

CHAPTER 7

A NEXT LEVEL OF MATURATIONAL CHALLENGE

I began to have very bad depressions in High School; I don't remember having had them earlier than that. My parents never noticed them, of course, and I never saw any reason to tell them about how I felt, as we never talked (exchanged information). And it would have been pointless to attempt to. It might seem remarkable that such dark sensations would appear at a specific point in time, but adolescence *is* the time when Nature taps you on the shoulder and gives you a new puzzle to solve, and gives you some new hormones and motivations to get through. It's Nature's gift and it has nothing to do with what your parents want or what you want, or what things were like previously. Teenagers become . . . uh . . . difficult. They're expressing *needs* that they are starting to feel but that they don't have words for yet, at the same time that their sense of what and who they were is losing its holding power.

The biggest task in "growing up" is to separate from the parents . . . as a necessary part of becoming "you". There are always frictions, tugs-of-war, clashes of wills, etc. in that separation; it's been described as being like pulling two wads of taffy apart. This "existential world of conflicting parent-child needs" includes, of course the growing into sexual identity. You know: the mysterious world of what the opposite sex -- and your own sex -- and sex in general are all about . . . because now, for the first time, *you're really interested in what they're all about*. This is not about diplomas, careers, success, etc. This is a different ballgame entirely. One could say that the teenage years (speaking metaphorically) are a bit like having a road crew showing up in your neighborhood and changing all the streets and street signs. One can think of this as a test/challenge that Nature places before you to deal with. I failed the test, I'm afraid; I failed to create or find distance between my parents and myself. Or to find any new parts of myself.

The starter kit for the go-signal of this new exploration includes the need for self-expression. For some degree of autonomy. To ask. To question. To say. To think. To do. To act out of one's own volition -- as I had tried to do in a minor way when at the age of two I refused to shit into the potty bowl and got badly beaten up for that. If there has been no room for any individual choices or expressions of anything, then the starter kit is out of gas. That was the case with me. I was entering a period of "adollescence" in which Nature was urging me to notice all the "dolls" around me . . . but . . . I didn't know what permission was. I'd never had any. And I certainly felt no right to explore . . . uh . . . what might be called the area of "spermission", if I can put it like that. I was developmentally stunted, and in high school I hit a developmental solid brick wall. Feelings were dangerous and mysterious. Females were dangerous and mysterious. It's an age for opportunities to explore shyness. But I felt too shy, tongue-tied, and afraid in the presence of girls of my age; they were friendly in mysterious ways that I had no way to respond to other than to hide. Furthermore, I'd never seen my parents behave in ways to help me make sense of what any of that is about; my parents had never modeled smiles, whispers, chuckles, a hand on a shoulder, etc. for me. But . . . my

new itches didn't go away. They really wanted to be scratched. And scratching those itches is, honestly, the strongest reason to talk with girls at that age. I hid from those itches.

Getting familiar with [the opposite] sex is part of the process of individuation, but it's a more complicated one than just saying "yes" or "no". It's a way of forming the idea that "I'm me, and you are you, and we're different, and that's o.k.". You just can't be you if you are not separate from another person. In one's earlier years saying "no" is a useful and necessary skill to learn. You start by saying "no" to the adults around you. In adolescence one has a similar but rather more complicated developmental task. Whereas previously you were developing the power of saying "no" you are now learning how to get along with someone else and finding out how to get them to say "yes" -- in any of a thousand ways. The impulse to bond with someone is a hell of an interesting challenge.

As I said, I hit a brick wall. How would I have had any idea of talking with girls? My mother had taught me that females have sharp claws. It didn't help, either that this all hit me just as my family had moved to San Diego -- where I began to go to a new school and I didn't know anybody. I mean, months-long friendships aren't the same as years-long ones. I'd gone to two schools for the previous three years, while living in a different city than the one those schools were in! So, no after-school friendships for me. Certainly one of that helped me to learn to interact with other kids. And the kids/friends I'd been going to school with in Mexicali: they were all now attending a next-level school in Mexicali and I had no contact with them. So: no friends in the new town, and no friends from the old town.

