

Bird on the Wire: Freeing the Father Within Me

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Abstract

This narrative is a work of memory and mourning. In the aftermath of my father's sudden death in 1988, I had resigned myself to living without the closure of a healing conversation that could break through the cycle of repetition that had defined our relationship. Later, I realized that death ends a life not a relationship and through personal narrative I might be able to find a way to loosen the grip of the past and break free from my psychic inheritance. In this story, I use the moral imagination at the heart of narrative and storytelling to confront and deal with the contingencies of my past, redescribing the history of my relationship with my father in ways that seek fidelity with what actually took place and a chance to remake a self—myself—that can live not against the past but with it.

Keywords

narrative, autoethnography, father–son relationships, memory, forgiveness

Under history, memory and forgetting
Under memory and forgetting, life
But writing a life is another story
Incompletion
(Ricoeur, 2004)

In 1997, I published a story that focused on an epiphany I experienced after I learned that my father had died while I was attending a national communication convention (Bochner, 1997). When I received the news, two worlds collided within me—the personal and the academic—and I was forced to confront the large gulf that divided them. As a child, I had experienced my relationship with my father as traumatizing and destructive. Although both of us may have wanted to settle our differences, somehow we never managed to find each other. One day I awoke to the reality that he had grown old and fragile before I could come to terms with the fierce father of my youth. Now, in the aftermath of his death, I had to accept the fact that any chance to rise above these circumstances was gone. I could never prove to be any better as a son than he had been as a father. We would never have a purifying conversation that I could look back on with a sense of resolution and closure. For a long time, I had imagined I would be by his side when he died, holding or stroking him as he passed—as if a tender, loving touch could magically transform a lifetime of painful experience between a father and his son. But now I had to face the fact that his sudden death had stolen my fantasy of a cathartic and healing

ending. Our relationship would live on in my mind, but conversation between us had ended. He was gone; *we* were gone.

Fourteen years later, May 2011, I sit here at my desk, reviewing published papers of mine to include in a volume of my collected work (Bochner, 2012). Rereading my article, “It’s About Time: Narrative and the Divided Self,” I feel a sudden urge to reopen the door I had closed when I said that “conversation between us had ended” (Bochner, 1997, p. 420). *Did Dad’s death have to be the exclamation point marking the end of conversation between us?*

I suppose all survivors with “unfinished business” continue to go over and over again the blown opportunities they had to set things right. What if, just one time, I had summoned the courage to speak my mind? What if he and I had created an opportunity to have that conversation? What would I have said? How would he have responded? *Could one more conversation together have shaped a different memory of who we were and what we meant to each other?*

I close my eyes and imagine my father entering the room. I see him in the doorway and start to rise from my chair, but he waves at me to stay seated, then he takes the

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chair beside me. *This is it, Art, the chance you've been waiting for all these years.*

Like a bird on the wire,
Like a drunk in an old midnight choir,
I have tried in my way to be free. (Leonard Cohen, 1969)

I was 43 years old when you died. Now I'm 65, only a year younger than you were when you fell off that ladder and broke your hip. Remember? You called the accident "the beginning of the end." No more lettering tractor-trailers, storefronts, or billboards. No more hard, strenuous, demanding work to justify your existence—nothing left to smother "the lava of nothingness boiling in your gut" (Henry, 1971, p. 181).

When I look in the mirror, I see your face in mine. I see you staring back at me and I think, *he's always going to be there judging me, telling me I don't measure up* (see Roth, 1996).

For a long time, I thought I could break free from your grip by becoming everything you were not. Every three weeks, you brought Leon, the barber, to the house to shave off all my hair (for a dollar). So I let my hair grow down my back. You hated beards; I grew one. You had a hair-trigger temper, so I prided myself on composure and self-control. You were up at the crack of dawn and asleep after the evening news. I became a night owl and a late sleeper. You were shy and introverted, didn't want to mix with other people, hated to go out in public. I became a college debater and relished the public spotlight.

