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## Promises to keep :: the story of successful professional men whose fathers were blue collar workers.

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PROMISES TO KEEP: THE STORY OF SUCCESSFUL PROFESSIONAL  
MEN WHOSE FATHERS WERE BLUE COLLAR WORKERS

A Master's Thesis Presented

By

NEAL APONTE

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements of

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Psychology



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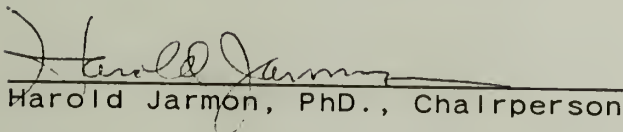
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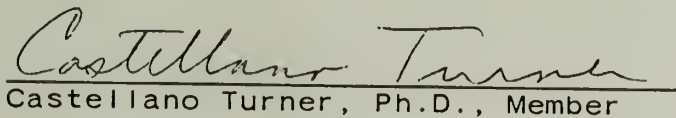
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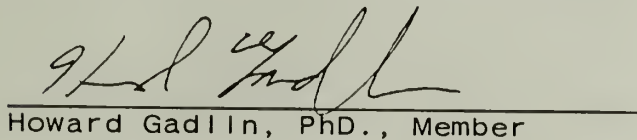
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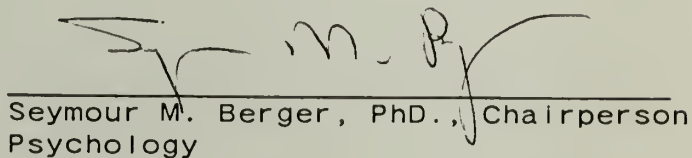
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To my parents

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

The promise of upward mobility defines an integral part of the American dream. Uniquely American tales, from Horatio Alger to the contemporary TV series "The Jeffersons", extol the virtue of hard work, persistence and cunning as a means to achieve a more prosperous material life. However, our cultural preoccupation with economic success obscures an understanding of the emotional costs associated with upward mobility.

In this study, I will examine the mobility process as a lived experience. I want to give voice to the thoughts and feelings successful, upwardly mobile sons have about themselves and their fathers. And I want to determine how the son's mobility affects the father/son relationship.

I want to discover whether upwardly mobile sons feel successful as individuals? Or do they experience a sense of ambivalence or even guilt about their educational and/or occupational achievements? Moreover, how do these sons understand their fathers? Does the son's achievements generate emotional closeness or distance between father and son? As the social worlds sons create and inhabit transcends their father's experience, and perhaps even their imaginations, do sons feel emotionally isolated from and experience a sense of being unknown to their fathers? Or do sons experience both intimacy and isolation with their fathers?

A primary working assumption I will use is that the son's mobility establishes an important emotional framework for understanding the

father/son relationship. In a society that measures one's masculinity and indeed one's self-worth as an individual by one's economic purchasing power and social status, the experience of a son becoming more "successful" than his father produces serious emotional and psychological repercussions permeating the breadth and depth of the father/son relationship. Yet I expect to find a range in the quality of intimacy shared between father and son. Consequently, I want to elaborate the general theoretical framework I will use to understand my interview and projective test data and to explain the anticipated variance in the quality of the father/son relationship.

Societies and cultures, like families and individuals, survive on the resilience of their mythologies. These myths, as collective representations, bind societal or family members to one another by expressing shared moral and ethical values and providing a symbolic arena to wrestle with the vexing questions, conflicts and ambiguities generated by these shared beliefs. Myths help us define who we are, how we are to lead our lives, how we are to behave with one another and how we are to resolve conflicts among ourselves. Myths also illuminate the desires and thoughts that produce the searing existential doubts and conflicts within ourselves.

A prominent feature of our American mythology involves the story of the self-made man. On one level, this story reinforces the idyllic notion that ours is a land of equal promise and opportunity for all; that with enough talent, ambition and sheer determination, any personal and/or collective goal can be fulfilled. The self-made man represents the model citizen in our individualistic and utilitarian

culture, where the good life remains defined as an individual's pursuit of his own happiness, bounded only by a recognition of our neighbor's similar pursuit.

In our society, the responsibility of success and the onus of failure rests squarely on the individual's shoulders. This "blaming the victim" morality provides an important ideological prop for a society that chooses to "cast a cold eye" towards institutional racism and sexism and social class inequality. But the self-made man myth represents something more than an ideological "rags to riches" story. It expresses and reflects, as all myths do, deeper psychological issues. Literally and metaphorically, the self-made man image involves a desire to be a maker of oneself, amounting to a defiance of the interconnectedness of the generations; a denial of the parental object's role (including their sexual desires) in creating the self. By suspending the creation of the self outside the generational chain, the desire to be a self-made man reverberates against a deeper wish to achieve immortality.

Our profound need to maintain an illusory immortality at once unifies such disparate phenomena as the liberal capitalist vision of an ever expanding economy characterized by unbridled growth, the wanton neglect and abuse of natural resources and the global ecosystem, our preoccupation with youth, physical beauty and glamour, and the segregation of the elderly into retirement ghettos. Much of our social life, both at the level of individual desire and cultural symbol, effects what Becker termed a "denial of death". (Becker, 1973)

Thus, with regard to the father/son relationship, the self-made man image expresses much more than an acknowledgment of the son's greater economic success; it communicates a disavowal of one's parentage. The image is of a son who eclipses his father and renders him irrelevant and emasculated. The strikingly Oedipal imagery here, involving a symbolic "murder" of one's father, confirms the psychoanalytic narrative of becoming adult. As Loewald bluntly put it: the process of maturation, of separating ourselves from our parents and assuming ever increasing responsibility for our lives, necessarily requires a destruction of the parental object. Becoming an adult entails a usurpation of the authority over and responsibility for ourselves hitherto exercised by our parents and represents a direct and profound threat to their identities as parents. (Loewald, 1980)

However, sons who become more successful than fathers, who become self-made men, confront, with their fathers, more palpable evidence of how their personal and/or professional maturity represents a symbolic parricide. I hypothesize that those men who identify themselves as self-made, will be most vulnerable to neurotic symptoms associated with Oedipal guilt, eg, anxiety about success, equating achievement with harmful or destructive consequences.

I will return to this important issue later. But first I want to develop a theoretical context for understanding the dynamics of the working-class father/upwardly mobile son relationship. As the popular cultural image of the self-made man is strikingly Oedipal, it seemed appropriate and useful to conceptualize this father/son relationship

in psychoanalytic terms, utilizing a recasted object relations rendition of Oedipal conflict as a theoretical leitmotif.

Developmental research and object relations theory support the idea that the self is a transformative agent. As the self develops over time, it continually reinvents and rediscovers its object world. The self also transforms its inner world, its map of the external world, and its internal world through the processes of introjection and identification. (Meissner, 1972) In short, psychological development entails the self's continued transformation of both its intrapsychic structure and its object relations. The delightful story Mark Twain recited about his own father illustrates how this process persists into adulthood: " When I was ten years old, I thought my father knew everything. When I was fifteen, I thought he knew nothing. When I was twenty, I was surprised to discover how much he had learned in five years."

From the perspective of the child's object relations, Twain's story illustrates how emotional and psychological development up into and through adulthood implies a continued process of destroying and recreating the parental object. The parents' ability to allow themselves to be symbolically destroyed and recreated in accordance with the child's ongoing and developing psychological needs represents a critical dimension of the "good enough" parental holding environment. As Winnicott argued, allowing oneself to be symbolically destroyed represents a powerful act of love. (Winnicott, 1969)

Winnicott's framework casts a different light on our understanding of the psychoanalytic crucible of development, the Oedipal conflict.



In the drive and structural psychoanalytic paradigms, the child's Oedipal complex illuminates the need to channel instinctual energies and/or to resolve intrapsychic conflict, both effected by the establishment of a new and powerful structure, the superego. In an object relations paradigm, the Oedipal drama can be recast. The focus here is on how the onset, duration and "resolution" of the Oedipal drama involves a transformation of the self and its relation to the object world. As the self and its objects are created, destroyed and recreated, the intrapsychic and interpersonal legacy of the Oedipal period reflects how this symbolic destruction and recreation process is negotiated by the self and the parent. The legacy of this period is intersubjective rather than intrapsychic; its universality derives from the transformation of the child's sense of self and its parental objects embedded in the shift from a dyadic to a triangular interpersonal world and not from its impact on the consolidation of the child's heterosexual sexual and masculine gender identity.

Winnicott's framework suggests that during the Oedipal period, the child experiences important intrapsychic and interpersonal transformations wrought by the self. The shift from a sense of twoness to an emerging awareness of threeness compels the child to reinvent the world, or to understand that the external physical and social environment is not tailored to fulfill its needs and desires. If all goes well, the child learns to acknowledge and accommodate external impingements and strike a balance between desire and constraint.

But if the child has not experienced a secure enough sense of twoness, then his emerging appreciation of threeness will be tinged with an extremely precarious hue. The way out of the potentially menacing experience of the triangulated Oedipal relationship is to have a reservoir of positive experience from the preoedipal dyadic relationship. Yet what makes this resolution possible is the parent's acceptance of how the child's development from an awareness of twoness to threeness entails a transformation of himself as parental object.

The process of destroying and recreating the preoedipal and Oedipal parents consolidates the way in which the self will experience successive self and object transformations in adolescence and adulthood. (Loewald,1980) The Oedipal period provides the child with a prototypical experience of self and object transformation.

Understood this way, the Oedipal period links the preoedipal past with a postoedipal future: the manner in which father and son negotiate the child's need to destroy the parental object, reverberates against the quality of the preoedipal father/son relationship. (Loewald,1980; Blos,1985)

In traditional psychoanalytic theorizing, the preoedipal father/son relationship protects the child's fledgling ego against a reengulfment into the primary symbiotic unity between mother and child. However, Stern's recent work on self development in infancy casts powerful doubts on the existence of a primary symbiotic relationship. (Stern,1985) If Stern is correct, then the protective allure of the preoedipal father must be reexamined. This also leaves open the question as to

why the child "turns" from the mother to the father as an identification object? I would suggest that the parent's behavior and fantasies concerning the child have a tremendous impact on the child's behavior and fantasies about himself and his object world. That is, how the father responds to the child's needs and makes himself available as an object of preoedipal identification will greatly determine the nature and quality of this identification. Empirical research suggests that fathers more than mothers treat their sons and daughters differently. (Block, 1983; Maccoby, 1980) Consequently, if the father promotes a style of interpersonal behavior and a way of interacting with the external physical environment in ways he considers "male," the son will develop an appropriate identification with the father.

But if the father has not been previously available as an identification object, then the child will experience greater difficulty in experiencing this identification as a resolution to his Oedipal strivings. Given the child's need to destroy and recreate the parental object, if the child has not actively experienced the father as an identification object, then what will or can be recreated?

This important question illuminates a critical shortcoming in the traditional psychoanalytic account of Oedipal conflict. Until now, the onset and resolution of the Oedipal period has been understood in the context of the child's intrapsychic libidinal and aggressive fantasies emanating from his instinctual energies. The object relations interpretation of the Oedipal period suggests, however, that the father's behavior towards or fantasies about the child will

greatly determine the nature and resolution of the Oedipal drama. So, for example, if the father feels threatened by the birth and development of his son, or jealous of the time mother and son share, and defines his son as a menacing rival, this will shape the child's experience of, behavior towards and fantasies in relation to the father. Accordingly, writers have referred to a "Laius complex" (referring to Oedipus' father in the Sophocles tragedy), depicting the father's aggressive "murderous" impulses towards the son. (Wellisch, 1954; Ross, 1982)

I would add that the elaboration of a "Laius complex" appears completely warranted by the Oedipus myth. It should be remembered that the oracle's warning to Laius, regarding his murder at the hands of his son and the eventual marriage of his son and wife, represented a curse placed on him as retribution for the crimes he committed as a young man, the crime of abducting and sodomizing the son of a king. Accordingly, Laius construed Oedipus to be a mortal threat. It is Laius' heinous actions, both as a young man and as a father, having ordered Oedipus maimed and abandoned as an infant, that sets the play's tragic events into inexorable motion. The play provides literary evidence for the need to replace the traditional intrapsychic with an intersubjective account of the Oedipal conflict between father and son.<sup>1</sup> If the father remains unable to resolve his own threatened feelings, perhaps expressing an identification with his own father, then the possibility of creating a new and emotionally secure father/son relationship becomes problematic.



The quality of the father/son identification in the preoedipal and postoedipal periods affects the development of two key intrapsychic agencies: the child's ego ideal and the superego. Consequently, the child's inability to form a secure identification with the father, as a way of resolving the Oedipal conflict, produces important intrapsychic consequences.

Much has been written describing the origins of the ego ideal and the superego. The ego ideal is defined as the ideal self; the kind of person the self would ideally like to be. The ego ideal's blueprint emerges during the child's preoedipal period and represents the enduring legacy of the preoedipal identification with the father. (Sandler, 1960)

The superego, on the other hand, represents an internalization of the parental prohibition of the child's oedipal desires. (Schafer, 1960; Blos, 1985) What emerges in some of the literature is a simplistic dichotomy between the ego ideal and the superego, the internalized good vs. bad parental imago. (Blos, 1985) Yet it would be more accurate to say that no one gets out of childhood unscathed: neither child, mother or father.

As Loewald noted, the child experiences both of its parental objects, and its own development, with a profound ambivalence. (Loewald, 1980) The child's ambivalence emerges from a realization that the self and object transformation embedded in its development requires a giving up of something important. Certainly the mother as libidinal object must be given up. But even more important than this, the positive preoedipal and oedipal parental imago and sense of self must be integrated with more aggressive ones. If all goes



well during the Oedipal period, the child integrates and cements its experience of the parental objects as whole objects who can and must be experienced ambivalently; the loving father is also one who thwarts the self's desires. And the child's ability to hold onto the whole parental object, involving both good and bad, pleasurable and unpleasurable aspects, involves an experience of loss; the loss of an idealized positive sense of the parental imago and of oneself, untarnished by aggressive and sexual desire.