Another thing that had helped to gum up my gender-related awarenesses was that in Mexicali classes were segregated after the third grade. Some were for boys only and others for girls only, and one group had nothing to do with the other during school hours. For us young boys -- even the ones who had sisters -- the non-sister girls were like beings from another planet. We young boys would dare each other to *just go up to a girl and wink at her!* Oh, what thrilling young **MANLINESS** that showed!

Also, at the time, teachers there were allowed to use physical punishment and/or humiliations against unruly students. One of the things that one of my teachers did was to order any difficult young boy to stand in a corner *while wearing a skirt*. That was a serious humiliation. And the other guys would razz the punished kid mercilessly. Even being associated with girliness was fraught. So, between this and that and the other, while I was *cognitively* way ahead of most kids my age (I had great test scores), I was, as a teen-ager, more a seven-year-old both socially and personally. I only grew past that when I was in my forties and working with a therapist. And it really hadn't helped that I'd learned from early on to not approach my parents for any information or support of any kind. I felt *much* safer just hiding behind a book.

And speaking of books, the Mexican school system didn't provide books. The students had to buy their own; they'd give their teacher money for that year's books, and he or she would order them, and when they arrived we'd receive and use them. My sixth grade teacher, *Profesor* Roque, kept the money from his class. We never had any books that year. Interestingly, *professor* Roque was

my only male teacher in primary school; all my others were women. I guess he had a sense of entitlement. None of the women teachers lied to us or stole from us.

PRIMARY SCHOOL IN MEXICALI

Something else to consider regarding my having grown up in Mexico and lived the life of a young Mexican boy there, is that I lived that life from ages six to age fifteen. Those are important years. I attended first through sixth grade. I got a very good education there and I dearly loved [most of] my teachers (I had my first HUGE case of puppy love toward my third-grade teacher). The level of teaching was so much higher than that of the American school system that I got transferred into eighth grade, right after Mexican sixth grade but, as with the books I mentioned above, the Mexican school system itself was without resources. You can find roll-down maps of this country (or other places) in lots of American classrooms, but no Mexican classrooms had anything like that. So every time my class needed a map of Europe, or some other place, I would be asked to draw an outline of it (and sometimes add mountain ranges and rivers or other geographic features) on the blackboard during recess. I did it freehand, holding a map of Europe in my other hand. I did it quite accurately and proportionately. I could even say at a professional level. I was about ten or eleven when I was doing that.

I didn't know that I had an aptitude for such things. I just . . . uh . . . could do it. No one had ever commented on that to me. My parents occasionally said something nice about whatever I was doing, but those always felt perfunctory. They certainly never said a serious good word about all the models and things I put together, made, and carved. As far as drawing accurate maps on the blackboard, I just knew that I could do things like that; and I didn't know that my classmates couldn't. I imagined that my teacher picked me to draw those maps because she liked me. I could draw blackboard-sized maps because of my endless hours of practicing basic manual skills when I wasn't in school and while being pretty much completely ignored and neglected by my . . . uh . . . keepers.

UNEXAMINED TOPICS

One of the saddest things I remember is that when I was in High School in San Diego I would walk up and down our street, Celia Vista Drive, in the evenings, which were quiet. This was nowhere near downtown and there weren't traffic, etc. noises. I'd walk past the houses in the dark and I'd hear the sounds of people having dinner: knives and forks clinking on the plates, the clinking of glass, and so on. Our house never produced sounds like that. For one thing, dad frequently worked until very late, so he was not part of the dinner scene. But sounds such as other families made were things that whispered "family". Ours didn't. For that matter, this society has changed so much since those days that I don't think the sounds of flatware hitting dinner plates is heard by anyone now. That's a loss, I think.

Aside from not making dinner noises, one of the things my family never discussed was “tomorrow”. You know: what’s ahead of us, what we looked forward to, or planned, or desired, or in any way in the future . . . just as nothing was ever said about what was behind us. We lived as though every week was the only week we’d ever have, without any meaningful connection to the past or the future. My principal connection to the future was the next test I was going to take in school and knowing that there was a grade of school ahead of whichever one I was in . . . and maybe becoming a doctor at the end of all that because that was what my parents wanted. And, not ever having seen anything different, I accepted all of that as being how things were.