Then one day I realized that these choices only tightened the noose around my neck. Acting *against* is just another form of submission and dependence. A person can't change the past merely by opposing it. That's an expression of bad faith (Sartre, 2001), an act of self-deception. If I was ever to break free, to weaken your grip on me, I would have to take responsibility for my own psychic life. Isn't that the meaning of freedom?

What did you say? "You don't understand why it's so important to me to be free of you."

You turned out fine, Art. You're a distinguished university professor. I'm proud of the person you became.

I tremble when I hear you say that, Dad. My academic achievements have little to do with what went on between us. I won't allow you to take credit for what turned out well, and I'm not here to blame you for what went wrong either, with perhaps one exception. A man wants to love his father; I know I did. But your actions made it so difficult and confusing. I can still hear the echo of your words when you beat me with your belt—"it's for your own good." Crap! Humiliation and coercion is never good for a person. You

wanted me to obey and respect you. That's what you thought you were teaching me. But that's not what I was learning. You earned my respect in other ways. You worked hard, "like a slave" you used to say, ten hours a day, seven days a week. You were honest to a fault and you put every ounce of energy into your work. There was love in those signs, and they expressed all the beauty, joy, and self-discipline missing from the rest of your life.

But what you created through the pleasure of your work, you destroyed through the sham of your fathering. You were a master of the paint brush and a disaster of a parent. The respect you earned in your work, you destroyed in your home. When you beat me, I learned to hate you. I didn't realize until much later how much rage and resentment I felt. When I was a kid, I wasn't allowed to feel. Remember what you used to say, "Be tough. Don't cry." In other words, renounce your feelings. Later, when I was gone—out on my own—and these feelings broke loose, they overwhelmed me. As far as I was concerned you were a rotten bastard, a bully, and a tyrant. I wanted you out of sight and out of mind. But, of course, that just made you figure larger in my life.

You're probably thinking, "You read too many books, Art. Is that something you read in one of those psychology texts? You never said anything like that to me."

No, Dad, I just left home and didn't come back until it was too late. When we reunited more than fifteen years later, you weren't the father I remembered. Your vigor and energy had disappeared and the sparkle was gone from your eyes; you couldn't hear me unless I raised my voice and your steel, muscular body of 230 odd pounds had softened into a fleshy 160.

I recall thinking, "Who is this man sitting in the corner pretending to be my father? That's not my father. That's a fragile, gentle, frightened old man standing on the edge of oblivion."

Now I had all the time in the world to talk to you—and nothing to say. What good would it have done to tell this father what I felt about the other father? The situation was tragic and sorrowful. Once I had convinced myself I had no right to feel; now that I no longer was denied the power to feel, the pain was palpable, but I had nobody with whom to share it.

I'm not blaming you for getting old and sick. If you were not the same father, neither was I the same son. If I had been "blind to the impress of your bearing" on myself, as Philip Larkin observed (see Rorty, 1989, p. 23), at least I was aware of the surrogate fathers—mentors, friends, and lovers—with whom I had cocreated a life I had not imagined possible. When I looked at you staring blankly across the room, I knew I was not there to hear you say "forgive me" or to blame you for any lingering trauma I carried from the past. There could be no redemption and no closure, no completion, final resolution, or catharsis. There was nothing to finish, only "a web of relations to be rewoven" (Rorty, 1989,

p. 43). Then you died, and I was on my own—as I had been for many years—still facing the work of memory and mourning, still feeling the need “to reshape a past which the past never knew” (Rorty, 1989, p. 29), not so much to question my being or yours but rather to find a way into *ours*.

Like a worm on a hook,
Like a knight from some old fashioned book,
It was the shape, the shape of our love that twisted me.
(Leonard Cohen, 1969).

You made sure I would never depend on you no matter how much I might need to. How often did you tell me the same story over and over again until it burned on my brain?

“My father threw me out when I was sixteen,” you said. “He made me quit school in the 10th grade. Told me to go get a job and bring back some money so we can have something to eat.”

You made it clear I would be responsible for myself as soon as I graduated high school. “If you want something, go and earn it.” That was your mantra.

But I want to be clear about how we parted when I went off to college. I’d like to be able to say I decided to leave the toxic environment of our home because I realized I needed to let go of you. But this was not a choice I made. It was you who let go of me, pushed me away.

