

Memories Lost
by
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What do we know about the people who made us what we are? Scraps of memory, occasional stories, fragments strung along a line of shared history. These are the pieces we hold onto, but they seldom are enough to nourish our adult need for full truth. I have these memories:

When I was a boy, a lifetime ago, no one I knew called their parents by their first name. Maybe they did that on the West Coast or the East Coast, but not in my world. My Father was Dad. But at an early age, I overheard my Dad's friends call him "Bob" and "Robert". Somewhere inside of my consciousness, hearing these names told me my father was a different person, in a way, to different people. Amazing!

The next step in my education was hearing my Grandfather call my Dad "Bobby". A young boy's name, I realized. So now I knew, really knew, that my father had once been a child, just like I was. My Dad, of course, called his father "Dad". Never would he have used his father's first name, not only because it wasn't done during this more formal era, but because of his obvious-- even to the young me-- respect for his father. Again a name, a title, unveiled a more complicated world to my child's eyes.

Tragedy, or at least sadness, brought more truth: seemingly healthy, still young, my Grandfather died suddenly of a heart attack. At his funeral, sitting in the church pew of my Dad's childhood, for the first time, I saw my father cry. The deep wound this event had given to my father, who I always had thought could not be wounded, impressed itself on me.

Through the years, few details of my father's youth were filled in. My great-grandparents had emigrated from Germany determined to not look back.

“There's no point living in the past,” my Dad would say, a phrase and a feeling he had inherited from his proud, independent ancestors.

But my Dad was a storyteller, so bits and pieces of his past would sometimes surface. He worked one summer on a freighter on Lake Michigan, an experience that must have been more exciting than the summer jobs I held. Another summer he lived out of state on a farm, where he developed a life-long distaste for live chickens.

“Dirty, mean little things,” he called them, telling stories of his battles trying to pry eggs from angry mother hens.

As a between the wars young man, my Dad joined the National Guard cavalry, riding horses and on one occasion being called into action to help quell a riot. Riding horses into battle, spending summers away from home on ships and at a distant farm, these are glimpses into a spirit of adventure, but the details are slender and vague.

The window into my mother's youth is even less open than my dad's. Her mother was a consummate storyteller, regaling us kids with tales of her pet dogs and cats and her Methodist minister father who stared down town drunks in the street of their small town. Perhaps because her mother was so good at this, my mother told few stories. The one she did remember and laugh at is of the time she danced a solo dance in a high school talent show. Her routine was done to music from a record player that somehow kept playing on and on, forcing my mother to keep dancing to near exhaustion. Finally, a kindly teacher appeared and helped her off the stage. The image of my mother endlessly dancing seems somehow right in a variety of ways.

The beginning of my parents' relationship provided a story they both told. My dad

worked in an office in my mother's home town and one night asked her to type a memo at the end of the day. He then offered to either call a cab for her or give her a ride home. She chose the latter and started their long lifetime together.

Like many couples of their time and place, my parents' honeymoon week was organized around attending a Packer game (my mother was a life-long fan). One lasting memory of this weekend involved eating at a nice restaurant where a phone call for them was delivered via a phone that was brought to their table and plugged in with much waiter fanfare. A touch of luxury they had never seen that for them marked the event as auspicious.

Sparse recollections, a threadbare accumulation of stories, these are what I have to go on when looking back. When my parents were young, few people wrote memoirs and there was no self-publishing industry like there is today. Like most ignorant young people, I never thought to ask them for the details of their early years. Or did the thought of my father being called Bobbie, the sight of him crying, the image of my mother caught in a dance, did these visions hint at their fragility and frighten me? I don't know. I stayed close to my parents to the end of their lives, so, of course, knew much about them and had some glimpses of who they were inside. But much is lost, I now realize. Much that might have told me more about who they were, who I am and where I come from is buried and that I count a shame.