

On Dad's Stories
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About a week ago, I read a book on the magician and escape artist Harry Houdini (1874-1926)--*Houdini: The Life and Times of the World's Greatest Magician*, by Charlotte Montague (Chartwell Books, 2017). Excellent book, great photographs, I recommended it. From its back cover:

Harry Houdini's [born Erik Weisz] compelling illusions and daring escapes made him one of the most famous magicians of all time. His spellbinding theatrical presentations were heart-stopping and attracted unprecedented crowds and dramatic headlines across the globe.

The Houdini book reminded me of an anecdote involving him my dad recounted to me frequently as a kid. Bringing up the memory of Dad and Houdini brought to mind other reminiscences, accounts, observations, and words of wisdom—I'll use story as the generic reference to any of that--Dad passed on to me when I was growing up, and that got me thinking about their significance to both him and me back then and to my life since those early years. I've gotten clearer about myself this past week, where I've come from and where I need to go from here. This writing describes the process of free association, reflection, and meaning-making I've taken myself through the past few days. I hope what I share here will be interesting and useful to you in itself, and that it will encourage you to do the same sort of thing with childhood memories that stand out for you.

Dad was a barber. I was ten to thirteen, perhaps fourteen, maybe nine, in there somewhere, when what I'll discuss here happened. This was way back, the early 1950's, in Saint Paul, Minnesota. Dad was old for a dad, over sixty, as he was born in 1890. Even though he had left the small Georgia farm where he

grew up as a teenager, he had retained a pronounced Southern accent. What I'll discuss here occurred upwards of seventy years ago—my gosh—yet memories of it still exist in my mind. I ask myself, how do we store memories? (I have no idea.) Why do some persist while others have vanished? (My best guess, because they are about something important to us, and thus it's worth our time to discern what they are about.) How accurate are our recollections—did what we remember really happen that way? (My best guess, not quite, but what is important in this context is the impact these occurrences had on us, and that is a function of what we perceive and recall--inner, subjective phenomena--not outer, objective reality.) How can we call memories up whenever choose to? (Again, no idea.) A truly remarkable process when you think about it. (Absolutely.)

The Houdini story. The memory of it was prompted by the book I read about Houdini. I ask myself, is there is a part of me beneath the level of my conscious awareness that knew I needed to think about the Houdini story, as well as other stories it would bring to mind, and that is what led me to take the Houdini off the new books shelf at the library, that it wasn't pure happenstance? It wouldn't surprise me if that were the case.

“Houdini came into the [barber] shop,” Dad would begin. “He was a famous magician. I guess he was in town to do a show. Little guy.”

This encounter Dad had with Houdini must have happened before 1926 when Houdini died. The town Dad referred to could have been Saint Paul--he came there around 1920, married my mother, who was a native of Saint Paul, in 1922, and stayed there the rest of his life--or it could have been in Nebraska or Illinois or any number of other unnamed places where Dad did his barbering after leaving Georgia. After reading the Houdini book, I now know what “Little guy” meant: Houdini was about 5'5". Dad was 5'7".

“Houdini said to me, ‘I'll let you cut my hair if you do it the

way I tell you.’

“I said, ‘It’s your money, I’ll cut it any way you want.’

“He got in the [barber] chair and held up a clump of hair and said ‘Cut.’

“I cut it, and then he held up another clump and I cut that, and he did that for the whole haircut. Never had anything like that happen before.

“I asked him how he did all those amazing things he did, and he said, ‘Just tricks.’”

That’s the Houdini story. I heard it over and over, I don’t know how many times, word for word, just like that. Ten times? I don’t know. A lot of times, I knew it by heart, that’s all I know.

Thinking about the Houdini story conjured up four others Dad told me repeatedly:

The five-cent cigar story. “Marshall came into the shop one time. He was Vice-President. He’s the one that said, ‘What this country needs is a good five-cent cigar’”

That’s it, the “five-cent cigar” story, word for word, time and again.

The Harold Stassen story. The way it went, Dad had driven a young Minnesota politician by the name of Harold Stassen to his various speaking engagements around the state. “I drove Stassen around, every small town in Minnesota it seemed like. Stassen makes it big later on, and what do I get from him? Nothing. Not even the time of day.”

