PART ONE

Mourning Has Broken

I will never mistake my memory of my father for my knowledge of him. But I am his heir, not his historian.

—Leon Wieseltier

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How Men Grieve

> It's so curious: one can resist tears and "behave" very well in the hardest hours of grief. But then someone makes you a friendly sign behind a window, or one notices that a flower that was in bud only yesterday has suddenly blossomed, or a letter slips from a drawer . . . and everything collapses.
>
> —COLETTE

GRIEF IS NOT RATIONAL. We keep coming up with new names for it—"uncomplicated mourning," "abnormal grief reactions," "anticipatory grief," "failure to grieve," "closure," and so on—in foolhardy attempts to understand and domesticate it. In reality, grieving is a messy and unruly process that's never had any respect for labels or the fine clean lines delineating one phase of mourning from another. Grief simply refuses to stay in the appropriate spaces we designate for it.

Grief makes us crazy.

Models and theories about bereavement are, as a whole, more helpful to authors trying to write about grief than to those of us going through it. Whether these theories use a "task" model

(where successful resolution or adjustment to the loss is gauged by the mourner's mastery and completion of specific emotional tasks) or a "stage" model (where healthy bereavement is determined by a person moving through a series of difficult but necessary feeling states), the problem with all these perspectives is that they take an evaluative stance in relation to people's mourning.

Reading these "grief maps," one gets the impression that if you're not experiencing exactly what you're supposed to when they say you're supposed to, you're doing something wrong.

The most well known of this type of approach is Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's groundbreaking work on the stages of mourning—*denial*, *anger*, *bargaining*, *depression,* and *acceptance*—that terminally ill patients and their families move through. Kübler-Ross's model is now utilized by therapists, clergy, and hospice workers everywhere. Similar to many Freudian and Jungian concepts, her ideas are so popular and widespread that they have worked their way into our everyday conversations as well as the professional lexicon about death and dying.

I have nothing against this sort of thinking or theorizing about the grieving process per se, especially if it helps people who are feeling confused or disoriented to gain a better understanding of what they're feeling and experiencing (and why). However, even Kübler-Ross made clear that she intended her stages of mourning to be used descriptively, not proscriptively.

The real problem with models is that most of our experiences don't fit neatly into them. And even when they do, many of us don't want to organize and categorize our most painful losses this way.

The Exception Is the Rule

A friend of mine, Carroll Stowe, wrote a story in which he described a beautiful memory of his father's touch:

> The last time I was privileged to shake my father's hand was at the 1980 Heath Fair. I had no way of knowing I would never see him or shake his hand again. That last handshake from my dad was so firm and strong it would belie his eighty-three years, a hand not gnarled from hard work but strong, kind, and good from many years of selfless toil.

His father died of a heart attack the following day.

The first time I heard Carroll tell this story, he was helping me clear some brush in our lower field. We were standing next to his gray '84 Ford F150. Carroll looked like Father Time. He had a thick, silver-white beard and a full head of hair to match. His face betrayed his seventy years, but the way his eyes sparkled when he sat on a tractor or held a chain saw in his hands, he didn't look a day over fifty.

"Jonathan," he said in his gruff Yankee accent, his eyes misting over, "it's been twenty years since I last held my father's hand in mine, but when I imagine his firm grip and heat from his warm palm it feels more like ten seconds." And then he pulled his right hand out of his pocket and stared at it as if he were eyeing a museum piece or a restored part to one of his cherished antique Farmall tractors.

Addressing the topic of grief and time, Hope Edelman writes, "We're an impatient culture, accustomed to gratifying most of our needs quickly. Expecting grief to run a quick, predictable course has led us to overpathologize the process, viewing normal responses as indicators of serious distress."

But as Edelman poignantly comments, "If it takes nine months to bring a life into this world, what makes us think we can let go of someone in less?"

Grief minutes are like dog years, based on some artificial notion of time. My friend Carroll's story captures the timelessness and intimacy of mourning in a way no model ever could.

Referring to Carroll as "my friend" is akin to calling the Atlantic "my ocean." He was a prolific author, storyteller supreme, good neighbor, logger, snow-plowman, expert on farm machinery and animals, wagon-train master, and our town historian. In short, a Heathan treasure. Sadly, he died on August 18, 2005, the day before the opening of what would have been his seventy-third Heath Fair.

