



2009

Junk-Yard Ride

Marshall W. Gregory

Butler University, mgregory@butler.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Marshall W. Gregory. "Junk-Yard Ride" *Journal of Family Life* (2009).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarship and Professional Work - LAS by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact omacisaa@butler.edu.

October 9, 2009

Junk-Yard Ride

Marshall W. Gregory, Ph.D., Ice Professor of English, Liberal Education, and Pedagogy, Butler University

Abstract

This paper describes the difficulties of being born into an emotionally and intellectually dysfunctional family headed by two child-parents who had neither the skill nor interest nor desire to be thoughtful parents, and who were saddled with all the intellectual and emotional baggage of fundamentalist protestantism that they passed on to their children, forcing the author of the essay to untangle many personal knots of confusion and pain on his path toward autonomy and peace.

Essay

If there is, in fact, a grammar of story, the language it shapes is a lingua franca, a common language for all of us. Story, finally, is humanity's autobiography.

Lloyd Alexander

With a nod of appreciation for the depth of insight buried in Lloyd Alexander's comment, let me tell you the story of my beginnings. Although I got lucky later in life, my beginnings were bumpy, bruising, and dangerous. Reared in a family that careened over life's terrain like a junkyard car with broken springs, bum steering, and no brakes, my childhood was a largely comfortless, mostly impoverished series of encounters with adults who were too little in control of their own lives to be responsible for nurturing the lives of their children. Certain bizarre facts illustrate the chaos in our family life vividly, but these facts are symptomatic rather than causal. They show no more of the hidden underside of instability than the iceberg's proverbial tip shows of its subsurface mass.

Even at that, however, the facts are revealing: the fact that my father, just in the space of my eighteen years at home (I left home the day after I graduated from high school), was, by turns, a feed-mill hired hand, a World War II soldier, the advertising manager of a prefabricated home factory, a college student (for one year), a Nazarene minister, an Evangelical United Brethren minister, (first in Indiana, then in Florida), the town manager of a Florida resort town where his infidelity with his secretary almost got him killed and his embezzlement of town funds almost got him imprisoned, the bishop of his own "Naturist Church" inside a nudist colony north of Tampa (a tax dodge mainly), and a male nurse in the psychiatric ward of a veteran's hospital. Even while my father was a Nazarene minister, he and my mother were also practicing nudists—secretly of course—in the various woods near our different residences in the hills of southern Indiana and Illinois, which is a little like trying to practice pacifism on a field of battle during a war. From his last job in the VA hospital my father finally retired, and, except for a short-lived marriage with a nurse he met there, he lived alone in a trailer on the nudist colony property where his "Naturist Church" was once located. He lived there until he died in 2005, bitter and

alone, alienated from everyone who had ever loved him, alienated from everyone who might have loved him, and alienated from everyone who ever wanted to love him (including my mother, from whom he was divorced twice and with whom he was remarried three different times). There was no funeral and no memorial service. He had arranged ahead of his death to have his remains cremated and to have the ashes scattered in a secret location unknown to anyone one in his family.

I did not know about my parents' sylvan nudism when I was a child, of course, and when I found out about it later it struck me as immensely sad and terribly funny all at once. It seemed sad because, knowing my parents, I could not imagine them conducting this breach of their own social and religious regulations with anything like a joyful sense of liberation or self-expression. I could only imagine them doing it like teenagers poking a stick in the eye of authority: petulantly and naughtily self-assertive. It seemed funny because the mental picture of my two young parents furtively cavorting around in the southern Indiana woods amidst the prickly burdock leaves, the poison ivy, and the cow flocs-occasionally panicking at the noise of a squirrel or possum momentarily mistaken for a good Nazarene parishioner who would have *loved* making such a scandalous discovery-was a picture of naughty freedom being purchased at an excessively high price of physical discomfort and personal indignity. In any event, quite apart from arguments for or against nudism, neither of which interest me, here or elsewhere, a Nazarene nudist, at least in the early 1950s, was simply an oxymoron that points to the underlying incoherence within my family life.

If my father's instabilities revealed themselves in a series of restless and angry moves from one church to another where the parishioners did not know how to fully appreciate his self-imputed genius, my mother's manifestations of instability were equally grave but totally different in character. My mother showed the underlying unhappiness of her life mainly by tears that, always near the surface, would shower out inexplicably, and express quiet depression and misery of spirits, by the expression of escapist longings that found outlet in her absorption in movies and movie magazines and pulp fiction, and by a persistent fixation on sexiness, on dieting followed by overeating, and on overeating followed by more dieting. Being sexy was important to my mother. ("Sexy" is not a term she would have used in the social context of my childhood. "Attractive to men" would have been her preferred locution.) The positive responses she received from men seemed to her (I now think) one of the few ways she had of demonstrating any worth to herself. What she was worth was however much men wanted her. Not that she ever pursued the proof of such valuations during her married life (so far as I know)-but she needed the promise of it, the hint of it, to feel valuable, or at least valued.

My father's childhood was ripped apart by the divorce of his parents in a place, rural southern Indiana, and at a time, the late 1930s, when divorce was an unheard of phenomenon that branded families with a terrible social stigma. My mother's childhood was darkened when she was six, and for the rest of her life, by the death (from a combination of typhoid fever and diabetes) of her own mother, followed by years of being raised by relatives until her father remarried and took her back into his home.