Ron Negray’s lament. Dad’s shop in the ’40s until the mid-’50s was in the basement of the Saint Francis Hotel in downtown Saint Paul. The visiting teams stayed in the Saint Francis when they were in town to play the Saint Paul Saints minor league baseball team, and some of the players, as well as some of the Saints players, got their haircuts from Dad.

I sat many the hour on one of the stiff-backed, vinyl-covered chairs for customers waiting for their haircuts watching Dad cut hair, and Dad would introduce me to the players. I'd describe them now as well-kept young men, working men; modest, straightforward, polite.

"This is Bobby, my son."

"Nice to meet you," they'd say.

I'd glance at them and then look away, not saying anything in reply.

"Bobby likes to play baseball."

"What position do you play?"

"Third base."

"Good."

Ron Negray, a pitcher for the Saints, was a regular customer, Dad told me. I don't remember meeting him, though I may have. I heard his story plenty, that much I know.

"Ron Negray told me you can't get anywhere the way things are set up these days. No matter how well you pitch, you can't get to the big leagues. You stay stuck in the minors. It's so bad it's not even worth trying. Negray wants to quit baseball and go back home and get a job. I think Negray's just quit trying."

That the Ron Negray story, or what I'm now calling "Ron Negray's lament."

The Last Man's Club story. Dad told me regularly that he was in a club of World War I veterans. He was a barber in the navy on troop ships; or was he a civilian employee, I don't know, I never saw a picture of him in uniform. Once a year the club met, so it went, with a bottle of expensive wine prominently displayed at the head of the dinner table, or on a small table, something like that. The point of the club was that the last one of the members still alive, or was it the last two, I didn't quite follow it, would drink the wine, and that would be the end of the club. I have no idea where these meetings were held, and I don't recall Dad ever going to one.

So those were the five stories, repeated time and again: the Houdini story; the five-cent cigar story; the Harold Stassen story; Ron Negray's Lament; and the Last Man's Club story.

What was my reaction to Dad's stories? No response, zero. Nothing like, "Who was Houdini?" or "What's a five-cent cigar?" or "Ron Negray doesn't even try, really?" As far as I can remember, I didn't even say "Oh." No facial expression. Not a word. No affect at all. Nothing. Blank.

And what was Dad's reaction to my non-reaction? No reaction. No "So what do think?" "Have you studied Stassen in school?" anything like that. He just went back to whatever he was doing, sitting on the barber chair waiting for the next customer to come through the door or, at home, skimming through the scores in the sports section of the newspaper. I went back to whatever I was doing, just sitting there, watching television, reading a comic book, or lying on the couch. It wasn't at the dinner table that this went on, because Dad didn't get home until almost 7:00 p.m.—his shop was open till 6:00 p.m. Monday through Saturday—and he and Mother had dinner together at around 7:30 and I'd have eaten alone earlier.

I didn't know anything about any of these people Dad talked about, and at the time that was fine with me. For that matter, I suspect that Dad knew next to nothing about them himself, and as far as I could tell, that suited him just fine too. It might help in this context to say a few words about who they were.

Houdini the world-famous magician I mentioned earlier.

"Marshall," the "five-cent cigar" guy, was Thomas R. Marshall, a Democrat politician who was governor of Indiana and, from 1913 to 1921, Vice-President under Woodrow Wilson. Marshall died in 1925, so, as was the case with Houdini, Dad's encounter with him had happened in the distant past when he told me about it in 1950 or so.

What was "What this country needs is a good five-cent cigar" about? Marshall was known for his wit. From Marshall's

Wikipedia entry:

Marshall's wit is best remembered for a phrase he introduced to the American lexicon. While presiding over a Senate session in 1914, Marshall responded to earlier comments from Senator Joseph L. Bristow in which the senator provided a long list of what he felt the country needed. Marshall reportedly leaned over and muttered to one of his clerks, "What this country needs is more of this; what this country needs is more of that" and quipped loudly enough others to overhear, "What this country needs is a really good five-cent cigar." Marshall explained that five-cent cigar was a metaphor for simpler times and buckling down to thrift and work.

I don't suppose anybody remembers Harold Stassen these days, but indeed he did make it big as a politician, first as governor of Minnesota in 1939 and then as a serious contender for the Republican presidential nomination in 1948.

Google says Ron Negray the baseball pitcher was born in 1930 in Akron, Ohio (so going back home to get a job would have been to Ohio). To my surprise, he's still alive, 87-years old—I just assume that everybody from my childhood is dead.

