

**Title:**

Talking to my father.

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### **Talking to my father**

My 8-year-old daughter, Evann, a history buff, asked me recently if my father died in World War II. This is odd, because my father is alive and well and living in central New Jersey. My son, Raphael, 5, is also confused. "Have I met him?" he asks. My children don't know my father, although they've seen him several times. He's a hermit, widowed for a quarter-century, who rarely ventures far from his home and factory. His engineering firm has dwindled in recent years, and my sister, his sole employee, often finds him napping at his desk.

Allan (born Abraham) looks like a homeless man these days, with his dirty gray parka and missing teeth, but he's still somewhat dashing when he cleans up. And every Saturday, rain or shine, he drives to a nearby all-you-can-eat buffet and happily watches other people's children. "Doesn't bother me one bit," my father says cheerfully when I call to report Evann's query about his early demise.

"You don't care that your granddaughter thinks you're dead?" I ask.

He pauses. "It would bother me if she were deprived," he says, his voice suddenly wobbly with emotion. "But she's in good hands, and that pleases me no end."

It's unnerving. I've been shadowboxing with my father since I was a little girl, but now I find the old pugilist no longer so ready with a sneer or derisive jab. He's softening and growing thoughtful about the past, leaving me wondering whether it might be time for me, too, to step out of the ring.

My father is 82, after all, although he won't retire. He'd rather die, a prospect he's been dropping hints about. "I don't expect to live much more than a year

and a half," he says cagily, as if letting me in on a secret.

"Why?" I ask, going for the bait.

"I don't want to talk about it," he snaps back, happy as a kid with candy.

It's like the old routine he never tires of:

"You haven't asked how I'm doing."

"OK, Dad. How are you doing?"

"Don't ask."

I telephoned him recently to ask about his childhood, and mine. It was mid-afternoon, and I was nervous about disturbing him at work. All four of us kids could recite, wincing, his deflating wisecracks:

"I can't be bothered."

"Time's up."

"I've got more important things to do with my time."

"Go piss in your hat."

I had practiced my entry/exit line, saying I wanted to schedule a talk after closing hours. But he stopped me mid-sentence. "We can talk now, Lexi," he said, warmly.

Well, I squirmed, it was about the type of father he'd been. "I fathered you for 2 seconds," he said, chuckling.

Then his voice softened, even broke. "But I always knew what a gift you kids were, each one of you. Your mother and I started you out with a prayer on your very first day, even though I didn't believe in God."

Words failed me. This was my father, the Great Disdainer, the man who never had time for his children or the wife he adored? I didn't have a single childhood memory of a walk, or even a talk, with my father. He'd raised us under the banner of healthy neglect. And he'd spent my mother's last day on earth, while she was dying in a New York hospital, working at his shop. I'd never forgiven him for that or for a host of other slights.

My anger wasn't doing me much good, though. If I believed recent research, it was wreaking havoc on my life. Girls who are furious with their fathers may have trouble forming adult relationships, lack confidence at work, and risk becoming emotional messes--even if, like me, they had deep bonds with their mothers. They're also more prone to eating disorders, teenage motherhood, and incarceration.

None of that seemed to apply to me. I'd been as good as married for nearly 20 years, raised two children, and cobbled together a decent career. And my anger had been a solid rudder in dealing with my father, who, despite his financial generosity and rakish wit, could be thoughtlessly cruel to my sister, my two brothers, and me.

But suddenly the Old Man seemed practically lovable. My older sister saw that I was thinking about lowering the drawbridge. "I just don't want you to get hurt," she said.

I called up a few experts for advice. "Learn enough about his background, particularly his relationship with his father, to have a little bit of compassion for why this man turned out the way he did, suggested Linda Nielsen, PhD, a psychology professor at Wake Forest University and author of *Embracing Your Father: How to Build the Relationship You've Always Wanted With Your Dad* (McGraw-Hill).

I knew the bare facts. My grandfather, Alexander, a Russian immigrant who owned a candy store in Queens, died of an untreated kidney ailment when my father was 11. Six years later, my father's mother, Fanny, was killed. "My parents did me a favor," he used to say. "I did everything on my own, and I never regretted it. I had an advantage."

That statement seemed cold and inhumane when I was young. Now it sounded tinny and unconvincing, the words of a lonely, scared kid thrusting out his chest.

I knew my grandfather was a self-educated man who, despite his limited means, owned a set of miniature, leather-bound Shakespeare volumes and a pair of opera glasses. An old photo shows him on a tenement roof, his nose buried in a book. Surely my father missed him when he died.