Not only were future and past events non-topics for conversation in our family, but so were Ideas. Ideas of any type. Zero. Zip. Nada. Not ever mentioned. Ditto current or even past events. Home reality did not include intellectual or social verbal life; there certainly wasn’t any for me outside of what I learned in school -- other than what I learned from reading incessantly. There was never any domestic *curiosity*. My parents were never curious about what I or my sister were up to. I learned about current events (such as the Korean War that was going on) by going to school, by reading the newspaper that we subscribed to, listening to the radio, etc.; but such things don’t provide a sense of culture, of family, or of belonging somewhere. Kids are curious. Most of the time dad left early in the morning and got back late in the evening. He never had time to discuss anything. I never saw him read a book or magazine. He worked all the time -- and I expect compulsively -- to distract himself from the dark stuff in his mind. We lived in Mexico for nine years and I have no reason to think that my dad ever knew the name of the Mexican President.

So, my young mind got geared to emptiness, isolation, and loss, early on. We subscribed to the Los Angeles Times newspaper in those days; it, like other newspapers then contained ads for exotic clubs that included photos of some of their scantily-clad female entertainers. They were innocent by today’s more pornographic standards, but interesting to a young mind such as mine was. There was one image of such a scantily-dressed dancer who I thought was the most beautiful female I’d ever seen . . . and I’ve never forgotten her image. But that was a long time ago and, on account of my unforgettable memory of her, I also carry an image of her aging over the years, and growing misshapen, and shrinking and wrinkling, and then dying. I’m sure she died long ago. And I feel sad about that. But I still retain the memory of how alluring she looked.

One thing that *was* nice was the rare occasions my parents invited friends to dinner; they were invariably other immigrants, and I remember the back-and-forth across the table in at least three languages. Those were, as far as I can remember, the only episodes of *enjoyment* that I ever experienced in my home -- even though I was the only kid in the room. The adults all chatted among themselves. Outside of that, though, there was no *enjoyment* in our household -- other than the enjoyment I felt when I looked at some of the images of scantily dressed showgirls in the newspaper, or ogling my dad’s hidden-away-but-found-anyway stash of nude-women-art-photography magazines. It was in that period that I discovered that toothpaste is not a good lubricant to use in masturbating. Trust me on this one.

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I came home from college one time wearing a peace symbol (do any of you remember those things? Well, Viet-Nam was happening, and there was a lot of student opposition to that war). When my parents saw that they both freaked out. They had learned that being identified or singled out as any kind of potential irritant or annoyance or, really, for any reason, was dangerous. Well, I can't blame them; they certainly had learned that lesson the hard way and, as I've been saying, we lived a life of considerable isolation and insulation.

Despite the fact that we never talked with each other about pretty much any matters at all except report cards and quasi-domestic things like that, our family certainly looked like a million other families. We lived in a house, or apartment, that had furniture in it . . . that looked fairly neat and tidy . . . and that we entered and left and then returned back into, every day. And we ate, and slept and stored our clothes in and washed them as needed. We had a car. And we dressed so that we looked "normal". But . . . we lived without a past or a future. They were never brought up. I have several memories of our moving from one country to another accompanied by only two suitcases full of possessions – one for each of my parents to carry. We carried our clothes with us. But that was all. No furniture. No art. No books. No keepsakes or heirlooms. No toys . . . or anything like any of that. The most portable things we had were the languages that we'd learned along the way . . . and we took these with us. I certainly did so. I like words. I can play fun games with them.

I want to add something else that will sound weird, but I do think it's true. It is that no matter what was going on in my life, I've always learned things. But in all the time that I knew my parents, I am not aware that they ever learned anything new at all. They were Stuck in Time. No "new things" were ever mentioned. Every day was a reality in and for itself. Like the movie *Groundhog Day*. Either that, or I'm just not remembering . . . but I don't think I'm wrong.

