

Chapter 9

MY FATHER'S DEATH: WHY SO LONG?

My right is exposed, my left is heavily attacked, my center is unable to hold its position, I cannot redistribute my forces. The situation is excellent. I shall attack.

— Marshall Foch at the first Battle of the Marne, as jotted down on an envelope in my father's papers.

So I wrote my mother back and posed my questions — including the question I had always been scared to ask, whether my father had left a note saying that my disloyalty and his disappointment with it had driven him to his death. I was able to ask that only because I finally believed that I could not have been responsible even if he thought I was, that a confused and searching teenager could not really have caused a successful and energetic man to kill himself. What my mother told me in the letters that followed was stunning in that it was so unexpected, and shocking in that I hadn't known, either before or after my father's death, about one of the central facts of his life.

All the troubles with his campus, profession, nation, and family were just so many crows circling in the air over a gigantic waterfall, their calls only intermittently audible above the constant roar of a crippling mental illness of which I had been completely ignorant. The troubles may have marginally narrowed his remaining refuge from the psychological storms that had been buffeting him with severe depressions for at least 20 years, but it was the storms themselves that had driven him to and finally over the brink in a turbulent last five years. We all, commentators and family alike, had correctly seen a link between the troubles and my father's loss of faith in many of his dearest tenets and sources of gratification, but we had incorrectly linked this loss of faith to his death.

Many of us experience bitter disappointments, but few of us decide to die. In this case, and I imagine in most suicides, just to ask the question, "Why?," is to be misled; to search for explainable reasons is to march off resolutely in the wrong direction.

There was no causal “why” for my father’s death outside of his illness, a true killer of a disease known generally as clinical depression. The real mystery was not why he died so soon, but how he managed to live so long with this tremendous burden, which was all the heavier because he carried it in secret. I had not abandoned him to his fate and he had not abandoned me to mine: my years of rage at myself for leaving him and at him for leaving me were unfair to both of us. Also missing the boat were the commentators cited in the previous chapter who had guessed that my father’s sadness over the plight of his campus, profession, and nation led to his death (even as most of them noted that his earlier faith was eventually vindicated, with Cornell flourishing, political science re-evaluating its essayists, and American institutions proving strong enough to get us out of Vietnam and back from the brink of social warfare). There had been no observable reason for this death, no story to write, no guilt to bear, no lessons to learn.

Juxtaposition, which is the hallmark of the social scientist, can sometimes enlighten, as it did in Ted Lowi’s reminder that my father’s approach was “not in the mainstream of political science” even when he won the premier prize in that field in 1953, and later when he served on the executive council of the American Political Science Association and presided over its New York State branch. Juxtaposition can also obscure, as when Lowi differentiated my father’s 1956 book on the presidency with Richard Neustadt’s classic four years later, when in fact my father had advised Neustadt and the two authors saw no conflict in their conclusions, and reveal more about the theorist than the theory, as in Lowi’s claim that his generation of political scientists are “sophisticates” whose realism contrasts with the “optimism” of my father and his mentors. But sometimes the search for juxtaposition can be reckless, as in Lowi’s neat linkage of my father’s external and internal woes. Lowi said in his article that he had been “unaware of Clint’s illness.” Yet in trying to answer the ultimate question about his friend and colleague with the puckish self-assurance that has served him so well professionally, he charged into an uninformed judgment of that illness, and that was certainly inappropriate in this most important matter of social science, the understanding of another human being.

Similarly, I respect John Marcham’s attempt to find a context for my father’s death. My mother herself had told Marcham

that my father brooded over the assassinations of the Kennedy brothers and Martin Luther King Jr., and an unnamed colleague had told him that my father had “put the (survival of the) university over...constitutional standards” in helping resolve the crisis in 1969, and that “this created an incredible conflict for him.” Yet Marcham was taking his own steps out onto thin ice when he concluded that the national tragedies, the local clash, or the fact that my father’s “technique of goading and jollying students into discussion, a technique that had been eminently successful for earlier generations, was no longer so persuasive,” were at least intermediate causes of his death. And historian Smith and student author Mayer were even more irresponsible, one explicitly claiming that shattered illusions about American life had shattered my father’s will to live, and the other turning the tragedy into a simple symbol of what happens when one loses “faith in the fundamental soundness of liberal democracy.”