Let go of me? That’s a laugh. You can’t let go of something to which you were never attached. Mom told me several years after you died how angry you were when she told you she was pregnant—with twins no less. “He didn’t want any more children. I had to trick him,” she said. I felt as if she had stuck a dagger in my heart. I guess I had deluded myself into thinking that when you ran me down, smacked, or beat me with your belt, you were showing that I mattered to you.

When I tell these stories to my partner, Carolyn, she tells me I’m making myself sound like a victim. She’s right—up to a point. It’s not as if I were some sort of passive prey. I knew how to get under your skin, how to work you into a frenzy, and oh, how badly I wanted you to notice me! If that meant taking a whipping, then I’d take one. But, Dad, you didn’t have to bruise me so badly, to relish every opportunity to break my will. What was it Dad? Did you need to knock against someone to feel alive? Was your spirit that crushed, your desires so buried beneath the rubble of your own childhood that you couldn’t contain the fire burning in your belly?

After hearing mother’s account of my birth, I could no longer hold on to the self-serving interpretation that inflicting pain on a child is an act of love. Do you know what it feels like to realize your father didn’t see your birth as a blessing? Maybe you’re the wrong person to ask.

But I needed a jolt like that to wake me up. After my conversation with mom, I felt as if I no longer had to hide

my scars or bury my anger. I had been pushed to the brink of freedom. I had thought that keeping it all inside protected me from danger and harm, but really what I was shielding was my own conscious self-reflection. I had never blamed you for the person I had become. I felt lucky that I hadn’t been stigmatized by some label like *hyperactive*, *codependent*, or *ADD*. But neither had I allowed myself the opportunity “to give birth to myself,” to borrow Harold Bloom’s (1973) lovely phrase. What I was seeking, Dad, was the kind of freedom Frederick Nietzsche refers to as “the supreme will to power” (Kaufmann & Hollingdale, 1968). You enlarge your capacity for assuming responsibility for yourself by engaging in “a constantly continuing and continually broadening process of appropriating your experiences and actions” (Nehamas, 1983, p. 410).

But damn if I didn’t see this as another instance of bad faith. Isn’t it ironic, Dad, how the one thing I thought you drilled into my skull—to take responsibility for my own choices and actions—was the one thing I had negated by unwittingly becoming a copy of you? Not an exact replica, mind you. I was sufficiently aware of my anger and pain not to take a chance of passing them on to children. Rejecting the option of a life of emotional detachment and obsessive withdrawal, I refused to throw in the towel the way you did. Still, I’ve had to work mighty hard to resist the impulse to live exclusively in my head and submerge my craving for life in a cave of cerebral reflection. I always wondered what was going through your head when you buried yourself in your work, confining most of your waking life to the four walls of that cold, damp basement shop of yours.

Now you can see the contradictions of lived experience, can’t you? For so long I stood proudly in opposition to your *habitas* of physical and emotional being, while all the time slaving away, working hour after hour, day after day, securing a safe dwelling in the sacred spaces of introspective solitude. It took me a long time to realize that safety is not as important as intimacy. Vulnerability always runs the risk of exposing one’s self to cruelty, but sheltering one’s self from the storms of life, refusing to venture out of the capsule, only ensures that one will never feel the compassion, tenderness, and immanence of real love. This would be death in life. Do you know the passage in the *Song of Songs*, a book of the Hebrew Bible, the one that says, “love is as strong as death” (see Ricoeur, 2004)? What makes love so decisive is that everybody dies, but not everybody loves.

I saw a beggar leaning on his wooden crutch
He said to me, “You must not ask for so much.” (Leonard Cohen, 1969)

When you died so suddenly in 1988, I was terrified. There was a time when I wished you were dead. But now I felt this huge hole and nothing to fill it. Sure, I knew you were sick,

that you'd grown old and fragile. What I didn't realize was the strength of your will—your will to die. I remember pleading with you to stop popping those sleeping pills.

"Dad, quit acting as if you know more than your doctors," I demanded.

"They don't know what I need," you blared back.

"But Dad, it's no good to take all those pills. They have side effects.