SURVIVING THE HOLOCAUST

My mother (more or less) survived the Holocaust with me, and is thus part of my story. She was a monster. This is not a whine; it is simply a neutral but apt description. She was once pretty accurately described as someone who wore dark glasses that were mirrors on the inside surfaces. Or, put in more clinical terms, she had a narcissistic personality, and had no capacity whatsoever for empathy toward anyone else. What she felt, she believed others felt. What she believed or thought, she imagined that others believed and thought; and if they didn't, something was wrong with them and they were crazy. Really. I don't know what she was like before the war; but what had been left of her after the war was about her, always her, and only her. And, underneath all that, she was a crabby and bitter human being. I feel sad in thinking about her in that way; I've been describing how I was brought up by a woman who had a Gordian Knot of P.T.S.D., fear, and murderous resentment inside of her. You might want to Google Gordian Knot. Amazingly, people in this country who knew her, or thought they knew her, liked her. She presented well. So did my father, for that matter. Underneath that neither one ever had any real friends they could be open with. I don't know if they had the capacity to be open, for that matter; I never saw that behavior. It was only when they walked

through our front door and came into the pressure cooker that was our home that the masks came off.

I never *quite* knew what my mother wanted; she loved you one day and complained about you the next. Dad could occasionally be very nice, and even when he wasn't his explosions were time-limited. But when he wanted anything he was THE BOSS, and a demanding one. As far as my mother was concerned, though, she was like invisible poison gas. Of course, that was all she could be, given the way my dad had colonized every cubic inch of air in the house. I tuned mom out as completely as I could, for many years; I went into a fugue state whenever she was near. I just shut down. I'd be having a phone conversation with her, and there'd be some kind of interruption in the middle of the conversation; or I'd go deal with something . . . and I'd forget that I'd been on the phone. Once, I forgot I was in the middle of a conversation with her and went to get a glass of water, or something like that, and I completely forgot that I was still in the middle of a conversation. I went and did something else, and she waited on the line for an hour and a half before hanging up. I don't remember this; I know it because my sister, who was there, told me about it. I still blank out sometimes when I'm very frightened or feel unsafe. It should also be a clue to you that she waited on the phone for an hour and a half. She had that level of blindness about, and need for, me. It was like she had nothing else in her life. Can you imagine any child who could survive such unspoken pressures all day long, all the time? Wouldn't you feel impelled to go out and buy a nice present for such a person, or make a check out to him or her in some large amount, just to make them feel better? Or, if that failed, to kill them?

All of his bad behaviors aside, my father was smart. He knew all kinds of things. But I never thought of my mother as being smart; she was, instead, cunning and manipulative. As I told you, she fed on me emotionally without ever suspecting that I needed to be nourished and not fed on. Her need was like the Grand Canyon, deep and overpowering. I don't think I ever actually knew my mother as a person. Whoever she might otherwise have been, in the time I knew her, she had what today's mental health people would have called a very unformed or regressed personality. And if she were alive today, and I met her, and we spoke about our lives, she would have been entirely incapable of thinking that she'd ever done *anything* wrong. She was adamant in saying that she had never made a mistake. May she rest in peace. She deserved better than the things that had made her the way she was. Incidentally, so did I.

I wish my father had found someone more satisfying. But then again, he didn't help matters given his personality and behaviors after the war. He was a brute and a rageful asshole with his family -- and a mostly o.k. guy in public. That's a tricky equation to balance if you have a family you're supporting. Having massive PTSD certainly didn't help. Neither was his lacking of some form of normal support group helpful. No people we lived among had the least idea about the Holocaust other than they may have seen newspaper headlines a few years back, when the world found out about the concentration camps. The humans we've lived among have always been blue-collar and lower-middle working-class people. My dad was better educated than anyone I ever recall having met, who knew him. He knew about war, history, famous doctors and generals, all kinds of stories, which hand to hold the knife and fork in, and how to pound a nail into a board without splitting it -- which can happen. We pretty much lived among people who knew sports scores, the

city streets, which restaurants to recommend, where to go fishing, their work, and who spoke only one language. It would take them a while to find Afghanistan or Denmark on a map, tell a kumquat from a kiwi-fruit, or even know much of the histories of their countries. And who didn't read books. You know: ordinary folks.

