

Oddfathers

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This is an essay about mentors -- how useful they are, mostly, but how difficult it has been for many of us to accept the idea of a new father, to submit to their guidance.

I suspect all generations struggle against the preceding one, because the space from father to son is supposed to be seeded with strife. As one decreases, the other increases -- never a formula for happiness. Except for a lucky few, it is unusual for one's own father to be one's teacher in life.

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My own father never quite got that writing was what I was all about. To him, an industrial engineer, vocation was a means to an end -- making money, making a comfortable life for oneself. It took me years to realize there was humility in this thinking. My dad liked selling Fuller Brush door to door and wanted to pull me into the business. I totally hated it -- what was a poet doing selling aerosols door to door?

The problem was that, writing aside, he was not an engaged father. Emotionally (and geographically) distant, unable to talk about much, and more concerned about his own prospects than those of his children. And he loved the TV more than he loved any of us. He wanted me to do well, but he was unable to walk the path with me.

So it was a problem for me when I got older and had opportunities to become disciples of older artists -- and found I could not bend the knee. Some stubborn part of me, still burned by my own dad's indifference, refused to take on new fathers -- it was too confusing for me.

None of these men volunteered to be "a father" to me, and I never asked them. And yet it was always in the air: What could we do that would be more valuable than sharing knowledge on how to do this stuff the right way. I think, because everyone was shy, we wound up stealing -- me stealing ideas from them about how to live, and think, and be, and them slipping ideas to me casually, as if they meant nothing at all, as if they were passing me the salt..

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My first shot came when I was 16 years old, with the poet James Wright. Visiting my stepfather's stepmother's home, I came upon signed books of his poetry, the emotional drama of which I liked very much, and was astonished that Elsie had a connection with him. Indeed, she had known him as a young man, and was in a position to introduce me to him.

One day in 1967 we drove down from Cleveland to Martins Ferry, Ohio -- John Glenn's home as well as Wright's. His parents lived in a small railroad house, with a melon patch in the back. Wright was very kind to me, which seems astonishing when I think back on what kind of young man I was -- murky, ambitious, and confused. We went for a walk, and he talked about the movie 2001: A Space Odyssey, which we had both just seen.

As a prospective father Wright was gentle, thoughtful, and unobtrusive -- ideal, really. And he validated

my own tendencies toward victimization and hyperemotionality. He did not ask to see my poems, and I did not shove the file folder in his direction -- though I had brought it with me. He was so nice, and I didn't want to be a beginner with him. Instead, I made plans in my head to go off, learn how to write, and then come back to him, and claim him as my true father -- after I had made myself worthy.

Which never happened. I think I wrote him a letter a year later, desperate to be remembered by him, suggesting that I come to New York and apprentice myself to him. I offered to paint his wife Annie's school. He wisely declined my offer.

When I went off to college at Wooster in 1967, we got a visit from the Oregon poet William Stafford. I knew nothing about his work. I was 17 and knew nothing, period. But because I styled myself as a poet, I was invited to interview Stafford, along with a handful of other self-styled bohemians, on closed-circuit TV.

I went in without any questions, half expecting Stafford to be "on the make" or just another dry old fuddy-duddy. He was anything but. In the midst of campus uprisings, be-ins and the other hysterical earmarks of the era, Stafford cut a calm, friendly, and modest figure. I liked him immediately. The other students rubbed their chins and asked academic questions about the meanings of this symbol and that, and about the use of classical form in his work.

But when my time came, I asked a question that made the other students cringe: "Is it fun for you, writing?"

Stafford brightened at the question, smiled broadly and said, "Yes. Yes. Yes!" And went on lovingly about the joy writing gave him, how it was the best part of every day, how it lifted him up from the barely breathing to the noticing, and wondering, and self-amusing tasks of poetry.

Later, as a literature student at the University of Minnesota I got word of the arrival by night of Russian dissident poet Andrej Voznesenski. The Soviet Union had refused him a visa until 24 hours before his scheduled visa, so he arrived nervous and tired from his trip. But the energy returned when he took the huge stage. Northrop Auditorium was cordoned off so that 50 people dotted the 5,000 seats while Voznesenski groaned like a swinging pendulum through readings of "Goya" and other poems in the only language he knew. Voznesenski was Byronic in his charisma and mystery. I yearned for the pummeling power of his words.