The self can experience this loss in a melancholic fashion, or in a way that approximates genuine mourning. Mourning involves a process of letting go and taking in of the lost object, while acknowledging that the object is truly lost. A melancholic reaction to loss involves a resurrection of the lost object in the self's intrapsychic world in an attempt to undo the experience of loss. The emergence of a punitive superego could be understood as a melancholic reaction; a way of undoing the giving up of the loving preoedipal and oedipal object. (Schafer, 1960; Slavin, 1978-79) The giving up of the good parental object becomes undone by the taking in of the threatening Oedipal father; what is lost in intersubjective reality is resurrected in intrapsychic reality. Moreover, as the internalized punitive superego segregates the hostile and aggressive from the "loving and beloved" parental object, it represents a defense against experiencing the discomforting ambivalence towards the parental object. Finally, the punishing superego engenders a repression of one's own aggressive and libidinal desires. As Loewald understood, punishment meted out by a sense of conscience alleviates the burden

of sustaining guilt for one's own desires; of owning up to, accepting and integrating the existence of "dangerous" feelings and desires into one's self-definition. (Loewald, 1980)

The experience of the parental objects as both good and bad, and as having a relationship between one another independent of the relationship to the child, represents an important advance over the child's parallel dyadic interaction with the parental objects during the preoedipal period. In short, the experience of ambivalence toward the parental objects and towards oneself amounts to an important developmental achievement.

The predominance of a punitive superego indicates that the experience of loss and the existence of certain desires is too threatening and must be undone. Yet what developmental circumstances produce a melancholic rather than a mourning reaction to the self's experience of loss? Here I think the issue of father/son identification is critical. When the son experiences the father as being unavailable as an identification object, then the giving up of the preoedipal or oedipal father represents a very real and threatening loss. Thus, if the father considers the son as a menacing rival, the child could develop a punishing sense of conscience based on an internalization of the father's aggressiveness, a sense of guilt for wanting to meet this aggression with his own aggressive desires, and the need to restore or protect an image of the positive, nurturing and loving father.

As noted above, the child's punishing superego represents a way of repressing guilt about its desires and renouncing the loss of the

good parental object. Seen this way, the child's punishing superego represents an important source of psychological comfort as it unleashes its fury in the child's intrapsychic world. If the Oedipal object cannot be adequately transformed, as the father, for whatever reason, is not available to be recreated by the child, the child experiences the parental object's destruction. This experience produces an intolerable anxiety that must be repressed. The child's punishing conscience facilitates this repression by restoring the lost relationship with the parental object.

To summarize the argument thus far, the process of development necessarily entails a process of destroying and recreating one's self and object world. An important dimension of "good enough" parenting involves how the parent allows himself to be destroyed and recreated to meet the child's ongoing needs. This symbolic transformative process is experienced as a loss that can produce either a melancholic or a true mourning reaction. The melancholic reaction involves an intrapsychic resurrection of the lost object in an attempt to undo the experience of loss. The mourning reaction involves an acknowledgment of what has been given up through the elaboration of an ambivalent parental object. An important feature of a child's melancholic reaction is a punishing superego whereas the child's mourning of the lost self and object, produces a balance between his ego ideal and superego.

A critical factor determining how the child experiences the transformation of self and objects involves the extent to which the

father remains available as an identification object. If the father remains available, then the giving up process can be experienced by the child without undue anxiety. If not, the giving up must be undone by what is taken in by the child, thus the punishing superego protects the child's relationship with the positive loving father.

Anywhere along the developmental continuum, but especially during the Oedipal period and adolescence, the transformations of self and parental objects wrought by the self's development, can be experienced by the self and/or the parents as threatening. Given the relative immaturity of the child and adolescent ego, the parent's emotional sensitivity in recognizing and managing the threatening quality of this transformative process becomes a critical variable in determining the developmental impact of the child's Oedipal drama. Yet as Loewald noted, parents both support and resist the child's development and attendant individuation just as ambivalently as the child does. (Loewald, 1980) The parent and the child both experience, and if all goes well, are able to mourn this loss.

Yet, as suggested earlier, if the father remains unavailable as an identification object, does not allow himself to be destroyed and recreated, then the child can associate its own development with the loss of the parental object. The negative psychological impact of this cannot be minimized.

In the context of the working-class father/upwardly mobile son relationship, the possibility of generating this kind of association is considerable. In this father/son relationship, the destruction of the parental object is not merely symbolic; does not consist of



the normal usurpation of parental authority involved in becoming adult. Rather, as noted earlier, the process of a son becoming more successful than his father, especially in a culture that sanctifies economic achievements, provides a more palpable confirmation of how the son's maturity involves a symbolic act of parricide. Thus, a distinctive aspect of this father/son relationship generates, in the sons, a particular vulnerability to anxiety and guilt about personal and/or professional success. As in all other cases, the potentially negative associations to the son's success depends on how father and son negotiate the meaning of the son's mobility; how each interprets the meaning of this mobility in terms of their respective self-images and how each uses the experience in their relationship. But here again I would single out the father's emotional flexibility, in accepting the son's destruction and recreation of the parent/child relationship, as the most critical variable in determining whether the son associates his success with guilt, anxiety or an intolerable sense of loss. As fathers struggle with their own unresolved Oedipal issues, coming to terms with how the birth, development and success of their sons conjures up ambivalent feelings, then the likelihood of fathers "acting out" existing anxiety, being emotionally unavailable or rejecting, will diminish. I maintain that insofar as fathers acknowledge and attempt to work through their ambivalence, and remain available as identification objects for their sons, the potential for neurotic symptoms experienced by the sons around the issue of success, will diminish. Where the father remains unable to face up to his "Laius complex", and the son is fantasized about and



interacted with as a mortal threat to the father's identity, then the son's vulnerability to neurotic disturbances regarding his success will be greater.

## NOTES

1. The distinction I want to draw here is different than that between intrapsychic and interpersonal. I do not mean to dichotomize unconscious fantasy and interpersonal interaction as the interpersonal psychoanalytic theorists did. Rather, the framework for understanding both unconscious fantasy and interpersonal interaction arises out of the shared (or intersubjective) experiences and meanings that two or more individuals create.

## CHAPTER II

### METHODOLOGY

I interviewed eight men who were successful professionals, but whose fathers were blue-collar workers. My selection criteria for my interview subjects were as follows: 1) subjects had at least a college education, and preferably graduate or professional school training; 2) subjects were firmly established in their careers, ie, had stable employment in their chosen careers and attained a recognized level of prestige and/or anticipated achieving greater professional success in the future; 3) subject's fathers had a high school education or less; 4) subject's fathers worked as a manual blue-collar laborer at either some point or throughout their working lives.

In short, interview subjects were men who experienced clear upward occupational mobility, which correlated with upward mobility in terms of income and/or social status.

I relied on several informants, who had contacts in professional circles in the Pioneer Valley, for obtaining my interview subjects.

Initially, I contacted each of the potential subjects by telephone, informing them of the nature of my study and the time commitment I required. If the subject agreed to participate, I contacted him with a brief letter, a copy of which is included here as Appendix A.

My protocol consisted of two parts: 1) a story completion projective test; 2) a two-hour semi-structured interview. I devised the story completion test for subjects to complete prior to our interview. The test consisted of five story items. A copy of the test instructions and items are included here as Appendix B. The

test was designed to tap how a son's professional success impacted the father/son relationship, how son and father viewed the son's success and the father's relative lack of professional accomplishment. I anticipated that these test items would highlight salient emotional and psychological issues. Unfortunately, only five out of the eight subjects completed the test items. The other subjects claimed they were not good storytellers, or just said they were too busy. Moreover, two other subjects wrote very tersely worded responses, making it difficult to generate hypotheses. In the other three cases, responses to test items helped me organize my reactions to the interview material and clarified underlying issues and concerns for these men.

I conducted the interviews where it was convenient for subjects. Four interviews were conducted where subjects worked, the other four took place at their homes. The interview site did not, as far as I can determine, affect the quality of my data. In each instance, subjects were initially apprehensive. But as the interview progressed, I was impressed and honored by how much men were willing and able to share their relationships with their fathers with me. The one exception to this occurred in my first interview, where I was repeatedly thwarted in my attempt to get any depth of interview material. My informed consent form and interview protocol is included here as Appendix C.

Interviews ranged from 1 1/2 to 3 hours long. I transcribed most of the tapes myself and found this to be invaluable. I used the transcription process to associate to the material, to make important notes

and to begin organizing the interview data into relevant and manageable categories.

After I transcribed the tapes and organized the interview data, I transposed my notes into a large chart, which summarized the salient information in each category for each of the interview subjects. I found the oversized chart to be an invaluable aid in writing up the analysis of the interview data.



## CHAPTER III

### INTRODUCTION TO THE INTERVIEW DATA

The stories presented here are very much my own story too. The often poignant testimony of these men's lives reverberated against thoughts and feelings about my own father and obliterated even the illusion of being an objective listener and reporter.

While each of these men experienced very different relationships with their fathers, I came away with a keen sense of commonality. We are different, but each of us confront similar issues about the meaning and impact of our professional identities on our father/son relationships. All of us grapple with our own and our father's complex and ambiguous feelings about being more successful than our fathers. I have tried to communicate what I understand is our common struggle here in these pages. Yet in doing so, I recognize making conscious and unconscious choices about what interview material to present. I only hope my choices illuminate issues that we need to acknowledge and explore if we are to make sense of our relationships with our fathers, our own professional ambitions, and our society that equates personal worth with socio-economic status.

## CHAPTER IV

### INTRODUCTION TO INTERVIEW SUBJECTS

Ralph: Ralph is a 54 year-old divorced man. He is an academic teaching in the social sciences. His father worked primarily as a garment worker, but also held various other jobs. His mother was a housewife. His father died in 1961; his mother died in 1968. Ralph is the youngest of four brothers; his siblings are: a retired school principal, age 66; a salesman, age 64; a colorist for the garment industry, age 60.

Ralph exudes a New York/jewish demeanor: he speaks bluntly, colorfully and with animation in a thickly accented voice. He is determined, opinionated and very psychologically-minded. He presents as both an intellectual and as a street-fighting man. However, his strong-willed exterior covers over a sensitive and insecure interior.

Gary: Gary is a 51 year-old married man. He is an academic teaching in the humanities. He has an interracial marriage and has two teenage sons. His father worked as a mechanic, a truck driver, a railroad worker and as a postal employee. His mother worked as an RN. His father died in 1975; his mother died in 1985. He is the oldest of five children. His brothers are: a postal worker, age 44; a guard, age 41. His sisters are: a woman who drives a truck with her husband, age 40. His other sister died while in the armed forces.

Gary is a quiet, mild-mannered and soft-spoken man. In our interview, Gary always spoke matter-of-factly and rarely displayed

any emotion or animation. He seemed despondent while reflecting on his family, as if his past weighed heavily on him.

Peter: Peter is a 33 year-old hospital accountant. He is married and has two children. His father, age 70, is a retired machinist. His mother, also age 70, is a retired factory worker. He is the youngest of two children. His sister, age 40, is a high school teacher.

Peter is earnest, extremely diligent and appears straight and true as an arrow. He keeps extremely active to the point of believing there are "not enough hours in the day" for all his activities. In our interview, he remained very animated and forthright about his family. He seems very sincere and is a very devoted family man.

Doug: Doug is a 47 year-old academic teaching in the social sciences. He is married. His father, age 70, is a retired factory worker. His mother, age 66, is a retired special education teacher. Doug is the oldest of four children. His siblings are a brother, age 40, who is currently an unemployed social service administrator; a sister, age 36, who is a nurse, and a sister, age 30, who is a biostatistician.

Doug is a very articulate and impassioned man. Yet he has a stoic, midwestern demeanor. He is energetic and committed to remaining involved in community politics. Yet he remains somewhat solitary and is very much a political maverick. He is extremely forthright and I could imagine him to be very combative and fiery in an argument or debate.

Walt: Walt is a 65 year-old college administrator. He is married. His parents are both deceased. His father worked as a draftsman; his mother remained a housewife. He is the youngest of three children. He had a sister who was a schoolteacher; his brother, age 76, is a retired high school principal.

Walt is a craggy, blunt speaking man. He likes to get right to the point. Yet he remains quite reserved about his inner feelings and family history. He is reluctant to dwell on aspects of his life that suggest problems or difficulties. He is very caring about and actively involved with the lives of his three sons.

Bert: Bert is a 47 year-old independent businessman. He has been married twice and has two sons. His father worked as a truck driver and started a small trucking business and died in 1967. His mother, age 75, is a retired schoolteacher. He is the third of four children. His siblings are: a brother who is a manager at a paper company, age 53; a brother who works for the family trucking business, age 50; a sister who is a high school coach, age 44; a brother who is a truck driver, age 38.

Bert exudes a boyish/youthful charm and energy. He is plain spoken and unpretentious. He is "rough around the edges", with a very earthy sense of humor. He does not spend much time reflecting on his family life or on his feelings. He is much more concerned with remaining active and is very much a can do kind of guy.

Tom: Tom is a 36 year-old academic teaching in the social sciences. He is single. His father, age 71, is a retired insurance salesman. In addition, his father worked at various clerical and other assorted jobs. His mother, age 63, is an executive secretary. Tom is the oldest of five children. His siblings are: a sister who is a housewife, age 33; a sister who works for a union newspaper, age 30; a brother who installs burglar alarm systems, age 26; and a sister who is a french teacher, age 23.

Tom is very articulate and forthright. In our interview, he communicated a deep sense of vulnerability about his professional accomplishments and his relationship with other family members. Yet he also suggested he was in the process of establishing a greater sense of stability and autonomy in his life. He is deeply proud of his ability to emerge from his working-class roots.

Steve: Steve is a 46 year-old academic in the social sciences. He has been married twice and has five children. His father, age 81, is a retired machinist. His mother, age 71, remained a housewife. Steve is the oldest of four children. His siblings are: a sister who works as a school counselor, age 43; a sister who operates a university cafe, age 40; and a brother who is a public defender, age 35.

Steve has a boyish demeanor. He is tall and gangly and has a very expressive face. He can be very excitable, to the point of being volatile, in the heat of a discussion or argument. His emotional responses can be unpredictable and Steve would like to have greater control over his feelings. Steve has difficulty being empathic,



although he tries very hard to remain emotionally in touch with his children.

## CHAPTER V

### ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEW DATA

"How should I tell him my fable and the fears  
How bridge the chasm in a casual tone...."

Stanley Kunitz, from  
Father and Son

When I think about my father, I think about silence. The resounding echoes of unspoken words pressed against the mute silence we share fills my head with questions: Where should I begin, at the beginning?; or somewhere in the middle?, and what about him?; where would he like to begin?, would he even like to begin at all?

Blood and flesh alone cannot begin to bridge the chasm between us. We remain, as father and son, enigmas to one another. And as we are, we remain enigmas to ourselves; the father inside me and the son inside him like riddles at the very core of our being.

The thoughts and feelings presented here, my own and those of the men I interviewed, represent a testimony, a bearing of witness to the pain, hurt, respect, anger, love, hate and intense longing we feel towards our fathers. The father/son relationships depicted here are nuanced; sometimes haunting; sometimes painful; sometimes joyful, and almost always moving. The thoughts and feelings presented here are like building blocks, stretching far into the chasm of silence. Yet as these words ring out in love and in anger, they continually reveal how we have somehow become, as fathers and sons, strangers to one another.