Interestingly, when those who had known my father best — long-time colleagues like professors Fred Kahn, Henry Guerlac, Arthur Mizener, Herbert Briggs, and Andy Hacker, vice president Steve Muller and director of athletics Bob Kane — wrote about him after his death, they made no attempt to link his death to his great loyalty to family, college and country, and his loss of faith in them. They didn’t see the linkage because they knew him, as Kahn said, as an “immensely complicated man,” too rich for such a poor theory. They lauded his exuberant but compassionate manner and his innocent but intense loyalties, noted his achievements as lecturer and author, offered fond memories, and certainly didn’t gild the lily in describing his disappointments with the times, but not one breathed a hint of a connection between the disappointments and his death.

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My mother told me of a drama that had occurred quietly and desperately around me as my father had fought a heroic battle with clinical depression for two decades. Too proud and private and perhaps too scared to open up to psychiatric treatment, he never even knew the cause of the pain that was draining away his powers of recuperation. William Styron has written a book about his own life-threatening depression, Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness, which shows how a person of logic can become completely illogical under the sway of depression. Even with full treatment, clinical depression is a mysterious disease for doctor and

patient, and its unpredictability alone robs the patient of the hope that is its best antidote. When hope departs, all that is left is pain and a sense of worthlessness, intermittent at first and in the end constant and overwhelming, obliterating all traces of the belief that things will improve, which helps us through our difficult times. Finally, the patient is convinced that there is no relief but in death.

As the pain mounted over the years, my father had struggled to control the blasting temper that was fueled by his bitter inner sadness, and it rarely peeked out. When it did, as my mother remembered from a party in the early 1950s when he had gotten drunk and gone “berserk,” and as Arch Dotson remembered from an inexplicable hall-way explosion in that same period, it was clear warning that a volcano of despair, what my mother called a “submerged rage,” was bubbling under his vivacious demeanor. It was more than normal academic commitment and pride that was driving my father to his constant challenges and successes. In the mid-1950s, when he was in his late-thirties and achieving a surprising early success, he began to use barbiturates to sleep. His doctor warned him that the quantities he was taking indicated an addiction, and recommended hospitalization. He refused, and my mother herself learned of this entire side of his illness only after his death. Another doctor then suggested that my father just try a shot of whiskey in the evening to help him sleep. I assume that the doctor didn’t know that he had a serious problem with alcohol, some sort of genetic predisposition to lose control when the hard stuff hit the wrong chord.

There was a history of alcoholism in my father’s family, and in response his father was nearly a teetotaler. In frustration with his insomnia, though, my father began to drink hard liquor, which he had never done regularly, and became an alcoholic within a few years. He managed to hide his alcoholism from everyone until my mother realized to her surprise in 1965 that he was drunk, which explained the aggressive tantrums he was throwing against us boys. But the alcoholism, like the apparent addiction to barbiturates and the bursts of anger, was only a complicating symptom, a serious problem in itself that masked a far more serious one underneath. As a teenager, I never dreamed for a second that my father was an alcoholic, and I had never heard of depression. It was less troubling for me, as for him, to blame a lost temper on

his disappointment with my behavior, rather than on an alcoholic rage caused by his disappointment with himself.

There were always incidents when my father lost control, and they became more frequent in the last five years of his life, but incidents can be explained as isolated events, and we boys were discouraged from connecting them. When he fell down drunk one night in about 1965 and hit his head, my mother didn't wake us, but instead called a friend who was a doctor. On the school bus the next day the doctor's son said to me, "How's your dad doing now?" I didn't know what he was talking about. Stunned at the news and embarrassed at what my ignorance said about my importance in the family, I listened to him describe how my father had gone to the hospital in an ambulance to be treated by his father!