Dad was much more complicated than mom was. He was a scary monster whom I was very frightened of when I was young. But I've learned to appreciate the things that he had come through . . . just to not die. Now that I don't have to be terrified of him I can see that aside from his deficits he was also, in his own way, a giant who got through every day while pulling an awful lot of baggage . . . underneath which he still had intelligence, loyalty, and playfulness. He could, on the rare occasion, show kindness and warmth . . . but on the other hand I never saw him show any *sympathy* or *empathy* for anyone else. My dad once shared a bit of gossip with the rest of us: an American had gotten arrested in Tijuana, Mexico – I don't know what his crime was -- and he was put into their brutal prison system there. There he was gang-raped and sodomized to the point that his rectum ruptured. Dad told us that, and laughed. Somehow, I never saw the humor in that.

But I will say one thing about my father that's worth saying: he *never* complained about his past life. Or even the problems he was having in the moment. He never whined nor expressed feeling sorry for himself. Or apologized. Not even once. He did whatever he did; but he never once complained. Dad carried his baggage from Hungary to Austria to England to Cuba to Mexico and finally to the U.S., starting from scratch each time, and at every step providing for his family. And despite of what he had come through, my dad had it in him to occasionally be a bit playful; he could be delightful when he did that. It just never lasted long. May he rest in peace. He loved dogs. I hope there are a lot of dogs where he is now. And there, I hope he didn't get to meet his own parents, who really mistreated him. And as for his being reunited with my mom who died a few years ago. . . geez. I don't know. She complained and whined all the time. She had no playfulness in her whatsoever. And I don't recall ever having seen her *enjoy* herself, or actually stop to *appreciate* anything. Her life was unending drudgery and complaining. She couldn't have been much fun for dad to be with; he was an incredible brute and would not have allowed her to relax or enjoy anything. Much less supply enjoyment. I don't think I ever saw or heard him address his wife with any warmth or kindness, or even to compliment her or thank her for anything. He might have done so once or twice, but I'm unaware of anything like that. Well, you can undoubtedly tell from having read these paragraphs that I have mixed feelings about my father, even after all these years.

ONE SAD THING ABOUT MY FATHER

As you know by now, I have unresolvable opinions about my father; my feelings are a Gordian knot of anger, hatred, resentment, admiration, and even love for that badly damaged dude. Years later, at the end of a long stretch in which he and I didn't communicate, my father died. I went to view his body at the funeral home that was dealing with his remains. They'd done a good job with him and he looked merely asleep. I remember looking at him and being afraid that he'd wake up. I also clearly remember wishing, at that moment, that he were alive so that I could kill him. As I said, I've been very conflicted about him all my life.

I went to the seashore on the anniversary of my dad's death . . . to . . . uh . . . think about him and to say a more personal goodbye to him. I sat near the water and threw in some raw meat and some vinegar; I felt that these were good metaphors and symbols for what had been our relationship. I sat down, and thought, and I must have really thought deeply, because I sat there for 40 minutes that felt like only a minute and a half. Time went past me and I hadn't noticed that.

There was an incident that happened in the period during which we *were* speaking with one another, that I've always felt sad about. Dad called me up out of the blue one afternoon, and told me that he'd bought a car for me! All I had to do was go to the dealer's and pick the car up -- or pick the same kind of car up that was a color I liked better. I was quite surprised to be told this and I asked him what kind of car it was that he'd bought for me. It was a sports car. A zippy little two-seater. Well, that was the last thing I needed. If I were going to get a car I would have wanted and needed it to be something that had carrying capacity. You know: woods, grocery bags, guitars in their cases, friends. Anything. Or, in other words: everything a sports car couldn't.