As Gary put it:

"...I can't remember from the time I was 15 or 16 ever talking to him for more than 10 or 15 minutes. About anything. I doubt if it was even that long. So there just wasn't that much to say. He wasn't very open and I guess I wasn't either in response...."

"...I very seldom knew what he was doing. I would know that he would go out to his job as a mechanic or a truck driver... I don't remember any talk or even what he looked like at that time."

And here is Peter:

"I wish my father could overhear this conversation- I wonder what he'd be saying right now...you've triggered a lot of thoughts...you've asked a lot of interesting questions...you make me feel a little bit on the bad side. I probably should have asked about my father...a lot of these questions when I say, geez, I don't know... I really don't know my father the way I should have known him. It makes me sort of sad actually."

"Like my father growing up, I've only gotten bits and pieces-I don't think I've ever talked to him particularly. Maybe he doesn't want to talk about it."

"And for years I believed  
That what went unsaid between us became empty,  
And pure, like starlight, and it persisted.  
I got everything wrong.  
I wound up believing in words the way a scientist  
Believes in carbon, after death."

Larry Levis, from Winter Stars

Opportunities missed, words left unsaid, and our voices tremble into silence.

If we ask who our fathers are?, the answer involves understanding something about our father's fathers. For the silence we share with our fathers, is an inherited gift, an emotional heirloom passed down through the generations. We learn from the words and the silence we share: what does it mean to be a man?; how does a man speak or not

speak about himself and to himself? What does it mean to feel?;  
 when can I feel?; and with whom, if anyone, can I share these feelings?  
 Breaking the code of silence means breaking a generational chain of  
 men; an unspoken collusion reflecting vows that we, as sons, undertook  
 without really understanding.

Who are our father's fathers?

Peter: "The way I understand it...I guess it's the truth...my  
 father had a brother and they both had the same father, however,  
 my grandmother was divorced-- my grandmother took my father and  
 my father's father took the other-- my uncle and moved to New  
 Jersey. So my father never knew he had a brother or never knew  
 his father was alive until he was 17 or 18 years old."

Doug: " He [his father's father], was a nasty son of a bitch.  
 He really had a mercurial temper. Very hard to live with. My  
 only recollection is... he would silently sit in a back hallway  
 going down to the basement whittling...we would be visiting him  
 and he would be carving and wouldn't have anything to do with us."

Steve: "My grandfather was an extremely opinionated man, really  
 opinionated. Much worse than my dad. My mom couldn't stand my  
 grandfather, hated him. She said he was just the worst sexist.  
 I don't know what to make of that, but I guess it's probably true."

Tom: "...I think his father was even more the way my father  
 was to me than he was. That is, my mother told me this, his  
 father really put him down and could be really stern and cutting."

"If you can think of the mind as a place continually  
 Visited, a whole city placed behind  
 the eyes, and shining, I can imagine, now, its end-  
 As when the lights go off, one by one,  
 In a hotel at night, until at last  
 All of the travelers will be asleep, or until  
 Even the thin glow from the lobby is a kind  
 Of sleep...  
 I stand out on the street, and do not go in.  
 This was our agreement, at my birth.

Larry Levis, from Winter Stars.

The chasm of silence sons and fathers share reverberates against the experience of our fathers as sons and the silences they endured and unknowingly vowed to preserve. Our "agreements" as sons are also those our fathers made. Many of our fathers learned early on about the cold, brute fact of what it means to be a man. And these are the lessons our fathers have bequeathed to us as sons. The borders of the silence our fathers endured become steeled by years of not knowing and experiencing male nurturance; years of toiling in workplaces where male bonding, created out of the shared intense experience of manual labor, prevails over the mutual revelation of selves, which remained associated with a kind of intimacy only women shared.

And so the chasm of silence becomes a widening circle, enveloping more lives; more fathers and more sons. And as we question, as sons, the need to continue the silence, we mourn the fathers we never knew, and we also mourn the fathers our fathers never knew. The pain, anger and hate we feel as sons affords us a glimpse of understanding what our fathers must also feel; our anger is their anger too. Yet breaking the silence means breaking agreements; agreements we and our fathers made as sons.

### Growing Up

Despite the shroud of mystery surrounding the inner world of our father's thoughts and feelings, we carry powerful images of our fathers like searchlights piercing through the darkness, illuminating the presence of the most important man in our early years.



Question: What is the earliest memory you have of your father?

Gary: "During a great hurricane, a tree limb fell across the car. And he- I think he was away and came back and it was good to see him...."

Steve: "The very earliest...must be when my sister was born and my sister is only two years and three months younger than me. My dad took me...took me to his sister's house...I remember staying there in that room, being scared...I remember standing there in this playpen thinking, God, it's scary in here, and I was there for the longest time. Finally my dad came in, maybe it's like 2 a.m.,...I have no idea. He came in and he laid down on the couch there and then I went to sleep."

Doug: "He worked nights some of this time. And he would come home at midnight and would wake me up because he hadn't seen me. He hadn't seen me much. So he would wake me up and I would come down and we'd have a midnight snack together."

Walt: "...I can picture myself sitting in the car with my father driving, going somewhere."

Peter: "...I remember going to the pond...I remember going motorboat riding with my dad."

These memories suggest the reassurance and comfort of being protected or taken care of by a father who is in firm control: a father driving a car or a speedboat. And they suggest the reassurance, joy and excitement, of being reunited with a previously absent father. Relatedly, these memories also embody a more unsettling quality: the fear and anxiety associated with separation, loss and death.

Our fathers protect us from, but also expose us to, or make us aware of danger; the danger inherent in the child's developing sense of the vastness of its environment and its tenuous ability to control it. The comings and goings of our fathers, and the attendant fear and comfort we experience underscores our father's power and our

relative defenselessness as children. So, for instance, only when father returns is it safe for Steve to fall asleep, or for Gary to feel protected against the hurricane. If we take these images as screen memories, as amalgams of actual events and our own desires, they underscore an underlying ambivalence we feel towards our fathers, who protect us from but also expose us to unknown dangers.

"The whiskey on your breath  
could make a small boy dizzy;  
But I hung on like death:  
Such waltzing was not easy.

We romped until the pans  
Slid from the kitchen shelf;  
My mother's countenance  
Could not unfrown itself.

The hand that held my wrist  
Was battered on one knuckle;  
At every step you missed  
My right ear scraped a buckle.

You beat time on my head  
With a palm caked hard by dirt,  
Then waltzed me off to bed  
Still clinging to your shirt.

Theodore Roethke, My Papa's Waltz.

The shadows and the silence we experience with our fathers as adults extend from the palpable physical shadows they seem to live in when we were boys.

The shadowy nature of the father/son relationship manifested itself as men struggled to define their fondest memory of their fathers:

Gary: "I'm hard pressed, I don't remember. I don't remember any great things...I don't remember too much."

Ralph: "We didn't spend a lot of time together. It's not like this image of an american family where you go to ballgames together."

Doug: "I guess the fishing trips that we went on...fishing, not even talking all that much- there wasn't all that much to talk about...."

Peter: "Ice fishing. My father always worked two jobs when I was growing up...my father would come home from his early job and we'd eat supper together and then most of the time he'd go out to another job. so the weekends most of the time he'd be working a second job...And we'd go up to Vermont-- i would probably have a better relationship in that one week-- my father would go up on Christmas week...."

Most of these men paused and then struggled to come up with some or any memory. When they did, their memories rarely evoked any feeling. Peter's response represented a different kind of answer. He responded immediately and with passion about the ice fishing trips. But his response also pointed to another salient characteristic of many responses: the ice fishing trips were like oases or islands of closeness; places of shared refuge and communion. For these men, being physically close to one's father contrasted with the everyday experience of separation.

Question: How much time did you spend with your father when you were growing up?

Tom: "Less and less, as I began to realize what he was capable of doing. That is, being unpredictable and embarrassing me. But also he worked real hard and long, long hours. So he wasn't around a lot. I remember crying to my mother once, that i never see daddy. And i think part of that was-- partly missing him but partly missing what my image was becoming of what a real father ought to be. And feeling that i don't have that."

Steve: "Not really that much. I never thought about it at that time as not being that much. I just thought that's the way things are, but my dad would go out and work during the day and he'd go

out a lot of evenings. I don't ever remember him sitting down and reading to me. Once in a great while my dad would play catch with me...but my dad basically was thinking about the union."

Peter: "I always remember that I wished he would play ball with me...But I always had a number of friends that- I tried to use my friends as a father...I was always with people I would play ball with or do whatever I wanted to do with. So when I came home, I would watch tv or go to bed."

Doug: "Not a lot. I spent much, much more time with my mother. I suspect part of that is conventional. Father breadwinner, mother homemaker. But beyond that, my father was very, very active in the union and in politics."

"Father breadwinner, mother homemaker". In many working-class homes, the economic necessity of making a living and supporting a family, clearly conflicted with any sense of emotional satisfaction derived from raising children. Even today, a man's ability to engage in both activities appears to be a luxury afforded by professional households, where men can more readily exert greater power in the workplace and negotiate more flexible work schedules. But just as important are cultural values: in many of these men's parents' homes, the gender division of labor was clearly outlined and unquestioned. And the reality of absent fathers left an important and lasting impact on sons.

Peter: "As I look back now, I go, hey that isn't the way it was supposed to be. My father, I guess I should be a little upset with my father for cheating me out of that...I think that's the way it was, I accepted that. My father had to work two jobs to pay the bills. Maybe I was a little too easy on him, but that's the way I accepted it...I think right now that knowing, if I had to go back knowing what I know now, I'd be sort of upset about it."

Ralph: "So the fondest things I recall was when he took us to those types of things [the circus or the race track]...See, what you're not getting is that I don't like my father. I like him



enough, he's my father, but if I had to choose, I wouldn't have chosen him. He did what he had to do."

Question: Did you ever feel or think, wouldn't it nice to spend more time with your dad?

Steve: "If someone were to ask me I think I would have said, Yes, it would be, but that isn't the way I thought about it. It's just one of those things. I didn't think you could spend more time or less time."

Our father's absence produces resentment, bitterness, sadness and anger. Yet the anger and hurt we feel coexists with a longing; a kind of hunger for more contact, for a greater emotional and physical connection with him. So our sense of him as an enigma evolves out a sense of deep disappointment and anger, ('why won't he play ball with me?') and a sense of resignation ('this is the way it has to be'). Our emotional needs as sons get buried. We learn, relearn and learn again by rote the silence we endure, like a mute reaffirmation of the unknowing "agreements" we made at birth.

The longing for a father's physical and emotional presence, emerges from experiencing the security and comfort he provides, the power and authority he commands, and the understanding that we are somehow like him. At some level, we, as sons, establish a strong sense of physical and emotional identification with our fathers. Our sense of our father's emotional and physical strength, coupled with our identification with that strength, provides structure, direction and a sense of confidence and purpose to our lives as children and as men. This identification with our fathers represents an important emotional reservoir from which we draw to elaborate a sense of our own personal strength.



Yet we live in a society where an important measure of an individual's self-worth remains tied up with the work he does and the income he earns. Our feelings about our father's strength, and about him as a person to be respected, admired and identified with, reverberate against this cultural backdrop.

Question: How satisfied were you with what your father did for a living?

Ralph: "...I used to be embarrassed about our poverty. I didn't like the idea- there were some kids on the block... there were some kids on the block who were a little wealthier than we were and...their houses were much better appointed."

Tom: "Obviously not...I wasn't satisfied with our financial security or lack of it. And then as I became older, as an adolescent, I wasn't satisfied at all. I thought it was degrading- also that he had to work all these other jobs...to my friends at the time, the notion that your father couldn't support a family well on a position, forget a job, a position, was absurd. So I think I was constantly aware of the fact that he couldn't make it at his job and had to do all these other jobs."

Gary: "...something would start out well and then not last very long. And he'd be in trouble again, having to look for a job or being disappointed in the job that he had. So I would have- there was no time when I thought he was doing anything satisfactory very long."

Peter: "When I was first growing up, I didn't know any better, I thought it was great what my father worked for a living. When I was older, I was somewhat embarrassed when I was in college, talking with all these other guys and what their dads did...most of the other parents were white collar workers. And my father was a blue collar worker and I was sort of ashamed of that...."

Moreover, a father's ability to provide emotional or educational guidance in their son's lives, to imbue their lives with a positive sense of direction, remains intimately tied to the father's sense of self-worth and self-confidence. Yet insofar as fathers internalize society's equation of self-worth with material success, their confidence

in their ability to counsel and positively direct their son's lives will be adversely affected.

Question: How satisfied was your father with the work that he did?

Doug: "I think he was an enormously frustrated man. I think it's safe to say that he hated his job, hated the work that he did. He did it out of ideological conviction... he belittled the work, [it was] stultifying, stupefying and repetitive. And it was paradoxical, he had great respect for the working-class and not much respect for the work they did."

Gary: "...he never felt he advanced as far as he should anywhere and he didn't ever like mechanicing. He thought that in the post office that he was sort of overlooked...he would not want to get up and go out there and do it anymore...so i don't think he was pleased with it at all."

Bert: "...he used to dream and talk about how he was going to do this or that and he never did it...I would say he really wanted more success in the trucking thing than he ever realized...I think he tried to and failed."

Ralph: " I don't think he was happy with the work...he liked the companionship that he had there, but I don't think he particularly cared for the work. His attitude was people have to work to make a living...He tried several other things, but they never worked out. Of all the things he ever did, being a garment worker was the most successful... he said [to me], I've been up to shit to here all my life. So life and work are difficult circumstances, but I think he did what he had to do."

I am not suggesting that these fathers defined themselves as "failures". But their sense of themselves remains colored by the reality that our society does not value the work they do as blue-collar workers. This, coupled with a keen dissatisfaction with their work, invariably undermined the father's ability to provide a suitable role model for their sons.

The most important message working-class fathers seem to give their sons is negative: don't be like me! So the issue of how one can

positively identify with one's father becomes problematic for these sons.

Ralph: "...he never had a positive conception of what he wanted out of me...he didn't know what it would be to be anything...I never had a positive sense of what it is he wanted me to do."

Bert: "I don't know what my father's expectations for me really were."

Steve: "Well, the strange thing is my dad never, as far as I can detect, worked hard on my career or anything. He never sat down with me or set aside money for college...he didn't ever think of me or any of his kids becoming like professors. I don't think it ever entered his mind."

As fathers have not been successful themselves, and therefore remain unaware of the upward mobility process as a lived experience, how can they provide the needed emotional and intellectual guidance to help sons achieve greater occupational success?