When I got home I was burning with shame, but my mother just said that there was no reason to have woken me, and that now it was all over. I was confused, since my father was supposed to have slipped in the shower, yet the bathroom where there was damage from his fall was not his, but the conversation was over. My mother wanted to keep us from being burdened with my father's problems, to keep us from losing faith in our hero, and to keep our hero from being mortified at our loss of faith. Her success brought mixed blessings. We never thought of our father as anything other than a proud, successful man, but that made the shock of his death all the more traumatizing.

My father's final descent to his death picked up inexorable steam in about 1966, before Vietnam was a major concern, before the Robert Kennedy and King assassinations and the riots of 1968, and before Cornell's Crisis and his children's misadventures as proto-adults. Pictures of him in 1965 show a trim young man with jet-black hair, grinning the smile of contentment; from that time on, they show a rapidly aging, puffy-faced older man whose smiles are wistful and poignant. His appearance went from that of a 40-year old in 1965, when he was 47, to that of a 60-year old by 1970, when he was 52. His rages and corresponding periods of gloom made him predictably unpredictable, and he regularly drank to excess to ease the pain.

There were so many incidents from this period in which he seemed to go almost mad with rage that the rest of us in the family began to try to remove all possible sources of irritation.

These rages were almost always directed at others and not us, but they probably scared us a lot more than their targets, because it shook us so badly to see this uncontrollable Mr. Hyde emerging from the rational, warm Dr. Jekyll who was the rock of our lives.

My junior high rock band, The Waterwalkers, was permitted to practice at our house just one time, with a strict deadline for when we had to be finished so that my father could return and write in silence. We had finished on time and were loading up the equipment into Eric's father's car when my father swooped into the driveway in our car. He took one look at the scene, his angry face indicating that he thought the mere presence of the band was a violation of our agreement, and backed the car wildly back out of the driveway, peeling the tires and screaming at the top of his lungs, and blasted off down the street. I was trying to think of a way to explain the outburst when Eric's father broke the embarrassing silence by kindly patting me on the back and telling me not to worry about it.

A couple of years later, in the spring of 1968, I visited my parents in London during my father's sabbatical, and I attended an anti-war march on the US embassy as a curious, albeit sympathetic onlooker. The crowd was so large and unruly that the police had to resort to rushes by horses to clear the grounds, and I almost was trampled by their hooves. In the evening, my father went with me to look over the battleground, and when he heard a man talking scatalogically about America, he rushed over to him and hissed obscenities with ferocious intensity. I dragged him away before he could start punching the other man, and after he regained his composure he said, "We showed, him, didn't we Calie?" He said the same thing after another incident in Ithaca that summer in which he sat in his car screaming obscenities at a student who had sworn at him for honking while he was trying to park. I didn't feel like "we" after these incidents; I just felt terrified by the irrational power that was increasingly bursting out from behind his rational mask.

In desperation, in the fall of 1969, my mother called a psychiatrist. She knew that just for her to mention this topic to my father might devastate him, but she felt she had to take the risk. He agreed to her request to see his doctor and the psychiatrist, but both missions were failures. The same doctor who had prescribed whiskey now put him on "antabuse," a drug that makes you vomit

if you drink alcohol, but he soon stopped taking it and promised to control his intake himself. The psychiatrist met with him a few times, but found such resistance to questions, such umbrage by a reluctant patient at the entire invasive process, that he informed my mother after a few visits, "I cannot help your husband."

My father pushed on in the fall of 1969 and the spring of 1970, working on his book, teaching and advising, taking trips to lecture, helping out the Constituent Assembly and working with Arch Dotson on strengthening the government department. But the edges began to fray, and for the first time his problems became public. In the spring alcohol became a more persistent problem, even at work, as he became more and more pained and in need of numbing. Here, the commentators' causality was reversed: rather than my father's loss of popularity on campus contributing to his depression, it was his declining mental health, his drinking to mask it, and the resulting bursts of anger in classes that contributed to his loss of popularity; rather than his loss of faith in his writings, his teaching, his country, and his family leading to his depression, it was his depression that caused him to lose faith in himself and his world when it wasn't justified.

