

In Daddy's eyes

► From cherished child to disappointed adult — and back again

By JUDITH HILLMAN PATERSON
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My father was a very troubled and immature man as well as an alcoholic. But I loved him just the same. Or — to put a more accurate and Freudian point on it — as a child, I was madly in love with him.

When I was born, he was a strikingly handsome, 23-year-old college dropout and ex-football player from a family of reform-minded, high-achievers who had come South after the Civil War to start schools for the freed slaves. By the time I knew them, the Patersons had made a truce with Southern customs and become successful entrepreneurs and community leaders in Montgomery.

Daddy, who was introverted and probably dyslexic, saw himself as an outsider in a family of insiders. It didn't help that the early death of his own father had robbed him of the one person who understood the ways in which he differed from his brother and cousins.

Because he worked in the family nursery business, which was next door to his mother's house, Daddy could take me to work with him any time he wanted to. By the time I was 2 years old, my own mother was already ill with a severe form of clinical depression, which she medicated with large quantities of beer. From my earliest memories, she was well on her way to drinking herself to death, which she succeeded in doing when I was 9 and she was 31.

So I went to work with my father often and divided my time between the greenhouses where he grew roses and my grandmother's house next door. In those days, my father was a font of love for me — playful, affectionate and sensitive (overly sensitive, I would soon learn). He was a born teacher, and I wanted to learn whatever he wanted to teach me — the kinds of the flowers he grew, the names of the stars in the sky, the growing habits of the strawberries and tomatoes he planted and nursed like babies in our backyard.

I have come to think that what children most need is to share the daily lives of their parents — merely to be with them while they do whatever they need to be doing. For the first few years of my life, most of my time was spent in that way with my father. Except for the year-and-a-half he was away at war in France and the Pacific — during which time my mother was miraculously sober — he was by far the most motherly parent I had.

He and I were simply emotionally and intellectually compatible, I think, and what a joy that was in the beginning. A little girl doesn't ask for



The author, Judith Hillman Paterson

stability or is there a volcano rolling beneath it?" She has no way of knowing that his unpredictable temperament, brooding self-doubt and cruelty under the influence of his addiction will eventually break her heart and complicate her relationships with men for the rest of her life.

She simply climbs into his lap whenever she can. As soon as she can walk, she puts her hand in his and goes with him wherever he will take her. When she is old enough to go about on her own, she collects things to bring him — objects, facts, stories, jokes, new things she has learned. In the end and most of all, she wants to be whatever it is that he wants her to be.

But the honeymoons of childhood don't last forever, even in healthy families, and ours was, by all current standards, about as unhealthy as they get.

As soon as my mother died, my father's barely controlled drinking locked into a lifelong cycle of binge drinking followed by remorse. Instead of grieving the failure of a marriage and the death of his wife, he drank and regretted it ... drank and regretted it.

Sometimes I wonder if that wasn't the thing I never forgave. That he didn't grieve, in fact hardly acknowledged, the death of my mother. And because he didn't grieve it, neither did any of his four children, including, of course, myself.

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ward rarely spoke his first wife's name. If anyone else spoke it — or sounded as if they were about to speak it — he left the room.

Over the years, the estrangement between my father and me grew and grew. I thought he sided with my step-mother any time she and I disagreed. I thought he over-protected my younger siblings while expecting too much of me. I resented the way he handled the money my mother had left to her children. Ultimately, his drinking completely controlled our family, and I grew to despise him as much drunk as I had once loved him sober.

As for him, he seemed to want his favorite and eldest child both to stand out and conform at the same time. He approved when I went off to a good college and excelled, but he was equally delighted when I married my hometown sweetheart and came back to Montgomery to start a family.

Though we often agreed in theory, he wanted me to keep my opinions about the Civil Rights Movement to myself. He thought my commuting to Auburn University to get a graduate degree endangered my marriage. When his predictions on that score came true, he did everything he could to stop me from getting a divorce and leaving Montgomery.

Yet beneath the surface, the old feelings still ran deep between us. And, now and then, they surfaced with all the force and sweetness of a long forgotten romance.

The most dramatic of those moments came in 1984 when my father suffered a stroke from which no one thought he would recover. He was, by then, riddled with cancer that had already spread from one lung to the other.

I flew to Montgomery expecting to see him for the last time but with feelings so conflicted and deadened toward him that his impending death seemed hardly to matter at all. I arrived at the hospital and was told he was semiconscious but that I could go into the intensive care unit to "speak to him."

To the amazement of everyone in the room, he glanced up at me and immediately returned not only to his conscious self but to his most charming version of it. With a look of acceptance and appreciation like nothing I had seen in him for

who lived in Washington, D.C., and was a professor at the University of Maryland. It was the admiration with which he said "professor" that got to me.

His attitude up until that moment had been one of irritation toward me for leaving town, combined with a seeming lack of interest in everything I did in any city other than the one where he and I had both been born. Suddenly, here — amid nurses in white, blinking screens and life-saving gawgaws — a jolt of emotion as palpable as an electrical charge passed between us.

He loved me. He was proud of me. I was his little girl again.

My stepmother and everybody in the intensive care unit credited me with bringing my father back to life that day. I don't know about that. What I do know is that he lived

With a look of acceptance and appreciation like nothing I had seen in him for the longest kind of time, he called all the nurses over to his bed and told them that I was his daughter.

another year and a half, badly debilitated physically but with all his mental faculties intact.

If he had been a wiser person or I had been a bigger one, surely that moment would have washed away all the disharmony between us and we would have enjoyed ourselves in

the old way for the little time he had left to live. Instead, the old tensions returned and smoldered until he died.

When he died, I did what we had been doing in our family for 40 years — I kicked the grief aside and kept going as if nothing had happened. But this time something was different.

Within a few months — and before I knew what I was doing — I had set out on a journey of reconnecting with my mother's friends, relatives and family history. As the reality of her life and my attachment to her came back to me, my anger toward my father lessened and my own childhood began to seem vibrant and real again.

One of the gifts of death, it seems, is that it sometimes allows us to see people more fully than we did when they lived. In my case, my father's death and the freedom it gave me to reclaim my connection to my mother also enabled me to remember that the rigid, disappointed 72-year-old man my father had become had once been the young father to a child who had thought herself the luckiest girl in the world.

Now, in memory, he is that man again. In my now aging heart, he is once again my daddy and I am once again the most cherished of children.

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Above, Duke Paterson at age 23, Montgomery, 1936; and his first daughter, Judy, in 1938. Left, Emily and children, Montgomery, 1945.



Right, Emily and children, Montgomery, 1937