Peter: "...all my relatives were blue collar workers. My uncle worked at a mill, my other uncle was a mailman, my other uncle worked in an armory. I never had any people with professional-role models...I had no direction. Go to your guidance counselor-my father didn't know anything about college...It wasn't until I was at college or even after college-christ, if people had told me, if I knew then what I know now, and I think my mother and father had that responsibility...My parents more or less depended on me to do it on my own because they didn't know what to do."

Peter's tempered statements about his parents' inability to assume a more active role in his education, masks an underlying resentment and anger:

Peter: "...my parents never advised me other than, go to college-- that was it...I am, I was always a little upset-- gee, I wish they had told me what the hell was going on because sometimes you're growing up and you make decisions-- shit, if i knew-- jesus, I wish someone had told me...I feel a lot of times, they should have told me that...I do have a little bit of anger because they didn't give me the proper guidance...I feel angry about it, but they didn't know. It's hard for

them. If i had talked to my dad, he would probably say, well, you should have found out on your own, which I ended up doing anyway."

And here is Ralph:

Ralph:"...if by some miracle I could have become a brain surgeon, or a doctor,...[if] I could have miraculously gone from high school to being a doctor, and it would have cost them nothing, first in terms of energy and money, they would have been delighted. But that would be a miracle, that would be their fantasy, it just wasn't going to happen. Well, it didn't happen and that's where the resentment comes in on my side. You can have all these aspirations, but if you don't put your shoulder to the wheel and make it happen...my parents [never found] the wherewithal to make it happen- wherewithal meaning more than just money-meaning know how, expertise, information, encouragement, discourse, scoping out."

Here is an important example of how one's social class background insinuates itself into the very fabric of the father/son relationship. The father's work experience does not provide a shining example of what he wants for his sons. Rather, the reverse is true. Fathers want their sons to be more successful than they are; they want their sons to be professionals, whose work and life experiences are very different from their own. But their ability to assist sons in mapping out the educational and/or occupational strategies for becoming a successful professional is problematic because the stepping stones remain unclear: just how does one get from high school to becoming a doctor?

Moreover, fathers dissuade sons from becoming like them. At some level, fathers do not want their sons to identify with them. But to be different than one's father means that the son's future college, graduate or professional school training, and any occupational success he experiences, carries his life further and further away from his father.



Fathers and sons are aware of the emotional distance created by the son's educational and occupational achievements. The awareness that sons will be different and better than they are, reveals itself in the overt ambivalence some of these fathers express about their son's education.

Ralph: "He hated education...He thought it was a waste of time. In the end he supported my education, but I never felt that it was..he was genuinely behind me, because he didn't know...."

"I don't know why he had such a distaste for education. Maybe he thought it was effete. He had troubles with his masculinity- we all do- but he seemed to have more than most and he probably thought education was effete."

Gary: "...my mother said something that she attributed to my father and I'm not sure whether he said it or not-that I had come back knowing too much for my own good or thinking I knew everything. And that who did he think he was, meaning me...none of the siblings were ever encouraged to go to college...so I think that they didn't have any great notion that college had done anything great for me."

Gary's father clearly felt threatened by his son's success. He associated Gary's desire to get an education with a desire to know more than he did; to upstage him and usurp his role in the family. In his father's eyes, getting an education meant Gary was becoming too big for his britches. This, in turn, produced an intense resentment, an ever-increasing emotional distance and an emotional and physical abandonment by his father. Gary's experience of being abandoned surfaced as he reflected on his family's move out west during his high school years.

Gary: "...in my junior year...my family started talking about moving to Colorado, but there wouldn't be room enough for me in the car. So there were 4 kids, two adults and a dog and some



belongings in the car...[I] arrange[ed] for a summer job so I could earn enough money so I could go out there...to finish up my last year of high school."

In other instances, parents indirectly expressed the threatening quality of their son's educational achievements. Ralph elaborated the lack of emotional support he received from his parents while describing living at home during his first year of college:

Ralph: "...we had a television. I had a thin door between me and the living room and they just played the fucking thing as loud as possible. And I was hurting; I was doing badly in school...I was failing...it [wasn't] like, let's be quiet, he's studying. My mother would come into my room and say, what are you studying so hard for...."

The insensitivity and disrespect expressed in Ralph's home represents another way in which father and mother can communicate their anxiety and anger over the prospect of a son developing a different kind of life. Ralph's father interpreted his educational achievements as an explicit rejection of his life.

Ralph: "...he used to say, Joe Schmidt's son, who later became a doctor, his son used to work for him in the garment shop and he never complained about it- so he wanted- he was just saying that's the model I want you to follow. So you show me that you care. But I couldn't do it...I didn't think he deserved that type of reward. He had not given me that type of reward."

However, a father's anxiety and resentment can be expressed in other ways.

Bert: "I knew that I would amount to something. He would always tell me that I would never amount to anything because I went to college. Or he used to say-I'd come home' and [he would] say, do you think you're ever going to amount to anything? And I guess I knew in my mind I would, but he never got to see that. I was the family black sheep. I don't think anybody expected a whole lot out of me...."

One can vividly imagine Bert's father goading or bating him about his educational ambitions and achievements. His father's actions can, in large part, be explained by understanding his sense of disappointment, frustration or despair about his own life. In fact, in those situations where fathers most readily maintained a sense of dignity and self-worth in the work they did, they were less likely to covertly express resentment about their son's success.

Steve and Doug's father maintained a sense of self-importance and dignity in their work through their political beliefs and union activities:

Doug: "...if it were not for his political commitments, he would have been a lawyer or something else. He was and remains a militant trade unionist and marxist. That's why he stayed."

Steve: "...he was very involved with the lefties there, the Communist Party, at the Univ. of Washington, and they said, hey, you go back to Idaho where you're from and help organize the revolution from there. So he went back there and he went to work there in a variety of jobs...."

These fathers' political and trade-union commitments both reflected and translated into a respect for intellectual pursuits and the value of an education. Consequently, both of these fathers clearly supported their son's academic careers.

Doug: "...I never sensed for a minute that he was disappointed in my becoming a teacher. It's a venerable thing to do in his mind."

Steve: "He'd say I'm an economics professor...That's better than being a doctor for him- an engineer would be good, but this is important. This is where the laws of motion of capitalism are involved."

It is interesting to note that whatever anxiety or resentment fathers overtly or covertly expressed, all of the sons imagined that their fathers remained proud of their accomplishments.

Ralph: "I'd like to think he had finally developed some pride in me. I think he felt that all his sons were failures. I'd like to think, for what it's worth, that he saw that I was on the brink of some kind of culturally defined success and that at last he had a son that he could point to with pride."

Peter: "...I know he's proud of me. I'm absolutely sure that he's proud of me. He'd never admit it, but I know he is. I know when he sits around talking with all his friends or his co-workers...I know he probably blew me up a lot better than I actually was...my kid is in charge of the whole hospital! I'm sure he said that. I know he said that...I think he's bragging."

Tom: "I think he would be proud of me for doing any professional occupation or anything where I made a lot of money...it would be a step up from what he was...I think he's very proud....He tells people that his son teaches at [name of institution] and I know he's gratified when people have heard of it...I think he gets some mileage out of that...."

What emerges then is a sense of the father's ambivalence about the son having educational and work experiences that clearly transcend his own.

The expression of envy or resentment does not diminish the pride fathers experience about their son's success. But the father's pride and vicarious pleasure does not detract from the other, darker feelings fathers have about being eclipsed by their sons. As a result, fathers give sons confusing and anxiety provoking double messages: don't be like me/ be better than me; yet I will resent it or feel envious if you become better than me.

This ambivalence affects both the father/son and mother/son relationship. For a few men, mother and father had quite different ideas

about their son's future. Consequently, the son's success became a debated issue or source of conflict between the parents.

Gary: "I think my mother thought I should go to college. and when I was talking a while about the ministry, I think she thought that was a good idea. There's a certain kind of prestige in it...I would have been valedictorian..of my class...she would have liked that. I don't think he [father] was especially taken with that idea, that that was so great...I think he thought that I was a bit smartalecky too. And I probably was."

Tom: "...going to college was my own doing...I remember feeling a little resentful that...why couldn't he help me out a little? He didn't have it, but my mother tried to help out some. I don't think he had a sense of what i was doing [ie, studying in Paris]. He didn't ever put it down in any way, but he also wasn't out there trying to manage it and help it in any real way."

Bert: "She [mother] was the real driving force in all of us-- studying and going to school. I think my father would have ignored the whole thing, by my mother made sure we did our homework and did go to school...she imparted most of the positive values in all the children."

Parental differences or actual parental conflict over the son's education and future success places the son squarely between the parents. Becoming successful in this instance means doing the bidding of one parent, the mother, at the expense of the father. As a result, the son's positive achievements become invariably associated with a negative outcome; a sense of harming or undermining the father. This association, in turn, generates guilt and anxiety about the meaning and impact of being successful. I will return to this important issue later.

Another example of father's ambivalence is his reaction to the traditional rites of passage men experience on their way to becoming successful: high school, college and graduate or professional school graduation. These rituals express a symbolic separation of the son



from his parents and family. In the context of the working-class father/successful son relationship, these rituals embody how the world sons inhabit and will create are quite different from, and in many ways "better than" that enjoyed by their fathers.

A few men I interviewed experienced great difficulty remembering anything about any of their school graduations.

Question: Was there any recognition in your family that you had graduated high school or college?

Steve: "...it wasn't celebrated...they didn't celebrate that way."

Ralph: "No. No gift. No nothing...But...I don't think I ever told them about the BA or the MA or high school graduation."

The lack of celebration points, I feel, to an uneasiness about the underlying meaning of the ritual: that the son is moving away from the family.

### A Personal Story

For as long as I can remember, my parents believed that obtaining a formal education represented a means of securing respect from others and achieving a level of material success they never enjoyed. While my mother finished high school, my father left school after the eighth grade to support himself and his family.

All of my educational achievements represent a great source of pride to my parents. And I have experienced considerable satisfaction from observing and feeling the vicarious pleasure they enjoyed from my success. However, during my adulthood, I have become increasingly conscious of a more painful aspect of my personal success.

My emerging awareness of this other aspect actually began at my high school graduation. In ninth grade, I had transferred from a New



York City public junior high school, to one of the city's most exclusive private high schools. I was fortunate to receive a scholarship which covered virtually all of the school's tuition. If I were to say that I experienced "culture shock", that would be an understatement. I went from "hanging out" with friends in Greenwich Village, riding my beloved red skateboard through city streets, in one year, to rubbing elbows with kids who lived in the finest homes in New York. Academically and socially, I did all I could just to hold my own. By the end of that first year, I had established a circle of friends and acquaintances. And I found this new world exhilarating; it was tailored to the educational and occupational ambitions my parents and I had for my future. While I basked in the privileged world of my high school for four years, I often felt that I was on the sidelines, or looking into this great big bubble from the outside. I knew something was amiss, but it took my high school graduation ceremony to help me begin to put things into clearer focus.

I recall standing alongside my parents in the school's elegant quadrangle. I can vividly remember their faces beaming with pride and a bit of reverence. And yet at the same time, I sensed my parents' awkwardness and my own considerable anxiety. At that moment, I could not understand what prompted these feelings, which threatened to undermine this moment of personal triumph. In the following months and years, the meaning of these darker feelings became increasingly clear. The world of this exclusive school; a world I now felt a part of, albeit tenuously given my modest background, was far removed from my parents' social world and their life experiences. While my

parents stood there that day in reverence of my accomplishment, they also, I feel, understood that an important part of my intellectual and emotional identity was becoming (or had become) inaccessible to them. In a very deep and painful sense, my life was unknown and unknowable to them. All of my accomplishments and success, everything my parents wanted and I wanted for myself, carried me further and further away from them. The more successful I became, the more emotionally isolated I felt from my parents. And I began to feel with a mounting sadness, and sense of irony, that my successive achievements would be difficult to share with them.

And yet the sadness was mixed with a sense of shame. I wanted to belong to this new, more glamorous and sophisticated world of my high school. My anxiety at the school graduation ceremony stemmed from feelings of embarrassment for my parents and for myself. I wanted to repudiate and disassociate myself from my parents' social world. And I wanted them to realize it. After all, isn't that what they wanted for me?; isn't that what they had always said: 'we want you to be better than we are'. And yet now that I was on the verge of fulfilling my own and their ambition, I felt confused, anxious and trapped in between two conflicting worlds....

The feeling of shame and embarrassment did not emerge in all the interviews. But it surfaced in enough of them to suggest that it is an important part of growing-up in a working-class family and becoming more successful than one's father.

Tom: "...the friends I hung out with, alot were sort of affluent...We were in somebody's car, we were drinking...and driving...going to a party. I was in the backseat of the car...and

we pulled into a gas station. And I looked out and my father was working pumping gas as one of his second jobs. And I was mortified. I was so embarrassed. And no one knew it was my father. Some of them would have but they didn't notice him, he was on the other pump. I remember just scrunching down in the backseat of the car absolutely mortified that someone- that he would recognize me and that an acknowledgement would be made that that's my father. Not only have I never forgotten that, but that feeling has produced such guilt in me over the years. I was ashamed of him...."

"...saturday nights he used to deliver the n.y. times...sometimes he'd wake me up at 4 [sunday morning] to go with him...we'd get into his car...fill it with newspapers and from 4 until about 9, drive through these suburbs where all my rich friends lived. It was awful. I had to bring a newspaper to their door. I just felt like I hated it. I hated it- I felt like I wanted to be in that house. Having someone to deliver to me. The idea that my father delivered their papers and sometimes they would complain to him about something- it really made me feel sick inside...I felt bad enough that he had to do this- for us to survive. But it was the worst kind of- for me- degradation."

Bert: "...I was in the 4th grade and I was walking down the street and I went into a store to buy some candy and I had 10 cents and I paid for the candy and the guy said, tell your father to come in some day and pay the bill. I can remember that and being embarrassed about it. I think it was the first awareness I had of financial problems...I was with a couple of friends and I was embarrassed. It stuck with me for whatever reason."

Peter: " [When I was in college] I wish[ed] my father wasn't a machinist so I wouldn't have to try to lie my way around it. I wish he was a car salesman or anything except a machinist...I'd say, yeah, he's a manager of big wire, he's a manager at friendly's, anything other than he was a machinist- because that was...dirty."

The experience of being ashamed of one's father, of his work and/or inability to provide a certain standard of living, generates both guilt feelings and a sense of self-denigration. Our fathers, after all, are important men we identify with on some emotional/psychological level. Consequently, when we are ashamed of our fathers, we are also ashamed of ourselves.

But just as important, the shame these men felt about their fathers made it even more difficult for them to assume an active and positive role in shaping their son's ambitions. And as fathers remained unable to guide or direct their sons, fathers became increasingly marginal, if not irrelevant to their sons' developing educational and professional success.

