


Fighting Against Forgetting: Remembering the Places Where My Relationship With My Father Came Into Being

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Abstract

When cancer took my dad's last breath, I was left with the fear that *all* the dark memories of our relationship might crowd out and overshadow *some* of my delightful son–father memories. Haunted by the fear of forgetting *all* those “good” memories, focusing on where they were created, I write into being *some* of the beautiful moments I want to preserve. Providing examples from my work of memory, the purpose is to show that we do not need to start with dark backgrounds before brighter futures can emerge. What happens when only mundane, beautiful memories are preserved is also considered.

Keywords

son–father relations, memory-work, beautiful autoethnography, death, loss

On the nineteenth day in November, two thousand fourteen, cancer took my dad's last breath. In her (1996) book, *The Vulnerable Observer*, Behar writes, “Death has something about it—One is always left with something.” Amid the *clunky intimacy* (Anonymous, 2015), I grew up with, reflecting on the struggles I had connecting with my dad, throughout the misery, confusion, anguish, guilt, and sorrow brought on by his death; one *thing* I was left with was the fear that if I think too deeply about the dark aspects of our relational past—constantly failing to connect and missing each other (Adams, 2012b) as often as we did, then I might somehow vitiate or permanently write over *some* of my memories of the delightful aspects about our relationship. What do I remember if I put to one side as many of the memories as possible (a) where we failed to share our worlds together and (b) where there was a non-meeting of minds (Maclaren, 2014)? What memories am I left with? Ellis writes, “Learning about yourself is justification enough for doing a study” (in Berry, 2008, p. 156). Through negotiating this intense situation (autoethnography as process) then, might I create a new perspective (autoethnography as product) on my personal experience (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011); improving and bettering my understanding of our relationship?

Haunted by fear of forgetting (Pelias, 2012) *all* the delightful aspects of our son–father relationship, in this performative autoethnography (Spry, 2001), I seek to re-write my narrative inheritance by zooming in on, and writing *some* of those joyful aspects into being (Adams, 2012a; Wyatt & Adams, 2012). Focusing on the “brighter” memories, especially of the places where those positive son–father memories were created, my purpose is to re-create these spaces so I can take *stock* of (Pelias, 2012) and *preserve* (Wyatt &

Adams, 2012) my relationship with my father. My story is a story among many but a story about issues that matter to a community of scholars participating in relational and scholarly contexts (Pelias, 2005): namely, of fatherhood and embodied (dis)connections in son–father relations (e.g., Anonymous, 2015; Pelias, 2012; Poulos, 2012; Sparkes, 2012).

Some memories of my relationship with my dad start good and end up bad and vice versa (Sparkes, 2012). But, must we always start by concentrating on the “deep, dark background” (Poulos, 2012) before a brighter story can emerge? Recalling *bits and pieces* of memories (Sparkes, 2012), I proceed by recollecting where and who my dad was when he was at his best. Structured through *fragments* (Pelias, 2012), as I write, issues of memory, guilt, and loss pervade the text. Through this writing, a new framing is achieved to honor my dad for who he *is* so I can come to know him in a new way (Poulos, 2012). Perhaps when I become a father, one day I will share these memories with my own son(s) and/or daughter(s).

This Paper Is

An autoethnographic performance

Tracing my quest to *preserve* (Wyatt & Adams, 2012) my relationship with my dad.

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An *archiving* (Pelias, 2012) of son–father place memories.

A chronicle of “beautiful moments” (Dealy, 2014, p. 29) I stumbled into, which

Like in Poulos (2012), always seem to have happened in the kitchen, but sometimes,

In the garden, my bedroom or the corner of a sitting room too.

Inspired by the beautiful autoethnographic work by Chawla (2013), Bolen (2014), and Dealy (2014), my aim here is to focus on the *good* memories. By engaging in a hybrid type of “grief work” and “griefwork,” that is, grieving done both alone and grieving shared and negotiated among supportive others (Letherby & Davidson, 2015, p. 348), my “work” involves *pulling forward vivid recollections* (Dealy, 2014, p. 22) of the places in which my *fond* (Dealy, 2014, p. 19) son–father memories were created. The story is also therefore a story from the “work of memory” (Bochner, 2012, p. 172). Can the crafting of a new narrative inheritance for myself and my future son(s)/daughter(s) be born out of an unashamedly, unapologetic, direct sketching of a positive *best dad* portrait based on memories of beautiful moments called forward through performance writing?

