

MY FATHER WHO WAS ON EARTH

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I can tell you the stories others have told me about my childhood, or I can tell you the stories I remember myself. Telling you the stories I remember myself doesn't mean that these are more accurate or closer to the truth for memory is a strange device. Our bodies remember all that human beings have learned since creation. We grow, breathe, and live without any conscious decisions on our part or even knowledge of how we do it. Our minds seem more selective. Perhaps everything is there and it's just that we don't know how to access it. The mind is an inconsistent filter: it remembers minor and inconsequential events and yet allows the larger, life changing experiences to pass through like fog that seems substantial to the eye, but slips through the fingers when we try to touch it.

In you want the facts of my life, the outward events, you would do best to talk to others. For what I recall is not the facts, they have almost faded from my mind. What I recall are the feelings the events provoked, the longings and desires, the interior path that God pulled me along without my understanding or consent.

If I tell you the stories I remember myself, there will be little to say. I don't remember much of my childhood before the age of 8 or 10, and what I do remember is like images seen in that fog. The memories drift in and out of visibility and when I reach out to put them into words or to seek them with my minds eye they immediately fade away or seem to be different than I first imagined. What is the past anyhow, but a series of images that we think of as fact, but in reality have been shaped by time and distance to fit the needs of our current hopes, fears, desires. It might be best to let the events go, even from memory, as the actual events themselves have gone and can never be recaptured, not even in memory.

When I think of the past the events of my life seem like a number of independent strands that wind around one another. On a day to day basis they are interwoven and seem to be a unity, much like the way individual strands woven together appear to make a single piece of rope. They are all of one piece, mixed in with one another, none standing out as more significant or important. To look at my life at any point in time is like slicing through a rope and expecting the end to tell you about the strengthen of individual strands. It tells you nothing. The only way to see the truth is to pull the strands apart and look at them individually, from one end to the other. And even then it's hard to know what that tells. My life is not as special as you think. I am only a man who has tried to turn his life entirely to God and live out the consequences of that decision. Anything I have done you

and others can do if you are willing to commit yourself to that path completely and at the expense of everything else.

Some of the strands of my life go back as far as childhood and reach to the present; some start or end at other points in time. One such strand is the memory of my father. One of my earliest childhood memories is waking in the middle of the night to see a figure standing in the dark shadows of the room where my parents and my brothers and I slept. At first I am not even sure I knew this was a figure; it could have been the shadow of an object in the room. But as I continued to wake like this in the middle of the night I soon realized that it was my father and that he was not just standing, but walking from the curtained area where he and my mother slept to the door that led out into the yard. I would wake up, see him, turn over and go back to sleep. Eventually I know I woke up enough to ask him what he was doing, but he merely put his finger to his lips signaling me to be quiet and told me to go back to sleep, which I did. This continued for some time, perhaps even several years. When I awoke in the morning I forgot about the experience for I never asked him or my mother about why he got up in the middle of the night. But at some level the question was always with me.

Sometime later, perhaps when I was around ten, I decided to stay awake and find out what he did. From my bed I watched as he made his way through the darkened room to the door and went outside. Then I lay on my back, staring at the wood beams and mud-rush roof of our house waiting for him to return. When he did not return quickly I usually became impatient, turned over and went back to sleep. One night, while I was waiting, I glanced toward the door to see if he were returning and noticed, through the adjacent window, that the color of the sky had changed from the dark black of night to a lighter blue. This surprised me; I got up to look and realized for the first time that it was not the middle of night, but the time just at the end of night before the start of the new day. When I looked for my father I could not see him. He was not in the yard. Then I noticed that he was sitting on the stone wall that divided the yard from the fields beyond where the sheep grazed. His back was to me and he just seemed to be sitting there.

That first time I went back to sleep immediately, but I remember that I finally asked my mother what was going on. "Why does father get up before dawn?" I asked her. "To have time to say his morning prayers," was her answer. Prayer was a natural part of our family life. We asked God's blessing and gave thanks at each meal and in the evening before we went to sleep. At the synagogue school, I was learning to recite and read the prayers that were said in the synagogue and the prayers we said at home at feasts and holidays and meals. I had not heard anything about a morning prayer. When I asked my teacher about this he said that all men were required to say morning prayers at dawn and that we would

learn them when it came time to learn all the requirements of being accepted as a man in our community.

