

Wittgenstein's Tigers: Lessons on Faith and Humor

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I don't want to achieve immortality through my work.
I want to achieve it through not dying.

—WOODY ALLEN

Several years ago a client of mine who knew something about my own experience found out his father had a terminal illness. In our next session, he expressed his fear that he wouldn't be able to muster the emotional resources he needed to face this grievous loss and be there for his father. "What's the most important quality a person must possess to make it through something like this?" he asked. I didn't hesitate. "A sense of humor."

A survivor of the Holocaust, when asked what he and others did when they first arrived at the death camps said, "We told jokes." Having experienced a trauma unimaginable by most, these men and women taught us that it is possible to suffer and doubt for a lifetime yet not lose the art of laughter.

If you can find the humor in something, you can survive it.

Socrates Meets The Sopranos

One day my father remarked to his hero, the philosopher Martin Buber, that Freud is reported to have answered a question concerning the meaning of life by saying, work and love. Buber laughed and said this was good, but not complete. He would say: work, love, faith, and humor.

This sort of badinage is not likely to uncover the meaning of life but the terms, "work, love, faith, and humor," do go a long way toward describing what was needed to sustain a relationship with my father. One crucial omission from this list is courage—and when trying to appreciate what it took to survive my father's dying, courage had a cast that was particularly Jewish. Every tragedy we experienced seemed a test of our faith and a challenge to redemptive action.

During one of his stays at the hospital, Dad and I planned the first of several father-son vacations to the Jersey shore. At the time, the New Jersey

coastline was not the first destination you would think of heading off to if you were a person with a compromised immune system. Mine was healthy and in good working order—and I had my reservations. This was just around the period that all the “red bag” trash receptacles containing used syringes and other medical waste kept washing up on shore.

Because of the increased risk of infection, Dad was frequently under doctors’ orders to stay out of the water, which, as he put it, was a real downer. Dad loved swimming, but even when grounded he didn’t get depressed as he could still engage in the other activities he was passionate about—running and skiing.

I loved watching him take up his lumbering gait as he headed down the beach in a slow jog, his feet sounding like bass drums pounding the old planks that lined the boardwalk. He had an endless supply of energy and a dogged determination to finish the race. He did not want to die a sick and helpless man and, as a result, refused to surrender to the aches and pains of his tired and battered body. If the doctors told him he couldn’t swim, he’d ski. If he couldn’t ski, he’d run. If he couldn’t run, he’d walk.

We stayed at an old bed and breakfast in Spring Lake with views of the ocean and lots of nooks and crannies to sit in and enjoy a hot or cold drink while getting lost in a good book. Unfortunately, there wasn’t going to be much leisure reading for me on this trip. I had just started my dissertation, a huge undertaking which eventually became my first book. In the evenings, while I toiled away writing, Dad busied himself playing games of chance inside one of Atlantic City’s palatial casinos.

These trips created many lasting memories but they didn’t make miracles. Rather, given our history, the miracle was that we were able to make them happen at all. Even though he was full of the best intentions, Dad was still capable of lashing out in crazy unpredictable ways that seemed lifted straight from the pages of an Augustine Burroughs story. After fourteen years in Al-Anon and nine more in therapy, it was still all I could do not to become reactive.

One morning after informing my father that I was going to go to the gym before breakfast I watched him try his hardest not to get agitated. He was failing wonderfully.

“Why don’t you work out after we eat?” Dad asked, innocently enough.

“Because I want to exercise before breakfast. If you need to eat sooner you go ahead. I’ll catch up to you later and we can go to the beach,” I said.

I worried Dad might sense that I was trying too hard to sound reasonable and feel patronized.

“I don’t feel like eating alone. It’s depressing,” he said in a sullen tone.

“Well, then wait. I won’t be long,” I responded, trying to placate him.

“Look, you know how I feel about eating late and this is the kind of place that makes all the food at one time. If we wait the food is going to get cold. Why didn’t you get up earlier if you knew you wanted to write and work out before breakfast?!”