These two young people knew very little of the larger world beyond their rural community, they possessed little education and few ideas, and they possessed no models of

adults who were balanced, controlled, or thoughtful. These two young people, steeped in a desperate longing for the love they did not find in their homes, did find each other. They found each other socially at high school, from which my father but not my mother graduated, and they found each other sexually at an evangelistic revival, where I was conceived as the unintended and undesired by-product of their passionate gropings behind the revival tent. I was consulted as to neither the dignity nor convenience of this event-it must have exhibited little of either-but I am possessed of an ironic certainty that my conception must have occurred outside the tent at the same moment the evangelist inside the tent was fuming against fornications of this very sort as two teen-ager parents were about to join an ovum and sperm into the unity that would be me: a moment rich enough in irony to challenge even the irony of poor Tristram Shandy's being conceived at the moment his mother inquired of his father about the winding of the clock.

Following the play of heat and passion in this event, which I assume was more passionate than playful and physically measurable in milliseconds, my child parents had to face the long-term consequences. They got married at an event called a "shotgun wedding" in their area of the country. My mother was fifteen, my father was sixteen, and I was born nine months after the camp meeting but, scandalously, less than nine months after the wedding. This was not a beginning for either them or me that made the angels rejoice. It was a beginning marked for trouble.

When trouble came, it did not have to use a map to find my family. We were highlighted for trouble in neon and fluorescence. We were sitting ducks. We were unhappiness in both bud and bloom. My father, lost amidst the conflicting models of his own childhood, became a fundamentalist minister when I was six. This decision was undoubtedly a world-class version of "the decision most likely to produce certain disaster," but, having been raised "in the church" and having little knowledge of and no confidence about the rest of the unknown world, my father seemed to gravitate to the church as the only thing he really knew about. My mother-whose own father had been a fundamentalist minister and for whom marriage seemed an escape from the grimness of life dominated by a harsh theology and a busybody God-instantly became depressed at the prospect of returning to "the Lord's work," and never really got undepressed for the remainder of her life.

The reverence that ministers were given in those days for doing "the Lord's work" was a rhetoric designed, I now think, as a humbug compensation for the abysmal poverty in which most ministers and their families were forced to live and about which they were never supposed to complain or even notice. Worse, they were supposed to be grateful for it, rather the way Dickensian waifs such as Oliver Twist were not only *not* supposed to complain about starving in the workhouse but were supposed to be grateful because, after all, they were shining examples of the public's munificence in paying taxes to maintain their upkeep, no matter how wretchedly. If my father had really wanted to rebel, which I think he did, he might better have taken on this issue and tried to do something concrete about ministers' hard scrabble lives, especially in rural areas, rather than thumbing his nose at the clerical establishment by running around naked in the woods and calling it "nudism," as if an "ism"-term could transform childish rebellion into some kind of reasoned view of life. But one of the worst things about my parents' misery was their persistent failure *ever* to find a constructive outlet for it. Misery was a broth in which my parents continuously simmered.

The ways in which my parents expressed their unhappiness were neither inventive, flamboyant, nor immensely varied (depression, anger, evasion, and desperation are the routine stuff of therapy couches), but what my parents lacked in imagination they made up for in intensity and repetition. My father swayed back and forth among deep waves of feeling: a deep anger at his lot in life, a deep fear of failure continually deepened by repeated failures, a deep resentment against those evil forces outside of himself (including his children) that plotted against his happiness and success, an immature rebellion against the expectations that accompanied his career, and a depth of self-pity that drowned his capacity for both imagination and joy. My mother wept a lot, felt powerless, ate chocolates and dieted, read romance stories in women's magazines, doubtlessly fantasizing about escape into a different kind of life, ate more chocolates and began more diets, and developed an uncanny ability to be absent in spirit and mind while present in time and space.

My sister, born into this nest of broken glass four years later than I, once told me her earliest memory was that of standing inside the screen door of our house in New Albany, Indiana, looking down the street at children playing outside, and wondering to herself, "Where is my mother? Why am I all alone?" Our mother, who never had a job outside the home when we were children, could have been nowhere else but *there*, probably no more than a few feet from my sister, but so enveloped in the invisible cloak of her own thoughts, fantasies, and misery that she managed, with a creepy talent all her own, to be somehow invisible and thus neither responsive nor responsible, even though present in the flesh.

I have my own early memory of my mother remarkably similar to my sister's. When I was a senior in high school (1957-58) I was terribly sick with the first of the many waves of "Asian flu" (as it was called at that time) that have since swept over the country. I was home from school two weeks, and, despite the fact that my mother and I were the only two people in the house all day long while my sister was at school and my father was at work in the church office, I have not one recollection of our interacting with each other during my sickness: not a cup of tea, not a drop of sympathy. Having watched her own mother sicken and die when she was six, my mother was probably terrified of sickness and must have responded to my illness with her uncanny ability to be both present and absent, present and invisible, at the same time. In any event, I remember lying on the bed feeling that I might die, listening to records I played on our cheap "hi-fi" unit in the living room when I could get up, and going to the bathroom to relieve myself of diarrhea or nausea, but I do not remember interacting with my mother. My father in the church office, it turned out, was not doing church work, at least not entirely, but was seducing (or perhaps being seduced by) the church secretary instead, so I was not interacting with him either. It has always amused me, perhaps a little perversely, that my father, who hated his church *work* so much, could have been sexually inspired, or so it appears, by church *buildings*, whether tents or brick-and-mortar structures, but some of my family's pathologies just seem beyond explanation.



