

Commonweal

A Review of Religion, Politics & Culture

OCTOBER 20, 2017

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\$3.95 US/\$4.50 CAN

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Out of Reach

MEMORIES OF A DISTANT FATHER

I reached for my father's hand as he lay in his hospital bed. Sensing his unease, I quickly let go. It was my last attempt at intimacy. He died several days later, maintaining the distance between us to the end.

I arrived in my father's life as part of a double surprise, the elder of boy twins. Nine months earlier, he lost his seat as a congressman from New York and my mother accompanied him to Washington to close his office. They were the parents of two daughters. He was forty-three, she forty. I suspect that my father thought his begetting days were done.

My mother made no secret that we were conceived in a hotel close to the White House. She disliked the way politics kept our father away from home and the public scrutiny she felt it brought them both. Less than disappointed by his loss, she considered herself blessed rather than burdened by our arrival.

For my father, a passionate Democrat and rising star, his defeat had to be a crushing blow. But I never heard my father mention it. Glad, sad, or otherwise, he never discussed his emotions with me or, as far as I know, anyone else. As for sex, he shunned any mention to the point my mother once teased him, "Do you want your children to think they were conceived by the milkman?"

In the opening days of the post-war era, when a returning army of youthful G.I.s coached and encouraged their ball-playing sons, my father was an anomaly. Too old to serve in the war, he preferred homburgs to baseball caps. Instead of spending Saturdays on the playing field, he retired to his room to read. On Sundays after Mass, he tackled the crossword.

Any time we spent together was usually at my mother's insistence. He took us to an occasional ball game at the Polo Grounds, or to the Bronx Zoo, or schlepped us to the Museum of Natural History, where we spent listless Saturday afternoons wandering among stuffed bison and dinosaur bones. Wherever we went, he was half-present, orbiting in his own mental sphere and landing in places that made him appear more grieved than distracted.

My brother and I attended the same schools he had. Lackluster students, we

were inevitably—and unfavorably—measured against his star performance. He made no secret of his disappointment. Try as we might, his approval seemed out of reach. The best we could do was avoid his displeasure. "I don't know if any man was ever less thrilled at having twin boys," my mother said.

My father's father was an Irish immigrant. Still in his teens, uneducated and unskilled, he paid his way west stoking coal on the railroad. He tried his hand at professional boxing, joined the labor movement, and became an itinerant union organizer. Eventually, he came back east, apprenticed as a coppersmith, married, and had a daughter. He fled to Cuba after his wife died, returned to New York, and married my grandmother.



The author (right) with his father and twin brother in 1949

OLD MIAMI

Levine used to say if you remember one of his readings that Donald Justice had never seen

a worker, and Justice who had practiced his childhood piano on one of Miami's old streets

could recall a sunburned man with a bucket of masonry trowels who had walked by the porch window of his piano teacher

one summer at the end of a lesson hour, his red hair stiffened by mortar.

—Kevin Cantwell

Kevin Cantwell has published two books of poems and has had poems in The New Republic, Poetry Ireland Review, Irish Pages, Poetry, The Paris Review, and Commonweal. He is Dean of Graduate Studies at Middle Georgia State University.

My father never knew his father had a first wife or that his sister was his half-sister until informed by my grandfather from his deathbed. "I hope you won't use that to cheat your sister out of what's coming to her," he said.

I never met my grandfather. But I have pictures of him. In one, he is seated on a horse at the head of New York City's Labor Day Parade. In another, his laborer's build is on display—thick, broad shoulders and Popeye-sized forearms. In contrast, my father as a young man had a dancer's build. Tall, thin, a jaunty dresser, he was of a type his father's generation disparagingly referred to as "narrowbacks," those liberated by American birth and Jazz Age mobility from a lifetime of digging and hauling.

Afraid my grandmother was spoiling their youngest child into a "mama's boy," my grandfather occasionally brought my father along on his union-organizing expeditions. On one trip, my father remembered being surrounded by a menacing crowd furious with what his father had to say. Unintimidated, he continued with his speech.

My father enjoyed telling stories about his father's exploits in Cuba, where he found himself caught up in the Spanish-American War, and the time the Pinkertons threatened his life when he was organizing a strike. In my father's telling, there was a heroic aura about my grandfather that made him sound to me more like a character out of a novel than an intimate part of my father's life.

There was also a hardness that could cross into the cruel. When my father was just five or six, he took him to a pier in Coney Island and threw him off. The lesson was simple. The weak went under. The strong taught themselves how to survive. My father never said how long he flailed helplessly in the water or how terrified he was that his father would walk away.

Deeply attached to his mother, my father never spoke of his parents' relationship. Nor did he ever hint at the resentment he must have felt when his father disdained his ambitions to be an actor and pushed him into politics.

