

I Want to Sing for My Father



I work as a psychologist with children and families at the Delaware Valley Mental Health Foundation. I practice family therapy as a potential tool for parent/children liberation. Recently I was able to work with my parents (therapists Harold and Ruth Greenwald) as a family treating families. Psychology and psychotherapy have always been part of my world as the child of a psychotherapist. Right now I am enjoying and appreciating the difficulties of starting a family with my wife Wendy Forman and our son Abraham Chaim Forman/Greenwald.

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Several years ago I was a participant in a men's group in Berkeley, California. It was a leaderless group and often consisted of getting stoned and seeing where the discussion would lead us. On one particular night the topic brought up was fathers and father-son relationships.

Virtually every man repeated the theme of fathers who were unavailable emotionally who set impossibly high standards of achievement and failed to provide realistic humane models for male-female relationships. The tone was self-righteous and complaining and I did not particularly want to join in, when I found myself utterly overwhelmed by a sense-memory. Suddenly I was transported back to a hospital room in Baltimore, where, at Johns Hopkins in 1962, I had open heart surgery. I was coming to after post-operative hemorrhaging and I focussed on my father standing there. My sense impressions were first of his breath heavy with the smell of pipe tobacco. Then I noticed that he was crying, that I had never seen him cry before, and I felt within me a strength and tenderness that felt like a direct connection and link. It was a link to life—strong, pungent, tender and painful. When I returned from Maryland to California and that room, I tried to convey what I had seen: to persuade my peers that their fathers must have shared a similar depth of feeling but had not had such an opportunity to express it. As a family therapist now, I work from what I experience as the natural depth of commitment between the generations.

It has been difficult to differentiate myself from my father. Difficult, because I have chosen as my life's work a field where he has some renown. Difficult, because he is dynamic, forceful, and has his own way of doing therapy. Difficult, because it is a field where one's loyalty is often to a par-

ticular personality; one is a Freudian, Jungian, or disciple of a more current guru. Difficult, too, because as a child I was jealous of the intimacy and warmth that emanated from his office in our home. But all this difficulty has been increased by feeling this debt, this existential debt from Baltimore. If I owe my life to him—both its creation and its continuance—do I offer him my own life so that he will attain immortality? No, of course not. Every father wishes for immortality through his sons. But every son faces the responsibility of which aspects of his father's life he will make his own, thus choosing how that immortality will be expressed. I look at my father and implore: "I want to be loyal, but not to that particular quality." I look at my infant son and hope: "Don't continue that trait of mine; reject it as I wish I would and let it die when I do."

As a son I want to be loyal—to sing for my father. As a father I hope to grow beyond my father, in the age-old tradition, to give him what he missed. I was able to bridge many of my personal gaps of generation, roles and realms with the birth of my son. He was born at home. I cut the cord and moments after his birth held him to my chest. My heart, often a trifle irritable, felt calm like never before as I held that tiny person. I called my father and with my son softly gurgling, told him, "Dad, we've decided to name him Abraham, after your father."

Postscript: The problem now is that Abe is so delightful that I have passed from being Harold Greenwald's son to Abraham Chaim Forman-Greenwald's father!



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