Father in the Looking Glass?

by Theodore Dalrymple (January 2016)

Recently I have been told by two people whom I had not seen for a long time but who knew me when I was much younger that I now strongly resemble my father, not only physically but in my gestures and my expressions, my tone of voice and so forth. I was, of course, completely unaware of this. Though I held my tongue, my resemblance to my father did not altogether please me, for more than one reason.

My father was in several respects an admirable man. He was extremely intelligent and even talented (the two are not at all the same). He composed and recorded some charming children's songs and held engineering patents though he was not trained as an engineer.

He started a business from scratch which was successful in a small way and would have been much more so if it had not been for two of his characteristics, one of them by no means bad and the other that finally laid waste his life.

He was uninterested in money beyond achieving a degree of material comfort; he was immune to greed. In the modern world this is no small virtue; he was completely untempted by the prospect of ever-more extravagant levels of consumption.

The quality that finally undid him was his intolerance of any human relationship of equality. He could not support that anyone should be his equal. Even the most trivial of conversations was for him a matter of establishing a hierarchy, with him at the top of it. The only question he ever asked himself was Humpty Dumpty's: who's to be master? And it had to be him.

It may seem strange in the circumstances that he did not see in the making of money the means to power, all the more so as he was, in theory at any rate, a Marxist. But in fact he was content to exert his power and domination over a small circle of people around him, rather than over larger numbers of those whom he could not see and with whom he had no contact. He needed a few actual human beings to dominate concretely: power in the abstract was of no interest to him.

The result was that he never had a friend. A consuming urge to dominate is not

propitious to friendship; his only untroubled relationships were with people of patently low intelligence. All others he saw as a threat; he feared, disliked and avoided anyone who knew more than himself, and if he met such a person he pretended to superior knowledge. This therefore kept his acquaintance small, short and superficial; and it is sad to relate that when he died, no one mourned or missed him. His years had been lived in vain; and if he had tormented many people during its long course, he was also a tormented, a self-tormented, man himself. It never occurred to him that, by bringing happiness to others, you bring happiness to yourself; or if it did, he was unable to act on the knowledge.

There was a corollary to his urge to domination: an inability to praise unreservedly, and this inability inhibited his pleasure even in small things, which he could never admit. He honed in on faults or deficiencies, often imaginary, more accurately than any drone so far developed. A soup or other dish was always lacking in some ingredient or other, or alternatively contained too much of such an ingredient. Even for politeness' sake he could not say that something was delicious or beautiful and leave it at that: he had to add a commentary on how it could have been better, if only this or that had been added or subtracted. He did so with the air of a man of the most refined taste, which he certainly was not, and who was so attached to truth that he had to speak his mind: privately, though, he was almost totally indifferent to aesthetics. He believed in Marxist use-value in the most literal sense. A rubber band was for him superior to Rembrandt.

I thought the inability to praise unique to my father until I unexpectedly came across an almost perfect analysis of it in the character sketches that the painter, Sir Joshua Reynolds, wrote about some of his eminent friends, including the poet, playwright and doctor, Oliver Goldsmith:

> It must be confessed that whoever excelled in any art or science, however different from his own, was sure to be considered by him as a rival. It was sufficient that [the rival] was an object of praise, as if he thought that the world had but a certain quantity of that commodity to give away, and what was bestowed upon others made less come to his share.

That was my father exactly: just as his Marxism caused him to believe in the zero-sum nature of an economy, despite the evident untruth of this as

exemplified by his own life and career, so he believed it was with praise and merit: the more for someone else, the less for him. He was like a critic who would say that because Durer was a great painter Chardin could not have been such.

In Goldsmith, apparently (at least according to Reynolds), the trait was harmless, almost innocent:

> This odious quality, however, was not so disagreeable in him as it generally is in other people. It was so far from being of that black malignant kind which excites hatred and disgust, that it was, from its being so artless and obvious only ridiculous.

I could not see the innocence of it in my father. Incessant carping about things he didn't care about in the least caused distress to others and brought him no joy: and as a result of observing him I resolved never to complain of small things, a resolution, like most resolutions, imperfectly kept, but nonetheless still present to this day in my mind.