The pills interact with each other. Eventually they're going to kill you."

"You don't know what it feels like not to be able to sleep," you replied. "Is a good night's sleep too much to ask for? I just want a good night's sleep."

"Do they ever work?" I asked. "Do you ever get the kind of sleep you want?"

"Yes. Eh, well, no, not exactly. It doesn't matter because I have to get up to pee. And it takes me so long to get started. My bladder feels full, but I can't get started. I wait and wait. And I get so frustrated. Then, when I finally do finish, I have to take more pills to get back to sleep."

"Oh, Dad, I'm so sorry. It's a vicious circle," I said, peeking at your swollen ankles and taking in the appalling contradictions imposed by the competing demands of insomnia and heart disease. When I looked up, our eyes met. I tried to hide the sorrow I felt that you had to go through this and then you whispered ever so softly, "Don't get old, Art. Not if you want to hold onto your dignity." I noticed your eyes were watering. It was the first time you had ever openly expressed pain in my presence. Your shame and humiliation were palpable.

I sit here now, all these years later, Dad, wondering whether those words were exuberant. There's a blaze of light and a fog of darkness in that utterance. Was that moment metaphoric? Were you really talking about the humiliation you had suffered as a child, then passed on to me as an adult? Was the hurt so deep, was that why you never talked about it, never even mentioned it?

Some time later, after you died, Mom told me you had started taking Sominex capsules when you were 40 and once they quit working you moved to prescription sleeping pills. What kept you up at night?

You were eleven years old when you arrived at Ellis Island in 1920, penniless and with no English words in your vocabulary. Stigmatized by the Yiddish jargon you spoke, the odd clothing you wore, and the filthy environment in which you dwelled, you internalized deep-seated feelings of inferiority and a social awkwardness you never overcame. I recall the stories you used to tell about how easily you were deceived and tricked by classmates. "Greenhorn, greenhorn," they would tease and make fun of you. You were stigmatized as one of those ignorant, uncouth, and gullible immigrants. Remember that jingle you used to chant, "When I was young and in my prime, I wasn't worth a single dime." I never grasped how literal you were being until I was

much older. Riddled in abject poverty, you had to quit school at the age of sixteen and get a job to help feed the seven hungry mouths at home. Then you learned you couldn't tell prospective employers you were a Jew because the big companies like Heinz and Westinghouse wouldn't hire Jews. Time after time, you got fired when you returned to work after calling in sick during the Jewish High Holy Days. It didn't matter that you were the hardest working and most talented sign man in the company. It must have been heartbreaking to realize that your circumstances would never allow you to fulfill your dream of becoming a real artist. Is it any wonder you were filled with rage?

How does one resist the compulsion to pass down the despair of growing up poor, insecure, and out of place? You endured the Great Depression and anti-Semitism. A poverty of spirit was etched on your body, submerged in your unconscious. So you shut yourself off from outside influences, protected yourself against the risks of exposure, tried to bury your pain. For you, life was a problem and a struggle, not a mystery or adventure.

As a kid, I couldn't understand why you were always in a state of perpetual anxiety, as if you were waiting for the next shoe to drop. When you would throw one of your tantrums, you would remind us again that "you worked like a slave," as if it were all for us, as if there was no pleasure in the work and you didn't desperately need to work in order not to feel the anguish of your unmet needs. I was confused. If work was nothing but coercion and sacrifice, then why was it so important to you? Would work always feel like a form of slavery and coercion or could one love work as much as play? Couldn't work be play?

The truth is you didn't really work like a slave. You may have felt like a prisoner, but you weren't a slave. You weren't owned by anyone, bound in servitude, or chained to your workbench. You were more like Sisyphus, the mythological hero of Camus' famous essay (Camus, 1955) on the absurdity of existence. Accepting the confining and strenuous demands of his work, Sisyphus keeps the rock rolling up the hill. Camus says, "One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (p. 123) because he has chosen to take responsibility for his fate; he doesn't give up or give in to the absurdity and disappointment of his plight. The way I see it, Dad, work was the way you rose above the absurd struggles of your life and filled your heart.

