

Requiem for Michael: The True Cost of Borderline Personality Disorder

by [Douglas W. Texter](#) (March 2020)



Self Portrait, Oskar Kokoschka, 1913

The child is the father of the man –William Wordsworth.

1.

My heart broke for the second time on February 6, 2019.

His mother's voice sounded dead and far away: "Please listen. Michael killed himself. I don't expect a call back or anything. But given the role you played in their lives, you needed to know."

And that was it, all there was. But, of course, there was more. There always is.

2.

Although I teach English at a small college and have read a lot of American literature, I have never been much of a Hemingway fan. The problem with Papa, apart from his almost staccato sentences, is his conception of manhood. I've been to Pamplona, but I've never run the bulls. I don't think fighting in a war makes one more of a man. Frankly, I have always thought Faulkner the better writer, richer in terms of his treasure chest of priceless sentences that serve as kind of specie of the human condition, closer to the chaos and flux whirling at the center of people.

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There has been, however, one exception to my dislike of Hemingway's work. When I was a little boy, an only child, my parents allowed me stay up late in the summers and watch television. One hot night, when the mosquitos banged into the window screens and the street lamp on Lake Cliff Drive hummed, I watched George C. Scott play Thomas Hudson, an artist and the divorced father of three sons. In the filmic version of Hemingway's *Islands in the Stream*, set in the late 1930s in Cuba, Hudson spends a summer with three sons from different mothers. Because I had a very good relationship with my own father, Hudson's love for his sons seemed appropriately tender and, paradoxically, incredibly masculine. Of course, this being a Hemingway novel, there was the requisite man vs. nature conflict. Hudson's youngest son stays strapped into a seat, fighting to land a marlin for about five hours. The boy's hands actually bleed. Hudson loved and respected the boy enough to allow him to fight his own battle with the fish.

The story ends a few years after the summer Hudson spends with the sons. He receives a cable telling him that the oldest boy, who had gone to England and joined the RAF, had been shot down and killed at the beginning of the war. I was haunted by Hudson's loss even when I was a child. *Islands in the Stream* has been for me one of those tales that softly, almost silently shaped me and told me what was sad, what right, and what wrong in the order of nature. And the tale also told me, unfortunately, what was to come.

3.

Michael, nine years old, entered the foyer of my apartment building on the back of his mother. Lynn put him down, and I introduced myself to him. We shook hands. I liked him. Short and thin for his age, Michael looked kind of goofy. He had a great smile. Over the course of the next four years, I would get to know Michael and his brother, Joel. A few months after I met Michael, he and his brother were, as they liked to call it, camping out on the balcony of my apartment in Minneapolis. They blew up some air mattresses that I had bought and spent the warm, muggy evening giggling and screwing around.

4.

In the summer of 1973, I walked up to my father and said, "I have a question."

My dad, always patient and willing to talk to me about almost anything, said, "Sure. What's up?"

"Well," I said. "There's a Mother's Day. Isn't there?"

"Yes."

"And there's a Father's Day, too. Isn't there?"

“Yes.”

“But there isn’t a Boys’ day. Is there?”

My father smiled. “No, there isn’t. But there should be. I’ll tell you what. We’ll celebrate Boys’ Day every year.”

That summer began a tradition that my father and I observed until I left for college in 1986 and that he and I talked about fondly almost until the time he died in 2006. Boys’ Day wasn’t spectacular. The holiday simply allowed time for my father and me just to enjoy each other’s company. We went fishing one year (and, no, he didn’t make me fight a marlin until my hands bled). Another year, we bought a K-mart raft and paddled around Lake Edinboro for a few hours, mostly in circles. A third year, we went to the local amusement park, Waldemeer, and rode the gondolas through the Wacky Shack.

The point of Boys’ Day wasn’t to aim for anything special. It was simply to spend time together.

5.

“Hey, guys,” I said one evening to Michael and Joel when their mother worked a night shift, or at least that’s what I was told, and they were staying over at my apartment. “Have you ever heard of Boys’ Day?”

The boys shook their heads. I explained it to them. And we celebrated our first Boys' Day together at the Mall of America in suburban Minneapolis. We all went to the Lego store, and I explained to them how I had always been upset that I had been too old for the pirate ship set. Then we had lunch, and while Joel hung out, I took Michael on the vertical drop in the center of the indoor amusement park in the mall. Michael loved the drop while my stomach did summersaults.

Boys' Day had been a smashing success for a second generation.

6.

When I was eleven, Mrs. Dolan sent me to the principal's office for fighting. I went down to the office. The principal sat at his desk. I took a deep breath and said, "Hi, Dad."