The author as a child with his dog

My mother's invisibility was one of the most important influences in my childhood (and in my later life as well), because it extended my vulnerability to others' hostility or manipulations indefinitely. There were no boundaries on others' behavior beyond which I could count on her giving me protection or assistance. When my father's frustrations prompted violent behavior, as they frequently did, and when I received one of the many beatings that remain among the most vivid memories of my childhood (we called them "whippings," an accurate term for the action of the lithe green tree branches that he preferred in summers; belts folded once for double action were preferred in winters), mother was as invisible then as always. She neither protected nor protested. She just lay low and neither saw nor was seen: a non-person non-reacting. Her ability to check out and thus avoid engagement with events over which she felt powerless not only protected her during the events themselves but protected her for life by blanking the events permanently from her memory. It fascinates me and speaks vividly of the power of the mind to shape its own perceptions that she claims-and I have no reason to doubt these claims-that she cannot remember me being beaten by a furious father in a trailer so small that she could have been no more than eight feet from the action. As an adult, I can sympathize with her being afflicted by feelings of such misery and powerlessness that the only coping mechanism she could devise was to erase her own memory-at the price, of course, of simply losing big chunks of experience-but, as a child, I needed her help and protection. It never came.

My mother died in June 2009, persisting to the end that she had no knowledge of the conditions of my upbringing that I wanted to talk about when I became an adult. As I've said, I believed her, not because this knowledge was unavailable to her-my upbringing was, in fact, right in her face for the whole eighteen years of it that I lived at home-but because I believe in the unlimited power of denial. Those who wish to live a life of illusion and self-deception, do so. It's always an option. What such people sacrifice is any connection to notions of excellence or truth, but what they gain is an avoidance of pain and culpability that they cannot imagine dealing with. It is one of the sadnesses of my life that I never came to an understanding with my mother of our lives together.

One of the earliest memories of my own life shares much of the character of my sister's early memory of loneliness and abandonment. My memory is of a dream, an oft-repeated nightmare of my childhood, in which my father is murdering me. He is chasing me around and around our house in New Albany, Indiana, stabbing me to death with a knife. I am six years old. In my dream, the repeated stabbings make me bloated and I am beginning to bounce and float like a balloon half-filled with helium. I am covered with stab wounds all over my body and I see this as if I were watching a movie at the same time as I am experiencing the events firsthand. The stabbings do not hurt immensely, but I am terrified and I know that I am going to die. Finally I spy my mother sitting on the edge of the sandbox under our cherry tree doing what she is always doing, eating chocolates and reading a movie magazine. "Mom," I scream, "help me,

help me!" In response she looks at me out of the corner of her eye, without ever losing her place in the movie magazine, and says in that matter-of-fact voice that she always used when avoiding things, "Why, Marshall Wayne, you'll have to talk to your father about that." End of dream. End of childhood.

My mother's failure to take responsibility has had the strange effect of helping to make me as an adult both excessively responsible and excessively irresponsible. At one level I have become possibly the most responsible person in the world, for whom doing my duty has always seemed a sacred obligation. (This tendency was also reinforced by the fact that working hard was one of the few actions for which I could receive genuine approval.) It is the case, of course, that such a deep commitment to duty is always more or less specious, and certainly less morally praiseworthy, than it might appear, because it is a commitment based as much on reflex as on reflection. I suspect that precociously responsible children who compensate for their parents' irresponsibility may lack, as I sometimes lack, a useful judiciousness in negotiating a reasonable path between duty and inclination. Adults with childhoods like mine may wind up doing their duty *no matter what*: because they have been trained to do it by fear of the consequences of not doing it, and eventually because they do not want to be like their irresponsible parents who could not cope. At other times they may over react *against* duty, when reasonableness might show another, more modulated, response.

My mother's inability to cope with life gave me no opportunity for learning how to cope either, not if learning how to cope *maturely* means making mistakes, learning from them, and gradually improving one's performance. I coped well, but *immaturely*. That is, I learned what people wanted of me; I learned how to deliver the goods, for the most part, and when I could not deliver the goods I learned how to lay low. But I did not learn how to deal with mistakes or how to learn from them. In my childhood, mistakes led to beatings. Denial of mistakes, therefore, had a practical urgency. As a child I tried to avoid being blamed above anything else. This was the prime directive. If I could avoid being blamed, I could perhaps avoid being beaten. It is the case, of course, that never accepting one's mistakes openly and correcting them or dealing with their consequences, but always, instead, insisting childishly that "I didn't do it" not only turns one into a liar but an evader. As an adult, I had to learn how to learn how to cope reasonably with mistakes and not fall into thoughtless responses straight from my childhood: excessive guilt, excessive correction, excessive denial.

In my childhood, I thought of my guilty record as growing blacker almost every day. In my own mind, I stood convicted of a great many crimes. In the world of fundamentalist theology and practice that my family stumbled around in, God was one of my most frequent accusers. Many if not most forms of pleasure and entertainment other people indulged in were forbidden to us fundamentalists as not just inadvisable or indecorous or questionable, but as sinful and damning. I was raised to believe that "worldly" unbelievers who had not been "saved and sanctified" (technical terms in fundamentalist theology) would go to a "skinny-winged devil's hell" (one of my grandfather's spine-tingling revival phrases thundered from one pulpit after another for fifty years). We actually believed-at least *I* believed; it amazed me in later years to find that even fundamentalists can be cavalier about "sins" that I viewed with deadly earnestness in my childhood-that we would go to hell for dancing, wearing jewelry, swearing, playing cards, smoking, watching movies, drinking alcohol, wearing bobbed hair, wearing

clothes that revealed more of the human body, especially the female body, than was allowed by nineteenth century styles, or participating in other forms of "worldliness."

