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 **Breaking the Cycle**

I am about tell you a story that contains violence. If you feel you must leave the sanctuary during the next 25 minutes, I shall understand, but, if you stay, I think you will find the experience rewarding.

When I was a child, my father spanked me with a belt, but more often he slapped me. He was right handed. His slaps landed hard on my left cheek. It was decades before I could stand having anyone I did not fully trust to be close to me on my left side.

Furthermore, whenever my father entered a room, I never knew who was going to show up – the nice Dr. Jeckyll or the evil Mr. Hyde. That Mr. Hyde side of him really came out concerning money. As I grew up, I avoided him as much as possible. My brother suffered when he insisted on confronting our father directly. I eventually learned from my mother that my father had been abused as a child, and he had been dreadfully poor. My father set a pattern for parenting that I – when I became an adult – realized I had to break. My three natural children inherited a condition from their mother called *epidermia graphia.* A scratch on their skin soon appears as a welt. When they were young, my children wrote on their abdomens with their fingernails and watched their work rise and then disappear. Their bruises could last for some time. I vividly remember slapping my daughter Amy on her left cheek and seeing the marks of my fingers on it for some time. That’s when I knew I had to break the cycle of my father’s parenting methods.

 My father never had a real father. When he was five in 1911, his father took him to two Charlie Chaplin one-reelers, bought him a new suit of clothes, sent him home on a street car, and said, “I’ll see you later.” My father never saw or heard from his father again until he viewed his corpse 27 years later. In the meantime, my father had an abusive step-father. Also, his mother was no model parent. She could be abusive. Pop always credited my mother with turning him into a *mensch,* which in Yiddish means a real human being.

 My father finished high school at night at age 21 while working during the daytime as a teller in the Central National Bank in Oklahoma City and going to school at night. During that time, he learned how to deal with people. He charmed them. Once he was out of high school, he went into sales. He became a representative for the Excelsior Stove and Manufacturing Company of Peoria, Illinois. He roamed in a Model T Ford all over Oklahoma, selling stoves and pots and pans. That’s what he was doing when he met my mother at a YWCA dance one Saturday night in Enid, Oklahoma. By then, he was quite the dandy: box-back coat, high-button shoes, and spats. I wore those clothes for several years as a Halloween costume. At that dance, he announced to the crowd that he was going to marry the best dancer and the best bridge player in the state. The irony was that my mother could never do either one well. But somehow they clicked. Not only emotionally but also financially. Together in 1933 during the depths of the Depression, they started the Brisben Furniture and Appliance store. Pop was the president, the owner, and of course the treasurer. My mother, who graduated with a degree in art from Phillips University in Enid and studied at the Art Institute of Chicago, was the interior decorator. The store lasted for 17 years when my maternal grandmother became ill, and my mother wanted to quit working to care for her.

 After a time, my father became an independent oil lease broker, the first job he really liked. He traveled all over the mid and southwest usually on assignment from major oil companies to buy leases from farmers and other land owners. He knew my brother Quinn, who was an arrogant intellectual and a professed socialist, was a lost cause, but he wanted me to succeed him as an oil lease broker and gentleman farmer. He eventually owned 800 acres in Grant County, Oklahoma. He failed in his mission to create me in his image. I succeeded to a degree in defying him. We came to regard each other in double focus. I admired him for his achievements. He became independently wealthy. I distrusted him because of his tendency to be chintzy, a poor listener, and mean. I think most people who have been abused by people they are supposed to love consider them in such a double focus. In kind, he admired me for my achievements. I was sometimes a straight A student. In high school, I lettered in basketball and worked on several plays. I spent most of my senior year in high school working for my hometown newspaper which fostered m love of writing. He distrusted me because I was sneaky and would not always obey him the way he wanted me to. He called me a hypocrite.

 While I was growing up (and if I had finished my homework for the evening), Pop and I would watch the Wednesday night boxing matches sponsored by Pabst Blue-Ribbon beer and the Friday night fights sponsored by Gillette shaving equipment. One night, some boxer demonstrated how he twisted his wrist as he landed a punch landed so that his gloves tore his opponents’ skin open and made it bleed. I looked at Pop, and he looked at me with a strange smile. It was also about that time that Pop told me, “You’ll never be a real man until you beat me in a fair fistfight.”

 When I was 16 on the Saturday afternoon before Memorial Day, he got his wish. That afternoon I had been out with my buddies. My strait-laced aunt saw me smoking a cigar and reading a girlie magazine in the lobby of a downtown hotel. She snitched on me. When I arrived home, my father demanded the keys to my mother’s car. I gave them to him. Then he demanded my driver’s license, I refused because it was my property – not his. He slapped me. Instead of taking the abuse, my amygdala took over. I punched him in the stomach and then the head. He fell to the floor. I was on top of him, hitting him in the face with both fists. He cried, “Stop! You’re killing me.”

 That was something I think my soul needed to hear. I told myself I guess now I was a real man. I rose. He got up, coughing and wheezing. When he recovered, he ordered me out of the house, never to return. I packed my suitcase and hitchhiked to where my brother Quinn was in graduate school. I later learned from an uncle my mother chastised my father for his action. I stayed away for the summer and returned for my junior year in high school. When I came home, Pop and I shook hands, but it was an uneasy peace.