May, sunny May except for the classic Ithaca snowstorm on May 5, was my father's cruelest month. In April he was still bouncing back quickly from gloomy days, on one day noting that he "gave up brooding for resignation," but the next morning writing: "Lots of sun — Spring! Felt more cheerful — much puttering in room." In May, most mentions of mood were along the lines of "Black Cloud. A day of quiet desperation," and words like depressed, globbed, pooky, grumped, and low are scattered through the month. Uncle Bill was "going fast and painfully," and the Cornell campus "went mad again" with the invasion of Cambodia and the killings at Kent State. Cornell was shut down along with hundreds of other campuses in the first true nationwide student strike, leading my father to record, "The world, my world too, is breaking up." During May, his drinking brought him mortifying embarrassment. First came the incident in which Winty and I had to call the Cornell police to break down his door; then came the clincher, the proof that even if the campus police didn't gossip, his problems still could not be kept within the family. Two of my father's closest friends, government chair Dotson and Dean Fred Kahn, called him to a meeting and stunned him with the

news that his drinking had become noticeable in classes, and that they wanted him to take a year's leave to get treatment.

In addition to being completely surprised at his two colleagues' knowledge and seriousness, my father must have been scared that their proposal would mean that the entire department, maybe the entire faculty, would find out about his weakness and his problems. He put Dotson and Kahn off, and after a few weeks told them that he refused to take a leave. Dotson had visited my mother before the meeting to tell her about it and to help her prepare to help my father with the rage they both assumed would ensue. She later recalled their talk in a letter to me:

Arch and I agreed that day that CR was seriously troubled, but also that he was really not, first of all, a drinker. The drinking came from some deeper problems. As Arch left my house, I recall saying to him, "I'm afraid he's going to kill himself" — a thought I had for the first time. Arch replied, "So am I."

To my mother's surprise, after puzzling with her about the purpose of the forthcoming meeting, my father never talked about it afterwards. He referred to it tersely in his diary as "sticky." My mother believes that in a final show of willpower, he stopped drinking completely, but as Styron relates, that sometimes just hastens the final reckoning with your demons. In June, my father rallied, and his diary shows an almost complete focus on his writing, interrupted only by concerns about the boys' political shenanigans, concerns that he was now too detached to pursue. When David came down from his radical collective in Buffalo, my father noted that as usual he enjoyed talking with him, but that because of his exhausting labors he simply was "not up to deep speech" with David. Work apparently was a refuge: my father maintained a brutal pace on his book, at times double sessions a day, four or five hours stints morning and evening, and he recorded his efforts and progress in detail.

My mother knew that despite this focus, my father was still in crisis, so depressed that many days he could not get out of bed. She tried to keep all unpleasantness from him; this was why she was so adamant that I not tell him about my story about SDS leader Burak. She sent Winty away on a canoe trip so that she could concentrate on saving her husband, and she wrote to the

doctor that she wanted him to suggest hospitalization when my father came in for his check-up in mid-July. My mother thought that because of the paranoia that the illness had made out of his powerful sense of pride and loyalty, he would feel betrayed if she suggested this to him directly, or if he even found out that she had made this indirect approach.

On Monday, July 6, my father made the last entry in his diary, starting with the exhortation, "Up guards, etc. !!" As had been the case for weeks, the entry was almost exclusively about his progress on the final editing of the book. It's end was finally in sight, the four years of shutting himself up in his room early in the morning and in his study in the library during the day were coming to a close. No previous book had been so difficult to write or had extracted such a toll. His private and public worlds were both, as he had put it, breaking up as he labored, removing the moorings on which his efforts usually rested. Only by an almost inhuman perseverance and discipline had he been able to fight off his private illness and his public doubts and wrestle the book to ground. He knew that he was winning the "race between creativity and exhaustion," but as valiantly as he fought, he was finally going to lose the other race, the one he could not bring himself even to acknowledge.