Stumbling into relating with his own father, Poulos (2012) notes that the troubled relations between fathers and sons constitute an archetypal form. Like many others, I am sure my father’s personal history is partially caught up in a complex multigenerational web of anger, strained-heavy silence, dark threat, physical intimidation, lost opportunity, alcoholism, depression, trapped emotion, communicative rigidity, overactive face-work, harsh critical judgment of others, and pain (adapted from Poulos). I do not want to entirely ignore or deny that there might have been a deep, dark background to my relationship with my father. But I do not wish to examine possibilities for these dark folds here. This is not the place for questioning the absence or presence of abusive, depressive, and repressive behavioral patterns which haunted(?) his fathering. I will address these patterns in another project. Rather, instead of writing *about* my father in the past, I seek to write *from* the past (Bochner & Ellis, 2016) to remember the places where the connective moments and delightful aspects of my relationship with him came into being. Where and who was my dad when he was at his best? These are some of my brighter son–father place memories I would like to preserve:

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Kirkby Sports Centre, Kirkby, Liverpool, England. It is sports day. One of only a handful throughout my school years that my dad could make it to. He was always working. Shift work. Bloody *shifts*. And when he wasn’t “working,” well, he was still working: doing “overtime.” I had the usual pre-race nerves and butterflies in my stomach. I had been in the toilet at least five times in just twenty minutes.

I spotted him among the other parents, making his way toward the spectator stand. Jumping over classmates and fellow competitors, I made my way down the stand to greet him. “Dad! You made it!”

“Here Son!” he said, as he bent over, whispering into my ear. “Put that in your pocket.”

He had never done anything like this before at any of the other races he had been to see me race at. It felt special. He slipped a brown paper bag containing something hard and cold into my pocket, and then fixed my arm in place to hide whatever it was. “Now don’t let anybody see . . .” he whispered. “About 10 or 15 minutes before your race, have some of this” he continued. Of what? I thought to myself.

My time had come: “BOYS COMPETING IN THE UNDER ELEVENS 100M SPRINT, YOUR RACE IS UP NEXT. WILL YOU PLEASE MAKE YOUR WAY TO THE TRACKSIDE.”

But where could I do what he said *without anybody seeing* . . . ? I know. I paid yet another visit to the toilet. I found an empty cubicle. I locked the door behind me, checking that nobody was peering over, and I took the bag out of my pocket. “Wow! What’s this?!” I wondered. A plastic bottle . . . “Super-fuel-go-fast-energy-juice” I remember thinking. I took three or four gulps, tightened the lid, and thought to myself: I bet none of the other boys have had *their* Dad bring them a bottle of the same dark orange fizzy stuff!

Maybe somebody else’s Dad *did* bring them some of the orange stuff? (It was probably only Lucozade)

I placed second in that race

Instead of only three or four,

Maybe I should have taken five or six gulps . . .

**

The kitchen in the house I grew up in, Kirkby. Dad is on days, which means he finishes work at 4:00 p.m. and arrives home soon thereafter. I usually get in from school around ten-to-four.

From inside my bedroom, I hear his car pull in to the drive way and the car door slam shut. No sooner is he through the front door, into the kitchen, tool bag down, kettle on; and I am fishing around in his bag, looking for goodies, or one of his leftover butties.

Dutifully, my Mum would make Dad’s butties (on four rounds of bread) the night before. Tongue, corned beef, or luncheon meat; these were his favorites. From time to time, and for a treat, Mum would buy proper meat: silverside of beef with salt and cracked black pepper.

Made with love the previous day and put in the fridge overnight. Left inside his locker for part of the day, absorbing the salty air of Seaforth Docks, in Liverpool, and kept in his tool bag to absorb the distinctive flavors of diesel and motor oil, *all day*; that he regularly leaves half, or if I am lucky, a whole butty to bring home for me to snack on when

I get back from school, I know he thinks of me much more than he lets on . . .

Diesel infused butty-love

I would give anything to eat another one of his squashed butties

And the more squashed, the better!

I would love to know that he is still thinking of me.

Just one more time . . .

**

My bedroom, Kirkby. It is winter. I am just home from school. I go straight to my room. I put the big light on. I put my things away. I tidy my room. I Hoover the carpet. I like a clean, tidy room. I tend to be more productive when it's that way—I can concentrate better. I put my desk light on. I get my school books out. I light an incense stick. I turn the big light off. I sit at my desk. I make a start on my homework. Later, I stop for dinner. I wolf it down. I go back to my desk, and the stage is set: I set out to finish the work I started.