His voice had the same high-pitched edge and forced restraint he used when talking to our mother when I was a child—like an acerbic opera singer trying to hit a high C. It was the kind of sound that, when sustained over time, shatters dishes.

I was starting to strategize my next move when, without warning, Dad pulled out a syringe and, with the same nonchalance he might use to adjust the waist-band of his boxer shorts, injected himself in the thigh with Procrit. Dad looked no more alarmed than he would if he were applying Icy-Hot to his knees before going for a run.

I was in shock. Suddenly, I realized this conversation was ending. One day very soon we wouldn’t be fighting like this. “You let me have first dibs on the sports section and I’ll work out before lunch,” I said as we headed down to breakfast.

Over breakfast, we talked about the killing he made at the blackjack table the night before (or so he said) and the progress of my latest chapter. Dad read what I wrote the previous day and returned it to me, his comments and suggestions penned across the page in his barely legible scrawl. He was my toughest critic and my biggest fan.

Philosophy As Therapy

At my father’s memorial service one of his students said that her older sister told her, “When you get to Princeton you have to take a course with Mal Diamond. Professor Diamond will crawl up the walls if it helps to make his point.” During his forty-year career of teaching, Austrian-born philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein was responsible for more claw marks on the walls of my father’s classrooms than any other thinker he taught.

A son who has just received his Ph.D. tells his Jewish mother his

great news, “Ma, I’ve just become a doctor of philosophy!” His mother replies, “That’s wonderful! So tell me, what kind of disease is philosophy?” Wittgenstein would approve of this story as he viewed philosophy as sick and in need of treatment. He intended his grammatical and philosophical investigations as a kind of therapy.

Talking philosophy with my father wasn’t good therapy for me. In fact, it didn’t resemble anything even remotely therapeutic. Engaging him in a conversation about philosophy—preparing for it, engaging in it, decompressing from it—was more like my run with him to the store for ketchup. Same rhythm. Same out-of-body-like feelings of disassociation. Same gratitude for arriving (sort of) in one piece (sort of). Same wondering whether there’s any adults in the room.

Nevertheless, those of us who forget history are able to enjoy it more when we repeat it. So it was with great enthusiasm, on one of our walks along the board walk at Spring Lake, that I asked my father if the particular way I was employing Wittgenstein’s ideas in my dissertation was even remotely close to anything the great philosopher intended.

After I posed the question, I held my breath and waited for his answer. Dad didn’t need that much time. My eyes began glazing over and my head started hurting as my father, who was just starting to rev up, proceeded to set me straight.

“Oh, I think I get it now, Dad,” I said cutting him off and launching into an explanation of my own. “Is that it, Dad?” I asked when I’d finished.

“No, that’s not quite it,” my father responded, trying to disguise his impatience. “Listen,” he said, visibly annoyed by the interruption and readying himself to launch into a lecture I’d attended many times before and simply called: “explaining complex philosophical concepts to ungrateful son without the educational background to understand what the hell I’m talking about.” But before continuing his tutorial he did a double take. And then he raised one eyebrow and, with a look of disbelief and amazement, said, “Actually, that’s exactly it!”

I was dumbfounded. My astonishment quickly gave way to jubilation. It’s hard to imagine a philosopher like Wittgenstein, or even one of lesser stature, engaging in the sort of celebration pro football players perform in the end zone after scoring a touchdown, and yet, somehow, dancing backwards in the sand in front of where my father was standing with my hands held over my head shouting “yes, Yes, YES!” felt very...well...very right.

When I dropped to my knees, looked up at the sky and began beating my chest in the fashion of a European soccer player after scoring a goal, the expression of amused surprise on my father's face turned to one of exasperation and anger. "Come on, Dad," I chided, in the most consoling tone I could muster, "I've been waiting my whole life for this day to come. This is my Oedipal moment of truth!" "I know," he responded in his most nebbish "dear old dad" voice, "That's the problem; it's mine too."

Dad had a knack for taking moments like this—infused with the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat—and making them more poignant. And making them more about him as well, I suppose. In my father's world, celebration never crowded out mourning and mourning was always an opportunity to celebrate. This particular exchange on the beach marked the beginning of a new intellectual bond between us, one we maintained right up until (and beyond) his death.

