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Dear Dad: I'm still trying to make sense of some history

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Abstract

This letter remembers the writer's father, considering the disquieted contexts of his life and early death. These contexts connect to histories and conditions far more extensive than any individual life, and suggest difficult questions about inheritance, relationality, aftermath, settler being, and more, with which the writer continues to grapple.

Keywords

Aftermath, grief, inheritance, narrative, relationality, settler being

Dear Dad,

As I write, it's been thirty years. Lifetimes ago in some ways, the blink of an eye in others. I'm now a couple years older than you were when you got sick, just a year younger than you were when you died. I still think about you all the time—about who you might have been had you lived; about the sensibilities you had, that were absorbed and shaped over your own life-course, and that you passed down to me; about how what happened to you shaped me despite my not knowing how you felt about it; and about how different ways of addressing and grappling with these matters suggest different ways of being and relating in the world.

I don't know as much as I would like about how you felt in and experienced your life and time. Mom, your old friends, my older sister, your brothers, and others—the way they remember you has long been, as much as anything, a reflection of their own relationships to you, their selective memories, and their conceptions of the world. And no doubt that's true of me, too. So here's me trying to surface and observe that, I suppose.

I know you felt much stress and anxiety in your life even though you, like me, were born into many relative privileges and existed in relative comfort. I know you were unsatisfied in your job teaching 10th grade American history at a huge suburban school. I know you worried about how others perceived and judged you—that they might interpret something like an unkempt lawn or wrinkled clothes as a sign that your life was chaotic and unstable (as your own household seems to have been when you were young) and/or that you were not a capable person; that any luxury would be interpreted to mean you were not adequately humble and grateful; that saying too much was a marker of arrogance or pride. These insecurities seem to have underwritten what many eventually eulogized as your quiet politeness.

Mom says these were the among the reasons you liked to be in motion: working, doing physical activities, or hitting the road. How much time did you and I spend roaming fields, walking forests, and wading through waters where your great grandfather's homestead once was and where you spent happy childhood summers; where your body is buried? How many summer months did our family spend in that bare-bones Econoline van; rickety cots bungeed to the frame; no air conditioning, unneeded stops, clear destination, or end point; only a direction and a desire to see whatever national parks or historical sites might be nearby? (Maybe why I grew up to be a geographer?)

I wonder if you believed the doctor who initially disregarded you and implied that what you were beginning to experience—the beginning of the end—was in your head. It was. But not psychological. As the symptoms became undeniable, and the next—last—years of your life deeply medicalized, your experience of yourself and the world must have shifted, so suddenly, so viscerally, so irrevocably. Loss of speech, loss of motor skills, strokes, medical-institutional confinement, ingesting engineered poisons to try and shrink the mass growing at the center of your very self. The ways people treated you; being at the mercy of institutions that were flawed and often could not reciprocate your humanity; the way you endured it and tried to hide from us how terrifying and awful everything must have felt. Still, you exuded love, humility, and grace—maybe the only powers you had left. Powerful nonetheless.

For years after you died, I had the idea that I should write a book about you. It seemed poignant to me that you were a teacher of history who would—like most of us—likely be forgotten to history within a few generations. I wanted to write something that remembered

you. But what was the narrative? Unlike those American history filmstrip tapes you used to bring home so I could listen to them at bedtime, your story could not be framed as one of protagonist heroics, achievement, impact, or biography taking command of history. But in that I felt there was another kind of story worth telling—one about how ordinary people are bound up with forces so much bigger than themselves, at the mercy of larger structures, but also experiencing, altering, and adding to the sediments of history in their own little ways. For you, that story might have included the following:

- A sense for the conditions you were born into: *Cis white straight man, 4th generation settler, born into the US boomer generation, beneficiary of all the above; birth family troubled by disfunctions carried forward from previous generations who struggled to relate to one another and others and make stable lives after they left the places they were from and became settlers.*
- A sense for how those conditions were predicated on troubled histories that were absent from the versions of the past that were re-traced in your work, in our travels, in our own self-narratives: *As we roamed the land and drove the van, we rarely acknowledged people beyond our own ancestors and fictive US-historical kin; we did not acknowledge the ways that these ancestors and kin had shaped history and changed the land in their interests and image; how that depended on and did profound violence to others.*
- A sense for how your life was predicated on and participated in some of those things: *As an extension of your own identity in the place and time you were from, as a consumer in later-20th century US ecologies, as a narrator of history, as a visitor across lands, as a suburban homeowner and lawn fanatic, as a “Reagan Democrat,” as evangelical-leaning, etc.*
- A sense for how some—certainly not all, but some—of the facets of life under those conditions ended up being bad for you, too: *Among the things that people thought might explain your rare cancer: (1) Some strongly carcinogenic thing you had been exposed to when you were young, daring, and odd-jobbing (there were stories), maybe the chemicals you put on the lawn (there were many); (2) The industrial solvents in the municipal water (contamination from the military manufacturing that had been central to the local economy at the dawn of your generation’s zenith moment) leading later to a superfund cleanup and, eventually, a cancer cluster in the place we lived; (3) Too much stress; (4) Some individual and/or moral failure—you yourself believed that if you didn’t get healed, it might be because you hadn’t tried the right thing, had enough faith, prayed hard enough (many in your family also believed this and let you know it).*
- An open question about how you might have experienced and made sense of such conditions as they kept playing out—wrought in part by the ordinary activities of people exactly like yourself—approaching what now appears to be a fully dystopian future, had you survived: *Feedlots, drug epidemics, and political-economic and ecological changes have transformed the landscape around the place you are buried, disfiguring things in ways that would break your heart. Similar forces—under way and connected to us even as we toured in the van, accelerating since—have scarred landscapes across country and planet. In society at large but also in our own family and communities, questions of history and relationality—and of who everyone is, how they are differently*

situated and connected, and what they might owe to one another within that—are up for grabs in ways that will directly condition the future.