Believe I did: fervently, piously, naively, tormentedly, and neurotically. I remember one occasion of riding in the family car through a downtown street and passing a movie theater at the same moment that both the entrance doors to the theater lobby *and* the interior doors into the theater itself were simultaneously open, giving me a split second glance at the movie screen as we drove by. Knowing that watching movies was a sin, I was tormented for weeks by the question of whether I had committed a sin by seeing the screen unintentionally, or whether one had to *intend* a sin in order to be guilty of having committed it. I had no one to talk to about these excessively legalistic concerns that were a specialty of fundamentalist theology. I just worried them, like a terrier shaking a dead rat, and they worried me, until they gradually got buried under other, different, more urgent-seeming worries. The overriding truth was that I just could not avoid being sinful. I could not avoid such sinful acts as getting angry, or such sinful thoughts as wondering what the girls I knew looked like without their clothes on.

While my sister participated in the forms of our religion (not that anyone ever offered her a choice), she privately maintained a more skeptical frame of mind than I did—a fact I did not learn about her until years later, a discovery that gave us great mirth as we compared our different versions of childhood religiosity. She was aware even as she was hitting the sawdust trail to the altar where she was expected to pray for forgiveness that it wasn't going to work because she didn't really believe in it. (In my childhood, "sawdust trail" was not the metaphor it has become today. During tent revivals in the days of my childhood, at least in the rural Midwest, coarse sawdust from local mills would be brought in to carpet the grass turf of the tent "floor." The altar at the front was a low scaffold of rough two by fours, the right height for kneeling at while "praying through.")

But my own temperament was both more ardent and credulous than my sister's. When I hit the sawdust trail I was in good earnest. I *loved* God and *wanted* to be good. I thought heaven was the most beautiful idea in existence, a place of peace and security, a place where God kept one *safe*. On the other hand, I found God's omnipresence, his inescapable busybodyness, nearly intolerable, almost maddening. I was taught (and did not question the belief for years) that God watched my every action, that he kept a score sheet on my behavior, and that he knew even my innermost thoughts and non-verbalized impulses. Thus I was denied not only any psychic privacy but I could not even rationalize my lapses from perfect faith because God, who had time while running the universe to think about *me* almost constantly, knew the "real" condition of my heart. He could not be fooled by my rationalizations and would not fudge the score sheet on anyone's behalf, much less on behalf of my own crime-riddled, miserable existence.

But if God was my accuser and scourge, he was also my savior. I do not know how children who are raised in fundamentalist contexts generally stand the stress of living lives layered so heavily with guilt, denial, repression, and a deeply personal sense of sinfulness. I suppose children of different temperaments develop different coping mechanisms. I only know that, for me, the stress of guilt and sinfulness—my personal terror of running foul of God's laws and damning myself to hell—led to a systolic and diastolic rhythm of guilt ("being under conviction") and repentance ("praying through") on the one hand, followed by forgiveness ("being saved") on

the other. "Being saved" was an immense relief; it produced an indescribably light feeling of cleanness and purity. But this feeling was only that—a feeling—with no intellectual or social fiber to give it substance. Social fiber was lacking because the ultimate test of "being saved" was left to individual conscience; no one could help you know. Thus the euphoria of having been forgiven, like all feelings unsupported by ideas or a social context, had the deplorable but inevitable tendency to fade, producing a new systole of growing guilt that would eventually have to be expiated by a repeated diastole of praying through and being saved all over again.



The author as a young boy Being at peace with God—my-savior rather than divided from him as God—my-accuser produced an experience of great headiness and, at the moment of being saved, of incalculable intensity—incalculably intense, at least, for true believers with minds and hearts as susceptible to guilt and rejuvenation as mine were. I recall an occasion when I was about nine or ten hitting the sawdust trail at one of the endlessly repeated tent revivals of my childhood, completely demoralized by my sense of deep sinfulness and knowing that I wanted and needed God's forgiveness more than anything else in the world. On this particular occasion my emotional intensity was more fevered and desperate than ever before, and in the course of praying through I experienced a true psychological oddity, an out-of-the-body experience that I did not expect to have then and know that I will never have again.

As I prayed, I was at first aware of the immediate setting: my own feelings, tears, and words, as well as the moans, prayers, and pats on the back given to me by other people who had come forward to help me "pray through." Suddenly, however, all the noise, commotion, and suffocating emotionalism disappeared. I was no longer *there*. Instead, I saw myself spread-eagled in black space that stretched infinitely in all directions around me. Vertically suspended, with no visible means of support, arms and legs outstretched, I nevertheless saw myself from the outside—illuminated by no specific source of light, yet visible—at the same time that I was aware of myself as the person hanging there. Around my right ankle was a leg iron connected to a chain that stretched in a wavy line across the incalculably vast reaches of black space, and at the end of the chain was an immense iron ball. As I both hung there and watched myself hanging there, a great quiet consumed the universe; all existence and all forms of existence were absolutely still, breathless, frozen, poised. Suddenly a huge bolt of white lightning rent the universe with an overwhelming immensity of sound and sight. The point of this lightening bolt struck the iron circle around my ankle, which exploded into white fragments like the sparks from a cosmic arc welder and set off succeeding explosions as the energy of God's liberating forgiveness traveled outward across the universe through the chain, consuming it link by link until the iron ball at the end exploded in a white light that utterly annihilated it. As I came to, and once again became aware of where I was and of the other people around me, I knew that I was saved with a certainty that I (incorrectly) thought was incorruptible and permanent.