For me, our conversation along the shore and the reconciliation it engendered was about my coming to terms with a subject my father had always been an authority on and the way he used it to wield a certain kind of power over my life. More importantly, it was an acknowledgement of the ways both my parents had contributed to my development and the person I was becoming. Growing up, this type of perspective had been hard to come by. Moving closer to my father and his interests, was, developmentally speaking, no easy task to accomplish. And, because of his violent temperament, it was often a dangerous one. Like trying to cuddle up with a *tyrannosaurus rex* who loves you a lot (sort of).

It was during times like these that our humor served us most. Laughter helped Dad and me create a safe space where we could use our creative imaginations to, borrowing analyst Christopher Bollas' term, "crack up" the seemingly fixed stories and immovable objects in our relationship and replace them with more affirming and less destructive ones.

What was noteworthy about that particular conversation with my father at Spring Lake—and all the time we spent together at the shore—was the way it conspired to change my perception of him. No, it was more than that. This exchange didn't just change my perception of my father or my father's perception of me; it changed my perception of my father's perception of me. It changed how we chose to be together in the present, how we related to large parts of our past and how we planned to be in our future.

Freud talked of children grappling with Oedipal experience somewhere between the ages of three and five, but speaking for myself (a pretty typi-

cal Jewish son) I see completion of this developmental task as taking place somewhere between the ages of thirty and fifty. While every son's experience may differ and my math may be a little fuzzy, my point is that this dance of intimacy between child and parent—with its moves of intense closeness, extreme distance, and everything in between—continues throughout the life cycle.

The relational aspects of these developments are, as so many feminist writers, thinkers and therapists remind us, what Freud missed with his one-way accounts of therapy and love. It doesn't work that way. Sometimes I move others. Sometimes another moves me. It's a dynamic process. Oedipal love is always a two way street. Whether both parties are blinded by it or can plainly see it, the two are bound together by fate.

Dad found his own way of letting me in on that little secret and sharing how much my moving closer to his world meant to him. Now that I'm a father myself, I realize what a humble and vulnerable position that was for him (or any parent) to be in. This kind of give and take, no matter how late in life we came by it, was a precious gift for both of us.

Anything We Love Can Be Saved

How we got there remains somewhat of a mystery to me. Sometimes a solution is so obvious that we cannot see it, even though it is right before our eyes. According to my father's mentor and nemesis, Wittgenstein, what we need in those moments is to learn to assemble what "already lies open to view."

Maybe, without fully understanding it, this is exactly what I did. To cure my haunting sense of loss and bridge my father's world and mine, I did not reach so much for deep analysis or subtle explanations of what was happening to us. Instead, I turned to something much more mundane, and much more open to view.

I went shopping for CDs.

At the time of my "classic rock attack," I hadn't bought any new music since my first son Julian was born five years earlier. Consequently, I had no trouble rationalizing a hundred-dollar shopping spree at my local music store. When I came home and began taking my purchases out of the bag I suddenly realized that I'd brought home all the albums my father and I used to play together. We listened to them for hours sitting on the living room floors of his apartments he lived in following my parents' divorce; the ones

on University Place and later on Bayard Lane.

It was hard driving music that pushed thoughts of anything but the beat from your mind: The Rolling Stones, “Sticky Fingers” and “Let It Bleed”; Traffic, “The Low Spark Of High Heeled Boys”; The Beatles, “Magical Mystery Tour” and “Let It Be”; Cream, “Disraeli Gears”; Joe Cocker, “With A Little Help From My Friends”; The Doors, “Strange Days”; Jimmy Hendrix, “Are You Experienced?” and Janis Joplin’s “Cheap Thrills,” “I Got Dem Ol’ Kosmic Blues Again” and “Pearl” (Dad loved Janis).