This information increased my curiosity about my father. I wondered what he prayed as he sat on the stone wall, but something constrained me from asking him about this. Instead, I decided to get up after he had gone out to observe him further to see if I might be able to hear something of what he said. So, one morning when I woke again and saw him going out the door, I got up and went out and sat on the stoop so that he would not notice I was there. I was too far away to hear him, but that did not matter for that morning I had no ears to hear so filled with wonder were my eyes.

Up to that morning I do not think I had ever seen the moment that the night changes into day, had never seen the sun return and rise above the edge of earth. I'd often seen the sun go beneath the earth, watched the sky change from pale blue to darker and darker shades, streaked with orange and red reflected in the clouds and in the light itself. I'd seen the stars appear and I'd even on occasion lay in the grass at night and looked up into the sky, filled with wonder for all that it contained. But I slept through the start of day until my parents woke me. That morning when I looked out at my father all I could see was the great bowl of the sky above turning from the black of night to the light of day. The sky nearest the earth had already become light blue while above it was still dark. As I watched, the light turned from blue to white and the clouds turned from grey to pink to orange, like bright banners, blown by a wind I could not see, reflecting the light of the sun still hidden beneath the earth. Then, when nothing could seem more spectacular than this display of color and light, the edge of the sun appeared just above the edge of the earth. It was bright orange and seemed to wobble, but then suddenly, rapidly it rose above the horizon, a huge bright disc of blazing fire in the sky, so bright it hurt my eyes to look at it. So overwhelmed was I by this event I had paid no attention to my father at all. It was only after the sun had risen into the sky and was too difficult for me to stare at that I noticed him standing with his arms upraised

From that day on I began to rise more frequently with my father, to watch the night change to day and the sun rise into the morning sky. At first I stayed on the doorstep of our house. My father sat on the stone wall until the edge of the sun appeared above the edge of earth; at that moment he stood and raised his arms in greeting to the sun. When the sun was fully risen he came back to the house to start his day. I knew he was aware that I was up and watching him; eventually he mentioned it to me and I began to join him at the wall. I sat on the grass, my back against the cold stones, while he sat on the wall and quietly said his prayers. From the fragments I could hear I recognized some prayers that I had learned and parts of the psalms he often recited for us at night. Most often he said the psalm that begins "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." It was interesting

for me to sit there, staring into the fields where the shepherds tended their flocks, and think about the way the shepherds were looked down on by people in the village and realize that David had used them as a symbol of the Lord.

When he stood to greet the rising sun I stayed seated on the grass, my attention still drawn to the light and the disc of orange fire in the sky. I heard him speaking without really hearing his words, but when I listened I realized that the words were not any prayer I knew. Later he told me that this was his own prayer, something he had made up himself. It began "Thank you dear God for the gift of this day, thank you for the gift of life." From there he continued to give thanks for his family, for the beauty of the earth, for many, many things.

One day I asked him why he prayed to the sun. "Do you think the sun is God," I asked. "No," he said. "The sun is not God. But at the same time it is. Everything is God. God is present in everything that he has made." "That's not what we are taught at school," I replied; "it's not what the Torah says." He did not argue with me; he said that I should pay attention to what I was taught at school. "I'm just a simple man who tries to tell God what he feels in his heart," he said. "Remember, the books aren't everything; it must be in your heart as well."

From then on I asked him more and more questions while we sat there and sometimes, still seated on the grass, I would say the psalms I knew with him, moving my lips with the words but not making any sound. My questioning was not limited to the morning. I also asked them when he was teaching me how to use his tools and help out in his shop. And he started asking me questions about what I was learning at school and would share with me his ideas about God's teachings. These discussions with him led me to start asking more questions at school much to the annoyance of my teacher; it also led to the time I disturbed everyone by asking questions of the priests at the temple in Jerusalem.

Of course the sun did not rise clearly every day. Often there were so many clouds it was impossible to see the sun at all; often the sky was completely gray. On those days the sun was a thin white disc behind the clouds, perfectly round and easy to look at. Some days it rained and, although my father got up and went through the same ritual even in the rain, I usually chose those days to stay in bed. After one of these mornings he said to me, "You know, God is with us in the bad times as well as the good. He expects us to do the same." And so the next time it was raining when I awoke I went out to the wall with him.

