



'A Son of a Sea Cook'

by Mike Finley

I had some good conversations with my dad the year before he died. He was 81, and had serious health problems. He had just lost his wife of 35 years, and was taken down by a lung tumor – though he had quit smoking thirty years earlier. I wrote this piece in 2006.

When I was 11 my sister Kathy, 15, died, and when I was 12 my dad abandoned us and went to live in California. My sister knocked the wind out of us. But it was my dad that finished us

off.

I think the killer was something I learned years later, that he didn't just leave us because California sounded nicer than Ohio. He left because he had been caught by his employer General Motors taking cash from an expense account. His standing with the company, which had already been marred by drinking and intemperate behavior, evaporated on him. Blacklisted by GM, he had to start over again in a part of the country where the blacklist did not exist.

But my dad never told us kids that. He left us with the idea that there was something wrong with us, that we did not deserve to have a father.

I have always suffered from a sense of being inferior, no good, unwanted – because our dad never want to be near us kids, back in the day.

I remember walking home from high school when I was a junior in high school, the day I found out I had won a district-wide scholastic award, thinking there was no one I could show it to, who would be proud of me. It sounds sappy, but it made my cry walking down Park Avenue – something 16 year-old-boys don't like to be seen doing.

From that day on, I made up my mind to just carry on without approval and not let feelings of neediness drag me down.

The world wanted me to be weak, to break down crying, and I wasn't going to give them the satisfaction.

This was the great wound of my life – living as a kind of clever imposter when I was really a heartbroken little boy inside. If you stand back and tilt your head, it's the subtext to my whole life – poetry, my writing, my working at home, my living far from family, the style of casual friendships I maintain, my website. This attitude of uncomplaining orphanhood, high-functioning above the turbulence of life, became my constant disguise.

The year before he died I showed my dad galleys for a book I had ghostwritten, about addiction intervention. I had never seen him so interested in anything I had been a part of. Addiction was a big theme in his life. He felt he had overcome alcohol, tobacco, overeating, and sex – though he was vague on that last boast. And our family saw more than its share of self-medicating, and self-unforgiving.

Anyway, for several months he would call me and we would talk about this. Unlike our usual conversations, which were "pleasant" (we never yelled at each other) but subtly vicious (him unfailingly competitive, letting me know what a big shot he was, me helplessly passive aggressive, sneaking in little shivs when I found the opportunity).

Our conversation about addiction, by contrast, was quite nice – and except for him wanting to change the central metaphor that the book hangs on, and that we spent \$7500 to come up with (the word "cannibal"), my dad was very restrained about ripping it to bits, as was his wont.

Bottom line, though, it was sweet talking to him. It was – friendly.

I experienced a kind of spiritual explosion that year around Christmas, that I could never talk to him about, that was based on the idea of fathers. I was always annoyed by people who talked about God as their father in heaven. It just sounded so false to me. The reason is that I had trouble thinking of fathers as loving, period. I saw them more as absentee landlords – which consequently was pretty much how I thought of God as well.

A friend described a meditation he had undertaken around the mental word *father*. The idea was to try to hear the idea in one's mind in a fresh light – and thus get a glimpse of what divinity might be, a father based not on one's own frail father's skillset, but on something better and sturdier, a spirit who would not pack up and drive off to California on you.

All you do is repeat the word *father* to yourself, instead of *Om*, for a few minutes, several times a day ...

Doing this father meditation, after a few days, I felt some of the disguise start to peel away.

But to really make it happen I needed a way to get past my sense of God as a deadbeat dad. You know what did it for me? This will sound vain but it was a vision of my own self and what a good tender father I am and have been to my son and daughter.

I was a good dad. I stayed home to be with them. I wiped their noses and their butts. I made their lunches and drove them to school. I coached them in sports and I made time to talk to them, about the problems they were having. They were never easy kids, so I put in long hours.

Suddenly, I was able to see this, and be impressed by myself, able to find healing in my own nature. I don't think I ever had any other feeling quite like it.

And then I saw further, and saw something else. It was a vision of my own father, of Paul W., the guy who got away.

And I understood just a bit what it felt like for him when his daughter died – the sick little girl he carried around all her life, because her heart could not pump blood as efficiently as other girls' hearts.

I thought of the Fourth of July, in Cascade Park, Elyria – my birthday. It was the greatest day you could have a birthday on. The whole world was happy, and there was ice cream, and fantastic explosions.

And we waited on the grass till it got dark enough, my brother and me, and my dad with Kathy in his arms. And it got so late, and I got so tired, and I was jealous that my dad carried Kathy back to the car, and I had to stumble along my myself, in the black grass.

And the vision was that my dad was once a loving man, but when his daughter died, his heart broke, too – and not knowing better, he had to leave.

It was as if God came into my head and said to me: "You want to think about what I am? Think about yourself. Love yourself. Forgive yourself. Revere your own love, which comes from me."

Now, it's possible, that at times, I was a good dad to my kids almost to spite the past, as a rebuke to my own unlovedness. But the way I see it, it doesn't matter. I still see myself looking in on the little ones when they were sleeping and feeling this incredible rush of connection and love for my babies.

And where did that beauty come from? An absurd universe ought not to kick out such moments. This one did.

This meditation is allowing me to think of my place in the universe in an amazingly more positive way. I'm like the Cary Grant character in *Arsenic & Old Lace*, Mortimer Brewster discovering he is not related to homicidal maniacs after all.

"I'm not a Brewster!" he crows at the end of the film. "I'm a son of a sea-cook!"

I'm not really a bitter surrealist at all. I'm a sweet guy who loved his kids, and wants to be connected to people, to do right by them, to be loved by them and to love the life we are all living – even when it sucks, as it does.

So let me pass this meditation on to you. There is no particular technique attached to it. Just the word *father*. Let it roll through your mind for a few days. Let the idea of this passionate, sacrificing love build in you. I swear there is self-forgiveness in it, and a better universe waiting to peek through.

A place where you don't have to hide your feelings or armor yourself against attackers. Where you don't have to stand on your own.

What is there is a father in nature, embedded in the atoms of things, who is not a jerk, and who knows you are his, and is not going to split the first chance he sees?

And what if that loving father is a version of you – helpless to prevent you from the pain of living, but there with you, and loving you, and keeping you company to the moment you die?

I'm telling you, it beats being alone.