Despite his gloominess about his baseball prospects (according to Dad anyway), Negray did make it to the major leagues, though he didn't have much of a career at that level. He pitched 13 innings for the Brooklyn Dodgers as a 22-year-old in 1952. The Dodgers sent him down to their farm team in Saint Paul, where he pitched for three years, 1952, '53, and '54, which is when he must have complained about the injustices of professional baseball to Dad. In 1955 and '56, Negray made it back to the big leagues with the Philadelphia Phillies—the Dodgers must have traded him—where he won six games and lost six games over those two years. Then it was back to Saint Paul in '57 (I was in the army then), and then back to the Dodgers in '58—now the Los Angeles Dodgers, the ownership had moved the team from

Brooklyn in '57—where he pitched a total of 11 innings and had no wins or losses. Then in was back to Saint Paul for part of '58 (I was still in the army), and then other minor league teams for the rest of his career. Negray retired in 1963 at the relatively advanced sport age of 33, so he didn't make good on his threat to quit and go back home to get a job.

As for the Last Man's Club, I just now looked it up and found that it was an activity of American Legion posts around the country. I vaguely recall Dad being a member of the American Legion (was he really a veteran, I ask myself). On one occasion, I remember him collecting Bingo cards at the American Legion hall. It stands out because it was the only time I had ever seen him with a public presence other than in the barber shop. He wouldn't even venture out for parent nights at the schools I went to. A 2014 *USA Today* article contained this about a Last Man's Club in Pennsylvania:

Once they got home from the Great War [World War I], the soldiers of Company B made a vow: They'd reunite yearly and save a trophy of their adventure — a bottle of French wine — until one man was left alive. Then he would uncork the white Burgundy and toast his departed comrades. They called themselves the Last Man's Club. They said they would never forget the French town they liberated in 1918 or the war they fought "to end all wars." Remembering was easy when World War I was still vivid — when Veterans Day was still called Armistice Day, and the former doughboys would squeeze into their old uniforms and march, a bit more stiffly each year. But 100 years after an assassination in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914, led to World War I, America's memory of its second-deadliest foreign war is increasingly tenuous. The nation's last World War I veteran died three years ago.

I assume Dad was referring to a Last Man's Club at the local American Legion chapter in Saint Paul. Perhaps he did attend meetings. He died in 1974 at 74, so I presume he was far from the last man in his group.

Looking over the five stories, what themes stand out? These:

Being less than others. The image of someone holding up a clump of their hair and telling Dad to cut it, and Dad doing it. How minimally people dealt with Dad outside of his immediate family. How little he meant to them. “Just tricks” was enough to say to Dad--two words. “Marshall” as Dad referred to him, presumably didn’t even say that. Dad was nobody to Thomas R. Marshall. To Harold Stassen, Dad was his driver. What did he owe his driver?

Dad tried to help me get a job when I was about nineteen. He told me to see the owner of PEFCO Porcelain Company in Saint Paul—I still remember the name of the place after all these years. “Go talk to this guy, he’s a friend of mine,” Dad said. Just now, I check online and I believe I know the man’s name—Allen Johnson. He died in 2015 at 96.

When I went to see Mr. Johnson—I’m going to assume that’s who it was--and told him I was sent by my dad, Walter Griffin, a friend of his, to inquire about a job. At first, he couldn’t place Dad; he looked at me without expression. Then he kind of lit up and said, “Oh, I know who you’re talking about now, my barber.”

Yes, your barber, my dad.

The plight of the little guy. The Ron Negray story—they keep you down, the game is rigged, I might as well quit trying. I believed what Dad said about Negray back then, but thinking about it now, I can’t imagine him not really trying. There’d be nothing for him to gain by slacking off, plus that’s just not the way athletes approach their sport. My best guess is that Dad said this about Negray out of a sense of the basic futility of life for people low on totem pole in society. I’m sure he didn’t think consciously about the effect this story would have on my outlook—hearing that things are so unfair, the cards are so stacked against people like Negray, like us, why even bother trying to accomplish anything. He was just reporting what was there for him, to a mute and unresponsive son he had

sired, whether he intended to or not, late in his life.

The irony is that in his own life Dad always tried his best. There he was at 74, the cancer so bad he had sit on a stool because he couldn't stand for more than a minute or so at a time, in great pain, giving the very best haircuts he could and getting the shop swept up and sparkling clean and ready for the next day.