I told him what happened. Pat Brooks and I had taken a few swings at each other over the honor of a 11-year-old who looked about 19. My dad listened calmly as I sat in the seat across the desk from him. The first thing he said was interesting. "Doug, Laura doesn't have any honor. Pick your battles wisely." Obviously, I never learned that lesson. Then he smiled and said, "Did you get a good punch in?" He didn't even seem upset. Finally, he sighed and said, "So, you're my kid. And both the teacher and the students will be looking for your blood. You and Pat have to stay after school for five nights. Don't worry. I'll give you a ride home."

7.

“He has the profile of a lone shooter,” the armed security officer said of Michael. I sat next to his mother at a school crisis team meeting. “Do you have guns in the house?” the cop asked.

“I’m a former Greenpeace activist. What do you think?” We were at the meeting because Michael had threatened to kill another child when they got into a fight. Michael had said he was being bullied. “Look, he’s only ten years old,” I said.

“He’s really dark,” one of the teachers said.

“A lot of people are dark,” I replied, trying to defend Michael and keep him out of the clutches of the mental health industry, which I had seen destroy a lot of lives. I told them about Richard Paul Russo, a science fiction writer I had studied with who wrote stories that had babies hanging from meat hooks. I also know that Russo plays in a slow pitch softball league with his Lutheran pastor. I also told them about Orson Scott Card, who wrote *Ender’s Game*. I studied with Card in 2009 for a week at the University of Southern Virginia. Card writes about pre-teens destroying entire worlds. But he’s also a Mormon. Lots of people have dark sides. Most of us do. It’s how we view people’s darkness, and how we help them to develop their light, that determines the outcomes of their lives.

Parents teach their children how to live, or in the case of Michael’s mother, how to die.

8.

It was about ten o'clock at night. I sat at my desk in the bedroom of my new 14th floor apartment in downtown Minneapolis. The lights of the city winked and blinked. I was teaching piles of credits. For the first time since I had left my childhood home, I was living reasonably well. I had the computer on. Facebook displayed itself. The message bell chimed. I took my feet down from my desk and sat up straight so I could type. I looked at the message. It was Lynn.

"How are you doing, Sweetpea?" I typed.

"I want to kill myself."

I took a deep breath. Talking someone out of suicide on Facebook is a genre of writing all unto itself. How do you show optimism and concern within a three-inch wide window? Doing so certainly isn't easy. I mustered up all my writing ability. "Why would you want to do that?"

The message popped back: "I'm worthless."

A thought crossed my mind, and I wrote: "Not to me you're not. Have you taken your medication, Sweetpea?"

“Not today.”

“You have to be consistent. Why don’t you come over after your shift? You can sleep here.”

“I love you.”

One of the things I later learned was that people with borderline personality disorder can’t really love you in a sustained way because there doesn’t exist much of a stable self beneath the exterior shell of what you think is their personality. It’s hard for someone with borderline to sustain love for anybody, especially themselves. This borderline inability to sustain love or even like can wreck relationships, but what it does to children is lethal.

9.

In the mid-1970s, the YMCA in Erie, PA, innovated by covering its outdoor pool with a blow-up mushroom. Well, it wasn’t really a mushroom; it was a huge piece of white canvass that covered the pool in the winter. Every September, the YMCA would inflate the bubble. A long hallway extended from the main building of the Y to the bubbled pool. In the dark winter nights that came early on the Great Lakes, my father would take me swimming. I loved the ritual of going to the Y: paying for our pass, putting our clothes in little metal baskets, walking up the long hallway toward the revolving door that allowed egress to the pool. And then my father and I would swim around in the super-warmed water on a winter night. I

would splash him and practice underwater handstands. In very good shape, my dad would swim a few laps. Sometimes he would chat with a teacher or a neighbor who also happened to be swimming. These nights swimming were among the many small acts of father-son bonding engaged in during a childhood that was almost idyllic.

10.

“Penalty Box!” Joel yelled. “Doug, put Michael in the penalty box! He tried to drown me!” Michael, Joel, and I were at the 4th floor indoor pool at my apartment building in Minneapolis. The wind howled outside. Snow piled up on the balcony.

“Penalty Box!” I shouted, doing my best authoritative voice. “Michael, out of the pool and to the penalty box. Three minutes in the penalty box. And, Joel, stop being so easy to drown.” An only child, I didn’t really have a very clear understanding of the dynamics of brothers. It took me a while to understand that Michael, about thirteen months older than Joel, was the aggressor. Michael reluctantly climbed out of the pool and sat on a bench while Joel swam around, enjoying himself. After the penalty box punishment was completed, Michael cannon-balled back into the pool and proceeded to try to drown his brother. After about 20 minutes more of this fraternal Ricky and Lucy routine, I shouted, “Out of the pool, gentlemen. To the bubbly.”

