent woman), as did my father's reading of the world and his family solely in terms of how they affected him. Each night at dinner, to take a rather prosaic

example, was a potential battleground. The dinner table carefully set, my mother would await his approval, hopeful that the food was acceptable – lest he walk out, announcing he was having dinner at a restaurant. The tension was draining. My mother would scramble after his ever-demanding, frequently dissatisfied responses, while my brother was silent and I was anxious. Holidays and family gatherings, as in most families, offered some relief from this self-referential ritual.

Not only did I refuse to learn in grammar school, I would not master the most basic of tasks (e.g., telling time and tying my shoes); I was, as well, repeatedly sick with pneumonia and the usual childhood illnesses. Not able to read any psychological meanings of his children's experiences, my father responded by shaming me for not learning and not mastering basic skills; when I was ill, I was left alone. (I consoled myself that I knew everything, anyway, and what I didn't know, I could just ask my mother. Clearly, infantile omnipotence has a long shelf life!) A brief interlude with a child psychiatrist, around age ten, gave me a hint that the world could be a caring and supportive place. My grammar school teachers assured my parents of my intelligence and with the recommendation of our family doctor, I was taken, I suspect with some desperation on their part, to a dark but pleasant

office on the upper east side of New York. All I can recall of my child psychiatrist is captured in the following lines:

How I wish I could remember his gentle face, my white-haired therapist. Sitting to his right, as he sat behind his desk, talking cautiously at first, I soon came to want my Sunday morning appointments, although I couldn't tell why. We would talk; sometimes we would play with a magic set he had bought for me. I was too closed inside and ashamed to let him know how stupid I felt. I also wanted to tell him that I knew everything; that I knew what was going on around me, I just didn't have words. I was not used to someone listening carefully to me and wanting me to talk.

This experience, locked in my memory, played a seminal role, I am sure, in my psychoanalytic professional life choice. As therapy progressed, however, my father, after about eight or so months of treatment, told me that I was much better and that twenty dollars a week was expensive and he had decided, therefore, that I should stop treatment. I accepted his decision – I said nothing, I was defeated, once more. (My father made a very comfortable living and we lived in a well appointed home.) Such were the facts. It would take me many years to translate his actions and read them as coming from a deep anxiety that I “would” get better and expose his role in my difficulties – an anxiety I doubt he was aware of.

Throughout high school years, my brother and I spent our school day afternoons working in our father's window display construction shop. We

worked every day after school until eight, nine or ten o'clock at night – homework and/or other afternoon activities were never given recognition or priority. Somewhere around thirteen, building on some tutoring I had received from a retired teacher my parents had hired, I recognized that I needed to learn to read, to tell time and to tie my shoes; the general strike I had called was only hurting me. Luckily, but somewhat absurdly, given my educational level, I stumbled upon and subscribed to the *Classic Book Club* and ever so slowly, dictionary constantly in hand, word-by-word and page-by-page, I struggled through Plato and other western classics. Riding on the hour-long subway ride to my high school, I would enter the world of my new friends. Encountering Homer and Plato, Socrates and Marcus Aurelius, before reading other more educationally basic texts, stimulated my speculative philosophical interests. Although such subjects would take years to study, philosophy and theology, psychoanalysis and theoretical physics have sustained that adolescent interest throughout my life. Despite major and significant gaps in my education, I was accepted into college. Within the first year, however, I decided to enter a Roman Catholic religious order seminary, looking, I am sure, for a father god and a mother church that I could rely on for unselfconscious care. For ten years I lived a life of study and quiet discipline, with caring and intelligent teachers and friendly fellow

students. There was little, if any, narcissistic grandstanding by either faculty or fellow students – no wonder I found it a safe place in which to live and to learn.

One year prior to ordination a deep and troubling doubt came over me. Fortunately, the religious order was willing to help me and I was able to spend a number of months with a sensitive and perceptive psychiatrist. Within the quiet setting of his small office, I mused about my life, my childhood, my family and my future and eventually decided that I would be making an error were I to continue toward the priesthood. I had essentially come together as a person and sensed that an emotionally solitary and asexual life would not serve me well. But I also felt grief, in making this decision. Was I making the right decision given all the work, dedication and care that had been offered me? And I would be leaving this world of friendship that I had found. With sadness but with a quiet conviction, I left the seminary a few weeks prior to ordination.

My father greeted my homecoming by deciding to have elective surgery; upon returning home, from my Washington, D.C., seminary, my mother drove me to his hospital room. No mention was made of my decision to leave the seminary and return home; it was as if I had just come by for a visit, not that I was returning home after a ten-year absence.

Within a few weeks I was able to secure a position at Manhattan College, in Riverdale, New York, as a lay professor of religious studies. During the following two years I married an extraordinarily loving and intelligent woman, Julia, by name. She has filled the empty spaces in my life and my soul, with her care. Within the first year of our marriage we were blessed with the birth of our son Paul and a few years later with our daughter, Connie. I pursued doctoral studies at Fordham University as well as psychoanalytic studies at the National Psychological Association for Psychoanalysis, in New York City. My father greeted these experiences with silence mixed with suspicion. I now know that there was a modicum of unspoken admiration as well.

My personal analysis would belabor the events of my childhood and adolescence; my rage and my grief would be revisited many times. My first dream in analysis, as I recall, was of my father, waving goodbye to me from behind a television screen. When I reached to touch him, I felt nothing but the hard, cold glass. No wonder psychoanalysis would be my new home. It would also be my home because it offered a way of relating to people, hopefully in a productive way, a goal that was similar to what the priesthood had promised. (I was, as well, I now recognize, looking for my lost childhood therapist). As I embarked upon my adult life, cordiality and some

closeness with both my parents were intermittent. For example, my parents came to one lecture of a series of lectures I gave early in my career; my father seemed impressed but maintained his usual remoteness. Such remoteness was also evidenced in his frequent weekend vacations, which always took precedence over attending any of his grandchildren's birthdays or graduations, whether the children were my brother's, my sister's or mine.