In my adult reflections on these kinds of experiences-of which the one I have recounted here is only the most intense, but not a unique, example-I am struck, as I often am in many of my adult reflections on my childhood, by the *solitariness* of my upbringing. My sister's image of being alone in that doorway wondering where her parents were is right. Where were the adults in our lives who should have been helping us make sense of such experiences? No adults inquired about our feelings on these matters, and no one asked us what we thought or felt or how we interpreted such events. We were alone with whatever resources of mind and scraps of information we picked up from hearing other people talk, whether formally in sermons or informally in conversations, none of which were ever directed at us. I had no idea as a child that my imagery of chains, leg irons, and lightening bolts were conventional images of bondage, oppression, and liberation. I had no idea that such imagery fits within a *tradition* of religious imagery. In my adult years I have often connected my out-of-the-body experience with those lines of Wordsworth's in which he talks about being led on by the feelings "Until, the breath of this corporeal frame / And even the motion of our human blood / Almost suspended, we are laid asleep / In body, and become a living soul"¹, or those lines of Tennyson's in which he recounts a spiritual union with his dead friend, Arthur Henry Hallam:

So word by word and line by line,
The dead man touched me from the past,
And all at once it seemed at last
The living soul was flashed on mine,
And mine in this was wound, and whirled
About empyreal heights of thought,
And came on that which is, and caught
The deep pulsations of the world.²

Yet Wordsworth's and Tennyson's experiences of spiritual heightening are psychologically unlike my own in that theirs are supported not only by ideas which they possess as individuals, but by a tradition of thought of which they are aware. They know they are not alone in experiencing these kinds of events. For me, all such experiences were *sui generis*. I was alone with my conscience and with God. And God was like Milton's terrifying image of a "two-handed engine at the door" [that] Stands ready to smite once, and smite no more."³ On the other hand, if God was most frequently an oppressive accuser and terrifying punisher, he could also be a spectacularly liberating forgiver, striking the chain of guilt from one's existence. But mostly he was an accuser.

God's rival in accusing me of many and varied crimes was my father. I was thoughtless, I was stupid, I was forgetful, I was irresponsible, I was gullible, I was impressionable, I was coddled, I was disloyal, I was expensive, and, perhaps worst of all, I was a Byrum while he was a

Gregory. The Byrums were my mother's side of the family, whom my father viewed as hayseeds, while the Gregorys, in his opinion, were superior to the Byrums-by what comically inappropriate evidence anyone who knew the two families could testify. The Byrums were indeed country people with simple tastes who favored simple pleasures, but what amuses me now is to know that the Gregorys were the same. They too were country people, but during the Great Depression they had moved to town and began to look down on country folk. Nonetheless, country people they were. They had not been gone from the country long enough or far enough to turn into something else, and I have photographs of my father in his youth wearing bib overalls, tending the pigs, and riding farm horses in bare feet. Not exactly a city slicker.

I remember my great-grandfather Cox, my father's grandfather, a small white-haired man who never had anything to say for himself, or to his grandchildren, sitting evening after evening in front of a radio set a big as a Volkswagen listening not to classical music from New York or even to pop music from Evansville but to the Grand Ole Opry from Nashville. Before his religion days, my father played guitar in a country music band, and country music and hymns were the musical forms he knew best. So the difference between us Gregorys and my mother's family, the Byrums, was not that the Gregorys were socially different. They were, however, psychologically different. The Byrums were for the most part happy country folk, relatively unambitious and therefore never bitterly discontented, while the Gregorys were neurotic *anti*-country people, always ambitious and always discontented, who mistook their neuroses as signs of superior social status and emotional sensitivity. For the most part I played the role of an unambitious Byrum, always trying to avoid trouble by working hard or-in a useful but self-destructive strategy of protection-inviting people to laugh at my (assumed) Byrum-like clodhopper style, a style that I could take off and on like a glove-or a shield.

But whether I was just myself or was a scorned Byrum, I knew that I was a lot of trouble and that I wasn't supposed to be any trouble at all. It was also made clear to me-and early on at that-that my job assignment in life was to minimize this defect by costing as little money and requiring as little attention as possible. My father, like many people whose upbringing denies them the opportunity of full human development, could not grant the opportunity of full development to others, even (or perhaps especially) to his children. In ways that I never dreamed then, he already felt inferior to me. People in general liked me more easily than they liked him, for example, so why should he push the son even farther ahead? "What that kid needs is to be brought down a peg or two" seemed to him a reasonable parental view.

My father was afflicted, although *he* knew this only dimly, I now realize-as a child *I* did not realize it at all-by a sense of his own smallness, and he took revenge for this humiliating smallness on objects even smaller and weaker than he. His children were logical targets and available: troublesome agents for whom he had sacrificed a good life in the world of business (a fiction I did not think to challenge until I was grown). It was easy to see us as the embodiment of the otherwise abstract forces that afflicted and undermined his life. He manipulated us with cyclical and cynical doses of affection and affliction, turning us into little emotional toadies, keeping our attention glued to the smallest nuances of his behavior and attitude. This attentiveness from us must have magnified his self-esteem and made him feel powerful. To us, the man who bore the switch, controlled the mother, dispensed the money, and made all the decisions *was* powerful. He never realized, I suppose, how little prepared we were, or how little

ambition we had, any of us, for challenging the power that he must have always felt slipping out of his grasp. Conduct that from an adult perspective I would now call brutal must have been felt by my father as desperate.