Consequently, the myth of the self-made man almost achieves a palpable living form in this father/son relationship.

Question: Did your father influence your ideas about what you wanted to be?

Peter: "He didn't discourage me. If I said I wanted to be a machinist or I want to go work in a factory, I think he would have tried to dissuade me...it's not how he persuaded me, it's how he didn't dissuade me."

Steve: "...he didn't ever think of me or any of his kids becoming like professors. I don't think it ever entered his mind. It just sort of happened. And he has a son who is an attorney and a son who is a professor. He can't believe it."

Tom: "I don't think so. I really don't. I can't think of any example or way in which he did."

Bert: "I don't think he was terribly important."

While several men observed that their fathers were not significant to their educational and occupational experiences, others reported assuming parental responsibilities in their families:

Doug: "I had part-time jobs since the time I was 12...None of the kids has been asked to pay and help out. But I did. I paid about half of my younger brother's tuition."

"...I had a fairly extensive bit of household responsibilities and they grew more extensive as more children came. And I was an active caretaker. I don't just mean babysitting on weekends."

Gary: Yes [I did take a lot of responsibility for the kids in the family], in a way, when I think about it. Because dad didn't



want to take the responsibility and my mother...she didn't always seem available."

The marginality or irrelevance of several fathers in shaping a son's career ambitions and choices, the experience of some men in assuming parental responsibilities and the son's actual educational achievements, suggest that the process of eclipsing one's father begins far earlier than the son's adult success. For these sons, the process stretches back into their childhood or adolescence.

Accordingly, as these sons grew up experiencing their father's ambivalence, they developed ambivalent feelings of their own toward their fathers. The intense longing for their fathers to act like fathers, ie, to be strong and provide guidance and support, contrasted with a deep sense of disappointment and anger. These darker feelings emerged from father's inability to exercise paternal responsibility, and, for some, a sense of embarrassment and shame about their father's working-class status.

This mutual ambivalence also stretches back into the son's adolescence and childhood, and establishes an emotional and psychological context for understanding how father and son experience the son eclipsing the father's position in the male world of work.

None of the men I interviewed suggested that their fathers were overtly bitter, resentful or envious of their professional success.

Peter: "...I can't ever recollect that my father said, well, if I had the opportunities you had...I would have done this. No, I don't think my father ever felt sorry for himself... saying, geez, if my father gave me what I gave you, I don't ever remember that."

Doug: "...I don't detect any sense of resentment or bitterness from my father to me- I busted my ass so you can get this."



"I think that one of the ways that my father got through the rough patches in his own life, wondering about how he's doing and what he should have done, was the satisfaction, as a common American, that his kids are doing all right. And that's a vindication that he did all right. He made the right choices even if it wasn't necessarily right for him...."

Bert: "My feeling right now is that he would have felt that he had done well for me. That he had made possible my successes or would have contributed to them- probably he would have been thinking, well, I got him through school and look what that did for him. I think that that was his real sense of achievement- getting me through college financially."

Tom: "I tell him certain...things that will make him not worry about my position here and make him feel respectable-- respectful of it. Partly to give him more vicarious-- to feed that a bit. Because I know he gets some vicarious pleasure out of it. And he gets a great deal of pride."

The son's success becomes an important way in which a father can feel successful too; the son's success fuels the father's sense of having fulfilled an important function in life, thereby imbuing his own life with a sense of dignity and purpose.

However, as I noted earlier, fathers often communicate other darker feelings about how they experience their son's success. And these feelings are not lost on the sons.

#### Bert

Question: If I were to ask your father to describe what you did for a living, what do you think he would say?

Bert: "A thief! A thief in the sense that I am making money and not doing much to earn it. I think the implication was that he had to work his ass off to make a meager living...that what I was doing he would have called me a thief because I was making pretty good bucks and not getting my hands dirty."

Bert's response can be read in several ways. On one level, the imagined response represents a devaluation of the work he does: as Bert does not perform manual labor, he does not really work for a

living. This can be read as a commentary on the father/son relationship and his feelings about his own work. In terms of the relationship, Bert's response emerges from his experience of his father goading him and openly questioning whether he would be successful. In this sense, Bert's response illuminates the negative aspect of his father's ambivalence about his success.

However, his response also reflects the extent to which Bert identifies with his father in order to minimize the anxiety, and perhaps guilt, about being better than his father. As he elaborates:

Bert: "...one of the things my own employees admire of me, the reason some of them stayed with me so long...they know that-getting dirty, laying in the snow, water, slush or water, whatever...it's a mental toughness, an ability to go out and get it done, whatever it takes...that has always been important to me, to not only exhibit that trait but that's the way I feel, I can do it. And I think a lot of that came from him. That's one of the greatest, that's one of the finer things that I got from my father. He was tough. He'd get dirty and work hard and not be afraid. And I always admired that."

His father's imagined response, conjuring up issues of father/son rivalry, or father feeling threatened by Bert's success, gets quickly blunted and transformed into an emotional solidarity and identification between father and son. The father's imagined devaluing comments provide Bert with a lesson to be learned from his father: 'don't be afraid to get dirty; tough things out and get the job done'. What becomes clear in these statements, and throughout the interview, is Bert's longing to be identified with his deceased father:

Bert: "...it seems to me that I was just reaching the age when our relationship was going to be important...I think I would have come to appreciate his hard work as I began to work hard myself."

Bert's need to identify with his father manifests itself through his description of his business:

Bert: "We relocate factories, move production machinery or we'll install a new machine in a factory. We do some heavy construction work...So pretty much it's a blue collar business for sure."

Bert's description of his business as "blue collar" enables him to maintain a sense of occupational solidarity with his father and to minimize the emotional distance between father and son. This was further evidenced by Bert's modest depiction of his own success; his ownership of a multi-million dollar business:

Interviewer: Well, looking back on it, now that you've become very successful--

Bert: Well, I'm surviving.

Interviewer: Certainly much, much more successful than your father ever was--

Bert: Well, probably.

Finally, the issue of father/son identification surfaced in Bert's comparison of his own and his father's youth:

Bert: "I think my father was a hellion when he was young...he went off on his own...I went through the same sort of hellion thing...drinking excessively as a youngster...in college...just irresponsible with booze and not really caring...and he may have been that sort."

Bert's need to emotionally identify with his father and to downplay the extent and significance of his success, minimizes his total eclipse of his father's achievements in the workplace. I sense that for Bert to dwell on his father's failures and to contrast those with his own success, would create a great deal of anxiety. To focus on his father's inability to succeed would evoke hostile feelings he had when his father drank, physically abused his mother, or when he was confronted, as a boy, by the shopkeeper who insisted that his

father pay his bills. The hurt and angry feelings Bert undoubtedly experienced remain subordinate to his appreciation of his father for teaching him about the work ethic.

What is missing here is the son who felt badly about himself for being the family "black sheep", and angry with his father for questioning his ability to succeed. Bert's unswerving belief that he would succeed, and then actually succeeding where his father failed, coupled with his rejection of his father's trucking business, represents something more than a son doing better than his father. Bert's success represents a defiance of his father's judgment.

At some level, Bert's desire to succeed and his actual experience of success, continues to reverberate against his father's expectation that he could or would not succeed. Accordingly, Bert's communication of how similar he is to his father mitigates his defiance of his father's judgment and provides a means of reconciliation between father and son.

Yet Bert's need to identify himself with his father is achieved at a cost; the anger and hurt he experienced being the family "black sheep" does not get acknowledged. Moreover, if Bert closely identifies with his father, to what extent does he concur with his father's judgment that he is a thief?; that he makes alot of money without earning it? The underlying emotional cost of maintaining an identification with the idealized father of his childhood is that Bert minimizes and perhaps even questions the impact and the legitimacy of his considerable success.



Peter

Question: If I were to ask your father to describe what you did for a living, what do you think he would say?

Peter: "Nothing! That's what my father would say, he'd say nothing. Then honestly he would say, he's an accountant. Well, what does an accountant do? He'd say, he does my taxes once a year. Then my father would say, he probably sends out bills to people. He doesn't really know what I do...how I deal with reimbursement and budgetary issues at the hospital, and cost issues and development of new product services-my father would have no idea- my son is an accountant- he adds up numbers. Puts little numbers in little boxes all day. And he does income taxes."

Peter imagines his father responding in a way similar to Bert's father. The explicit message is white collar work is inferior to manual labor:

Peter: "...my father [says] anybody who is a white collar worker,...aw, he makes alot of money but he doesn't do nothing. Because I don't get my hands dirty."

Peter's father was a machinist and these imagined statements can be construed as a way of preserving dignity, pride and self-worth in a culture that devalues manual labor. The pride embodied in his father's imaginary response expresses a resistance to the cultural degradation of blue collar work. Yet what about Peter's feelings?; does he share his father's judgment?

On the one hand, Peter takes considerable pride in having mastered the demands of his job:

Peter: "When I moved into the health care industry, I was very lost. I didn't understand alot of things- very complex issues...[Now] I feel like I'm on top of most of those complex issues. I feel like I'm in charge. I feel like I have a handle on everything. I feel very confident...I'm confident in what I do. And...that's the part I enjoy."



And in an imaginary dialogue with his father, Peter expresses a desire to show his father just how successful and powerful he is:

Peter: "I have to admit I think I'd like it if my father could come and watch me and keep his mouth shut. I mean that because he'd start saying, *jesus christ, jesus christ*, what the hell are you doing; *jesus*, you don't do nothing...I wish he could just see...to see me in action sometimes in some of these meetings- how I take control. People are sitting down and I'm the one in charge and they do what I say... [I'd like my father to see] my power and my knowledge, almost to the point of showing off. To see me when I've got a roomful of people and all eyes are focused on me and people are just waiting for my words of wisdom...I think it would impress him-- just to show him that I do more than just add up columns and numbers."

Peter's desire to show off his knowledge and power reflects feelings of frustration, resentment and anger about his father's imagined devaluing judgment about his work. It is as if Peter would like to say: "I'll show you dad"!

But for all his pride in his achievements; in amassing power and exercising authority at work, I wondered whether, at some level, Peter agreed with his father and associated "real work" with manual labor.

Peter explicitly denied he agreed with his father. Yet I sensed in his desire to prove himself to his father, a concurrent need to prove to himself just how important his position at the hospital was. The bold and assertive quality of Peter's characterization of meetings with subordinates, reflects a need to believe that he exerts a kind of masculine or "manly" authority at work; that his work is indeed "real man's" work.

We can understand Peter's need to prove his manliness to himself and to his father as a way of counteracting both his father's inability to acknowledge what he does for a living and his imagined devaluing

comments. Peter's reaction expresses both a desire to set his father straight and to demonstrate that his work is just as "manly" as his father's. His need to demonstrate this suggests that Peter wants to remain identified with his father. However, this need for identification reflects and maintains ambivalent feelings about his own work. Peter feels considerable pride about his occupational achievements, yet tacitly agrees with his father's equating real work with manual labor.

Moreover, his father's imaginary response about Peter's work reflects how he perceives that, at some level, his father remains threatened by his occupational success.

Bert's and Peter's responses express an ambivalence about their success; an ambivalence both father and son share. This shared ambivalence derives, in large part, from the son's close emotional identification with his father. Accordingly, the father's imagined devaluation of the work their sons do, impacts and influences how sons feel about their own work and success. But where does the father's need to devalue or belittle their sons work come from? Does this need stem directly from how fathers feel about their own work and their lives as men? Are fathers who are able to maintain a sense of dignity and pride in their work less likely to feel overtly threatened by their son's success? In turn, are their sons less likely to interpret their own success as threatening or harmful, and to develop anxious and/or guilt feelings about their achievements?

There is another important point here. We live in a society that devalues manual labor, and to the extent that fathers share the cultural norm of devaluing manual labor, and encourage their sons to be "better" than they are, they will invariably feel some ambivalence about themselves and about their son's success. This appears to be so even when fathers remain quite proud of the work they do.

While a son's success might represent an important index of one's success as a father, it also highlights the experience of not being successful oneself, and trigger feelings of envy or jealousy about being eclipsed by one's son in the workplace.

Gary

Question: If I were to ask your father what you did for a living, what do you think he would he say?

Gary: "He would say, he teaches in college- I don't know if he would say much more than that. He never asked me to describe what I was doing. Never seemed either interested...in asking or listening to any descriptions of what I was doing. So I think he may have decided that he didn't care. Or may have decided that it was a world that he would never understand."

Gary's response evokes a clear and painful sense of being emotionally abandoned by his father. At one level, this sense of abandonment reproduces what Gary knows about his father's relationship to his own father:

Question: What do you know about your father's relationship to his own father?

Gary: "It wasn't good because his mother died when he was 7. And his father sort of left him and went and lived in a one-room cabin for the rest of his life and had very little to do with his son or his grandchildren...I think he was never around a really good family relationship. Never had it himself. So that's part of the reason he wasn't very good at it...."

The experience of being abandoned by his own father must have contributed to Gary's father's inability to be emotionally involved with his own sons. As many of our father's fathers were emotionally abandoned, and left without a clear positive sense of what a father is, it makes sense that abandonment issues got reproduced in our father's lives.

Gary's response suggests two contending interpretations of his abandonment by his father: did his father decide not to care for, or merely decide he could not understand Gary? The latter interpretation is somewhat benign, while the former remains more seriously hurtful. The sense I have from my interview with Gary is that he believes the former. Throughout his childhood and adolescence, Gary experienced his father as being threatened by his success at school and by his familial role.

From early on, Gary's status as a "little star", as he put it, impacted familial relations, in particular the parental relationship.

Gary: "...I used to take-force the kids below me to get dressed and go off to sunday school and church...I used to make them come...and I'm sure there was some notion that I would be saving them from something- helping them to break out of something that I must not have appreciated...I probably did seem like somebody who might have been interfering at times- I must have talked with them [parents]...."



"...I think there probably was somewhere in me the notion that I had to make up for what my father wasn't doing- to some extent. And I had to be a success at something or other...success in school came relatively easily...but the rest of the family didn't have any successes."

Gary succeeded where his father failed and became the boy and man his father never was or could be. In this context, Gary's success represented a source of direct father/son rivalry and conflict.

When a son's success becomes imbued with such a clear and profound impact on the father's familial role, then the son's success can be implicated as the cause of the father's diminished authority or power. In thinly veiled ways, his father communicated how he believed Gary was responsible for his own inability to succeed.

Gary: "He would sometimes talk about young whippersnappers coming in and taking over jobs that men who had been around longer and knew better should have been doing. And I think he was trying to- I think he was aware that just working mail handling or something like that, wasn't as dignified a thing as...something professional would have been."