 I shall always be grateful to Pop for putting me through college at the University of Chicago. I was not on financial aid. I had what I later called the “Brisben scholarship.” While I was a student from 1959 until 1964, tuition rose from $3,000 to $10,000 a year. That doesn’t seem like much in this day and age, but it was a lot then, about the cost of a new car. After I finished college, I told him sincerely that he could not have given me anything that I appreciated more.

 My mother was diagnosed with thyroid cancer in 1954. She contracted cancer of the right breast in 1966 and underwent a mastectomy. Because she went for two five-year periods without a recurrence, she ironically received two “cured” pins from the American Cancer Society. In 1972, cancer spread all through her spine. She died in November, 1973, just 14 days short of her 71st birthday.

 Pop lived another 19 years. Quinn and I both hoped that our mother would outlive him because he was so irascible. Quinn didn’t, but I prayed. Pop disinherited Quinn after he did something so despicable that I don’t even want to describe it. Let’s call it an unnecessary act of revenge. That left me, if you will, holding the bag – and – oddly enough -- a chance for significant spiritual growth that helped form my identity.

 This wasn’t the first time Pop cut off relations with people. When his brother Irvin and he went to Omaha to take care of their father’s funeral, Irvin drank himself silly on the way back. Pop thought Irvin lacked moral character and would have little to do with him after that. My Aunt Effie kept an uneasy peace between them. She had less luck in the early 1950s when she suffered a detached retina and after surgery had to keep her head held firmly between two sandbags. This was decades before laser surgery. My Aunt Eva had to care for my Grandma Brisben until Effie recovered. Eva charged Pop for caring for *her own mother* while Effie was incapacitated. Pop paid Eva, but he never would have anything to do with her again. Needless to say, the list goes on.

 In the 1950s and 60s, my father would augur wheat at harvest time from trucks into eight grain bins. While doing this, dust and chaff flew everywhere. He did this so he would not have to pay storage costs at the local elevator. In the late 1920s, he had contracted tuberculosis. He recovered three years later. He had been smoking cigarettes since he was a teenager. When he left the sanitarium in 1931, he asked his physician if he could smoke again. He smoked Old God cigarettes ads for which proclaimed, “Not a cough in a carload.”

 “Sure,” the doctor told him. “Doing that will help keep the TB germs in check.” That remark shows you how far medicine has progressed in the last eight decades. Pop’s smoking habit, however, eventually left him with a case of emphysema. He would come home after binning wheat and wheeze and cough and spit up gobs of mucus. “Your father’s going to kill himself auguring all that wheat,” my mother told me. “If you don’t help him, he’s gonna die.” She made me talk to him. Knowing how his mind worked, I knew I had to approach him as though we were making a deal.

I told him, “I’ll help you bring in the crops, if you cut me in on the profits.” He did but not until after the first year because he felt I owed him capital and made me buy in with my labor. I found that attitude infuriating because, as a lowly journalist with two small daughters at the time, I really needed the money. But at least I was in. In the process, I was learning further how to manipulate him, finding where his buttons were and when and how to push them. Over time, I learned how to follow the grain markets. Later, when Pop started buying stocks and bonds, I knew I had to study them. When I asked for his advice on how to handle them, he had four cryptic words for me, “Buy low, sell high.” Still, learning about his investments had an influence on my mid-life crisis. At age 42, I transitioned in 1983 from being in charge of the news service at the University of Iowa to being a broker at the old Securities Corporation of Iowa in Cedar Rapids.

When I made the change, I came to characterize myself as “catering to the investment needs of widows, orphans, and college professors.” I also came to the conclusion that my clients honored me by trusting me with their money, funds that they needed to put their children through college, for retirement, for emergencies, and so forth. I came to consider myself as a social worker for peoples’ money, and I did my best not only to make money but also to keep it out of trouble. I am in debt to my father for supporting my decision to make that transition.

Pop had a partner in his oil brokerage business named Arthur Messman. Art was a sweet guy, and he also knew where all of Pop’s buttons were. In his spare time in the office, Art would reach into his desk drawer and bring out and read brochures about a retirement community millionaire Del Webb was developing in Arizona called Sun City. At the time, both he and Pop were widowers. And widows were pestering them to no end. In 1977, they decided to pull up stakes in Enid and move there. Pop went first. In the meantime, Art remarried. He took his wife out there. She didn’t like it. She said, Arizona was too hot and the people there were not as nice as they were in Enid. She made Art return and buy her a brick bungalow on West Oklahoma Avenue in Enid like the one she had lived in on West Cherokee Street. But Pop flourished in Sun City. He monitored bingo games, checked on his stocks daily in a local brokerage firm, went to entertainments that Del Webb’s organization brought in, attended Phoenix Suns basketball games, and went to dinner with friends.

As he moved to Sun City, Pop did something that astounded me. He let me take complete charge of the farms if I would split the profits with him 50-50 at the end of the year.