“To the bubbly,” the boys echoed me. The bubbly was a blue bottomed hot tub next to the pool. Joel went to the wall switch and cranked up the hot tub motor, which burbled into

life. The boys and I walked down into the tub and soaked. As we gently floated and watched the snow swirl outside the window, I thought about my time in a pool with my father 30 years earlier.

11.

My parents bought me a trombone when I was about ten. To say that I was awful in terms of my playing is an understatement. However, my mother thought it important that I learn how to play a musical instrument. So, from the age of 10 to the age of 18, I played the trombone rather badly in an elementary school ensemble, an afterschool band when I was in Catholic grade school, and in the Cathedral Prep Marching and Concert Band. My father and mother were very dutiful band parents, coming to all my concerts and field shows. They also put up with my horrible practicing every day. I have to say that although I was never very good, the band provided me with a love of music that I have to this day. The experience also taught me that a good father goes to a kid's events.

12.

I sat in the darkened elementary school auditorium with Joel and the boys' mother as we listened to the junior-high band play. Michael tooted his trumpet. Everybody sounded pretty off key. But that wasn't the important thing. Rather, it was the fact that he was making music. And he had an audience.

13.

In August of 2010, I was driving on the trans Canadian highway in Nova Scotia, somewhere near Halifax. The phone was ringing. I picked it up. It was Michael's mother. "I'm at the drugstore. I don't have enough for my prescription. I'm losing it. I'm having an episode."

"OK," I said. "Let me pull over." I pulled to the side of the road. Tandem trucks roared by me, making the car shake. I dug out my wallet. "Can you put the pharmacist on the phone. How much is it?"

"150 dollars," an educated voice said.

Psychiatric medications are expensive as well as ineffective. "OK, can I read you my credit card number?" I did so. "Can you put Lynn back on?"

"OK, sweetpea," I said. "Make sure you take the meds."

"You're so great. I love you." I thought to myself: today you do

14.

"I didn't see her do it," I told the Child Protective Services worker who stood in our apartment in Orlando. Michael had run

away shortly after we had all moved to Florida so that I could take a job at Full Sail University. Lynn had taken Michael to a children's counselor at the University of Central Florida. I had kind of wondered if that had been a mistake. It had. Michael had told the therapist, a mandatory reporter, that Lynn had hit him.

What I did see her to do was scream at him when the police had returned him. "You little shit," she had said.

"Easy, Lynn," I said. "He's back and safe. That's the important thing."

What worried me more than the brief, relatively benign encounter with Florida CPS was that Michael, when the police found him, had given them some weird name when they had asked him who he was. Something seemed really wrong with Michael, something beyond what I knew how to deal with.

15.

When I was a little boy, my principal father had as one of his responsibilities ordering and obtaining hand-painted signs for the doors of new teachers. I would always ask to go along with my dad when he picked up the signs at Al's Sign Shop. Al was a convicted felon who had turned his life around and opened the shop in the late 60s. It wasn't that I wanted to see Al. Rather, I wanted to go to the sign shop and say hello to Joe.

A six foot long alligator who lived during the day in a pen in the back, Joe would be released at night to patrol the shop, which, interestingly enough, never had a break in. While my dad would talk signs with Al, I would go to the back of the shop and say hello to Joe, who would always open and close his mouth in greeting to me.

16.

As we all drove around the Florida swamps, Joel asked me, "Do you think Joe is here?"

"Yeah," Michael said. "Maybe he retired to Florida."

Whenever we drove by an alligator, Michael would roll down the window. Joel would shout, "Is that you, Joe? Do you remember Doug?"

17.

The property manager in Florida was talking to me on the phone. "What's his name?"

"Michael," I said.

"Yes, Michael. He was unplugging lines to air conditioners.

The maintenance men saw him.”

I thought: Jesus, what have I gotten into?

I got off the phone and talked to Michael: “Did you do this?”

“No,” he said. I wasn’t sure whether I believed him or not. But he was a child. So, I took his side because somebody needed to. Right or wrong, he was with me.

The following week I retained legal counsel, who verbally slammed the property manager to let us out of the lease, and we moved to a better apartment. After the incident, I talked to Michael. “Dude, you have to be more careful. Someday, you’re going to get into a jam I can’t get you out of.” When we all moved into the new apartment, I heaved a sigh of relief. Everything was going to be fine. Smooth sailing seemed to be ahead. I couldn’t have been more wrong.