Unfortunately, in situations where the son assumes a parental role in the family and becomes groomed to eclipse his father, a tacit or explicit alliance between mother and son, a two against one alliance against the father, often gets established. In effect, the son's success becomes embroiled in the struggle between the parents. As sons get enlisted in the struggle against the father, this increases both the power and authority sons feel they have, and their sense of responsibility, both for the family's well-being and for the father's sense of his own failure.

Gary: "...my mother was sort of a proud person who often said that she came from good stock and all that shit...she could point out a nice big house that used to have alot of property



related to it that her father owned. And the family name was had been big and she showed me a family tree...she would harken back to a better time when things were better."

Interviewer: ...I was wondering whether you ever felt the responsibility to restore [the family name]?

Gary: "Oh I imagine, sure I imagine it was that. And especially if I was the only one who seemed to know anything about it, then it was my responsibility to do something about it. Return the family name to something decent. I'm sure that had its effect."

Gary's burden remained substantial: he would alleviate mother's frustration with father, by "doing right by her" in a way that father was never able to, and restore the family name (his father's as well as mother's?, or just mother's?) to a dignified place. Gary's burden extended from his immediate family back through the generations, making him a kind of familial Atlas with the whole family on his shoulders.

However, Gary's mother did not totally impose this burden on him. Gary willingly, and perhaps even eagerly, assumed the responsibility of being the man his father could never be. Moreover, Gary possessed a fair degree of self-consciousness about his familial role and its impact on his father. From a very early moment, Gary understood how he threatened his father. He associated his father's anxiety with the responsibility and power he assumed in his family.

Clearly, giving a son this profound emotional and psychological power and responsibility in a family is inappropriate. But it also generates anxiety and guilt, and represents an obstacle to be overcome as these children enter adulthood. The appropriation of too much power

as a child or adolescent can often be compensated for by adopting self-deprecating beliefs in adulthood.

Gary: "...I don't have any great admiration for people who become doctors or lawyers or college professors because you meet stupid and unfeeling doctors and teachers...that doesn't make them any brighter or more human than some of the other people who didn't know about how to open up some of those avenues...I'm sure that's consistent with what my father would have said, interestingly enough."

The two salient themes here are Gary's lack of respect for professional people and his identification with his father. Gary's negative feelings are put forward as a way of strengthening his association with his father.

Gary: "...sometimes when I see somebody else doing something I could have done, ...I say to myself, why didn't I find out about it? Why didn't I go to some of these professional meetings? So in some ways I think I have a workman's attitude rather than a professional's attitude toward the opportunities...so I think that he probably had a working-class attitude and that I still think I have a working-class attitude toward a blue collar attitude toward the professions."

"...so probably the attitude hasn't been helpful in making me helping me advance in the profession or even toward getting by now I could have had a professorship had I done things a little bit differently. And I don't blame anybody for that, I essentially blame myself. And that attitude might be partly related to suggestions about just being weak and not wanting to be aggressive or not wanting to be... being more lacksaidaisacal about putting myself forward. Or pretending I...know less than I do. Rather than going the other way, pretending to know more."

Gary's attitude toward professionals, and his refusal to play by the rules of the game and participate in academic politics derives from a worldview he defines as "blue collar"; a "workman's" view of the professional world. Gary's beliefs adversely affect his own professional advancement, and they represent a clear and continuing

obstacle to any future occupational success. However, his beliefs reflect something more than a cynicism about academic politics.

The responsibility and power Gary amassed and wielded as a child and as a young man in his family, provides a source of irony, doubt and guilt to Gary as an adult. In effect, Gary tries to do to himself what his father remained unable to do in the family: to take away or undermine the position of power Gary occupied in the family.

Question: In what ways do you think your life is like your father's?

Gary: "I expect that putting off certain decisions, figuring out what I wanted to do is similar. And perhaps not setting any goals or thinking that it's important to be a boss or a professional or make alot of money. I'm sure that's a reflection of him. And maybe that thing about weakness- not wanting to put myself in a position over someone else or being all that responsible, except with my family."

Gary's inability to aggressively pursue his career goals, stems from the association between being successful and being threatening to his father; being a success clearly meant usurping his father's familial role. Gary's ambivalence about his own career, and feelings about himself as a professional man, emanate from a sense of guilt for upstaging his father. This sense of guilt becomes all the more profound because Gary willingly assumed the responsibility and power embedded in his familial role. Accordingly, Gary's defensive identification with his father amounts to an attempt to alleviate his sense of guilt: to minimize and undo his sense of his own power to negatively impact his father's life and his father's sense of himself.

Yet Gary clearly does not want to relinquish his identity as a successful professional: he does not want to be like his father. In the context of explaining why it took several years to graduate college and why he has not scampered quickly up the ladder of success, Gary explains:

Gary: "...he was at a low point and four years after my high school graduation...I would have looked like I was getting ahead and he wasn't. I would imagine that would have been very difficult. But as it was extended, then he may have thought that I was just like him. And not able to do much of anything. And I may have had that fear some point along the line...so I may have thought that, here I go duplicating my old man. I'm sure i thought that a few times."

In a sense, Gary lives a kind of trapped existence. He continues to feel anxious about being too full of himself and responsible for his father's failures, and yet he remains fearful that he might end up a broken and passive man like his father. Gary apparently avoids the difficult task of working through the anger and hurt he experienced while being emotionally abandoned by his father. Yet this working through seems necessary so that Gary can begin to forgive his father (how can a man who was never fathered himself know what it is to be a father?), and, more importantly, forgive himself (a son cannot ever be held accountable for the misfortunes of a father's life), and bring about the desired reconciliation with his deceased father.

My interview with Gary illustrates, in perhaps more extreme or stark terms, what all upwardly mobile men must own up to: they are leading the kind of lives, and perhaps becoming the kind of men, their fathers never did or could become. The emotional and psychological distance the son's mobility generates must be acknowledged and dealt



with by father and son. At some level, upwardly mobile men must acknowledge that their success eclipses their father's occupational status. Moreover, given society's values, equating one's self-worth with one's income and status, they become more of a man than their fathers. An important distinguishing feature of the various father/son relationships I discovered in my interviews, is how (and not whether) fathers and sons dealt with these issues.

Gary needs to curtail his ambition to succeed for defensive reasons; that is, to minimize both the threat he posed to his father and his responsibility for his father's deflated sense of self.

Unfortunately, Gary attempted to fashion a connection with his father out of an emotional void; a void of silence and abandonment.

Gary's painful experience with his father illustrates, by contrast, an important ingredient of what makes for a healthier, satisfying and less guilt-ridden father/son relationship.

In the course of a son becoming an adult, both sons and fathers go through many life changes. And there are times when fathers will perceive their sons as attempting to symbolically destroy them. After all, becoming an adult means taking away the authority fathers wield and assuming greater responsibility for oneself. This process of usurping parental authority means destroying an existing parental role and an existing parent/son relationship. And parents must accept this if their children are to emerge as healthy adults. What makes for a healthier relationship is for fathers to accept, within reasonable limits, the son's need to destroy their fathers.



In the context of the father/son relationship depicted here, if fathers do not accept their son's desire to take away their responsibilities and to eclipse their achievements, and remain threatened by their son's success, then sons will become vulnerable to anxious and guilt feelings about their success. Sons will feel their success is indeed threatening to their fathers, and therefore harmful and/or destructive, rather than something to be supported and celebrated.

Fathers who are blue-collar workers must own up to their own insecure feelings about their work and their lives. If a father is able to successfully contain his own insecure feelings, and his own resentment about being relatively unsuccessful in relation to his son, then sons will not assume an inappropriate and anxiety provoking responsibility for their father's lives. If a father does not communicate that he feels threatened by his son's success, he remains emotionally available to his son as someone to positively, rather than defensively, identify with.

Two other interview subjects, Doug and Steve, experienced father/son relationships in contrast with Gary's.

It is interesting to note that both Doug's and Steve's fathers were working-class radicals. Both fathers became involved at some point with the Communist party and were active union organizers.

#### Doug

Doug's father was clearly atypical of men who worked in factories: he felt more comfortable in the world of ideas than on the shopfloor.

Doug: "...he's [his father] actually more at ease and comfortable

with intellectuals than with workers...he's always had to stop himself and...[not] use words that are too big...."

Doug's academic profession represents the career his father never had. While they share the intellectual stimulation of the world of ideas, their common interests expresses itself in a rather tempestuous manner. Doug describes himself and his father as sharing a "combative intellectual style". As his father fought the good fight in the factory, antagonizing management, Doug did the same at school:

Doug: "...in some ways I'm like him. Pick fights with teachers, not physical fights, but argue with teachers about textbook interpretations of trade-unionism...being contentious and making trouble. So I was proud and quite willing myself to take on that kind of defiant role."

Doug and his father expressed a kind of comraderie through continued verbal jousting. But what are we to make of a father who remained locked in verbal combat with his son?; who respected and appreciated Doug for holding his own in fiercely contested arguments, and who dominated and devalued another son who remained more passive?

Here is how Doug described his father:

Doug "...[he was] very autonomous and austere in some ways-emotionally. But there were all kinds of ways in which he asked for support...particular task things, not emotional support."

On one level, we can point to how Doug's father never really experienced his own father:

Doug: "...[his] father was a very austere man- quite closed down. My father left his home at the age of 13 and lived over a bowling alley in town and set pins at night for room and board and a little spending money."

For Doug's father, remaining austere serves a very important function. He avoids dealing with the enormous pain of growing-up with an unfeeling and uncaring father. Yet this avoidance exacts a

high cost: as sons become fathers, become our fathers, they remain locked into patterns of behavior that are familiar to them; they remain "austere." And as they remain austere, they inflict the same emotional wounds on us, as sons, as they experienced with their own fathers.

We can also point to Doug's father's frustration about being an intellectual on the shopfloor.

Question: Did he openly talk about his feelings about the work he did?

Doug: "Yeah. And often used it when my mother or one of the kids would ask him to do something and he wanted to read... he'd say, fuck you, I've had it and I'm doing this shitty work for you guys. There was a lot of guilt tripping of that sort. He wasn't above those kinds of underhanded things."

While he remained "ideologically committed" to union organizing, Doug wonders what if his father had...:

Doug: "Occasionally I've wondered, and maybe he's wondered too, what if he'd gone to college. He started and he...organized young communists and got kicked out and got a job in the factory...and never went back to school. So it's pretty clear that had he gone to college, he would have been formidable. He's a really smart guy."

His father's working life represented a kind of sacrifice to the working-class; a dedication to organizing a militant trade union for the revolution.

Interestingly enough, this theme of dedication and sacrifice sheds important light on one of the most vivid experiences of Doug's childhood.

In thinking about Doug's parents, it is difficult to imagine two people from more disparate social backgrounds: his father came from a broken working-class family; he was an atheist, a communist and a

union organizer. His mother came from a middle-class Jewish family; her father was a businessman. When Doug reached the appropriate age, his mother decided to have him bar mitzvahed. Doug was furious. And he expected to be supported in his opposition by his father. As he explained:

Doug: "...I would schlepp across...the town 3 times a week after school. On public transportation. Associating with kids I didn't like. And i didn't feel comfortable with it at all. I just wasn't part of them. I didn't feel part of them...and here I was going. And i argued about it every goddamn day almost. At least I remember bitterly arguing about it...Both my parents were atheists. And so I was-- fucking hypocrites. Making me do this shit. And I could understand at some primitive level why it was important to my mother. So I almost never appealed to her. I always appealed to my father, who wasn't jewish and didn't give a shit about religion, quite the contrary. And he would always back my mother up...he didn't really have an argument. He just said, do what your mother says. It was solidarity."

"I felt betrayed- I think is not too strong a word for how I felt, I think it's too strong a word for what actually happened. But at the time I certainly felt betrayed by my father...I was the peace offering- the bridge between my mother and her estranged parents and family."

We may ask, along with Doug, why he never received support from his father? I believe part of his father's motivation, probably unconscious, stemmed from a desire to solidify a sense of father/son identification. His father's refusal to support his opposition engendered in Doug the same kinds of feelings his father experienced in his own life. As Doug's father sacrificed his working life for the good of the working man, Doug would be sacrificed for the good of the family. In turn, this shared experience of sacrifice would establish a powerful emotional bond between father and son.



I raise this issue because Doug's ability to identify with his father renders him secure from guilt feelings about his success. Doug's career choice and political values appear, to both father and son, as extensions of, rather than an eclipsing and repudiation of his father.

However, Doug's identification with his father, as an outspoken political maverick, impacts his academic career.

Doug: "...institutionally I represent this anti-elite stuff, both within the institution and in the societal context as well. I side with the students when there's a demonstration against the CIA...I'm involved against the administration."

Doug's maverick political stance effectively places him on the margins of academic "respectability"; his political struggles ensure ongoing personal and professional struggles with many academic colleagues. Yet Doug both relishes and is long familiar with this role. But the intersection of his radical politics and socioeconomic class background, isolates Doug in his elite academic setting:

Doug: "It's a pretty homogeneous faculty here- homogeneously upper-middle and upper class. Stuffy and boring from my point of view. I'm sure they can find things to be excited about in themselves, but I don't...I don't feel myself really at home here in the sense that my colleagues, fortunately not my immediate colleagues..but alot of people here, I find stiff and arrogant and horses asses and I assume not to have anything to do with them...they want to talk about castles in England and I'm not interested in that stuff."

Doug's identification with his father's personal contentious style and his general political worldview, leave him with one foot in the academic world, and another remaining identified with the values and experiences associated with his father. As Doug remembered his first academic job his sentiments about being a professional conjured the feelings expressed by Peter's or Bert's father:



Doug: "I was certainly insecure. I didn't feel part of the university world, even though I was obviously good at it. I still don't feel part of it here either...I'm in but not of. For the first couple of years, I was probably the only person in the world that didn't have their check directly deposited in the bank because I wanted to see the fucking thing. Sort of disbelief... that they were actually paying me for this. It was fun. I was enjoying it. Was it real work?...I knew it was real work...but underneath i felt, am I an imposter at this place? Can people be paying me to be doing this?"

Doug continues to feel a lingering sense of being caught between two worlds; between his professional academic world and the world of his father. And the questions: is this real work?; am I an imposter?; can people really be paying me for this?, captures an important emotional and psychological dilemma of conflicting allegiances.

If too much of the old allegiance to the father's world is jettisoned, or if there was not much of an allegiance there to begin with, the son's success can be experienced by both father and son as a direct repudiation of the father. This was the case in Gary's family, and to a lesser extent in Bert's. In this instance, fathers are likely to perceive their son's success as threatening to their familial roles and sense of self-esteem. In turn, the son becomes quite vulnerable to experiencing a hobbling or debilitating sense of guilt, that could effectively undermine whether sons succeed or appreciate their success.