My father's physical ascendancy over me ended abruptly during my senior year of high school. It happened in the following way, and I now see that it had everything to do with why I was hustled away from home the moment-literally the day after-my high school graduation. Every afternoon and evening after school, I worked at the local grocery store, Publix, and never finished my evening's work until 10:00 p.m., which means that I rarely got home earlier than 10:30 or 11:00 p.m. Since I was always left on my own anyway, curfews were never a part of my childhood or teen-age life, but on one particular evening my father decided to take umbrage at how late I was staying out after work. He had an instinctive understanding, and had known how to act on this understanding all of my life, that "coming down on me," as Dickens might say of characters like Quilp or Murdstone, in arbitrary and unexpected ways was a highly effective stratagem for keeping me fearful and submissive.

On this particular evening, I was indeed a little later than usual, having gone to a local burger stand to get something to eat before leaving for home, and my father had driven out in his Cadillac, a car that our family finances could not afford, looking for me. We met at an intersection near home, and my father, nudging his car close to mine and lowering his window, said the formulaic words that I long recognized from my childhood as the prelude to a beating: "Marshall Wayne, you get home. I will deal with you there." Out of life-long habit, my heart fell into the old childish reaction of fear and dread. When we arrived home and parked our cars, my father followed me into the house and I saw that he was carrying a cattle whip that he had once acquired on a visit to the stockyards. I sat down and he stood up, assuming the primal posture of ascendancy, and he began to upbraid me for being late, gradually gearing himself up to the high anger that would inevitably lead to his attack on me with the whip.

But something in my heart and mind rebelled. Somewhere in the seismic regions of my soul, tectonic plates of emotion began to move. As I looked at my father's grip on the whip and heard the tumble of his words to which I was not listening, I grew less and less frightened and more and more angry. I suddenly interrupted my father with a low-toned declaration uttered in a voice of dangerous determination: "You'd better not hit me with that whip," I said quietly, and that was all I said: there were no outbursts, no rage, no further declarations, not another word. My father's flow of words stopped as suddenly as if his larynx had magically disappeared from his throat, and he stared at me as if I had suddenly become the Medusa. My mother, who in her typical way was there, but not really present, did not breathe. Both of my parents were more aware of the obvious threat in my words than I was. Then my father turned and left the room. I now realize that my sudden, unexpected, dangerous resistance had not only startled my father to the soles of his boots, but, more significantly, had frightened him. I had outgrown him physically. I was young and strong, and I had just revealed to both of us-to our mutually profound astonishment-that I was no longer cowed. The spell of absolute authority that my father had always cultivated and relied on in his relationship with me was broken. After that moment, I now realize, he could not get me out of the house fast enough.

My sister and I, as children, never saw the weakness behind our father's desperate displays of power. We took his power according to our experience of it: as absolute. Later, as adults, it seemed incredible to me that we were so easily held in thrall to such smallness of spirit and poverty of feeling, but, as with all children, our world was the only world we knew and no one ever suggested that the terms on which it allowed us to exist were negotiable. Quite the contrary: we were told over and over again that the terms of our existence were *non-negotiable*.



The author in second grade

This phenomenon—the limited perspective that children have of their sufferings—is brilliantly expressed in a passage about Charles Dickens from Edmund Wilson's *The Wound and the Bow*, a passage that I first read in graduate school with an amazed sense of significance and recognition. In it, Wilson explains that Dickens' early experience of abandonment by his family—as his parents went off to debtor's prison and he was put to demeaning work in a blacking warehouse at age twelve—had a profound impact upon him all the rest of his life precisely because he had a child's inability either to compare his own condition with that of others or to imagine how to escape his circumstances without the help of the very adults who had abandoned him:

It has been charged by some of Dickens' critics that he indulged himself excessively in self-pity in connection with these hardships of his childhood; it has been pointed out that, after all, he had only worked in the blacking warehouse six months. But one must realize that during those months he was in a state of complete despair. For the adult in desperate straits, it is almost always possible to imagine, if not to contrive, some way out; for the child, from whom love and freedom have inexplicably been taken away, no relief or release can be projected. . . . For an imaginative boy of twelve, six months of despair are quite enough.⁴

The circumstances between Dickens as a child and me as a child are not identical. I was not separated from the adults who should have protected me from life's pains; their closeness was in fact the primary source of my pains. And since I was in my circumstances longer than Dickens was in the warehouse, I was gradually able over the years to compare my situation to those of others and to imagine, although with only partial clarity, a different kind of life for myself. But the sense of being helpless and little in the presence of adults who were all powerful and frequently malevolent, the sense of being abandoned or tormented by the very adults who should protect you, does create indelible impressions. As Dickens said in his fragment of an autobiography, "I never shall forget, I never can forget."⁵

I know now, of course, that among the various species of mistreatment children are subject to, my mistreatment was not nearly as bad as the mistreatments visited on other children. I was not tortured, or literally starved, or beaten so badly that bones were broken or internal organs exploded; some children endure these things. But I did live in fear of what would happen next; I

never knew how bad the physical attacks might get; I did know that I was powerless to evade them; I was beaten, humiliated, and depreciated, publicly as well as in the privacy of home, for minor infractions or as an innocent object of adult frustration; and, in order to protect the dignity and wisdom of my parents, I internalized the standards by which I was mistreated. (That children will sacrifice themselves-blame themselves for things not their fault, believe in their own wickedness-in order to "preserve" the integrity of their parents only underscores how fundamentally necessary to children's existence parents are.) Finally, like the twelve-year old Dickens, I had a child's inability to see how or when things might ever get better.