But Sisyphus had no other hearts to fill. He was alone on the slope. It was just the rock and him. "His rock is his thing," wrote Camus (p. 123). Moreover, Sisyphus had a passion for life. His tragedy was his consciousness of his plight. Were you conscious of yours?

I remember one of the last times I saw you. You kissed me on the lips and held me tight. Then you whispered in my ear, "Try to see me more often." Driving home, I felt as if I couldn't breathe. First, the rage exploded inside of me and I swore I'd never come to see you again. Then, suddenly my

fantasies of revenge dissolved in a pool of tears. It wasn't over; it would never be over. But my body was telling me something. If there was any hope to break the cycle of repetition, it could come, not through rage, but only through an epiphany of sorrow (Miller, 1983).

*And a pretty woman leaning in her darkened door
She cried to me, "Hey, why not ask for more." (Leonard
Cohen, 1969)*

Hettema (2000) claims, "Only forgiveness is able to release a human being from the past, and set someone free to live towards the future." I think he's mistaken.

You never asked me to forgive you; I never asked you to ask me either. The way I saw it, this was not Hollywood. There would be no happy ending, no kiss and make up. But neither was this tragedy—at least not for me. My work, the labor of a narrative inquiry, is the work of memory, a determination to be faithful to the past even in the absence of any single enduring truth to be discovered (Freeman, 2010). You did bad things and you did good things. You weren't a demon and you weren't heroic. The fact is that you weren't a father to me. You didn't protect me, and you weren't really interested in me as a separate and unique person. I was wounded more by your disinterest than by your belt. Now I understand your indifference when it came to my life. I can see that I was not singled out. You were just not interested in life, yours was a kind of death in life. You provided food and shelter, but you were too wounded and damaged to make a home for your children, a dwelling place of love, support, and acknowledgment.

Some readers may say I'm being too hard on you. To such readers, this narrative may sound like just another rant, another hurt kid refusing to grow up, expressing his rage. If they say this, either I have failed to express what I am after here or they just don't get it. They may simply not understand that memory is both an epistemic project, a seeking after fidelity with what actually took place, and a pragmatic one, a coming to terms with what chance has given us in order to make a self for oneself (Rorty, 1989). The question that drives this inquiry, then, is how to cut the ties that hold one in the grip of the past, a project you, my father, could not have imagined, given the indignities and humiliations you suffered as a child. Recognizing the importance of such a project does not make me better than you; it only suggests that I have been the beneficiary of kinder strangers. My memory work does not seek to discover precisely what caused me to be the self that I am but rather to confront and deal with the contingencies of my past by redescribing them, so I am not condemned to stay in the bubble of my psychic inheritance.

In our culture, a moral priority is given to the victim, but what if one is the victim of a victim? Dad, who was there to

meet your demand for reparation? Did you ever get to grieve the loss of the child within you? If you and I had been able to mourn together, to grieve the irreversibility of a past we both regretted, maybe you would no longer have needed to defend your principles and together we could have spun a different web of our relations, something jointly constructed that acknowledged our differences and expressed the love we held in reserve (Miller, 1983).

When I started this conversation, I thought I was seeking to break from the past once and for all, to break free from you, my father. Now I see two fathers; you, the father I wanted and never had, the one whose loss I've mourned and come to terms with. But there's another father, a second father inside me trying to break loose, the one I never accepted, never gave a voice. I can see now that the only possibility for reconciling the impress of my father is to free the other father within me; the father I could have been; the father I still can be; the father I denied, submerged, and rejected, the one I suppressed in order to try to stop the cycle of cruelty and pain. By imagining and accepting myself as a father, I make myself available and free to provide a dwelling place of love, nurturing, and acknowledgment for the sons and daughters who may seek connection with me. This is the freedom I choose, the freedom I seek, the freedom to live not against the past but with it.

I open my eyes and realize I am alone with my thoughts.
You weren't really here, dad, were you? In the background,
I hear the satellite radio and instantly recognize the gravelly
voice of Leonard Cohen (1969):

If I, if I have been unkind,
I hope you can just let it go by.
If I, if I have been untrue,
I hope you know, it was never to you.

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Bio

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