His tractor sat for three days at the entrance to the fairgrounds adorned with flowers and cards from grown men who as boys had been introduced to the ways of farming and their first tractor ride sitting on his lap. Their children, including my sons, Julian and Oliver, decorated it with drawings and pictures of moonlit hayrides taken with their moms and dads in the back of Carroll's wagon, just as their parents had done with their mothers and fathers before them.

Carroll kept alive our agricultural past with humor and with great feeling for what we have lost and with caution to hold on to what we value most: our sense of community, the rewards of hard work, and respect for our land and our fellow creatures. He was a man of deep faith. When he wasn't cursing God over a broken-down tractor sitting idle in a field of freshly baled hay, he could be found praying to God in church. He believed in heaven. If such a place exists, now that he's there, I'm not sure what he's up to. But I know that when he arrived, his father's outstretched hand was there to greet him.

Kübler-Ross cautioned against our approaching grief in a formulaic fashion because, as she was fond of saying, when it comes to understanding death and dying, "the exception is the rule." This is an important lesson to remember. When teaching, regardless of the topic, I often tell my students or trainees, "All my ideas and concepts when applied to your individual clients are lies."

Each time two people sit together, they're starting from

scratch. It is up to therapist and client to do their own theory building and research. This does not mean that when consoling the bereaved we ought never draw on prior experience. It simply entails our remembering that grief is expressed in a range of ways; and while there are stages of sorrow, no two people mourn identically.

When a Boy Loses a Father

If losing a parent is one of the most stressful life-cycle events an individual can face, losing a parent during childhood is catastrophic. However, without a forum for discussing his feelings, the fatherless son has little validation for the magnitude of his loss. Unlike the adult, who experiences parental loss with a relatively intact sense of self, a boy who loses his father during childhood or adolescence incorporates the loss into his personality, where it becomes a defining characteristic of his identity. From learning at an early age that close relationships can be impermanent, security ephemeral, and family capable of being redefined, the fatherless son develops adult insight while still a child but has only juvenile resources to help him cope.

A boy's journey from childhood to adulthood is also complicated by the loss. Boys identify strongly with their fathers. However, while most boys separate from their fathers during adolescence to create an individual identity, and then spend the later years trying to return as an autonomous adult, the fatherless son moves forward alone.

Chronological age is not the only factor by which to measure the depth of a son's emotional attachment to his father, nor is it the most reliable. An older child, an adolescent, even an adult who has been unable to make secure attachments to a mother, father, or parental figure will respond with frustration and rage when the person he counts on to attend to his needs is absent.

Usually, however, from the time a child is two, the death of a parent is accompanied by profound disappointment, a loss of self-esteem, and fantasies of abandonment. These emotional devastations are, according to Louise Kaplan, “compounded by attributions of fault and responsibility, good and evil, and other complexities of conscience which, in a young child’s mind, are always reduced to ‘Who is to blame?’ ‘Who is the bad one?’ ‘Who made Daddy disappear?’ ”

Early loss is a maturing experience, forcing a child to age faster than his peers. Children take on adult roles, such as planning funerals, taking responsibility for younger siblings, or caring for an ailing parent. Without a father or father figure to guide him, a son has to piece together a healthy male identity and self-image on his own. The most trying thing about the way young people grieve (for parents and children alike) is that it happens incrementally: they grieve as they grow. Every few years, children reprocess the death of a parent in ways that match their new-found stage of cognitive development.

The news that an adult lost his or her mother at an early age often renders people speechless. The experience of losing a father is different. Often the first question asked when someone discovers that an adult lost his or her father at an early age is, how did your mother provide for you? It’s as if the most defining or horrifying aspect of the loss they can imagine is the economic challenges the family faced. Not to minimize the trauma of sudden financial hardship or change in social status, but my own experience as a therapist tells me that these are not the most scarring aspects of the experience for children.

Images of Fatherhood

Both men’s and women’s experiences of their fathers’ absence in death are colored by the way they experienced their presence in

life. If the archetypal figure of motherhood is of a person who was always there for us, the image of fatherhood has become one of a person who was always gone. Consequently, for many, the death of a father crushes any hope of ever getting to know the man. Their pain is often more about the loss of what could have been than the loss of what they had.