On the other hand, if an allegiance is too strong; that is, if the son maintains too strong a positive identification with his father, then the son can become trapped between two competing sources of self-definition.

Steve

Steve confronts similar issues. His father was also active in union organizing. Steve's political worldview and moral values stem from his father's beliefs.

Steve: "I had this notion of my dad as being invincible and being incredibly smart and I had this notion, it was like his notions, that the issue was that some people had the power and some people who didn't have the power...they owned the property, they had power, they ran the newspapers, and we were the other side, but my dad could outwit any of them, that was my view. He was very smart and if there was ever an argument, he would always point out how they were wrong."

Question: Did your father's concern for union democracy influence your career choice?

Steve: "Yes, definitely. Definitely. You bet. I went into economics, not because I wanted to be a professional economist... I basically believed...I had a Marxist class analysis...this was a particular field in which you could talk about the military industrial complex, imperialism, the workplace...."

Steve's strong identification with his father gave shape both to his sense of professional responsibility and political values. His academic career comes right out of the work and the struggles his father engaged in.

Steve's remarks also reveal that he idealized his father's knowledge and abilities. Yet as he matured, and went through college and on to graduate school, Steve developed a more balanced understanding of his father's "invincibility".

Steve: "I remember once when I...was in graduate school...my college economics professor, I and my dad were going to see someone...and someone asked a question...something to do with the economy...so I attempted to say, well, the following. And my dad sort of laughed, you know, like, that's not right...and I got mad at him. I mean, I'm the one who's studying this, not you. I know about this. And he might have been right about what he said, but right there it started to shift. Right

there, at that moment almost...and I started to say, you know, my dad doesn't have this figured out...I was realizing then that the old man was a smart guy, but he did say some things which were in fact wrong."

However, Steve's developing insight about his father did not precipitate a greater emotional closeness between father and son. Apparently, it sowed the basis of his father's idealization of him as a teacher and as an economist. Steve describes his father's reaction to sitting in on his classroom lectures:

Steve: "He sat in those classes and he thinks that he gained so much...it's unbelievable. He had complete faith that I'm teaching these kids a lot of stuff and that I'm going to write a really good book...after I've done that he knows I'm going to be on to another really fine project."

Yet on a deeper level, his father's idealization of Steve's abilities represents a way of ignoring Steve's feelings about his career and family. The history of Steve's father/son relationship, characterized by strong identification and idealization, prevented his father from recognizing Steve as a person.

Steve: "...I love my dad. He's had an enormous impact on me, but he's sort of an impossible guy in lots of ways. He doesn't, how do you put this? Any time I call my dad, he only talks about one thing, that's all he wants to talk about. He's a lovely guy, but all he wants to talk about...is his book that he's been doing. It's his life history."

One can understand his father's self-concern as, in part, a reaction to Steve's occupational success. As Steve succeeds in precisely the areas his father might have wanted to in his own life, the father's autobiography represents an attempt to prove an intellectual credibility both to himself and to his son, and to stave off feelings of being threatened by Steve's occupational success.

Steve also remains caught between an allegiance to his profession and to his working-class roots.

Steve: "...there are very few people who are economists, successful type economists [who] in fact did come from a working-class background. It's not a great profession for that...so I've always been one step behind struggling...but I do have a lot of...insights...like i used to think my dad had...but the question is, are they really profound or not?...are they really to the point where they...allow you to actually make a contribution...I don't think I'm there."

Steve feels his class background represents a liability; an obstacle he must overcome:

Steve: "...I do not have the command of the language I would like to have...the fact of the matter is that there was a fairly limited vocabulary at home. It was quite extensive by working-class standards. But let's face it, in a working-class background, these are not the tools of the trade."

The legacy of Steve's class background impacts his sense of professional self-confidence, his command of his academic field and ability to communicate knowledge effectively, and his personal relationships with colleagues.

Steve: "...my best friend...has a working-class background...he and I once-a-week go over to the bars in Northampton...I don't have any colleagues here now who do that... I'm not going to do it with some colleague who doesn't appreciate it...they do different things and they have different styles...I don't have a lot of the graces that you sort of get from a middle-class upbringing."

However, Steve's anxiety extends beyond the issue of a working-class person trying to succeed in a middle-class environment. As Steve noted above, he acknowledges having important insights and believes he could make an important contribution to his field. Yet he remains hobbled by a nagging self-doubt; the same kind of self-doubt that undoubtedly fuels his father's intense self-concern and preoccupation



with his autobiography. Steve's anxiety goes right to the heart of his relationship with his father:

Question: How is your life like your father's?

Steve: "...it's very easy to be quite self-deceptive...and think, well, my life is a lot better than my father's. I suppose at some levels I have a lot of the same problems and frustrations of my father...sometimes in me is enormous ambition...I guess...I'm containing it. Sometimes I can see myself as an enormous big failure...what have I accomplished really...I don't have any...terribly significant contribution...I'm a bit of a failure. And so I know what my dad felt."

These are Steve's words and thoughts, but they could also be his father's. And it is precisely this similarity which creates anxiety. Steve asks himself: am I replicating my father's life?; am I becoming the same kind of person he was or is?

Steve's allegiance to and identification with his father provides both a source of strength, an emotional resolve about the rightness of his political beliefs, and a nagging sense of doubt and anxiety. This strength and weakness represents an important emotional inheritance from his father. His father's inability to come to terms with his own life, eg, his own sense of unfulfilled ambition, and his consequent inability to recognize Steve, generates and helps maintain Steve's self-doubt and his emotional isolation. Moreover, given the way in which his father uses Steve for his own emotional needs, Steve cannot draw on the relationship to help him resolve these issues and achieve a more profound self-acceptance. As a result, Steve remains trapped between two worlds and neither one enables him to alleviate doubts about his own success.

Tom

The experience of one's class background as a liability is also salient for Tom.

Tom teaches at an elite college and his job rekindles powerful feelings of anger, resentment and envy he experienced while growing up. Tom experienced a kind of love/hate relationship with his father for not being able to provide a better standard of living for his family. Yet now that Tom participates in the privileged world he yearned for in his boyhood, he discovers similar ambivalent feelings:

Tom: "...some of them...they pop out of Princeton or Yale and there's that arrogance that goes with that-I just want to strangle-I've always hated it. I've always been excluded from it- I've always wanted a piece of it. Here I am in the situation-in all kinds of ways I'm in the middle of it, I still hate it."

"There's a sort of smugness about this place and other elite places that I've always hated. Now I'm in the middle of it and I hate it even more...I'm also...demystifying it a bit...I think about going to a large state university where you are somewhat anonymous...But I also realize that you lose the patina of the elite. I'm not sure that I want to give that up either, because that opens things up. So I'm sort of conflicted about that...."

In part, Tom's anger towards social privilege represents an emotional vengeance against the world he felt excluded from. But at a deeper level, the anger and ambivalence reflects feelings about himself.

Tom: "...I'd never been associated with an elite institution. I'd gone to community colleges and other colleges, and...consciously felt excluded from that world. And here I get allowed in and more than just being allowed in, most people think I belong, especially people on the outside. The people on the inside, I'm not sure if they know."

Now that Tom has gained access, that privileged world becomes "demystified". But Tom describes it as if his image has been tarnished

or soiled because he has been "allowed in." Tom's statements reflect an uncertainty about whether he belongs to this newfound privileged world. The source of this uncertainty stems from Tom's fear that he will be as irresponsible and as unable to succeed like his father:

Tom: "...I think so much of who I am professionally is an attempt to distance myself from who he was."

"It was very important for me to get a PhD at a certain point. As a credential...he never had any credential. I think that credential was important as a sense of security and something that no one could ever take away and as a badge."

While Tom's educational achievements reflect his desire to gain greater autonomy from his family, in particular his father, his sense of the emotional distance between himself and his family remains tenuous. In describing what he feels when he is with his father, Tom commented that:

Tom: "I think there's something I have to protect, to not be like him. I don't want to, I think my position in the world is more precarious than it probably is. Partly because of his life...when he's around, that's all the more real and tangible. And visual."

In large part, this tenuous sense of personal autonomy emanates from his father's continual attempt to take away any sense of initiative Tom tried to develop. This leaves Tom with a gnawing sense that his life will replicate his father's:

Tom: "I worry that I have just as much an ability to fuck up my financial life as he did his. I hate being poor, I hate feeling that I can't afford things. I feel like so much of my life I had to be concerned about that, now I don't want to be. So I do some fairly extravagant things and get sort of close to the edge by doing that. I travel to Europe alot...In a certain way, that's like him coming home with a piece of junk sometimes...."

Even Tom's style of dress reflects his sensitivity to both his intense desire to distance himself from, and his fear of being like

his father:

Tom: "...the things that I buy to wear are from the crimson shop in cambridge...I care about how I look usually, and he never-[was] always sort of disheveled...I think about how I look in a way that I know he never did. I think I'm much more conscious about the way I appear. He had no sense of that at all."

Tom's desire to distance himself from his father is also fraught with uncertainty. On the one hand Tom recognizes how aspects of the professional world remains foreign to a man with working-class origins:

Question: What aspect of your work do you least enjoy?

Tom: "...the subterranean language of an elite institution that I don't fully understand yet...I don't trust it."

On the other hand, becoming a part of this new and privileged world eclipses his father's achievements and experiences:

Question: When you got your first job, what feelings did that engender in you about your father and his life?

Tom: "I thought I'm being offered more money than he ever made-on my first job, I'm being offered alot more money than he ever made at the height of his so-called career...I just ponder that sometimes....Also, all of a sudden I have more social prestige than he ever did in his life. And I'm just some young punk...."

What is there to ponder? The experience of a young man making more money and enjoying greater status in his first job than his father ever did, embodies an important piece of the American dream fathers and sons share. Yet Tom is left thinking: who am I, a "young punk", that I should earn more, on my first job, than my father ever did? Do I really deserve it?

These questions testify how the lived experience of upward mobility remains more complex and painful than the glib surface of the rags to riches American dream suggests. Tom's questions also reveal an



underlying sense of guilt about feeling angry and ashamed about his father's inability to be more successful:

Tom: "...I think he worked hard and I'm sort of proud.... [how] he worked 15 hours a day for us...I respect him for working that hard. And I feel guilty that he worked that hard and that I felt shitty about him while he was working that hard and about what he was doing, that he was an embarrassment to me. I feel bad about that and I think it's terrible that I felt that way."

Yet we can understand Tom's intense anger at the privileged world he participates in as reflecting the profound sense of hurt, disappointment, humiliation and anger he experienced towards his father while growing up. Tom's success continually reminds him of his father's limitations and keeps alive angry feelings towards him for being unsuccessful. As a result, his professional success does not provide a source of comfort. Rather, it creates anxiety: the fear of being like his father propels him to become more autonomous, to create distance from his father.

Tom would like to shed his past and become the well-groomed, respected and successful academic who looks like he "belongs" to the privileged world he works in. But he fears being too much like his father and that somehow this similarity will sabotage his personal autonomy and professional success. On the other hand, his occupational success reminds him of his charged feelings about his father's failures.

Tom also yearns for a reconciliation with his father. But a reconciliation premised on the father's recognition and acceptance of Tom's success. When talking about a book he is completing, Tom fantasizes presenting it to his parents:

Tom: "...I have an image of them opening the package and seeing this book with my picture on it and my name. I think they're going to be really thrilled by that. And I like the image of that...it's not like, see you schmuck, in spite of what you did to me, but it's this book, I did this and I want you to be proud of it and that's all."

If his parents can understand, recognize and share his success then perhaps the need to distance himself from them, and the guilt he feels about his anger and disappointment with his father, can begin to diminish.

### Ralph

The desire to establish emotional distance from one's family through occupational success represented an important theme in my interview with Ralph.

Ralph portrays his father/son relationship as fraught with mutual feelings of anger, resentment and disrespect. Ralph's intense hurt and anger was vividly expressed when I pressed him for any early memories about his father:

Ralph: "See, what you're not getting is that I don't like my father...I like him enough, he's my father, but if I had to choose, I wouldn't have chosen him."

Ralph's intense anger towards his father diminished only after Ralph embarked on his career and established some autonomy from his father.

Ralph: "...I was [in graduate school], I was traveling across the country. I think he sort of saw that I was on the threshold of a career that I had created for myself with almost no money from them from start to finish and he sort of gained a little more respect for me. And I, some of my animus toward him abated because I really no longer had to depend upon him at all. Since I didn't have to depend upon him at all and he wasn't making a demand on me, the tension became less...and in the end we had some sort of friendship."

Ralph's hostility towards his parents and his upbringing translated into a street-fighting, blunt speaking, New York style. This brassy exterior, however, masks an underlying and complex ambiguity or confusion about his relationship to his father and the relationship's impact on both his professional and personal life, and his identity as a man.

Ralph conveys the wonder, fear and confusion he felt when he arrived at Harvard after obtaining his doctorate:

Ralph: "...I went up to the bulletin board that had the directory of names of people in the dept...and I said, Jesus Christ, everybody on this fucking board is who I read to get my education. And I said, this no longer has anything to do with my background. This is totally discontinuous with my background. But I felt no resentment or anger at them at that time because it was something so alien."

"...I had plenty of troubles ...when I got to Harvard. But I couldn't muster anger for him. It's just like I had gone to Mars. And I said, well dad you didn't prepare me to go to Mars. Nobody- my father couldn't prepare anybody to go to Mars...."

The "troubles" Ralph experienced related directly to his social class and geographical origins:

Ralph: "...I had always thought that to have integrity... what you thought you had to say...being forthright...what you see is what you get, you can't be there [at Harvard]. Physical strength doesn't matter... I got involved with a Soviet guy who defected, and I know I have a New York accent and one SOB said, when you speak to him, speak slowly because with your accent, he'll have more trouble understanding. Had we been in Brooklyn, I would have fucking hit the guy."

Ralph paints himself as the street-wise Brooklyn man in a den of wily and insidious academic wolves. But as he quickly discovered, his sense of self and interpersonal skills he acquired in Brooklyn 'didn't matter'. Ralph resolved his experience of being caught between two worlds by attempting to discard the "irrelevant" parts of his past

identity.

Ralph: "...before you can cut that off, [one's identification with one's past], you've got to make some transitions or else you're just in chaos, you don't want to be in chaos."

"...the principle I work with is that given the right concatenation of circumstances, people can reconstruct themselves. And what I did was raise it to a principle in my own life...all this by way of saying that I think of myself as having made myself...my parents were really outside me. And so being outside me, they gave me the freedom to formulate myself."

Ralph's attempt to "reconstruct" himself clearly represented an attempt to make sense of, and to succeed in, a working and living environment he felt inadequately prepared for:

Ralph: "I don't think I made myself entirely, I'm not a fool. But a sense of really reshaping your life that's discontinuous- if you want to take that scene at [the bulletin board]...really reshaping your life that's discontinuous with your past, not only is it a personal but it's a conceptual position that I take. That whatever is internalized, can be.. you can get rid of it and start all over again...."