18.

“I hate you. I never want to see you again.”

“How did we get here, Sweetpea?” I asked. “Six weeks ago, you said if I ever died, you would never want to be with anyone again. What’s changed?”

"I hate you. I don't even want to be in the same room with you." This was the second time Lynn had split me black. Splitting is a common phenomenon with borderlines. All of us have good and bad qualities. A borderline can't see shades of gray. People in the borderline's life are either all good or all bad. And because the borderline doesn't have a stable sense of self, the people in their lives shift from saints to devils and back again. This shifting is called splitting. Being split white means one is viewed as a saint. And being split black means that one is seen as Satan.

I think at that point my trust in the therapy industry completely evaporated. I had paid for two years of Imago Couples Counseling for us. I had done some therapy myself. I had paid for us to go to an Imago Couples' weekend. And I had paid for a supposedly qualified counselor to do DBT with Lynn. None of it had worked. And all told, I probably racked up twenty grand in counseling bills and drug expenses for Lynn.

None of it had worked, mostly because none of it is really any good.

19.

"She's cheating on you," Michael said. He and Joel and I were eating at Shake and Steak on Colonial Avenue near Union Park in Orlando. Lynn had announced that she was leaving. She was penniless, so I paid for a moving van to take her and the boys back to Minnesota. "My mother is a slut," Michael said. I sighed. God, this was painful. "Listen, Michael, you're thirteen. I can't have this kind of conversation with you. I

can't talk about her with you."

"Without you around," he said. "Things will be worse for us. You always say, 'Lynn, take it easy.'" That was the last conversation I ever had with Michael.

"Without you around." The words haunt me.

20.

After the summer Hemingway's Thomas Hudson spent with his boys, the artist, in addition to painting, took up U-Boat hunting in a location not that terribly far from Central Florida. Not finding many U-boats to hunt off the coast of Cocoa Beach in the summer of 2013, I became the secretary of Amnesty International Group 519. In addition to teaching full time, I worked on our death-penalty abolition project and oversaw the sending of over 1500 birthday cards to death row prisoners. I also intervened with the warden of Florida State Penitentiary on behalf of a hunger striker and lobbied congressional offices on behalf of refugees. Our little group won the Hironaka Award from Amnesty International. I also took up exercise in a serious way and dropped the hundred pounds I had put on stress eating in graduate school and with Lynn. I wrote for a *Voice for Men*, published three stories, and reviewed science fiction short stories for *Tangent Online*. Somewhat fractured after four years with someone with borderline, I began practicing Buddhist meditation at a local Kadampa Center and renewed my commitment to Catholicism by participating in two Christ Renews His Parish workshops, and I worked through a twelve-step program for codependency.

I also engaged in another activity, which, interestingly, connected me deeply with both Michael and my own father.

21.

I waggled the rudder of the glider, and the Cessna headed down the field. The tow rope grew taut, and we shot forward. The glider became airborne quickly. As we ascended, my instructor asked me to box the wake. I dropped the aircraft down through the turbulent air created by the wake of the tow plane. Bump, bump, bump. I thought about how much Michael would have enjoyed this experience. I reached the point at which the bottom of the box was formed. I gently guided the aircraft over to the left and was soon below and to the left of the towplane as we continued to ascend. Up and up we went. I pulled the stick back and climbed: level with the towplane and then above and to its left. Then I swung us to the right, dropped us down and directly behind the towplane again. Michael would have been hooting with enjoyment. I had hoped that someday I might be able to take him up.

When we reached an altitude of 3500 feet, I cleared the airspace and disengaged us from the tow plane. The Cessna banked hard to the left. I banked hard to the right. After a few seconds, the roar of the towplane engine ceased, and we were alone in the air. After four years of suicide threats, angry landlords, crisis team meetings, ridiculous therapy sessions, and painful cheating episodes, it felt so good to have to worry only about not crashing the glider.

After about twenty minutes, the instructor told me to find a cloud base. The barometer, an instrument detecting rising air, trembled. I put us into a tight turn. We corkscrewed up and up and up, over 3000 feet. Off our right wing, an eagle thermalled with us. I thought about how much Michael would have loved flying.