Four days later, my father said he was staying in bed for the morning rather than going to the library. As noted, at this stage of his illness, that was not unusual; what was unusual was that when my mother returned from playing tennis later that morning, he wasn't there, and his practice of neatly making his bed had been neglected. By mid-afternoon, my mother called me at the apartment Ann and I had rented in collegetown, where I had been lying for a couple of days like a battered chipmunk from having my wisdom teeth pulled, and asked me to come over to the house and help her look for my father. We walked to all his favorite haunts — the trails by the suspension bridge over the gorge, his office, the library, the woods at the back of our house — while my mother's growing unease rubbed off on me.

After dusk, without saying a word, we began to shift our gaze from the upright to the fallen, expecting more to see my father lying somewhere than standing. In the evening, we called the police to report his absence. Ann and I spent the night, and sometime the next morning, after Ann had gone off to work, I

was talking with my mother about what our next step should be when somehow I suddenly knew what had happened, and I knew where my father was! With dread and certainty in my heart I walked to the top of the stairs to the basement, and told my mother in a firm but quavering voice that must have terrified her: "Sit down. Don't come down here." I didn't want to go down myself, but I knew that if I didn't, she would have to, and that I could not permit. I was filled with the worst fears and weaknesses of a boy and the best sense of duty of a man as I walked down the stairs, a man-child of 18, about to lose what little of my youth I still had.

For years we boys and our friends had played the most wonderful games of our lives in the basement, which was an expanse of laundry rooms, steam-pipes, double-connecting closets, and bathrooms that curved and jutted through five separate rooms. Hide-and-seek could go for hours if those hiding were willing to lie that long like mummies in the recesses of the closets that opened onto the curving passageways. My father had been an active participant in enough basement games to know that the one place nobody dared to hide, the darkest, dankest place where spider webs and years of dust combined into a kind of sticky grime, where maybe even rats were scurrying around, was the long crawl-space, three feet high and twenty feet deep behind the furnace, where loose coal had been stored in the days before gas heating. I knew my father was there, and that he had killed himself.

Yes, with the flashlight I could just see him way off in the corner, behind and under some white steam-pipes that obscured my view. He had really wanted to succeed: it was almost impossible to see him if he was not exactly what you were diligently looking for and expecting to see in that very spot. The light showed a gleam on his prominent forehead, the light color of his pajamas, and the horrifying whiteness of his huge head with the jaw slightly slack, and his bare feet. For an instant I was blinded with fear, the great white head seeming to stare at me like a raging skull. Then I felt an urge to abandon myself to madness and crawl in there with him and lay my head on his chest for comfort, but my instinct for survival, my fear of going mad, prevailed. I ran up the stairs, my heart pounding so hard and fast that I couldn't speak, and found my mother sitting at the top of the stairs. I made her walk with me away from what was directly below us, out into the dining room, and I told her that I had found him.

Leaving my mother sitting against the wall, I ran to the phone, the same phone by the front door that my father had posed at for *Life* during the Crisis, and called his best friend Arthur Mizener and the police. I told them to come immediately, that I had found my father and I thought he was dead, and then I went to sit with my mother. Once Arthur came, followed by the police and our lawyer and friend Jim Buyoucos, and then all the husbands and wives who made up my parents' closest circle, my mother was in better hands than I could offer.

I did appoint myself the task of making sure that the ambulance workers and police didn't take my father's body out of the house by the easier path through the wider front door, which would pass by my mother's view as she sat in the living room with her friends. They promised not to, but just in case I sat by the top of the stairs, scared to see the body but determined to make them go out the back. Sure enough, the attendants came up the stairs with the shrouded body, took one look at the narrow door into the garage, and in their work-a-day mode tried to come into the front hall. I stood in their way and tried to steer them aside quietly, for fear that a disturbance would catch my mother's ear and bring her over. She was too wise to look, though, and when she heard the argument heating up, her voice floated out insistently from the living room, "No!! No!!" That command, along with my grip on the door, finally dissuaded the attendants from the easy route.