I remember Dad buying some living room furniture at Home Furnishings across the street from his barber shop—not the best quality, thinking back on it, but it was all Dad could afford. My mother, who held Dad in surly contempt generally, never as much as acknowledged his gesture (nor did I of course) or take the trouble to remove the cellophane wrapping the furniture came in. There it was in the cellophane wrapper, we sat on that way; I never knew what it looked like exactly. It must have been very tough for Dad to play his life to Mother and me as his audience.

On the periphery. Houdini was one of the most widely acclaimed performers of the twentieth century. When he came to town to perform, it was front page news. Dad never mentioned going to see Houdini's performance. Now that I think about it, I understood back then that we, our family, us, wouldn't do anything like that. The show of an internationally known performer? That'd be too much in the world for us, too much at the center of what's going on. No, no—we're not at the core of what's happening, not us.

Dad got free passes from the Paramount movie theater for having a sign in his shop advertising its current feature. He and Mother and I went to the movies at the Paramount just about every week. Sitting in the dark watching images—not the real thing--of musicals with Dan Dailey and Kathryn Grayson, that was us.

We went to the Saint Paul Saints' minor league baseball games (major league games? not us), our seats way back in the bleachers. We went to the rodeo and the circus and the Ice Capades, an ice-skating show, when they came to the Saint Paul Auditorium once a year, with seats near the top of the auditorium and, for some reason, always over near the corner.

I remember going with Dad to the University of Minnesota basketball arena to watch the final game of the NCAA basketball tournament. In those years, you could get a ticket for the game that same night and pay regular prices for it. I just looked it up, it was 1951, I was 11, and Kentucky beat Kansas State 68-58.

We got to the ticket counter and Dad told the guy selling tickets, “Two of the best you’ve got on the side.”

“Courtside?” the ticket seller replied, referring to seats down by the floor of the arena.

Dad seemed to get a bit indignant and replied, “No, up top!”

Wasn’t it obvious that we weren’t the kind of people to sit courtside? What was wrong with this ticket seller that he couldn’t see that.

Wait it out. It was fitting that Dad was in the Last Man’s Club, which essentially was about acknowledging that it was now one year closer to the end. I never heard Dad talk about a hope, a dream, a project, a trip he wanted to take, something he wanted to accomplish, anything like that, not even what he planned to do with his Sunday off (he worked six days a week). A November, 2008 thought for this site called “On the Barber, which was obviously about Dad, ended with this:

The son cannot recall a time when his father complained about his lot in life, or a time when he extolled any aspect of his existence, professional or personal. The barber seemed to go through life without comment; or at least external comment, one can never be sure what he thought inwardly about his life. However the barber may have seen life when he was young and just leaving the Georgia farm to confront the world, it appears that for him existence had come down to doing the thing right in front of him the best he could, and then the next thing, and then the next and the next and the next, until, in 1964, next things ran out and eternity began.

Not really alive. Looking back on it now, I'm struck by my numbness, deadness, growing up. I was flat, unresponsive. It was as if I had post-traumatic stress syndrome. I went to school, but I wasn't really there. It was a history class that I was taking, and an English class, and those were teachers, I knew that, but it wasn't really real, and I wasn't really real. The other kids were alive, in the world, but, the way I'd describe it now, I was a disembodied awareness. I wasn't a person, a corporal entity, like the others. The other kids went to the high school prom. Never for a moment did I think that was something I could do, because that's what people who actually exist do. I watch television.

As far as I can remember, all the while I was growing up, I never exchanged sentences with Dad. I never responded to anything he initiated, and I never initiated anything with him. He was kind to me, like when he arranged for his friend Hank Bratfeit to drive us to the emergency room--we never had a car--when I cut my hand so bad that time (the very large scar remains, I'm looking at it now), but it was a silent trip. When I left for the army at 17, Dad didn't know I had enlisted.

When I got out of the army at 19 until Dad's death I never had a conversation with him. The one memory I have during those last years was of Dad, shaken and looking shrunken and very old, calling to me from the bathroom, "Bobby, come here and look at this." It was blood in the toilet bowl, the beginnings of the prostate cancer that would end his life. I stood there mute, it didn't register with me. It must have been very difficult for him not to get sympathy and support at a frightening time like that—Mother had died three years earlier and he was very alone, as I am now.