Now, when I ask, a vivid image of my grandfather tumbles out. He was a kindly man who roasted chestnuts over the candy store's electric heater while listening to my father recite homework. They had little rituals and even a sideline business: My father, unbeatable at marbles, won so many aggies that my grandfather sold them as used. In the afternoons, Alex would send Abe to buy crumb buns, and they'd eat them together behind the glass storefront.

But my grandfather, like my father, never played with his children. "He was crippled, basically," my father recalls. As a young man, Alex had gone swimming in the polluted waters of Coney Island and emerged with an infected leg that somehow atrophied, leaving it shorter than the other. He had other health concerns, as well, but he kept them to himself.

One summer, while my father was away at camp, my grandfather grew acutely ill. Abe returned 2 weeks later to find his father dead and buried. "I ran to his room and put my nose into the pillow so I could have something to remember him by," he says. "And I vowed to myself that I would never forget." That summer, sent to another camp, he gazed at the nighttime sky and decided there could be no God. He would have to take care of himself.

Fanny had to sell the store and move with her three sons to Brooklyn, where she took in laundry to support them. One night, carrying several packages of clothes through a blizzard, she was run over by a snowplow. She lingered in the hospital for weeks.

"I remember visiting her there," my father says. "I sat on the bed. 'Ooh!' she indicated to me that she was in pain because I'd moved her. She said, 'Please.' And I got off the bed pretty fast. That's the last time I saw her."

My mind reels back to my mother's hospital room and my father bursting in after she'd died. Maybe it had been too reminiscent: the children standing in vigil, the mother dying too young.

Abe got into night engineering school, enlisted in the military, went off to war, returned, met my mother (a fellow engineering student), and started life anew. He even changed his name: Abe gave way to Allan--not Jewish, not an orphan, but a self-made man with no past, only a boundless, shining future.

Did his parents' early deaths make him shy away from people? "I don't think I thought that far ahead," my father says. "It's just the way things worked out. I don't know anyone well. My children I know a little better than strangers. But I never took the time to know you kids that well."

I take the plunge, knowing I probably shouldn't. "Do you regret not knowing your children, Dad?"

And out comes the old Dad, bounding like a tiger out of his cage. "Not at all! Not at all!" he bellows. "Healthy neglect, remember? I meant that. And who knows, maybe my healthy neglect had a profound effect on all of you. Maybe it was good."

But there is something pained in his voice that I've never heard before. "Will you give me some credit for that, maybe?" he asks. "Don't damn me to hell. I grew up with healthy neglect, of necessity. And you kids know that I'm always here for you if you need me."

"But, Dad," I say, sucking in my breath. "What if I called you up and said 'I need you to show that you care for me' or 'I need you to show that you care for my children'?"

"Don't hold your breath," he says.

"Why do you draw the line there, Dad? Why are you so generous financially..."

"Because I can do it easily."

"Rut not so generous with ..."

"My time."

"Not just your time," I whisper.

"Healthy neglect," he says again, softly. "That's one of the signs of it, Lex." He says it as though it's a vow he must obey, a sacrament that he knows pains us but is written in stone.

He reminds me that he helped pay for my house in Vermont and bought outright the land surrounding it. "That's better than a pat on the back," he says brightly.

I'm weary. "I'm not looking for a pat on the back, Dad."

There's a pause, and again his voice changes. "Well, yes, I can," he says finally, as if playing with a new toy. "I can pat you on the back. I think that what you're doing with those children is just exquisite. I said it, OK. Exquisite. Brave and wonderful. And I'm happy that you're independent, and that you're happy and creative."

I draw a deep breath. Is this what I was waiting for? I'm usually so armored when dealing with my father that the rare compliment bounces off, to be picked up and inspected later, after the skirmish. Sometimes I'm not even sure he said it. And if I ask him, he'll retract it, or worse, won't recall.

But this feels right. I need my father to acknowledge my children, and me. I breathe out, released.

"How do you want to be remembered, Dad?" I ask.

"Don't remember me!" he exclaims. "Not at all. Think of what your next step is in the living world. Do the best you can, and be useful. Remember me? Forget it. I did my job. You kids are my contribution to society. You serve as a testament to my sense of values."

I think about that and say nothing. We talk a bit more, laugh about a few things,

and say good-bye. My father, as usual, doesn't say he loves me. I can't remember if I say it, either. But I smile, thinking of how the next conversation, if we have one, will likely begin:

"How are you doing, Dad?"

"No good--never was, never will be. How are you?"

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE)

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