If there is a cultural resistance to mother loss—an entrenched psychological denial or taboo—with fathers, it's almost the opposite. Although it is just as traumatic, there is less indignation; we almost expect it. Many of us are used to our fathers' comings and goings. We grew accustomed to long periods of absence—actual and emotional—and their movement in and out of our lives. Life conditions us to accept this as simply the way things are. In a sense, our entire lives have prepared us to cope with our fathers' absence. So rather than allowing ourselves time to grieve, we simply walk away from the experience.

For men, this is not that different from how we cope with many of the traumas and significant losses in our lives. Women are socialized to talk about this kind of experience; they are often more attuned to their bodies, their feelings, and other people. When men are confronted with a challenging emotional experience or catastrophic loss, we are taught to fight or take flight. Like mountain climbers who get caught in a deadly storm during their descent on Everest, we are trained to leave the bodies and our relationships behind and focus all our resources on surviving.

Bertrand Russell said the fundamental defect of fathers is that they want their children to be a credit to them. So much of our experience of the loss is tied up in our fathers' hopes and expectations for us, both real and imagined.

A client, a twenty-five-year-old musician named Philip, came to see me shortly after his father died. "I loved my father but I

never told him because I was afraid he wouldn't say it back," said Philip.

Many fathers become paralyzed or choked with emotion when trying to say the words "I love you." Most find other ways of saying them and expressing their affection for their sons. What became clear to me after only a short time spent talking with Philip was that he would have no way of knowing how his father felt about him, as the two never spoke much at all.

Philip's father was a successful surgeon. Philip looked up to his dad and always assumed his career choice of music over medicine had been the source of great disappointment to him. The two never discussed the matter, and his father never said anything to him to indicate he felt that way; it was just an impression Philip formed over time. Following his father's death, Philip's mother told him that the only request his father made for his funeral was that his son play music. Philip knew then how proud his father had been of him. "I just wish he had told me," he said.

While every man's story tells a different tale about the nature of his relationship with his father, all demonstrate the power of the father-son bond and the hold it has on us throughout our lives. Philip portrays a father-son relationship glowing with pride and admiration for each other but tainted by the sadness of undeclared emotion.

To one degree or another, we are all—sons, daughters, mothers, and fathers—in a state of abbreviated or interrupted mourning. To escape hurt and disappointment, our hearts remain closed and our minds stubbornly disconnect from our bodies. What's sad about disengaging from the world in this way is that we don't just avoid disappointment, we avoid love.

These stories are not unusual. Hundreds of men I've seen in therapy have similar untold stories of grief and depression they carry with them, feelings of despair that haunt them, which they cannot explain. Oftentimes, men say, these feelings show up dur-

ing moments when they're supposed to be experiencing joy, such as the birth of a child, a promotion at work, a son's graduation or wedding, or some other celebration, and they can't tell you exactly why.

Time, they say, heals. Time also ambushes.

Grief is not like other emotions; we don't seek it out. It finds us. And when it does, for most men, it's no accident. A neighbor of mine had a ten-year-old nephew whose father had just died. When I asked him how his nephew was doing, he said that it was tough on him but he was impressed at how well the boy was holding up. He told me they had just come back from the funeral that morning and how proud he was of his nephew because he "never lost it." "The kid teared up a bit," my neighbor continued. "I thought he was going to lose it a couple of times, but he held it together. He's tough, just like his old man. He's going to be okay, that one."

I fumbled for something to say that might make the boy's tears more acceptable to his uncle. I told him that in my experience, it was good for children to cry at times like these, because then it doesn't come back up on them later. But it didn't matter what I said. The men in this family were simply trying as best they could to come to terms with the devastating loss they'd just suffered, and this boy, like most male children his age, knew what was expected of him. His feelings about his father's death, dutifully cast aside at the beginning of his young life, will not resurface until years later.

In the meantime, all his grief and sadness will remain tucked away inside him until one day, in the distant future, some other loved one will die, or a precious possession will be stolen, or some important ideal will be lost. It is then, as Louise Kaplan observes in her *No Voice Is Ever Wholly Lost*, that the man who lost his father in childhood becomes overwhelmed by the feelings and thoughts he was not allowed to feel or think when the trauma first struck. Nor does the later loss he comes face-to-face with

have to be on the same scale as the earlier one in order to elicit a son's unfinished grief. Sometimes it can be as simple as a change in job responsibilities or as insignificant as a lost scarf.

