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Father

Chalice Lighting

In the Fall of 1991 my father came to see me for what turned out to be our last visit ever. I'll tell you about it a little later.

Not long after he left, I wrote a three part round. After working it out on the piano, I wanted to hear how it sounded on a human voice. So I sang the first words that came to me. I was satisfied and turned to write real lyrics.

But I couldn't get those spontaneous words out of my mind. I tried for months. Finally I gave up and decided those were the words it was supposed to have. The result was this little song.

I think of it as a song to sing to my kids and as the song that I wished my father had sung to me. Please join me.

*Know that I'll be walking by your side,
open wide, feeling pride,
as you go on your way.*

I light the chalice for that in us which yearns to be fathered.

Reflection

"Daddy bad. Daddy bad." At first they were just faint words in the back of my mind. As they grew stronger, I began to see vertical lines across my field of vision. It was as if I was looking out from a crib. My daddy was hurting my mommy. "Daddy bad! Daddy bad!"

Several days after recovering the memory, my sister called to say Pop had cancer in his neck. He had been in treatment for six months. I called him and good-naturedly chewed him out for not letting me know. Toward the end of the

conversation he asked, "So, how are you doing?"

I thought, "What the heck: I'll tell him," and said, "I've been having memories of you and mom fighting when I was little. It was scary."

He said, "Well, you know I was alcoholic back then. You have to get to the bottom of those feelings and work them out. Maybe we should get together and talk."

I was shocked, excited, surprised, disoriented. He had never admitted a drinking problem. This was not the father I had known. I was delighted that I might actually be able to talk to him about something real.

So that Fall he flew north. The next morning, we sat in the kitchen. I spoke to him again about my early fears. He didn't know what I was talking about. As he sat at table eating left over Halloween Tootsie Rolls, he said there was never any abuse and implied I should not even think about it.

For the next four days, I tried every angle I could think of to get some information about my early childhood. What was I like as a child? "Oh, you were a normal kid." What kind of things did I like? "The usual stuff kids like." He had no idea who I was! He could tell me the jokes they were telling in the office the year I was born, but he did not know me.

The next day, I put him on the plane to fly back south. I was disappointed that I had gotten no information about my early years. Then I realized this was the biggest confirmation I could have gotten for loneliness in me. Emotionally, he had not been there.

That was the last I ever saw him.

* * *

A few months later, as rage emerged from beneath years of hurt and numbness, I smashed a pillow thousands of times in therapy. One afternoon as the tennis racket hit, the image in my mind suddenly shifted. My father was no longer standing up to the blows or even cowering. He was dead. I had beaten him to death.

My anger evaporated. "This is not what I wanted." It was not a statement of guilt, just an acknowledgment of reality: I wanted to reach his heart. To break through his armor would require enough force to kill him. "This is not what I wanted."

A week later my brother, Ren, called me to tell me Pop had just died.

I went up into my room and tried to talk to him across planes of reality:

"So, where are you now, Pop?"

I imagined him responding, "I have no way of knowing. It's kind of foggy and vague. I can't see too much. But it feels okay. Do you know where I am?"

"Pop, you're dead."

"No," he said, "I don't think so. This is not how death will be. It will be darker and colder. This isn't uncomfortable. In fact, I feel better than I have for a while. Lying in bed has not been much fun. I seem to be on my feet, at least. Where's Lavern?" (*Lavern was his second wife.*)

I said, "She's at home with Ren and Stephie and Roger." (*Three of my siblings.*)

He asked, "What are they doing with her?"

I said, "They wanted to come see you before you died. Ren made it, though you were pretty far gone. Steph and Roger did not make it before you left."

"I see," he mused. "So I am dead. Hmm. What a development this is."

"Yeh," I said. "And now I'm trying to figure out how to relate to you."

He came back, "Don't make a problem of it. It's not worth it. Use me to release your heavier emotions. I can handle your feelings now. No need to live with them any longer than you have to."

Closing Song

1 Dm G C Am
Know that I'll be walk - ing by your side,

2 Dm G C Am
o - pen wide, feel - ing pride,

3 Dm G C Am
as you go on your way.