We played them over and over again, the grooves in the vinyl worn down like patches of fur on the Velveteen Rabbit. Sometimes the music was the only thing we could relate to or talk about with one another. The songs were for us what box scores and baseball represented for Lenny and Stan and so many other fathers and sons. It was a way of calling over the fence, so to speak, which, at times, was the only safe intimacy we could tolerate. It allowed us to connect.

When I was twelve or thirteen, I gave Dad a birthday present. A sky blue T-shirt with the words “Wittgenstein Tigers” in white lettering emblazoned across the front. It was, beyond a doubt, the most excited I’d ever seen my father become over a gift he received from me. “I love it, Wus! Wait till the group sees it!” he said, referring to a seminar he was teaching that included some of his favorite students. Then he leaned over, pulled me close and gave me a huge kiss and a bad case of razor burn to go along with it.

I loved those kisses.

At bedrock, there was always a strong bond between us. That was never in doubt. But, borrowing another one of my father’s hero’s expressions, what if I’ve been using the wrong kind of “language game” to unlock the mysteries our relationship? What if I’ve been looking to philosophers for answers when I should have been turning to poets?

Even before I had a clue who Wittgenstein was, I could see he was taking up way more space in my father’s head than he was paying rent for. Part philosophical muse, part intellectual tormentor, I saw how exuberant my father became when trying to explain him to students. I identified with the fierce loyalty the philosopher inspired in him and the mix of joy and anguish this caused my father.

Recently, I read a passage in which one of Wittgenstein’s former students at Cambridge described the philosopher’s temperament as being akin to an atomic bomb or a tornado. He said he felt total adoration in his teacher’s presence or struck dumb with sheer terror, and often a combination of the

two. Like his intellectual mentor, my father was tortured by what he took to be his moral shortcomings and took his frustrations out on the people he was closest to and who loved him the most.

I've always felt my life more resembled Alice Walker's title *Anything We Love Can Be Saved* than it did the dense writings of Wittgenstein, Buber and the other philosophers my father, as he so quaintly put it, "grooved on." But, as the cliché goes, love is not always enough. And, it wasn't for Dad and me either. We needed something more.

I think these objects—the records, the T-shirt, my childhood artwork that hung on the walls of his office—and others like them served as reminders that, no matter how confused or muddled things became between us, if we were willing to abandon our quest to try to solve or fix the problems we faced (or each other), everything would become easier. We started making headway when we stopped trying to resolve our many contradictions and just tried to get a clear view of them.

Our fit was more like the jagged edges of the dramatic rock formations found along the continental divide than the exactness or kind of perfection one experiences when resting a machine-sewn hardball inside the pocket of a well-oiled baseball glove. And yet, even with all its flaws and imperfections, there was a certain grace to our relationship.

"It is clear great flyers have always been great fallers," writes Sam Keen in his *Learning To Fly*, a collection of philosophical reflections on the trapeze, fear, trust, and the joy of letting go. In a story Keen recounts in his book, one of the early legendary flying acts of the century was composed of Ernest Clarke, the flyer, and Charles Clarke, the catcher. Without any third person to return to the trapeze, these brothers mastered a double summersault and a pirouette return. Keen quotes an interview from Irving Pond's *Big Top Rhythms* during which Pond asked Ernie about falling:

"Ernie, you must have had a few falls into the net before you got that act to perfection. Five hundred, say?"

"Well," he answered, "five hundred would hardly be circumstance. We tried it at each and every rehearsal for a year and no fewer than ten times at each rehearsal before ever our hands came together (and every try meant a fall into the net). Then we caught and held. In three and half years more, we reached the point where we thought we would be justified in presenting it in public. More than two thousand falls; and then three and half years before it was perfected." (p. 111)

The transformation from angry nemesis to loving parent and angry

young man to grateful son was, for my father and me, hard earned. It did not happen overnight. There was no epiphany. There was a lot of falling.

It was the accumulation of hundreds, if not thousands, of little reminders captured in the lyrics and harmonies of a nostalgic song, the wording on a tattered article of clothing, or a child's faded artwork. Collectively, these moments—gifts of the heart—served as a relational hope chest where the most precious parts of ourselves could be stored for safekeeping.

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