Once my father's body was gone, I had nothing to do. My mother and her friends would make all the arrangements. I was the child again, with no responsibilities, no need to show judgment; I had had my time of trial as the man in charge well before I wanted to or was ready to, and that was enough. Of all that followed that day, I remember only the kind face and voice of Jim Buyoucos, who thought to leave the crowd with my mother in the living room and come find me as I sat in shock on the cool flagstones at the side of the driveway. He was direct, as was his way of being respectful with young and old alike, not patronizing or openly sympathetic, and I can remember his words almost perfectly. "You'll hear a lot of things about your father over the next few days, and a lot of it won't make much sense," he said. "Just remember this one thing very clearly: your father was a great man, and you can always be proud of him."

Jim had a special sensitivity for young people, and had rescued many of his friends' children from legal difficulties, counseling and befriending them along the way. He somehow stated his opinions, even in direct contradiction to theirs, without using the self-important tone of challenge most adults bring to their conversations with unruly teenagers. I usually never listened to adults without an argument; that was my way of showing that I wasn't accepting their authority. Jim never thought to assert his authority, and so paradoxically he had it in spades, and I took his words to heart. I found something very reassuring in his advice to me, certainly in the fact that he had thought it important to find me and in the words themselves, but even more in the nearly worshipful tones with which he referred to my father. My father was clearly always going to be one of Jim's heroes; I knew right then that he could still be mine, too, no matter what had happened. It's heartening to look through the clippings to see the wonderful things that my father's colleagues said and wrote about him, and to read the outpouring of hundreds of letters to my mother from friends, admirers, and students around the world, but nothing was ever as important to me in understanding who my father was and what respect he deserved than Jim's words and tone that first devastating day.

Until I specifically asked my mother 20 years later, I never knew that my father had in fact left a note behind. On a single sheet, in cryptic words and a sprawling scrawl that were in marked contrast to the clear expression and tight hand that marked his writings in life, he had written:

The hell was private, very private. There should be no grief, guilt, feeling of responsibility, etc., on anyone's part, above all MCR [my mother]. I have had the death wish for years — and were there hope I would go on suppressing it. There is no hope, I am of no value.

And there, in the dark, he had drifted away to sleep forever in a soft haze of sleeping pills, barbiturates he had saved up, perhaps with this purpose in mind, finally happy, I hope, as the pain receded. His doctor told my mother later that he thought the suicide was actually for the best, since my father was a poor candidate for therapy, and there was no other way to ease his pain. He

was just too proud to reveal his weaknesses and ask for help. The same rigid code of conduct and sense of honor that sustained him in his life also guaranteed his early death; his noblest strength was his fatal weakness. My father had inserted the word "had" in the third sentence of his note, apparently upon rereading it; it had read: "I have the death wish for years." This original sentence might reveal the extent to which all the pain of a clinical depression, past, present and future, is balled up into a single crushing reality without time. And where there is no differentiation in time, there is no hope, as he says in the same sentence. And without hope, the pain was unbearable.

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How could a person who made a career of assessing the broader meaning of facts be so blind to his own value, as a father, a husband, a scholar, a man, a friend, and an American, when the proof of it was all around him, on each count the good outweighing the bad, the strength of the past outweighing the worries of the future? How could so logical a man think that there would be "no grief, guilt, feeling of responsibility," when even a cursory musing on his death's impact should have shown him that grief and guilt would darken our family's door for decades? How could he be so cruel as to wish those feelings on those he loved? Again, even to ask these questions is to ensure that one will miss the point about a life afflicted with clinical depression. My mother believes that had none of the troubles of family, campus, and nation occurred, my father would still have succumbed to his disease at about the same time. Nobody knew him better — although she acknowledges that there were still parts of him she didn't know at all — so I accept her judgment, give or take a few months of pain. Had he been hospitalized forcefully, which my mother was willing to do, even though she believed that this would end their relationship, his end would only have been harder, his heart even more saddened by embarrassment when he finally could end the pain.