But this is an adult's perspective. As a child, I was trying neither to forget nor escape. I was completely caught up in a life of weird dynamics and uncertain survival. Neither God nor my father could hold a candle to my own accusations against my own sinfulness, for neither one of them had the concrete sense that I had of just how deeply that sinful nature extended. As the ardent believer, as the perfect encoder who internalized all the religious and family values that I was raised by, I was of course my own worst accuser. Only I approximated God's own understanding of my interior condition and only I knew of some crimes that I had committed, crimes that I knew would have curled the hair of a bald man and rent the veil of the temple all over again right in the middle of the twentieth century.

There were no such crimes, of course; there was only my sense of guilt. The story of how I managed to get past all of this is a different story from "junk-yard ride." My sister never managed to create a different story. She tried to, but for reasons that I do not fully understand, she could never escape our family narrative and create a new narrative of her own, one that liberated her from the story in which she had been a thrall. My sister committed suicide in November 2007. Her husband has shared information with me that he found among my sister's papers and computer files that indicate that she had contemplated her suicide for at least ten years before doing the act itself. My sister came to me for help and advice many times throughout our lives together, and she never came to me for help without getting it, but in this last extremity she never even hinted that she needed the help and advice that she had so often sought before. Clearly, she did not want it. Some stories for some people prove unchangeable. Who among us is wise enough to know why?

I have been luckier than my sister. I am not wise enough to give a complete explanation of why, and, in any event, that part of my story is different from the part I am telling here-but I can hint, briefly, at those desires and influences in my life that I believe have allowed me to create my own story instead of retelling forever the story assigned to me by my parents.

First, I always had the strong desire-from what source I cannot say-to be a good person. Even as conditioned as I was to yield to power as a child, I managed (without knowing quite how) to preserve a corner of my mind as my own, and I wanted to be something different from and better than my parents. I wanted to be morally good, not just legally correct. When I was in grade school, a kind neighbor took me to the library and told me that wherever I lived, there would be a library. I read my way through those Carnegie libraries that dotted the Midwest, and in the books I read I discovered alternative worlds to my own impoverished life. I was an avid reader of stories from the time I first read *Smoky the Crow* all by myself at age six, and I have never ceased to marvel at the way human beings everywhere and in all times employ stories for

that supplemental education about human motives, human types, human experience, and human options that none of us lives long enough to acquire by first-hand experience.

Second, I learned about the transformative power of love. Finding a woman who loved me liberated me to reach for my best self rather than feel that I was hopelessly saddled with the crippled self my parents had foisted off on me. My college sweetheart who became my wife and my best critic, counselor, and loving partner in all things saw in me my best potentialities and dismissed with contempt all the childhood conditioning that had left me with a shaky self-image and a fund of self-confidence as compromised by holes as a hunk of Swiss cheese. I have loved creating with her a home full of light and joy. I also found love in my relationship with my lively, bonny daughters. Their need for me as infants, their willingness to take my own love and return it with no corrupting manipulations of power on either side have been, for me, not only healing but transformative. I never could have managed to create a different story without finding the grace of love in my life.

Third, although I began my education at schools where children went barefoot and ate possum for supper, I was always hungry to learn. My parents did not plan for my education, pay for it, or validate it by showing up for my graduation from college-just as, indeed, they failed to validate my finding love by also not showing up for my wedding-but in exchange for shoveling tons of coal in the boiler room at nights, scrambling forty dozen eggs in the cafeteria in the mornings (in college), and working on railroads and in steel mills (in graduate school), I managed to get a college degree and a University of Chicago Ph.D. It seemed like a bargain. Along the way, I discovered that learning about ideas is like acquiring an immense extended family whose relations are troubled and contradictory but who are always prepared to help you understand or do anything you desire. Within this extended family there are feuds and fights, competing points of view, and varying theories about everything-life, nature, sex, how to spend your money, religion, good and evil, how to find your way around mid-town Manhattan-but the extended family of ideas also offers support for all pursuits of interpretation and meaning, offers content to make understanding more robust and vivid, and offers clues about what values to embrace and reject on the journey to creating a life that is intellectually perspicuous, socially responsible, personally enriched, and morally defensible.

Thus, when I say that I managed to write myself a different story than the one initially assigned to me, I do not mean to say that I created that alternative story out of nothing. I merely mean to say that I did get a different story underway and that I have stuck with it ever since. I have managed to claim a life with the joys in it of marriage to a wonderful and talented woman, to claim a life that had in it the birth of wonderful and talented daughters, to claim a life that had in it the shared construction of one home and two careers, to claim a life that has included the teaching of thousands of receptive students and the companionship of many enriching friends. Next to my wife and children, I have always loved teaching best. As an adult I have also endured some of the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune that human beings are all vulnerable to-the loss of a child, the loss of loved ones, and the sicknesses and physical breakdowns that call for mind-clouding medicines and difficult-to-recover-from surgeries-but, as I have already said, that is a different story, one that is not yet over but is as challenging and rewarding as any I could imagine in the best book ever written.

So what is the purpose and the effect of telling such stories as my "junk-yard ride"? If I truly believe that desire, love, ideas, and stories can help anyone fashion his or her own story rather than remain stuck in some story that sells the protagonist short, or, worst, tries to make her a tragic victim when what she really wants is a robust life, this only explains the protagonist's aims. It doesn't explain a potential reader's or listener's interests. Why should anyone care? Why does anyone else's story matter except to the teller? Here, in conclusion, is my attempt to answer this final question.

I believe that human beings are interested in each other's stories because we cannot triangulate our own position on the ocean of potentialities without knowing what courses are being tracked by others. As we read or listen to others' stories we check out the human condition and compare the choices and accidents of our lives with the choices and accidents of other people's lives. Such comparisons show us not only the range of human types, but show us how other people feel, what they think, how they react, and what they want. Learning about the lives of others offers a fundamental education in both human nature and in the human condition.