Tom, the man who had been doing our actual farm work, entered his dotage in the 1980s. Younger farmers started telephoning me and offering their services. I called Tom and brought him into the process of finding his successor. He recommended his 34-year-old godson Steve, who had gone to college and worked in several jobs until he became an expert on wheat, fertilizer, soil chemistry and such. I gave Steve the job, and we began the transition. Unfortunately, I did not have the wisdom to bring Pop in on the process. When he found out, he was so upset that he decided to come for harvest in 1989. Steve managed the elevator in nearby Hunter, Oklahoma. Before harvest, Pop entered Steve’s office and grilled him hard on subjects ranging from varieties of wheat to the advantages of low-till farming. When Pop and I left, he noticed a shiny new navy or baby blue Cadillac parked near the front door.

“Whose car is that?” he asked.

Steve, who was standing in the door behind us, drawled, “That’s mine.”

When we got into Pop’s Oldsmobile 98, he commented, “You know, I think this boy’s gonna be all right.” That was valuable affirmation, but Pop wasn’t sure until he saw the expensive a car Steve drove, one more costly than his own.

I have four children. There are five years among them from the oldest to the youngest. I came to realize that I could have all four of them in college for one year and perhaps three of them in for two years. I proposed to Pop that we donate wheat in each of their names and let them sell it at their tax brackets, which were much lower than either of ours. “That way,” I explained to him, “we can do for them what you once did for me – and with lower tax consequences.” He had to think about that for a day or two. Then he telephoned me and said, “Let’s do it.” He had come to respect me for how I handled money. In later years, he sometimes complained about how the plan lowered his income. In compensation, he insisted on forcing each of my children to write him thank-you letters every Christmas.

 The question remained: How was I supposed to care for my cantankerous father when I was in Iowa City and he was 1,600 miles away in Sun City? I telephoned him every week. I tried to visit him for three to four days over January 28th, his birthday. Most of the time when I saw him, in his mind he imagined I was eight years old, and he could still boss me around. I let him do that on his birthday in 1990 as I scrubbed his kitchen floor, cleaned his refrigerator, and vacuumed his car. The next day, he started to boss me again.

 “No,” I said, “I let you boss me around yesterday. That was part of your birthday gift. Today, you will treat me like a man.”

I had taken a course on how to be an executor, and I knew I had to make an inventory of his personal property. We went around his townhouse, and I asked him questions about furniture and artwork that my mother had actually purchased. When we finished, he said, “Joe, you really do want to take care of me.”

 “Well,” I said, “I know my limits. I’ll never take your car away or put you in a nursing home without your permission.”

 I also made arrangements for him to donate his remains to the University of Arizona’s College of Medicine. Then he did something that astounded me. He could never tell me he loved me. He patted me on the back, which in addition to everything he did for me, seemed to be his way of telling me he loved me.

I also became acquainted with his friends. I wrote down their contact information. One in particular was especially valuable. Her name was Eleanor Wegner. She was smart. She learned where all Pop’s buttons were and when and how to push them faster than anyone I ever saw. She had once been in charge of all the social work programs for the State of Wisconsin. She talked Pop into taking care of people with Alzheimer’s disease so that their caregivers could have a break, something that he had also done for my maternal grandmother. Pop used to take her husband Charlie with his wheelchair and oxygen tank to Phoenix Suns games. After Charlie died, Eleanor found herself beset with suitors. Pop had the same trouble with widows. So she came to Pop and made him a deal. Remember how much Pop loved deals.

“John,” she said, “I know you’ll always love Olive, and I’ll always love Charlie. Let’s become a couple. We’ll go out to dinner, and we’ll go to shows. We’ll call each other every morning and make sure we’re both still living. Do we have a deal?”

“Yep,” Pop said, and they shook hands. When Pop didn’t answer his phone on Sunday, April 21, 1991, Eleanor called the sheriff. When the sheriff’s office telephoned me about his death, I told him I would fly to Sun City as soon as possible and take care of the arrangements. After I put the phone down, I turned to my then wife and announced, “Well, the boogie man is dead.” In retrospect, I probably shouldn’t have said that, but at least I got my feelings off my chest.

I know this is not the usual message people deliver about their fathers on Father’s Day. Not all people are lucky enough to have nice men for fathers. It’s important to know that, even though he could be mean, Pop and I did learn to get along. We trusted each to a large extent, but we continued to hold each other in double focus with doubt on one side and trust on the other. Unless I held my ground, he thought he could mistreat me. But I was his last resort. I was his only living relative to whom he could turn to care for him in his declining years. Everyone else, like his sister Effie, was too old, or, like my brother, he had distanced himself from and didn’t trust.

I suppose in some ways, Pop should not have trusted me. After he died, I telephoned Quinn and made peace with him. Legally, Pop could not totally leave my brother out of is estate completely, so he bequeathed him a token $100. Quinn didn’t want anything more, but he asked me to aid his children and grandchildren. In the spirit of family unity, I did so. As the executor, I think it was the right thing to do. As Mark Twain once wrote, “Always do right. You’ll gratify some people and astonish the rest.” Thank you.

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