To me, what felt compelling about all of this was less about you personally (which, given your modesty, I imagined you would not mind) than about how, in the above and other contexts, your life was not exceptional, but indeed pretty ordinary. Your friends, neighbors, kin, and co-workers lived under very similar conditions. Confronted with the story of your life laid out as such, I imagined others who didn't even know you taking pause to consider their own lives, perhaps then reflecting on a whole range of difficult questions—not least around how we tell and interpret stories about ordinary lives and/in/of broader conditions in the first place. (Maybe why I grew up to be an ethnographer?)

I never wrote that book—this letter is the closest I have to offer. But I still reflect often on your life and questions and complexities such as your story evokes. Over the years, my perspective on these things has shifted. Naïvely, I once believed that, if I were sufficiently conscientious and proactive, I could opt to avoid your fate—avoid being someone who embodies so many contradictions of their historical moment to tragic ends. The older I get, however, the more I realize this is my fate, too, even if the details differ. I'm getting an ever more visceral sense for the hubris and folly in thinking one can exculpate oneself from or sidestep the troubling conditions of one's time. This has been true for generations of our family and kin. In my guts it feels urgent to face up to this, but I'm not sure how.

I still have dreams about you. In them we don't talk—not because we don't want to, but because we don't quite know what to say. I was young enough when you got sick that I never fully knew what you were like, nor did you know the me I've been and become. Maybe this is why my subconscious self is not very confident conjuring conversation between us. In my dreams, it's all we can do to awkwardly embrace, confused, trying to understand our relationship and establish our connection—trying to understand what has happened and where we have been. Sometimes it feels like we're succeeding, other times it is frustrated, fleeting.

But you keep coming back and you don't turn away. In this you model how I increasingly feel I should approach my own relationships with people, places, and the conditions of my existence; my sense of self in relation to these and the histories I've inherited. Awkward, confused, often frustrated. But I mustn't turn away (and talking is probably less important than doing, as I know you would agree).

Over the past few years, I've been lucky to collaborate with thinkers, artists, organizers, and others who seem to believe that people should treat their being in place and relating to others as processes of open-ended trust-building in formation (never stable achievements, not identities). For them, one's relations are not self-identified but reciprocally iterated among those with whom one seeks to be in relation. From there, they imagine, there might be ways of collectively enacting different ways of relating and being, toward different futures, even and perhaps especially when what has been inherited from the past is deeply troubled, with plots uncertain.

Ultimately, I suppose I'm writing to you in this spirit—posing your story, my story, our relationship to each other, the world, the past, and the future as things still being worked on (even if in little, ordinary ways); trying to channel the questions and disquiet that haunt me from your life toward different ways of relating and being in mine. Despite decades trying, I

still don't know what sense it all makes or what conclusions to draw, and maybe that's as it should be.

Maybe the best I can do is just keep grappling, questioning, iterating; toward my own fleeting attempts at—my own versions of—love, faith, humility, and grace.

Looking forward to each awkward embrace with lots of love,
Christian

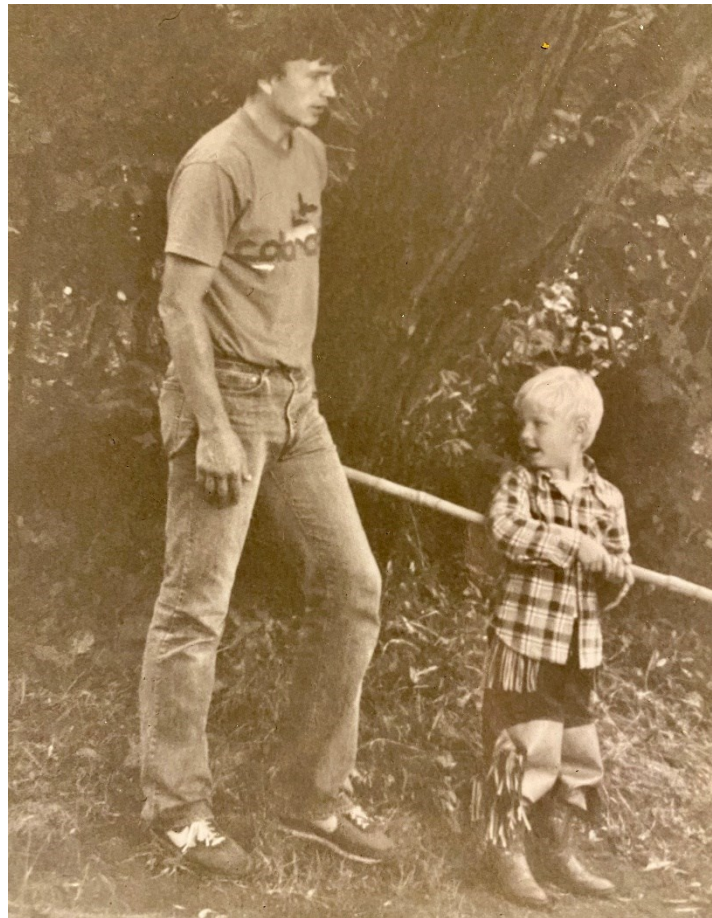


Figure 1: Fishing near the family homestead, early 1980s. Image courtesy of the author.