We are especially interested in each other's stories, I think, if those stories include vivid or extreme components of good or bad luck. Stories about other people's good luck hold out the possibility that good luck may come to us as well. Stories about people's troubles are even more instructive, perhaps, because good luck comes only to some of us but none of us avoids trouble. We all experience troubles that are sometimes formidable and that, in their worst forms, may be overwhelming. What we look for in the stories of survivors are clues about how we ourselves may survive. What may sometimes look like a voyeuristic or an entertainment motive in reading stories about other people's troubles is really an educational motive. We want to learn. We need to learn. "If ever this kind of trouble or difficulty comes to me," we think, "the story of X may help me cope with it."

Thus when we hear about someone rescued from a desert island after a long period of being grieved by loved ones, or about the family who lost three sons in a war, or about the paralyzed woman who paints Christmas cards by holding a paint brush in her teeth, or about the hunters trapped in a Rocky Mountain blizzard for three weeks survived by eating the flesh of one of their dead companions, we sit up and pay attention. We want to hear the story. We know that trouble and occasionally even catastrophe are the prices of staying alive. Sitting in on others' stories educates us about the qualities we might need, the strategies we might employ, the attitudes that we might draw on, the values we might follow, in order to survive.

On the other hand, the stories of people who have achieved great good luck or success give us a vicarious thrill of hope and anticipation. Even if we have no realistic hopes of ever being successful in the way that Angelina Jolie or Donald Trump or Tiger Woods are successful, we experience a thrill of vicarious enjoyment anyway. Extremes of luck or skill or riches or fame interest us-"how did Laurence Olivier or Martha Graham or Henry Ford or Toni Morrison or Michael Jordan get so far beyond the ordinary?"-and the way these people, despite their distance from us in some ways, nevertheless do and feel some things just like us: "President Obama puts his pants on one leg at a time just like I do." Fictions give us an even wider range of models and examples. As we participate imaginatively in Lear's anguish, Esther Summerson's goodness,

Huck Finn's moral growth, or Harry Potter's courage, we see pieces of ourselves that we might develop, explore, or fulfill.

While the listeners or readers of stories about trouble and success have their motives, so do the tellers, who seem motivated by the fundamental desire for companionship. Even the simplest response-"Ah, so that's how it was for you"-can be a profound form of companionship. Whether that initial recognition gets followed by "that's terrible," or "how could they," or "aren't you lucky to have survived," or "boy, I wish I could have such luck," is less important than the human sharing that occurs when one's experience gets recognized by an interested reader or listener. Many writers tend to be inarticulate and sometimes reclusive in their everyday lives. They lack the first-hand ability to tell their stories vividly, compellingly, and emphatically, but they achieve in the developed form of their written tales a kind of companionship that we all desire but that only good storytellers realize fully.

In any event, storytellers worry less about whether they are hated or loved for their stories than about whether they are heard. Sharing stories of trouble, survival, and success brings tellers and listeners alike around the primeval campfire of human companionship. Human beings are so fundamentally social that we feel we *must* be heard. Not to be heard is to live in solitary confinement. We have little existence apart from the social nexus in which we share our stories. Even those who choose a solitary form of life carry in their heads the stories of others' lives that they acquired before they left society, and they usually carry books and other forms of human sharing with them into their isolation. The companionability of stories is no less important to those societies that have only oral rather than written stories, for stories educate and bond whether they are heard or read.

Much of my story, as you have seen, is a story of survival from childhood troubles and traumas. Childhood suffering is a common event in human affairs and a common theme of discussion in today's society, but, despite its commonness, abuse is never a theme or a discussion topic to children. To them, it is a totally engrossing reality. Intellectualizing about it is not an option or an issue; the issue is survival. But my story is not one of abuse and survival merely. If I began life as an unlucky child, I have lived it as an adult blessed with more good luck than I could ever make a convincing argument for having deserved. As someone who simply wants his story heard, I have told my story neither to construct justification, acquire love, fend off contempt, nor purchase any other particular response, but just to say it. If my story meets other people's need to understand their own troubles more clearly, so much the better. But my story is not a tool with a specific use the way a crescent wrench has a specific purpose. No reader is required to *use* a story at all. The teller of a story, especially if it is his or her own story, tells it to get it told, not because he or she can know in advance what readers will make of it. Since the only thing any of us owns outright, perhaps, is our own story, offering that story is tantamount to offering ourselves for companionship of the most basic kind. I tell, you listen, and if I am lucky I hear you say, "Ah, so that's how it was with you."

Footnotes

1. William Wordsworth. "Lines Composed Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour, July 13, 1798." 1798. Reprinted in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, eds. Stephen Greenblatt, M. H. Abrams, Jack Stillinger, and Deidre Shauna Lynch, 8th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006): 258-62.
2. Alfred, Lord Tennyson. "In Memoriam A. H. H." 1850. Reprinted in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, eds. Stephen Greenblatt, M. H. Abrams, Carol T. Christ, and Catherine Robson, 8th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006): 1138-1188.
3. John Milton. "Lycidas." 1638. Reprinted in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, eds. Stephen Greenblatt, M. H. Abrams, George M. Logan, Barbara K. Lawalski, and Katharine Eisaman Maus, 8th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006): 1805-1811.
4. Edmund Wilson. *The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature*. New York: Oxford U. P., 1965.
5. Charles Dickens. Reprinted in Edmund Wilson. *The Wound and the Bow: Seven Studies in Literature*. New York: Oxford U. P., 1965.