I had trouble saying "no thanks". I'd never been sure of my ground with dad, and I prevaricated. I told him that I had to think. And it soon became clear to my dad that I wasn't going to accept this new sports car from him, and I could tell how greatly disappointed he was at my refusing his generosity. My sister, who was still living at home, later told me how badly dad felt about his failure to reach out to his son and make him happy. He really had wanted to just reach out. The problem was that dad had no idea of how to reach out. His method in anything was to have an idea and act on it come hell or high water. It never occurred to him to ask me what kind of a car I'd have liked. I would have told him, and the episode would have ended differently. I'm sad that he tried, and we failed. I think that dad was thinking about how things were when he was young; he'd had a motorcycle with a side-basket and he drove it around the city at high speeds, often with a girl in the basket. I think that he imagined that I'd feel just as thrilled as he had felt; but we failed at communication. He failed in the manner I just described, and I failed to tell him what I thought and how I felt; I didn't dare go against his wishes. I've always felt badly about this incident. But dad had made an attempt at reaching out; mom never ever did anything like that.

LIFE AT HOME

As a side note to my parents' state of mind, as well as their learned culture of upbringing of children, they never spoke to my sister and me as though we were people. They honest-to-God didn't know how to. They'd lost the capacity to speak with each other as people, too. From what I know, neither one of them had, when they were young, ever been treated as anything but objects or servants or annoyances. So how would they know to treat my sister and me as little *people*? And then, of course . . . there was the war.

I'm really not sure why I came along. What I mean by that is that in the 1930s Hungary did not have anything like "birth control". Sex is the most powerful human drive -- second only to the drive to survive -- that Nature has given us. Where there are humans there is always sexual activity.

And any country that has child-bearing age women will have more pregnancies than most couples want children from. So, I'm sure that there were people in Hungary who could be found who could deal with those problems. My mother got help from those people a bunch of times. She once told me that she'd had eleven or twelve abortions before I came along. She had trouble telling the same story in the same way more than once, and I don't know if she'd kept track of how many abortions she'd had.

I was surprised to hear about that, if only because I never thought of my parents as sexual beings. And given the post-war relationship they had it never occurred to me that they could possibly be attracted to one another; they never even did any friendly kissing or touching that I was ever aware of. Or anything like that. And, they never so much as mentioned anything about sex – with the single exception of mom's getting me a book about the birds and the bees, when I was 14. The book contained language that I had never heard or read; it took me a while, for instance, to understand what the phrase "*copulatory motions*" meant. I'm guessing that my parents had a lot of sex before the war got really bad, and that my mom got fertilized a lot. I don't know if my parents ever wanted children. Or maybe they were waiting until they could move into a larger apartment when they could afford that and also a child. I'm guessing; I have very little information about that part of their lives. Living-space-wise, my great-aunt Janka, whom I visited in Munich in the mid-1980s, lived in an apartment that consisted of one decent-sized room that was living room, dining room, bedroom, library, and everything else in one . . . and one small bathroom, one small closet, and one small kitchen. When I first entered that apartment I looked for other rooms and was surprised that there weren't any. But: if my parents had had more than just me there's a good chance that we would not have survived. We just barely did as it was.

In any event, mom got pregnant with me in August of 1943 . . . but I don't know why my mother didn't abort me too. I'm, guessing that Budapest was already in great turmoil because of the war (it had been going on for three years by then), and everything was getting more scarce and worse . . . and I guess abortionists were hard to find. I also wouldn't think that having a child in the middle of wartime would be any kind of priority for most people. But, for whatever reason, I was allowed to stay. It wouldn't make sense for me to think they'd have wanted me at all, under those circumstances. And, if so, then Adolf Hitler is partly responsible for my being alive!?!??? Talk about luck!

FROM HUNGARY TO ENGLAND . . . AND BACK . . . AND THEN BACK AGAIN.

As I had mentioned before, my parents had tried to leave Hungary in 1938; they traveled to England. By the late 1930s, before the Nazis stopped people from emigrating, everyone who could get out left that country. My parents had also tried, but were unsuccessful. They had gone to England hoping to find work so that they could remain there. But they failed in that. And, as I said earlier, my parents had liquidated everything they could and converted that into easily-transported jewelry. But they couldn't get a residence permit and they had to go back to Hungary. But before they did so, they entrusted their stash of jewelry to a man they'd befriended there, with the intent of

retrieving it as soon as they could. Well, as things turned out, my parents wouldn't see England again for ten years.