I also knew, amidst all my childhood and adolescent anger, that my father had a creative and inquiring mind, unrewarded by education and burdened, as I have said, with a sense of his own personal needs. I admired his strength as much as I suffered from it. He was raised in a successful middle-class, turn-of-the-century Italian household, caught between old-world discipline and new-world mores. He was merged, I would eventually conclude, with his mean-spirited, demanding mother, while acting, first born male that he was, as if he was the direct inheritor of his father's authority.

On one occasion, given my wife's focused remarks to my mother on how parents were expected to behave, he listened to some of my poems, abandoned his usual remoteness and engaged his good mind by offering some comments. But, as I was to come to understand, I wanted something more. It was, at such times, as if I could almost reach out and hold him – but then he would slip away, or maybe it was I who would let him go. While he

was alive, I struggled with both possibilities. Did I let him go because I was too sensitive a child and he, just a difficult father?

It was only with his cancer, toward the end of his life, that I was able to have a new understanding of him, a new translation, if you will. And it was his actions, as I will relate, that helped me to do this.

Toward the end of his life he was hospitalized every few weeks, I would, whenever possible come by for a short visit. One late afternoon, about five months before he died, as we walked the shiny chlorine-washed corridors of Mount Vernon Hospital, he suddenly stopped; he grasped my arm and held me still. I felt injury and awareness beneath his usually cold exterior. With his voice shaking and with tears flooding his eyes, he asked for my forgiveness. He told me, as if he had to get rid of the awareness, that I was right in my lifelong complaint, that he had, indeed, always favored my brother over me and he asked me to forgive him. I tried to capture that moment, in my memoir, by writing the following.

My insides shook with grief; I was weeping for that injured little boy and confused young man. All the while I found myself telling my father, amidst my bewildered tears, that it was okay, I forgave him. In that moment, I knew I had found my father and he had found his son.

Finally confirmed in my perception of being second best (and having been apologized to), my perceptions could expand. As I would revisit that day and

write my memoir, I could hear themes and appreciate nuances about his life and actions I had clearly been blocking. No longer just focusing on what had happened to me, I could hear him as just another human being, with his own life history, with his own injuries, who was also my father.

A few months later, having slipped into a coma, he died in my arms: this father who had shadowed and overshadowed my life was gone – my words of comfort in his ears, my tears, a witness for what was, and for what could have been.

I waited a few years before starting my memoir – my second personal analysis; willing and able, this time, to encounter him on another level. In the writing of the memoir, I came to know and to recognize how he had been victimized by his childhood, as I had been by mine. I also recognized that to be continually injured is as aggressive as injuring and that my sustained sense of injury had not been my friend, nor his. The real culprit – if one is ever justified in using such a word – was his mother, my demanding and penurious grandmother. It was as if she had taken up residence in him; his constant self-reference must have been a cry for a recognition that she, most likely due to her childhood, was not able to give.

Amidst such reflections, I finally grasped Erickson's (1959) profound insight that we are only humanly free when we can will the inevitable which

has happened to us. He writes: *It is the acceptance of one's own and only lifecycle and of the people who have become significant to it as something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted of no substitutions. It thus means a new different love of one's parents, free of the wish that they should have been different, and an acceptance of the fact that one's life is one's own responsibility* (p. 98). To be able to do that, I discovered, is the beginning of owning one's life, of creating one's life. It is, as Winnicott reminds us, to experience being alive.

At my father's eulogy I was as truthful as he would have wanted. I spoke not only of his difficult personality but also of the good times he had shown us; of the parties he often gave, of the longed-for-happiness that was lurking beneath his remote exterior. I described how, in the last year of his life, it was as if he awoke from a deep sleep and met, to his surprise, a family that loved him. I found myself his son again when my children hugged me after my eulogy and told me that I was a good son to have spoken so. Hopeful that their necessary translations of their father would be less burdensome than mine had been.

As I wrote the memoir, I became aware that I was writing a letter to my father. I wanted to tell him that I really did forgive him because I was now able to read my life differently. The pain of what could have been will

always be present, but also is the awareness of all that has gone into the making of that pain and, consequently, all that life has enabled me to gain from it.

I ended my memoir with my new reading of both myself and of my father, well aware of all the other Humptys who have fallen and who are in need of healing.

I am listening now to my musings, as I hear the endless mild-mannered waves of the ocean come home to their shores on this sunny September afternoon, sitting, as I am, on a sparsely peopled Amagansett beach, knowing, as we all know, that there are other private, seemingly separate selves, sitting like me, by water's edge, millions of us, listening to the waves, listening to ourselves, wanting, forgetting, killing, loving, talking to parents, forgetting our own names, finding consciousness, losing it to reverie, to violence, to drugs, to facts, needing the moment to stay for just a second longer, forgetting that we are close relatives with the seas which haunt us, engulf us and feed us, seeking the Humpty of our youth, or our hopes, if we can still have them, and knowing that kings and armies pass, parents fade into forgotten tales, facts deceive, and matter breaks repeatedly, and it is only in the touch of finger to finger that we feel created because we let someone close, and in the telling of our common tale of Humpty's fall and rebirth, we know that consciousness is noble, wherever its epiphany, and we owe each and every moment of its appearance the dignity of healing.

## References

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