What were the roots of this illness that my father fought so courageously for so long? One can only speculate on the causes of a powerful mental illness. Perhaps there is a genetic basis, a naturally unfulfilled yearning, a churning chemical disappointment. Some children, I know from teaching, are simply "born angry," while others get that way through abuse. Maybe my fa-

ther was “born sad.” Perhaps his parents’ method of showing affection created the sadness, or augmented it if it was already there. They were strict and proper, and demanded and received total respect and obedience. His father in particular pushed him to external recognition of his success, and his collection of mementoes, from tiny medals for sailing races as a boy, to pins for honorary societies and clubs in college, and on to his treasured combat ribbons from World War II, indicates that my father complied.

When my father was just 36 years old, he won the prestigious Bancroft Prize and Woodrow Wilson award for the best work that year in American history and in political science, with his book on thinkers before the Revolution, Seedtime of the Republic. To spur him on again, his father sent him a sketch of a stairway on which the steps were labeled with such achievements as: editor of school newspaper, Westminster School; first in class, Westminster School; accepted to Sigma Phi fraternity, Cornell; Phi Beta Kappa; youngest Ph.D. from Princeton; first in class, Naval Officers’ School; Lieutenant and battery commander, USN; married “Merry” Ellen (“best step yet”); first book published; appointed professor, Cornell. Only half the steps were labeled, the last being, “Bancroft Prize, 1953.” The remainder were marked with question marks. My mother showed me the “staircase” sketch soon after my father’s death, and for years I thought it provided a sound explanation of a man driven by his parents to ever-rising and ever-disappointing levels of achievement. As I read through his papers, though, this explanation, so plausible to me because I was angry at my parents for also having moved the goal-posts in my search for acceptance, lost its validity.

For each pressure, for each disappointment, my father’s parents had also provided support and rewards. For example, just a few months before the staircase sketch, his father had written a spontaneous, generous, and emotional note of thanks when he found out that Seedtime had been dedicated to him and his wife. The note told of my grandfather’s joy on coming home, finding my grandmother crying but stammering out, “Nothing is the matter — it’s wonderful news,” and being shown the book and its dedication to them, which said that their “lives have been a witness to the dignity and durability of the virtues of their ancestors: Industry, Frugality, Piety, Charity, Integrity and the Love of Lib-

erty." My grandfather concluded the note by releasing my father from any future need to impress him. There was not a hint of pressure for more achievement here, only pride in what had already been accomplished:

They say that each generation should square its own debts and not leave it to children or grandchildren to bail them out. We — Mom and I — must violate that sound advice, for you and our "Merry" Ellen long since wiped your slate clean and balanced your ledger. Now we are eternally in your debt — too large to hope to repay — so I leave our debt to David and Caleb and any others who may follow. May they pay our debt in full, 25-30-50 years hence, by giving you both the joy you and Merry E. have given us, culminated by your expressed tribute in Seedtime of the Republic!

So the more I learned about my father, the farther I was from any theory about his inner rage and depression. My mother says that she, for all she knew of him, and Jim Buyoucos, for all his tremendous insight, finally agreed that the illness that killed this complex man was simply "an inexplicable tragedy." Whatever the cause of his depression, my father was horribly cheated of the happiness he had deserved in the past, let alone that he deserved in the future. But that doesn't mean that his life itself should be seen as a tragedy, even in those tough last few years and even in that horrible final year. He really lived and he really loved, and his life was full of incredible happiness, adventure, and meaning. Pictures of him throughout his life show that. Even in his last year you can see alongside the tension and the tiredness some traces of the broad smiles, deep laughter, and burning pride that characterized his life.

My father was a man of such enormous vitality that he was able to live a richer life than most of us even as he grappled with an illness that would have killed a lesser person a lot sooner. He left so much of himself behind that it was impossible for those of us, family and friends, who survived him to feel cheated by his absence for very long. Yes, I feel an emptiness every day that combines a sorrow for what he's been missing and a yearning to hear his perspective on the politics I practice and the history I

read, but my father is such a huge presence in our family that we can always find a reason, as his friend Cushing Strout wrote after his death, to “Light a candle and curse the darkness too.” My daughter Sarah never met my father, but from listening to our memories is as close to him as any granddaughter could be. And I feel, especially after writing these chapters, as if I walk under his protection every day.