Just now, I looked up the Wikipedia entry on *dissociation*. It hit home.

In psychology, dissociation is any of a wide array of experiences from mild detachment from immediate surroundings to more severe detachment from physical and

emotional experience. The major characteristic of all dissociative phenomena involves a detachment from reality rather than a loss of reality as in psychosis.

Dissociation is commonly displayed on a continuum. In mild cases, dissociation can be regarded as a coping mechanism or defense mechanism in seeking to master, minimize or tolerate stress--including boredom or conflict. At the non-pathological end of the continuum, dissociation describes common events such as daydreaming while driving a vehicle. Further along the continuum are non-pathological altered states of consciousness.

More pathological dissociation involves dissociative disorders, including dissociative fugue and depersonalization disorder with or without alterations in personal identity or sense of self. These alterations can include: a sense that self or the world is unreal (depersonalization and derealization); a loss of memory (amnesia); forgetting identity or assuming a new self (fugue); and fragmentation of identity or self into separate streams of consciousness (dissociative identity disorder, formerly termed multiple personality disorder) and complex post-traumatic stress disorder.

There were never any interventions, call them that, with me growing up: the school, social services, never did anything; my much older brother and sister were married and out of the house by the time I was around five and busy with their own lives; and counseling or therapy was beyond the realm of possibility for people like us. I think now that that was very unfortunate.

A personal work agenda for me. Looking over the themes I've just listed--being less than others and so on--I can see that they were important themes in Dad's life and in my life. I internalized these themes, these messages, took them into myself, they became part of me as inner, organic, physically felt, foundations or bases for conceiving of myself and my place in the world, and they directed my thoughts and actions in the various contexts of my life. In every case, they are problematic, limiting. When I eventually

realized the price I was paying for their presence, they became challenges, tasks, for me, they comprised a personal work agenda: to expel them from my being. Since my mid- to late-twenties, and with an increasing critical awareness and understanding—yes, I really need to work on this for these reasons—I’ve taken on the job of ridding myself of these chains that bound me. In this life-long project, I’ve been greatly helped by the strong work ethic I picked up from Dad; he did his best with things, and so have I.

With one exception, which I’ll get into at the close of this writing, this is not the place to go into particulars about how I’ve taken on my personal work agenda. This exploration of Dad’s stories has help me get a sense of their totality, how they went together, what they added up to—yes, this is the package, this is the configuration, this is where it came from, now I understand. I’m seeing more clearly that rising above, transcending, transmuting, the limitations of my childhood experiences has been a major part of my life: I’m not inherently less than everybody else. My horizons aren’t restrictively circumscribed. I can be fully in the world. I don’t have to just cope, endure, wait it out. And, I *am*.

How’s it gone? I’ve done quite well, actually, and that’s highly gratifying for me to realize as I take stock of my life now so very near its end. I’m proud of my diligence and persistence and accomplishment. That acknowledged, however, I’m still Bobby—those inner realities, those themes, those prison bars, whatever to call them, are still very much part of me right now sitting on my leather couch typing these words. They are muted, chipped away in good measure, and they aren’t as central and dominant as they there, but they aren’t gone, not by a long shot.

I’ll end with the one exception I referred to a bit ago, where I get particular about the particulars of the work on my personal agenda:

It’s 9:30 in the morning on Saturday, January 13th of 2018. I’m in Burlington, Vermont, and I’m alone in my two-room rented apartment amid its decades-old downscale furnishings. My

eighteen-year-old Honda Civic is parked out front. My fingernails aren't clean and my tee shirt has food stains and my pants cuffs are frayed with wear and my shoes are unshined. And I'm tense, on guard.

By March 1st, or perhaps April 1st, or May, but soon anyway, I'm going to move to the west coast where my thirteen-year-old daughter lives with her mom (given to surly contempt for me unfortunately, but a good soul and a dedicated mother, as was my mother). I'm going to get a really nice apartment—I can afford it, money's good now—with a room for my daughter if she wants to visit. I'm going to work with an interior designer to get upscale furniture. I'm going to get a new BMW, a series 2. I'm going to get new, fine, tasteful clothes. I'm going to clean my fingernails and shine my shoes. I'm going to sit in my new apartment in the evening reading a classic book while my daughter does her homework and invite her to stay over if she'd like. And I'm going to be calm and at peace, and I'm going to be happy. At last.