That was the case for my client Philip. For months after his father's funeral, Philip had not allowed himself to cry. Almost a year later, he was looking through his father's desk. It had been mostly cleaned out by this time, but he came across some address labels with his father's name on them. When Philip couldn't remember what the middle initial in his father's name stood for, he burst into tears.

The heart can open in sadness as much as it does in joy.

Philip used his father the way Doris Lessing describes, as a recurring dream, to be entered into when needed. "My dad was always there for me to love and hate; but it occurs to me that I was not always there for my father," said Philip. In their hearts, the men I spoke with never wanted to be at odds with their fathers, but most felt, over the years, especially when they were younger, that their fathers gave them no choice.

For some sons, the more they learned about their fathers, the more they disapproved of them. These were the ones who said, "It was better for both of us that he died when he did." However, the more genuine truth is that each time one of these men thinks of his father, all he wishes for is that his dad were still alive.

Despite all the anguish my own father caused me, the words "my father" will always make me smile.

The Soul in Grief

An entry from a client's journal written shortly after his father's death reads:

> The night my father died I don't know how long I cried, but I cried until I was cried out. And then it was gone.

> Where did it go? I asked. I felt like the room should be a foot deep in bile and thorns and the foulest muck, but it was all just gone. I felt like I could both fall right asleep and go out and save the world. It felt like a huge weight had been lifted from my heart. Maybe that's what dying feels like, too. Whatever suffering we're carrying goes into the light, leaving our hearts free to float all the way away. Maybe that's why we can never be completely free of pain and heartache while we're alive . . . maybe every heart needs at least some suffering, to bind us to earth and to each other.

Grief is profoundly important to the human condition. A man who cannot grieve cannot love. It takes great courage to, as Hamlet cries, unpack our hearts with words, and commit ourselves to another person when the only promise we can be sure about in life is death.

A commitment is a promise in the present to do something in the future that may not be in our best interest at that time or may cause us great pain. It's the sweet sorrow of a father who knows his young son is growing up to leave him. Or the mixed emotion of a grown son who knows that before he can truly become an adult he, in turn, must witness his father's departure.

Our capacity for such commitment is what makes us human. It's why we don't just despair but rejoice in mourning, because while grief in its bitterness marks an end, it is also praise to the one who is gone.

Grief is the celebration of commitment.

REFLECTION

Ketchup

My father worried about everything. He worried about worrying. Dad had reason to worry. Without intervention he could get himself into serious trouble; and in a cruel twist of fate, he lacked any common sense whatsoever. He was truly his own worst enemy. My father had the uncanny ability to turn worry into an experience. Just driving to the grocery store for a bottle of ketchup could turn into a life-threatening event.

Counting down to the drive, there was mission prep. Car keys? This could take up an entire afternoon. Wallet? "Mission control, we're experiencing some technical problems, we're going to need to stop the count." And then there was the drive itself. A few near-death experiences later, you'd pull up to your final destination, so grateful to arrive in one piece that you didn't even bother mentioning the odd bump, scrape, or swipe in the parking lot. Inside the market, things took on a sense of urgency: "Ketchup, ketchup, ketchup . . . " "Dad?" "Don't talk to me now! . . . Ketchup, ketchup, ketchup." "Dad?" "Not now, damn it!" "They have signs above the aisles now, they're down here under 'Mustard, Ketchup, Oils, and Vinegar.'" "Oh yeah, *hah*! Way to go, Jon. Good thinking. Here we go now."

The expenditure of energy necessary to complete the most mundane task was mind-boggling. And these reckless acts of daily living—awesome eruptions and displays that they were—were not the exception. As Lyndon Johnson used to comment

about his opponents, "The man couldn't pour piss out of a boot if the directions were written on the heel."

Cicero says that to philosophize is nothing else but to prepare for death. Dad spent his career preparing for his. Every day he woke up, stared all his intense worries, anxieties, and fears in the eye, and with an intimidating look—the sort of game face perfected by NBA stars and other pro athletes—said, "Bring it on!" Every peaceful, unencumbered moment of presence in his life was actually a battle. A battle he fought with his lifelong obstinate tenacity.

It was something to witness.