Afterward we poets got together at English professor Chester Anderson's to boast and jostle and drink, Voznesenski sitting alone on the couch, a slight frown on his face. Several beers later, I took to the bathroom, where Chester's golden retriever lay, and stepped over him to pee. As soon as I started, Voznesenski entered, smiled politely at me, knelt by the dog and scratched his ears, not more than a foot from my pee stream.

Confused, I turned to see the poet kneeling, eyes closed, his hands stroking the golden dog, his face held out to me, the dew like manna on his face, and a smile as if finally, finally free. When I left the party, Voznesenski stood by the door and pointed to me. "You," he said, and smiled coolly. "Be great for me!"

That's all he said to me -- but it stuck in my head like a spear.

That same year I edited the school literary magazine and I wrote to Robert Bly, who lived in the west of the state, offering to publish poems of his choosing.

He sent me a handwritten note -- hand-drawn would be a better description, as he writes in a kind of pictographic swirl, using butterflies and birds as punctuation. But what he said he liked wasn't the poetry, but the design! He liked a photo of a pretty girl standing under a bare tree. I sent him the original print with my compliments.

The next few years saw a minor flourish of correspondence between us. Bly was flattering to me, and I was flattered. I was 20 when I met him, barely more than a boy. The idea of being taken in by a major figure like Bly was sweet.

Bly appeared at the university and I was enthralled with his cantankerous Norwegian self. He was rock and roll to me, grandiose as sky yet contemptuous of the complicated circles other people walked in and the big words they used. Bly snubbed the pretty and went straight for the spiritual fireworks. I dug that a lot.

But Bly in person was not as gracious as Bly on paper. Perhaps when he met me face to face after the reading he read the hurry and ambition that was written there. Or perhaps he saw I was younger than he supposed. In any event, he quickly took to teasing me with little jabs, nicknaming me "Irish." It was funny, but the joke was at my expense.

Doing a journalism gig I traveled outstate with regional poet Franklin Brainerd for a big prairie poetry reading at a rural university. Franklin, a very kind and down-to-earth man who liked young women poets very much, was then dying of leukemia, and I was writing a feature about him for the university paper. For several days we drank beer, talked, read poems and taped.

"A good poem is like a potato," Frank told me. "You have to dig it out of the dirt with your fingers. And it's as ugly and unpromising as you. And if it wasn't, what good would it be?"

Frank suggested I bring some poems of my own on the trip west, so I did. Bly and Thomas McGrath, the great and lovely chronicler of American radicalism, were also on hand for the poetry event. The three headliners took turns reading, and they were well received. Afterward, Tom and Franklin waved me upon stage for a kind of poetry improv -- audience members would shout out an image, and poets would scramble to produce and read a poem featuring that image or idea. It was just nutty and open-ended enough, that I shone.

McGrath and Brainerd were very kind to me, parachuting in on their reading the way I did. But Robert scowled when I beat him to the punch by quickly locating a poem about hibernation.

Afterward we all caroused in his motel room, drinking cheap red wine, along with a half dozen other young men poets who had driven out to attend to Robert.

"You young men should stop writing for three years, get away from all this," he said, waving his hand toward the motel bed. "Move out to the Dakotas and live under the sky. Forget you met me, forget what made you so hungry and false -- then start writing again."

We waited on every word of advice, but we were damned if we were going to leave that motel room. It dawned on me, through the haze of Chianti, that we were acolytes.

I have two other stories about Bly. The first happens four years later in 1979 when I am a newspaper editor in a small town in the same part of the state where lived. Robert again came around to read his work, and I covered his visit as a journalist. Afterward he agreed to meet with several of us at a tavern. He was in good form, enjoying the attention, and playing the role of Sufi mystic, a person apart from the cares of the world, to the hilt.

To his dismay, however, his teenaged daughter sidled up to him and began begging him for money. "Come on, daddy, there are some cords for sale at The Gap, and they're only \$14.99." She forced him to open his wallet for us to see. None of us took this as unusual. Teenage girls need jeans. But I could tell from the look on his face that he felt she had blown his cover. Robert Bly was just a man, with credit cards, a driver's license, and a couple of twenties. It was terrible.

I will save the other story for a moment,

All along, I had access to fathers who knew things that could save me from living a stupid life, the way fathers are supposed to, but either the father drew back or I did.

When I was a newspaper editor I apprenticed myself to Paul Gruchow, naturalist and essayist. I followed him around from bog to ridge, listening to him rhapsodize about his childhood in the tall grass. I admired the hell out of him, but I don't think he ever figured that out.