To be told, then, that I strongly resembled my father was not altogether pleasing to me. But quite apart from any disagreeable characteristics he might have transmitted to me, there was the realisation that one's destiny is not entirely of one's own devising. One is dealt a hand in life that is seldom the hand that one would have wished. Habit forms character, and one can choose one's habits; but basic temperament is probably innate, and to a large degree inherited.

From this, people are apt to conclude that human freedom is an illusion. Because all kinds of things are beyond our choice – intelligence, height, and many others, I hardly need enumerate them – we think, though only when dissatisfied with our lot, that our lives were plotted from birth. It was written in our stars, our genes and our circumstances that we should not be heroes of stage and screen, or mathematical physicists, or Olympic athletes; therefore we were destined to turn out as we do.

I think this is false because it mistakes the nature of infinity. Infinity minus one is infinity still. People make the same mistake when they suppose that rules of grammar constrain free expression because they limit what can be said by prohibiting certain constructions. But this does not in the least reduce the

number of things that can be said, which remains infinite. To prevent me from becoming *x* does not force me to become *y*.

My father was a dogmatist, and I have inherited the tendency. When my father pronounced on the soup – too salt, not salt enough – he did not do so as a man expressing his personal taste, that he would like it to have more or less salt, but as a man expressing a truth universal for mankind. Anyone of the slightest intelligence and honesty would have to agree with his pronouncement. There was an objective criterion by which he judged the soup and which depended not at all on his preference; his judgment was impartial and intellectual rather than merely gustatory. He lived in a permanent sitting of the Supreme Court with one judge on the bench, namely himself.

This raises a problem that I have still not resolved in my mind, and I doubt now that I ever shall. Whenever I say that a work of art is good, or something is beautiful, I am not merely reporting on my state of mind – or at least, that is not what I hope and think that I am doing. True enough, I can hardy say that such and such a work of art is good without revealing something about my state of mind. I could, I suppose, just about say that it was good but that I didn't like it; but I could not say that it was good and deny it any qualities whatever that I found valuable in a work of art.

But when I say that it is good I am not merely saying, or I hope that I am not merely saying, that it produces a certain reaction in me. I think or hope that I am saying something about what inheres in the work itself, just as my father thought that the wrong degree of saltiness inhered in the soup and depended not merely on his estimate.

The critic can, and indeed must (for such is his function), elucidate the beauties and deficiencies of a work of art, make manifest its deeper meanings, and so forth. He does so using evidence and rational argument, and obviously believes his interpretations to be true, or at any rate more true than any other; I have a whole shelf of books on *Hamlet*, for example, the authors of which have exercised much ingenuity and even brilliance in producing, and which they must have believed advanced knowledge. But in the end, the critic produces no argument or evidence that compels assent. Though you throw subjectivism out with a pitchfork, yet it always returns.

Dogmatism is the reaction of those who want to know best but suspect that the metaphysical foundations of their supposed knowledge are shaky. Ambiguity disturbs them: how can there be rational criticism, for example, founded on argument and evidence, when at the same time there is no disputing taste? The solution to the tension is to stand behind a stockade of indubitable truth.

For such people, the search for certainty is much more important than the search for truth. I know a man, an eminent writer, who has changed his opinion many times in his long life, often by 180 degrees, but never admits to having done so. More to the point, he has held every successive opinion with a kind of angry intransigence, his certainty being to him what its grin was to the Cheshire cat. The opinions change, but the certainty is left behind. Challenges to that certainty by people of another opinion make him turn red with rage: they do not merely differ from him in opinion, they are attacking him personally. He comes across as a bigot — a well-informed bigot, but a bigot nonetheless. It is not true that bigotry is the exclusive province of the ignorant and stupid; there is the clever and well-informed variety as well, which is the more dangerous because the less easily recognised.

I do not exclude myself from these remarks. When someone expresses an opinion that is very different from my own, I often feel a mounting tension, though the subject may be one that, if I am honest with myself, is of little importance or consequence to me. Certainly it cannot harm me that someone thinks differently from me about it; and yet my heart begins to beat wildly, and I am sure that my blood pressure has risen. I feel an excitation, I tell myself to keep calm but I don't succeed; my hand shakes; I want to interrupt, to shout. I am not defending truth, but my opinion. Generally I succeed in controlling myself, but occasionally I do not, especially when my interlocutor is young. I immediately feel ashamed of myself afterwards; I even feel ashamed that, at my age, I am still so little capable of detachment.

I am indeed my father's son.

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