At first the rain was very light, but suddenly the skies opened up and the rain poured down upon us. Within minutes I was soaked through to the skin. It felt good to know that I was just going to stay there with him and let the rain drench me and not run for the

cover of the house. Although I was not yet inclined to stand when the sun rose, for some reason I wanted to stand in the rain. I took off my tunic and placed it on the wall. My arms rose naturally to receive the rain just as my father's rose to greet the sun. In that moment something unexpected happened. I felt extraordinarily happy. The water seemed like God's love pouring down on me, cleansing my body and my mind as well, washing all my cares away. But it also felt as if I were being filled, as if I were a jar in the yard being filled with water, being filled to overflowing with God's love. I experienced a tremendous feeling of joy and yet at the same time I felt something else I couldn't put into words. It was as if the rain was part of me and I was part of it and yet we were not separate, we were part of something else, something larger, part of the complete unity of God. This feeling was so exhilarating that I could not stand still. I began to jump around and splash my feet in the puddles of water in grass; I wanted to shout some prayer to God, but I couldn't think of any. The only thing that came to me was one word and so I shouted it over and over as I splashed in the water. Yes, I shouted; yes, yes, yes. I continued it like a chant and laughed all the while I was doing so.

I never stood and prayed with my father when the sun rose; but each time it rained I stood and lifted my arms to receive the rain, to receive God's blessing.

As I grew older, it was difficult for us to find enough work in the village to keep both me and my father busy. Since it was easier for me to be away from home than it was for him, I started going to the nearby villages and towns seeking work. I would stay there for a few weeks doing what work I could find, then return home with my earnings and help my father in his shop. I enjoyed these trips; they gave me the opportunity to see how other people lived and increasingly exposed me to new ideas, new experiences. My father could tell this and so he encouraged me to go and to travel farther and stay longer if I wanted. This was the reason I was not at home when he died.

It took two days for my brother to bring the message to me and another two days for us to return home. When we arrived it was early evening; all the ceremonies had been completed and there was nothing we could do for it was too late even to visit the tomb. I comforted my mother and my brothers and sisters, but could not seem to feel the same grief. The fact that I wasn't there, had not seen his lifeless body, made the event somewhat less real to me than it was for them. The two days of travel with my brother had given us time to talk about our father's life; what we shared were happy memories. That made me realize, in a way I had never considered before, that my father's life had been very good. He had a loving wife, a close family, work he enjoyed, good friends in the village, food on his table and a close relationship with God. These thoughts made me see his life as something to be admired and that took away some of the sorrow at his death.

That night I stayed at our house and slept in the bed I had slept in as a child in the corner of the room. Though I was tired I could not sleep. I lay on my back staring at the beamed ceiling and mud-rush roof I had often stared at as a child. But it was not my father who occupied my thoughts; I thought about my own life, in contrast to his, and wondered where it was headed, what it would be like now that he was gone and I was the head of our family. These thoughts troubled me, for I knew I was not content to stay in the village and operate my father's shop. Something called me into the wider world, some call of God that I had yet to understand.

When sleep came it did not last long. I awoke in what I thought was the middle of the night, but of course it was not, it was just before dawn. I smiled to myself, remembering those earlier days rising at this time to join my father, and walked out into the yard to the stone wall and sat in the place he had usually occupied. Without thinking about it consciously, I began to repeat the prayers that he usually said as I watched the light change. Yes, he was right, I thought; everything is God, God is in everything he has created. Lift a leaf, turn a stone and he is there. When the sun broke above the edge of the earth I stood, not because I decided to, but because the rising sun itself pulled me to my feet and pulled my arms up to praise the power and glory of God. At that moment, with the orange disc of the sun blazing before me, I was suddenly overcome with grief. Tears came to my eyes, rolled down my face and sobbing shook my body uncontrollably. For the first time I knew my father was dead; we would never sit together again, I would never get to ask him any more questions or to tell him that I loved him. At the same time, I felt my father was there with me, his spirit somehow merged with mine, yet God was there with me too and his spirit merged with mine also or mine and my father's with his. Through the tears I could hear myself repeating his prayer, now my prayer, as I watched the sun rise on another new day: Thank you dear God for the gift of life.

A power filled me that morning I had never felt before. The power and the presence of God flowed through me, bathed me in its light as the sun light bathed my body. In that moment I felt so in harmony with God that I could say God and I were one. Every morning since I've risen before dawn, sat and watched the sun rise or felt the rain, and prayed. It reminds me that I carry within me both the spirit of my father who was on earth and the spirit of my heavenly father as well. Both are present in me, I am the place where both come together.

My father taught me that what you know in your head, what you have learned from the books or other men, is not as important as what you know in your heart. He taught me that the world around us is infused with the presence of God; he is not remote and

separate from us, but here with us at all times, around us and in us, as pervasive and encompassing and as nurturing as the air, yet as unseen.