About forty-five minutes later, my Dad knocks on the door. He waits to be invited in: "Oh great! Come in," I command. Navigating through the darkness as he makes his way toward my desk where I am seated. With only a desk light to guide his way, with his hand held out, he offers, "A cup of tea Son . . . ?" I continue reading and writing. Standing there, his frame fills what empty space there is in my room. While pointing at the coaster on the corner of my desk, placed at a safe distance—away from the books, without looking up, "Just pop it there" I instruct. "Great. Thanks Dad." He sets my favorite cup down. A cup of boiling hot, freshly brewed tea with the perfect amount of milk. He turns around. He leaves the room

I wish I had taken more time to share with him what I was reading

I wish I had asked him more questions about where he did his homework

I wish I had shared with him what I was thinking or trying to learn

I wish I had looked up to say "Thanks Dad"

The cottage where I live, Fliskmillan, Newburgh, Cupar, Fife, Scotland. I live at the bottom of a very steep hill in prime farming territory, overlooking the River Tay, in North Fife. My Dad loved it here. He came to visit twice. On both occasions, as soon as he got out of the car, I reminded him, just as we had agreed on the telephone before his arrival:

This is a non-smoking house. All smoking is to be done outside. And not right outside the front, or back door. Go around the side of the house where there are no windows with air vents!

During his second visit, I remember asking, "Dad, how do you find it up here, in Scotland?" Thinking about it now, speaking to him like that, the way I did, I wonder why he even bothered visiting me . . . ?!

"Well, it's ideal isn't it . . . ?!"

"What do you like about it?" I quizzed.

"I love the sound of the wind rustling through the trees. It's like music! It's strong! It doesn't sound like that in Kirkby."

Maybe I didn't make him feel as welcome as I could have

Perhaps I didn't need to say it like I did

Next time I . . .

Inside > Out

When we find ourselves asking about an intriguing experience, we also try to connect with others who have had, and have written about, similar experiences. In connecting with others, we move from what is happening *inside* our bodies, hearts, minds, and lives and *out* into what is happening in culture. Indeed, we are always in culture and culture is always in us, but a new awareness around an experience encourages us to connect our selves and others' selves in tangible and meaningful ways. (Adams, Holman Jones, & Ellis, 2015, p. 70, emphasis in original)

Today is the twentieth day in May. It is two thousand sixteen. It is sixteen months since my dad passed away. During this time, using techniques of "text spinning and collaging" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 72) to craft this performative writing, often *nestled* in stories (Wyatt, Gale, Russell, Pelias, & Spry, 2011, p. 264, emphasis added) written by others who have had similar experiences, I have lost and found myself. Similarly, employing the technique of creating found and parallel poetry/stories for use here and in future projects, by carrying with me other men's stories about their fathers and folding in others' fathers too (Wyatt, 2008), I have re-lost, re-found, and re-lost myself anew. Writing about and around these experiences, feelings, and haunting memories, I have trusted and immersed myself within the writing *process* (Adams et al., 2015). To now move *out* into what is happening in culture, I ask, what might all this mean for the ethnographic world around and beyond my immediate experience?

From my dad's, to mine, to my readers' flesh and through the "flesh to flesh scholarship" (Spry, 2001, p. 726) where writer(s) / reader(s) "connect . . . within a scholarly community and locate themselves as individuals" (Pelias, 2005, p. 420); echoing the words of Ellis and Adams (2015, p. 271) my writing is an attempt at providing *companionship, cultivating hope*, and forging a space for discussion of matters that *matter*. The matter of worrying, that "bad" memories might eventually vitiate the fond memories, has mattered a great deal in my story and the other stories I have thought through and with. I hope that my performative writing provides a space where others might see themselves, evoking identification and empathic response (Pelias, 2005). Wyatt et al. (2011) observe how it

can “get cold standing there if someone doesn’t move closer” (p. 273). My goal here is to make life better and offer companionship to those who feel troubled by the need to start with the “deep, dark background” before a “brighter story can emerge” (borrowed from Poulos, 2012, p. 199). Some people, like Auster (1982), have “A feeling that if I am to understand anything, I must penetrate this image of darkness, that I must enter the absolute darkness of earth” (p. 34) and they scintillatingly show how they achieve in doing so. However, like me, and perhaps like Auster himself, not everybody is capable of starting there. Through this “I-witness,” others might be inspired to strive to understand and cope with their own struggles, eventually feeling better equipped for living (Adams, 2012a, p. 191) and perhaps able to attempt to face and penetrate the darkness.