Of course, for a number of years after my father’s death I was shell-shocked by what my mother calls the “defining experience of our lives,” that crucial day, that central fact that puts everything else into perspective forever. His death devastated me, taking the wind from my sails just as I was hoisting them for the first time as an adult. Like my contemporaries who were psychologically scarred by combat in Vietnam, I had experienced death and suffering at too young an age in a battle that nobody seemed to care about.

In his powerful and revealing autobiography, Lewis Puller Jr., a badly wounded Vietnam vet who like me had to sort out his life from that of a famous and strong father, talks of the rages he would fly into when he saw people both in and out of the armed forces who had never been in combat in Vietnam, as they went about their normal business with no apparent concern for those who had. I recognized myself immediately in Puller’s description as I remembered a scene three months after my father’s death when I was wandering home on a clear, crisp fall day, and I saw across the avenue, in the middle of campus, Arthur Mizener, Fred Kahn, and Mike Abrams walking and laughing together. I was shocked, then enraged, and I veered away to cry off my anger. I felt they were hypocrites, to have been so sorry for their best friend, to have said all those nice things, and now, so soon, to be laughing again. Of course, they were just trying to live their lives as best they could, and they might not have carried on like that with me, but my reaction shows how consumed I was by my sorrow.

Even though the shock of my father’s death stunted my growth for a while, there is no question but that his life was the pillar on which I built mine. As my father’s sister Suzy said in a letter to my mother, “What a marvelous legacy he has left for his sons.” He planted deep within us what Mike Abrams called his “tremendous capacity for the joy of life,” and the basic goodness of a man who was, as his friend Alan Altshuler said:

that rare breed among men of great eminence, charm, and wit — one who is also a great democrat, who lavishes his personality on those who seek him out, with total disregard for what they may or may not be able to do for him.

And so, I am left with my father's life as a guide and comfort, a source of strength, a sword for my struggle for myself and for justice for others of which I can say, as he said with typical flourish in 1942 upon receiving a ceremonial sword for being first among the midshipmen in training school:

Sir, I will cherish this sword always. I will strive mightily to be worthy of the honor and confidence which I take it to represent. That it will be a sword of victory I have no doubt; and I know that my thought will not be misinterpreted when I say that the next truly happy day for me, and indeed for all of us here, will be that day when this sword and the other swords of a complete victory shall be beaten into the plowshares of a just and lasting peace.

Why did I decide to describe my father's private thoughts and demons, to reveal what he wrote in his diary and to recount mortifying details of his descent that had been known to only a few and held in strictest confidence? At first I saw it as a question of my right not only to know about my father's death, but to break the secrecy about it that had shamed and scarred me. Now, having mined this shaft as far as I can, I see it differently, as a question of my duty. As my father's son, as someone who is not ashamed a whit by anything he did during his illness and who wants him to know that he shouldn't have been either, I am heartily sick of the whispering and the breath of scandal that confounds our memories of all people who commit suicide, including my father. They and he deserve better.

Despite my mother's success in getting at least the national newspapers and magazines to call my father's death what it technically was once the barbiturates did their work, massive cardiac arrest, everyone who knew him learned through the grapevine that he had committed suicide, so his reputation has already taken it on the chin for thoughtlessly choosing this embarrassing mode of dying. He has been cast into that bin of troublesome and troubling people whose lives are deemed less meaningful because the

disease that killed them is seen as mental and not physical. By telling it all, especially while some of his friends and colleagues are still alive to read it and to understand his life and death a bit better, I think I've rehabilitated his reputation, not sullied it. Could anyone read this account of a man victimized by a raging illness all his adult life who still managed to give the world, as his friends Herbert Briggs, Arthur Mizener, and Andy Hacker wrote of him in eulogy, "far more than he received in return," and not have more affection and respect for the man than before? Do we need heroes? Here was a hero. Do we need men? Here was a man. Do we need fathers? Here was a father.

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