Paul hired me not knowing I was somewhat the same kind of writer he was -- literary -- so we made each other miserable during my stay in Worthington. Paul was old school, and wanted us to trade book talk over cigarettes and sandwiches. He loved Henry James, whom I found hard to read. I was forever disappointing him.

One night, after an especially vexing day, which resulted in readers calling him to complain about an article I wrote, he stood at the side door of my house. "Do you want to come in?" I asked. He said nothing. "I've got a good idea, Paul," I sighed. "Why don't we be friends?"

In truth, he outdid me in every way, but his response was to become more jealous of me. Once, introducing me for a reading at the local library, he merely said, "This is Mike Finley. I really don't know what else to say."

When I quit and moved away to Connecticut, a midwestern magazine published some poems of mine and cited me in the biographical notes as having his job. It was a magazine that had rejected his work.

"Congratulations," he wrote me in the shortest and bitterest note I have ever received, "on your big promotion."

The thing about fathers is, they tend to die before you do. All the lovely gentlemen I met over the years, with whom I shared an hour of light, eventually went away.

Frank Brainerd succumbed to leukemia in 1977. His disease was like an apotheosis for him. No one cares about a poet, until death comes knocking. Then everyone crowds around, and Frank delightedly met many women poets.

James Wright died in 1980 of cancer of the tongue. Working for the newspaper, I pulled the news of his death from the teletype machine and spun slowly in my swivel chair.

I ran into William Stafford on a stairway in 1978, at a publisher's party. It had been eleven years since I asked him my silly question on college television in the Amish country. Darned if he didn't recognize me. "Hello" he said, and smiled. "How are you?" Which still seems like a miracle to me.

Tom McGrath, who had always been in frail health, followed in 1990. About three years earlier, I invited him to a holiday open house, and he surprised me by showing up fifteen minutes early, and nursed a cup of hot cider, asking me questions about my children. He had been through a lot in his life, but to the end he was a tender fellow.

Paul Gruchow, the friend who so disliked me, took his life in the early spring of 2004, after many years of suffering from depression -- but not before the two of us buried the axe on our misgivings.

I guess Voznesenski is still out there, sneaking up on young poets in toilets.

Sometimes, driving around Minneapolis, I see Robert Bly crossing a street or loading his car trunk with groceries. I was at a poetry reading against the Iraq War one Sunday afternoon in the winter, and for a brief moment, while I gave a brief lecture on the Mighty Republican Wurlitzer approach to propaganda, we shared the same stage.

Afterwards, I was milling about in the basement of the Macalester College chapel, and I looked up to see his hoary visage backlit by the winter sun. He was descending the steps and moving in my direction. This is it, I said, and straightened my posture for long-awaited fatherly reunion.

But Bly merely squinted at me and asked, "Is this where the men's can is?"

So now I am the old guy, and all the grand gents are gone. My own dad, who stopped smoking thirty years ago, has been diagnosed with lung cancer, and he is pissed. I talk to him on the phone. I wrote him a letter of amends, apologizing for being a remote if dutiful son for so many years. At the eleventh hour I remember how much he suffered in our family, losing his firstborn child, being married to a scary woman, my mom.

And I thanked him for his financial advice over the years. He always thought writing was an idiotic

career choice, and urged me to take up an aspect of it that would net me some bucks. Which I did, drifting from poetry to fiction to journalism to business writing, which is how I fed my family over the years.

"You know, Mike," my dad told me, "if anyone should be apologizing to anyone, it should probably be me apologizing to you."

I waited a few minutes for him to clear his throat and deliver the actual apology, and then realized that his concession was all there would ever be. But it was good. It was all right.

And another thing. A few months after Paul Gruchow died, I got a call from Matthew Gruchow, his nephew. Matthew never met Paul, but he knew about him, and wanted to know more. I agreed to meet him for lunch, and we talked.

Matthew is in his twenties, and he too wants to write, and from what he has shown me, he will be very good. Books, adventures, essays -- I looked into his eyes and saw all the desire, all the heat-lines that once radiated from mine.

I decided, in a moment of exuberance, to throw in with him, to tell him everything the old guys had taught me.

"Yes, write your ass off," I told him. "If you want to do a thing get at it now. Do it while you are young. You won't be ready, but unless you write you never will be.

"Write crazy, like a child. And when you rewrite, go over it like a parent, picking up toys and putting things right. And then wait a while, and make a final pass, and this time do it out of love, and out of the joy of it.

"And don't worry about who you are, or if you have a right to write. Don't stop, and don't apologize, and don't expect anything from anyone. Grow in the doing, and between sentences, breathe."