I also thought of my father, who had been in the US Army Air Corps between 1946 and 1949. When I was a boy, he had told me stories of the classic airplanes of the golden age of military aviation. A few months after he had joined the Air Corps, he had found himself in the fuselage of a C-47 that had become lost in a snowstorm in the Rockies and was running out of fuel. The pilot had told the crew chief to get all of the boys into their parachutes. The crew chief was actually opening the hatch. Wind was rushing into the plane. Fortunately for my father, the pilot found some clear air and a cornfield to land in. Later, my dad told me about what it had been like to ride in the nosecone of a B-17.

Flying made me feel closer to my father. But it also made me feel closer to Michael. I sometimes I thought it would have been so nice to have been able to fly the three of us through the skies of Central Florida.

22.

“He hanged himself in an in-patient treatment center,” the email that came with an invitation to his funeral said.

“Without you around.”

I never, ever would have let him be placed in an in-patient unit. Another stunning victory for the mental health industry, a conglomeration of intellectual butchers, charlatans, and con men.

I thought about going to the funeral, but I didn't really want to see Lynn. I would have loved to have seen Joel, but I knew that there was another man in his life. And I didn't want to confuse Joel by a sudden reappearance. So, I declined and stayed home. I also didn't want to go a celebration of Michael's life. He hadn't really had a life yet, and those kinds of events seem dishonest to me.

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Lynn and whoever she's with today couldn't afford funeral expenses, and so they used Go Fund Me to pay for his cremation. I gave some money to that effort. I had a Mass said for him, and I gave a 500-dollar gift to my local library in his honor. I wept openly at home when I thought of both the belt around Michael's neck and the flames consuming his body.

“Can I have a few minutes with him?” I asked.

“Sure,” the doctor said. He stepped out of my father’s room and shut the door.

“Hey, Old Boy,” I said, holding my father’s hand. He had dropped into a coma. But he squeezed my hand, so I knew that he heard me. “Thank you for everything you’ve done for me. I’ll make sure that Mom is taken care of.”

He squeezed my hand back.

I was sad a few weeks later when the priest said, “Ashes to ashes and dust to dust.” It was a beautiful October afternoon in Northwestern Pennsylvania. I had picked a grave overlooking Lake Erie. The air was brisk and chilly, but the day was beautiful.

While I was sad, the death of my father sat squarely in the order of nature. Everything in my family had turned out about the way it was supposed to. I was burying my father.

He wasn’t burying me.

The real cost of borderline personality disorder is not paid by the person with the condition. It's not even fully paid by the partners. Of course, there are the cheating, the mood swings that make Nazi-Soviet relations of the 1930s look downright stable, and sometimes false allegations and even physical abuse. The real cost is paid by the children. My mother and father were together forty-nine years, until my father died. Although my mom and dad had a mild Ricky and Lucy act going on, my childhood and adolescence were pretty stable. The bills were paid. The house was clean. I could study. There was money for activities and, eventually, for college. Dad didn't hit Mom, and Mom didn't fuck Greek sailors.

Michael changed houses about as often as his mother changed men. That revolving door of guys would make anybody unstable. And with every change of a boyfriend or partner, a new story would be told about how awful the last one was.

The best way to describe this phenomenon is to refer to an old movie called *Hotel Sahara*. When the Germans occupy the hotel, the inn keeper flies the German flag, plays "*Deutschland Uber Alles*" on the gramophone, and mounts a picture of Adolph Hitler on the wall. When the British push out the Germans, the swastika comes down and the Union Jack goes up. "Rule Britannia" plays while the hotel keep nails up a picture of Winston Churchill. In the final scene, after the Germans are kicked out again, a picture of FDR goes up as the Stars and Stripes are hoisted over Hotel Sahara.

A borderline is the consummate switcher of alliances. The shifts are so complete that it's almost as if the last occupying force is written out of history in an Orwellian fashion. Oceania has always been at war with Eurasia. The

trouble, of course, is that the children witness this constant rewriting of history. What this pen wielding does to their own life stories must be profoundly disturbing.

In my less charitable moments, I remember all the times I cheered up Lynn and talked her out of suicide. I wonder whether perhaps I saved the wrong person. Maybe if I had let her do it, Michael might have had a fighting chance at an adulthood. Perhaps I had betrayed him by saving her.

25.

Six months after Michael killed himself, I was speed walking in the desert at Bitter Lake National Wildlife Refuge in New Mexico, where I live now. It was a beautiful day. An eagle flew above me. As I walked along, the sweat evaporating from my body, a deer stopped alongside the trail. Over a distance the deer and I stood stock still and stared at each other. Then, young and strong, with its tail bouncing, the deer ran off into the shimmering heat of the desert. I thought of Michael and regretted that he never had the chance to come to the desert and witness the raw nature here. I continued my walk and reflected on the beautiful and ephemeral nature of life.

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