It's easy to theorize that the distance between my father and me owed itself in part to a pattern of emotional repression that reached back generations through grim, unsparing annals of poverty, oppression, and famine. Hard countries breed hard men.

As a child, I didn't have the luxury of reflecting on any of this. All I knew was my father's remoteness.

A civil engineer as well as a lawyer, my father had a long and distinguished career as a judge. After his death, I meandered toward a PhD in history until an unexpected bend in the road led me into political speechwriting. Although I never entertained following him into law or politics, I worked six years in Albany writing

for two governors.

Several times, upon hearing my name, people recalled my father from his decade in the state legislature. "He was a brilliant orator," one long-term legislator remarked. A lawyer who argued several cases before him said, "He was the most compassionate judge I ever encountered."

I moved on to a career in corporate writing and became absorbed in the added responsibilities of marriage and fatherhood. I started rising at 5:30 a.m. to begin a long-contemplated novel. I had little time for distractions. Memories of my childhood felt as distant and irrelevant as the hodgepodge of fading black-and-white photos my mother kept in a box in her closet.

Soon after my daughter was born, my life was upended by back pain so excruciating it threatened my ability to work. I was diagnosed with a herniated disc and told it would require surgery. Seeking an alternative, I spoke with a friend who recommended a program that treated back pain as a symptom of psychological distress.

I was reluctant at first. I knew little about the relationship between psychic and physical pain and feared the stigma of mental instability. Instead of the quick fix of surgery, there was no way to tell how long psychotherapy would take. Yet, as hesitant as I was, I sensed that the root of my trouble was more profound than a disc.

I began working with a wise and caring therapist. She patiently helped me face the unspoken fear and anxiety that I felt at replicating with my daughter my unhappy relationship with my father. My back pain gradually subsided.

It returned with a vengeance several years later when my son was born. I began to doubt that psychotherapy could bring permanent relief. I toyed with surgery before I went back to my therapist. We dug deeper this time. Progress was slower. "When you talk about your father," she said, "you seem to know everything yet feel nothing." At one session, after I spent an hour circling around various memories, she asked, "What crime did you commit?"

Whatever my misdeeds, I was certain they never rose to the level of criminal. It was a while before I put what she said in the context of my religious upbringing and substituted sin for crime. Instead of following the biblical commandment to honor my father, I'd been possessed by silent resentment and rage, and the guilt that followed. It was only after I allowed myself to feel and articulate the full measure of those emotions that I could confront the lode of sadness and regret that I'd done my best to leave unearthed.

Except for the occasional twinge, I was never bothered by back pain again. I joined my wife in the ordinary and extraordinary experiences of raising our two children. In the beginning, I acted out of sheer determination to avoid my father's mistakes. But I quickly discovered that, along with the tribulations and frustrations, fatherhood brought intense joy and satisfaction in love openly given and freely reciprocated. I understood that in the gulf that separated us, my father's loss had been greater than mine. For the first time, when I thought of him, I wept.

I recently turned the age at which my father died. I find myself often thinking about him. I remember the soulful sighs drawn from a place burrowed within, as though he were exhausted from wrestling with ghosts he left unnamed. I recall how as a small boy I walked beside him on a pitch-black summer's night and, rather than voice my fear, bit my lip until it bled. Once, on a rare excursion, he took my brother and me fishing. Far away from land, bathed in sea-sparkled air, he sang lightheartedly, as if delighted with our company. Sometimes I ache with all that went unsaid.

I've reconciled as best I can to my father's limitations. I've also come to appreciate and admire his decency and honesty. He was utterly devoid of racial or religious prejudices. His generosity to various causes and charities sometimes squeezed our household finances. His intellect and integrity earned him the respect and high regard of colleagues and peers. Yet none of that can change what did or didn't take place between us. It's useless to wish otherwise. Facing my own mortality, all I can do is reach for his hand and say that I love him. ■

Peter Quinn, a frequent contributor, is the author of *Banished Children of Eve*.

ANNUAL FALL MCGINLEY LECTURE

Reformation: Jewish, Christian and Muslim Experiences

The Reverend Patrick J. Ryan, S.J.
Laurence J. McGinley Professor
of Religion and Society

RESPONDENTS

Rabbi Daniel Polish, Ph.D.
Congregation Shir Chadash, Poughkeepsie, New York

Professor Jerusha Tanner Lamptey, Ph.D.
Union Theological Seminary, New York City

This lecture will be delivered first on

Tuesday, November 14 | 6 p.m.

McNally Amphitheatre | 140 W. 62nd St.
Lincoln Center Campus | New York City

and repeated on

Wednesday, November 15 | 6 p.m.

Flom Auditorium | Walsh Family Library
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