Writing about her own loss and mourning the sudden death of her son, Yvonne Sliep (2012) notes, “There is no conclusion to this journey, it will be part of me as long as I live” (p. 83). With Sliep (2012), I am not saying that my journey through fighting against forgetting provides a way that “can now become a map for others to follow” (p. 62). As a potential space of recognition and resonance, my writing performance, about the places out there and of the self, reveals a place of discovery where tensions are felt and uncovered (Pelias, 2005). Writing in fragments and in bits and pieces, as I have done here, I am crafting a paper that “leaps and jumps and weeps” (Wyatt, 2008, p. 954) in an “attempt at flight not travel” (p.66). I have *flown* over my clunky intimacy experienced with my dad, choosing to suspend my examination of the times we missed each other. Nestled in this safe space, from *here*, I feel more settled and confident to perhaps travel *there* in my next writing project. Maybe. Perhaps. Writing about memory as work, Bochner and Ellis (2016) observe, “Memory is also a destination, a place we inhabit or revisit in order to question and reflect on this meaning of the past” (p. 252). Maybe, like Sliep (2012), when I get there, perhaps I will be able to contribute to the understanding of mourning as social phenomena. More specifically, to borrow her words, maybe I will seek the

**glimpses of connection
that increase
our being
[hoping that]
I fall**

towards us (Sliep, 2012, p. 73, emphasis in original).

Conclusion? (Sliep, 2012)

Witnessing my decision to “work” through the darker secrets in a future textual/emotional space, it is hoped that my autoethnography validates and inspires others to take stock and preserve as many of their own good son–father place memories as possible. By rescuing the *fond* memories through performing a type of “connective work” (Dealy,

2014, p. 29), my autoethnography of delightful memories provides agency and visibility for the often under-represented and unacknowledged less traumatic and mundane experiences (Dealy, 2014, p. 20) that define son–father relationships. In a future here-and-now, with fumbling immanent writing, w/here the writing becomes porous and entangled (Guttorm, 2016); stammering (Wyatt, 2008), stumbling (Adams, 2012b), and seeking the joys of autoethnography (Adams, 2012a), I intend to write through and with and remain inside my writing and lose myself (Berry, 2008) in the complexity, pain, confusion, anger, and uncertainty of loss and the darkness I have missed in this fly-over. Wandering and wondering (Guttorm, 2016) through text spinning, collaging, using found poetry and parallel stories (e.g. Maclaren, 2014; Tahhan, 2013), I wonder if I can assemble and write into being—always becoming—new son–father connections (Wyatt & Adams, 2012). Having preserved some of the “good” bits, I now feel more confident and ready to dwell in the “bad” bits but like Dealy (2014), I don’t want to write a story about hating my dad, and I don’t want to write *against* or to *contest* the past (Bochner, 2012). Rather, with Bochner (2012), I accept that writing about the past cannot change it, so I want to write to acknowledge, accept, and to better live *with* it.

After remembering, then, the mundane moments with my dad when he was at his best, what am I left with? While these beautiful moments have been preserved, a darkness cast by the shadows that remain lives on inside me. Walking with me, hand-in-hand, this darkness is an uninhabited place—an unwritten narrative truth (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). My memory of the “good” moments is my memory of them *now*. But my memory-work isn’t done . . . there is more *story-making work* (Bochner & Ellis, 2016, p. 252) left still to do. “Thinking and writing as lingering and becoming . . . Just fumbling and becoming and being open for the ‘new’ . . .” (Guttorm, 2016, p. 355), stories about *then* in the past are yet to be made. What will be my memory of the “good” moments *then* in the future? To “squirm away, just think aloud” and not to write against “bad” moments from the past “but ask and fumble” (Guttorm, 2016, p. 355): will the more traumatic memories of what I knew *then* in the past generate emotion, good or bad, toward each other (Dealy, 2014, p. 20)? Will the memory-work I do there, in a moving future here-and-now, cast even brighter shadows on the memory-work I’ve already done here?

“The lives of fathers and sons are linked together, for better or worse, in emotional terms” (Pirkanen, 2015, p. 395), these emotions are “always temporal, changing, and in flux” because the son–father relationship in problem situations is “dynamic and uneven” (p. 399). Writing through “think-feelsensing” (Guttorm, 2016, p. 357), when I get there, I wonder if I can create new ways to bond, remember, and (re)connect, coming to know “new” possibilities, touching on matters that also matter to other writers within the

community of flesh-to-flesh scholarship. For us, I hope I can, but for now, these are my memories. "All I have left are my memories" (Letherby & Davidson, 2015, p. 354). "What is written here is what I have" (Pelias, 2012, p. 148). What I have will be enlarged when I get there.

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