The intense need to identify himself as a "self-made" man, as a person who has reconstructed his life, suggests that the fear of being like his father still operates at some level. And indeed Ralph is aware of similarities between them:

Question: In what ways is your life like your father's?

Ralph: "...I haven't been able to really create an ongoing relationship...it's so deeply embedded that not even 5 years of analysis, reflection and...effort has not made it get any better."

But I sense a deeper anxiety in Ralph's responses. Ralph describes his father as a passive and broken man. In a particularly vivid story, Ralph described how his father was arrested for fencing goods the night he was born. Ralph believes that jail adversely affected his father's remaining life:



Ralph: "...I don't know if he was a weak man beforehand or passive beforehand-- he certainly was a passive man after that."

In stark contrast, Ralph describes himself becoming a "hard nut" even as a child:

Ralph: "...by 7 I was a hard nut. So I don't think there was any way no man was ever going to break me."

"...this might be my own craziness, but I just don't know how to be passive."

However, Ralph provides some clues that perhaps the difference between father and son is not so cut and dried. For instance, in discussing his father's womanizing, Ralph acknowledges:

Ralph: "...the womanizing becomes very crazy with me because that's one of the things I've internalized."

Ralph's independent and aggressive stance represents a defense against feeling or being too dependent. For Ralph, being too emotionally needy, too dependent on his father, would mean that he too is a passive man; a passive man just like his father. Ralph's fiercely independent style covers up both the deep hurt and anger he feels for being unloved, unacknowledged and unprotected by his father, and his deep unrequited longing for his father. In a poignant moment, Ralph describes the death of a cherished mentor:

Ralph: "I was very close to [my mentor] and when [he] died, my former wife asked me how I felt...I felt now that I was without protection because there was nobody who was older than me in the interface with the world. And now I was really on my own...I'd always been there but it never [felt] that way because [he] had protected me and my parents had protected me...very frequently I do feel alone and then I have this fantasy that I'd like him to be alive and to protect me. But they didn't protect me anyway so it's really like a mythic conception of what I would have liked him to be...."

In the middle of his remarks, Ralph begins talking about his father; the wish for protection, and the equally deep yearning for emotional support is a communication to his deceased father. And shortly afterwards, Ralph gets to the heart of the matter:

Ralph: "So now if I became dependent, or I was threatened by him, I'd never feel that I was moving in a position where he was going to take advantage of me or emasculate me."

Ralph associates being dependent on his father with losing a sense of his manhood. This association suggests an underlying anxiety and confusion about how much of a man Ralph feels he is:

Ralph: "I think I'm sometimes not as brave as I like to believe I am. And I think it would have taken a little more fortitude for me to go to [my] commencements. I think...it has to do with strength and weakness...masculinity/lack of masculinity; femininity/masculinity. Faggots go to those commencements. Gutsy guys don't. Gutsy guys go to the commencements, faggots don't."

In Ralph's scheme of things, being a man means being invulnerable, a "hard nut", or being fiercely independent. But this definition covers over Ralph's deep longing for his father. To acknowledge this desire would mean admitting that he remains emotionally dependent, and therefore less of a man and more like his father. Moreover, for Ralph to express these deep longings to a father he perceived as emotionally unavailable, would have indeed rendered Ralph vulnerable. Yet the longing to be accepted and loved and to feel protected and to be dependent remains.

Ralph's professional ambition and success represents, like Tom's, a need to create emotional distance between father and son. Ralph wants, on one level, to repudiate his identification with his

father. For Ralph, this repudiation merely reciprocates the neglect and disrespect he experienced in his family. Yet Ralph's overt repudiation of his father covers over and devalues his powerful dependency needs; the need to feel protected and accepted by his father. And as these needs are devalued, they remain unfulfilled. And as they are unfulfilled, they persist. But as they persist, they merely feed Ralph's anxiety about how much of a man he really is, or how much like his father he has become, despite the manifest differences in their lives.

### Conclusion

For these men, becoming a successful professional represents a central accomplishment in their working and personal lives. For their fathers, having a son become successful validates their lives and provides an index of their success. While each of these men observed how their fathers remained proud of their occupational achievements, the interviews confirmed how the mobility process as a lived experience is complex and painful and fraught with ambivalence and uncertainty. All of the men I interviewed identified clear emotional costs associated with being upwardly mobile. One of the most poignant cost these men articulated was the feeling of somehow being unknown to their fathers.

The educational and occupational achievements these men experience render their lives extremely different from their father's lives. The happiness and anxieties of their professional and personal routines are beyond their father's experiences, and perhaps even their imaginations. Not all men in the study felt isolated from their fathers and some welcomed the emotional distance between father and

son. Yet all experienced some degree of sadness or grief over their father's inability to understand important aspects of their lives as children and/or as adults.

There is, after all is said and done, a deep longing to be known, recognized and approved of by one's father.

Ralph: "...I don't want you to go away thinking that if I couldn't get them to give me the respect- if I could have gotten them to give me the respect that I was looking for, I would have done it in any which way possible. I just don't...think it was possible to get them to think of me as a worthy person."

Ralph's longing for recognition persists despite feelings of being unacknowledged and perhaps even unwanted by his family. In another very poignant moment during our interview, Ralph reflected on a recent family experience:

Ralph: "I was unknown...just a few years ago, I was at a wedding and I had an elderly aunt there and I asked her if I was an accident. And she said no...she said, the truth is your mother wanted a girl...you were wanted as a girl, not as a boy...I always felt an outsider...that I was not a member of the family...."

And here is Doug commenting on how having his own family gives him pause to reflect on his father:

Doug: "I think I've been able to be much more the father to my children than he would have been, or like to have been...Maybe I did as a kid want him around more or want to go fishing with him more. I don't remember that in an annoying sense or an active disappointment. But it wouldn't be impossible for me to discover that was sort of an unrequited wish or a resentment."

And here is Bert, who somewhat stoically accepts the reality of leading a different lifestyle than his parents:

Bert: "Because of my education, and the people that I socialize...you tend to socialize with people of your own level of education. Your whole lifestyle becomes different from your parents who haven't gone through that...And I think it was with my father."



Question: Your life is really very different than other family members, is there a feeling of being unknown by them?

Bert: "I don't know. They know what I do-- sort of."

And Gary reflects on his father/son relationship:

Gary: "...I've regretted it at times. I think that it would have been useful for him and for me both-- to have been able to talk about men, about what men are supposed to do, and what husbands are supposed to do...all the things that... adults should be dealing with. I feel as if I never got any chance or never did go through any of that with him...I regret for me, mostly of course, but I sort of regret it for him too."

"I think it's been difficult to think of the many times when we should have talked and didn't. And how responsible I must have been for some of that lack of communication. That I didn't take it upon myself to do it...and there have been times when I wish- now that he's gone, or certainly before, when I wish I could have talked about some things and somehow wasn't able to."

And here is Peter discussing whether he could share his work experiences with his father:

Peter: "...I don't think he'd ever fully comprehend it... you tell him once and ask him, what did I just tell you?, he'd say, I don't know."

For men like Bert and Peter, being unknown to family members represents a fact of life. These men accept that the details of one's professional life, its rewards and anxieties, remain beyond the comprehension of one's father and family. Nevertheless, a desire to be known and to be approved of by one's father persists.

Tom: "...the things I like to do are not things they know anything about or care about and vice versa for the most part... I don't go back home. I don't like going [there], it reminds me of all those- the same feeling I get when my father's around-me sinking back...."

Yet Tom again reflects on showing his parents his forthcoming book:

Tom: "...I want them to get pleasure out of it. I want- it's like, hey mom, look at me, when you're a kid...[I want to have] their approval but not in a bitter way."

This desire for recognition and approval reflects a need to diminish the emotional distance between father and son. Yet this need represents one end point on an important emotional continuum. The other end point consists of the fear that sons are replicating their father's lives; that there is not enough emotional distance between father and son. Bert and Peter clearly fall on the first part of this continuum. Ralph, Gary, Tom and Steve fall on the other side. Walt and Doug did not express a clear concern in either direction.

The issue of emotional distance between father and son relates to another theme: how and to what extent sons identify with their fathers. Who our fathers are, how they act, what they say and do not say, provides us with important information about what it means to be a man, a father and a husband. Sons identify themselves with their fathers to consolidate their own identities as boys and men.

However, for several of the men I interviewed, their identification with their fathers assumes a defensive function: identification with one's father minimizes the threatening quality of their success; minimizes the extent they are different and "better than" their fathers. This defensive identification with the father surfaced in my interviews with Ralph, Gary, Tom and Bert, and to a lesser extent with Peter, Steve and Walt. The fathers of these latter three, and Doug too, remained more emotionally available as a person to be

identified with. Their availability stemmed from their efforts to salvage a sense of dignity and meaning in their working lives. These fathers were less overtly threatened by their son's success, although they communicated their own ambivalence, and their sons remained less anxious about how their success impacted their father's lives. Consequently, these sons felt less of a need to identify with their fathers in the service of taking away their father's anxiety and their own guilt about being successful.

#### Promises to Keep

In the end there is an awareness, somewhere in the jumble of conflicting thoughts and ambivalent feelings of the men who participated in this study, that the relationship with their fathers has changed, often dramatically, over the years. In the process, many of these men grapple with a sense that somewhere along the way, perhaps beginning in childhood, or maybe in adolescence or even adulthood, they have lost something: a closeness, an intimacy with their fathers, or maybe just the experience of sharing time with them.

This sense of loss keeps alive a longing to reclaim or rediscover, or perhaps create for the first time, an understanding of how their father's thoughts, feelings, actions or inactions, affect their lives. Yet these men also recognize how different their lives truly are; how they speak to one another, as father and son, in dissonant voices. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, these men struggle with the need to heal the wounds they and their fathers endured as sons; to achieve a reconciliation and to forgive themselves and their fathers as an unspoken promise to keep:

"As I drive off, a deep masculine quiet rises,  
of its own accord, from beneath my shoes.  
I turn to watch my father's white handkerchief  
flutter, like an old Hasid's prayer shawl,  
among the dark clouds and the trees. I disappear  
into the clean, quiet resonance of my own life.

To live, dear father, is to forgive.  
And i forgive."

Michael Blumenthal, from, Waving  
Good-Bye to My Father.



APPENDIX A  
CONTACT LETTER

Dear Sir:

I would like to thank you again for participating in my research study on successful professional men whose fathers were blue collar workers.

Enclosed you will find a series of verbal scenarios and a brief set of instructions. I would like you to make up a story about each scenario. Let me assure you that your responses to the scenarios, as well as to the interview questions, will be kept fully confidential. Please do not put your name on any of the forms; they are coded by number for my own record keeping. As I would like to discuss your responses with you, please try to finish the story completion exercise before our interview.

Again, thank you for your interest, time and participation. I look forward to meeting with you next week.

Sincerely,

Neal Aponte

## APPENDIX B

### INSTRUCTIONS

This is a storytelling exercise. I would like you to read each scenario and make up a story about each one. Tell me what is happening in each scenario, what led up to it, what the people are thinking and feeling, and what the outcome will be.

Write your story as fully as possible in the space provided (you may use both the front and back sides of each sheet). Complete your story about each scenario before moving on to the next one.

When Tony decided to go to graduate school, he received a phone call from his father.

Roger, who has just been made a partner in his law firm, finds himself thinking about his father.



Jim's father is a mailman. He and some friends are sitting around at lunch one day and someone asks him what his son Jim does for a living.

Glenn, who has just been promoted to Vice-President of the bank he works for, finds himself thinking about a dream he had when he was growing up.

Jack is a tenured college professor. His father is a factory worker. Jack's brother, Ben, also has a job at his father's plant. They all get together for his father's birthday.

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Participant's Name:

Date:

In this study, I am interested in exploring the father/son relationship between successful professional men and their fathers who were blue-collar workers.

If you choose to participate in this interview, then I will be talking with you about yourself, your feelings about your work, and your feelings about and experience of your relationship with your father over time. I am sensitive to the fact that the material we discuss may be very personal at times. Please remember that you may let me know if a particular topic is too distressing, and that you are free to withdraw your participation from this interview or this study at any point without penalty. Although I cannot provide monetary compensation for your effort, I will be pleased to send you the results of the study at its completion, and will be happy to answer any questions or discuss the study with you at this time.

I will be tape-recording our interview for my own use. Please be assured that our discussion will be kept strictly confidential. In writing up the results of this study, I will disguise all identifying information about you and your life.

I hope that you will find your participation interesting and enlightening.

-----  
Signature of participant

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1) What kind of work do you do? (length of time in current occupation; other careers after school)
- 2) How much formal schooling do you have?
- 3) What about your work do you most enjoy?
- 4) What about your work do you least enjoy?
- 5) If you had a chance to choose another career, would you do so?
- 6) Describe your father using a list of adjectives.
- 7) What is the fondest childhood memory you have of your father?
- 8) What is the least pleasant memory you have of your father?
- 9) What is the earliest memory you have of your father?
- 10) When you were growing up, how much time did you spend with your father?; what things did you do together?
- 11) Did your relationship to your father change as you grew older?; in what ways did it change?
- 12) In what ways are you and your father alike?
- 13) In what ways are you and your father different?
- 14) What do you know about your father's relationship to his own father?
- 15) When you were growing up, what did you want to be as an adult?



- 16) How did your father influence your ideas about what you wanted to be?
- 17) Describe what your father did for a living as you were growing up?; how did you know about his work?
- 18) Did you ever visit where your father worked?; if so, what was that like?
- 19) How satisfied was your father with his work?; how did you know about your father's feelings?
- 20) Did your father have any personal goals or ambitions that he was unable to fulfill?
- 21) How satisfied were you with what your father did for a living?
- 22) What expectations and/or ambitions did your father have about your future?
- 23) What would your life be like if you fulfilled all of your father's expectations?
- 24) If I were to ask your father to describe what you did for a living, what do you think he would say?
- 25) Has your father ever visited the place where you work?; if so, what was it like?
- 26) When you got your first professional job, what feelings did you have about your father and his life?

- 27) Do you think your success affects the way in which your father feels about his own life?
- 28) How did your family celebrate your high school graduation?; college graduation?; professional school graduation?
- 29) Did your relationship with your father change after your high school graduation?; after college graduation?
- 30) In what ways is your life different than your father's?
- 31) In what ways is your life like your father's?
- 32) What do you and your father do when you are together?
- 33) What do the two of you talk about?
- 34) Are there parts of your life you feel unable to share with your father?
- 35) Are there important aspects of your relationship with your father that we haven't talked about?

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