

Chapter 4. Family Troubles and Academic Identity

While I was finding academic success and a welcoming home in school, my actual home life was more troubled. Throughout my childhood and preteen years, until the time of my parent's divorce, my father was more absorbed in his business and his leadership in the synagogue than our family. My few memories of him have to do with him on some business trips when I was between nine and twelve, and driving with him to his factory on Saturdays for me to earn a few dollars preparing storm door hardware assembly kits. From watching him at work I learned a bit about business files, orders, logistics, sales, and the anxieties of small businesspeople always on the edge. I also witnessed the hard, corner-cutting business world in his office or on a sales trip, and heard about it when I listened in to his talk with friends and business associates. I promised myself I would have no part of that world when I grew up.

I also rejected what I saw at the temple he helped found. I went to Sunday school as my parents required through my Bar Mitzvah, gaining a smattering of Hebrew, a vision of traditional values, and taste of the communal pressure to maintain the people and support an idealized Israel. Since I had been so protected from stories of the holocaust, I did not understand how these communal pressures reflected the anxieties and traumas of just a decade before. All this seemed to have little to do with my daily life and the life of the school where I spent my week and made my friends. I quit attending Sunday school and religious services immediately after my Bar Mitzvah. My parents' divorce shortly after made my separation from the temple easy. I had become increasingly alienated from what I saw as hypocrisy between the lives led by my family and their friends and the values I saw being piously preached, attempting to enlist me in a tribe which had very little to do with the society I was growing up into. I did, nonetheless, take some of the more ethical elements from that world and some biblical phrases and rhythms pop up even now in my writing.

My mother tried to live out her frustrated academic and cultural ambitions through me. Though she saw herself as an excellent high school student and maintained a strong attachment to one of her high school English teachers, she had dropped out of Brooklyn College in her first year, for reasons I never learned. Despite some nostalgia for left-wing activism of the thirties, she was emotionally committed to cultural and economic mobility, and ostentatiously displayed middle brow symbols of European culture. These tendencies were not uncommon for those of her assimilating generation, but she seemed to exhibit a more extreme version than those around her or the parents of my friends, as her sense of worth and identity seemed to hang almost entirely on her display of signs of material success and awkwardly expressed cultivation.

I benefited, nonetheless, from her taking me to libraries, theaters, and museums, as well as supporting my music lessons and my book and record purchases. While she supported my academic achievements, she also wanted to claim for herself what I felt were my accomplishments, not giving me recognition for what I felt I had done. She used to claim me as “her” child, as opposed to my brother who was “my father’s.” So for her own needs, she had a high valuation of me, but to have any sense of myself, I needed to distance myself from her. As part of that same paradox of her needing my accomplishments, she sought opportunities for me, which introduced me to worlds that allowed me to form identities and affiliations far from the family.

More troubling was her deteriorating mental condition. My earliest memory of noticing her difficulties was a joke I repeatedly told myself when I was about seven: “I once had a mummy, but she got all wrapped up in herself.” Throughout my school years her psychological condition became progressively worse, with increasing rapidity in the years just before and after her divorce. From around my age eight until thirteen when they divorced, I remember constant arguing and hostility between her and my father. For a fifth-grade assignment I wrote a play about travelers in a small airport waiting room being fogbound; they became increasingly irritated with each other as they were stuck there together. It doesn’t take a lot of Freud to see the mood of the life I was living and the desire to travel on.

My mother’s rants about my father’s failings grew to include paranoid FBI plots, murderous dentists, and unknown forces guiding her to expose conspiratorial misdeeds and corruption. Her accounts of the interactions with my father were so far from what I had observed, her narrated plots were so delusional, and her rages were so unpredictable and frequent, that I soon gave them no credibility, though I regularly tried to read her thoughts to console her and to avoid triggering landmines. After a while I stopped trying to reason with her. The divorce was shortly after my brother’s leaving for college, so I was left alone with my mother for almost five years to figure out how to navigate around her, not rile her up unnecessarily, and keep the rage and occasional violence from being directed at me—though I often failed at all of these. This experience evoked a deep sense of the cruelty of the world, which somehow I needed to atone for, cure, or maybe just remove myself from.

School as Home

As I distanced myself from her delusional world, I pursued the opportunities she opened doors to, as in how I came to be part of the Columbia Science Honors program—a special program for scientifically talented secondary students in New York City and suburbs, created in 1958 just after the launch of Sputnik. My mother read about this new program in our suburban newspaper and immediately thought I belonged in it, although I was only in the seventh grade. At that time my school district was not nominating students for it, but after she persisted,

the school nominated me for the testing program. I got in (and participated from eighth grade through completing high school), joined in following years by a few of my high school classmates. This program affirmed to me my specialness and I came to see this as my own, apart from my family; it was also a chance to spend one day a week in New York City away from the suburbs and my mother.

Fortunately, I was doing very well in school. I found it a predictable and sometimes fun place with friends and enough interesting teachers to counterbalance the others. With the lack of rationality, emotional support, stability, or even calm at home, I found school and other academic experiences increasingly important for my sense of affiliation, identity, and social contribution. Throughout high school I anticipated a career in physics. My intellectual life and commitment to the academic world became ever stronger as a counterweight, an escape, a stable world built on reason and evidence. I came to see myself as living through ethical relationships established by writing and the search for scientific knowledge. I felt myself more communicative, revelatory, honest, meaningful as a writer than the anxious, often sullen, angry, aggressive face to face person. I thought of myself as a writer rather than talker. Only with my quirky intellectual friends did I experience more tolerance for my stammering style, my thoughtful hesitations, my complex, digressive constructions, and my obscure jokes. My personal presence however was not appreciated by other parts of high school culture and I was frequently the butt of taunts and bullying. Self-deprecating humor became a protective shell, even as I gained a reputation for obnoxiousness. Whether this reputation was a response to my behavior, a reaction to my academic achievement and self-confidence, a targeting of me for my weight, weakness, and lack of athletic skill, or residual antisemitic discrimination, I do not know, but it did lead me to further self-deprecation and shyness except in circumstances where I felt confident of acceptance. This reputation as obnoxious also remained a puzzle for me as I attempted to improve my social presence in college.

My emerging intellectual left, social-reformist, academically-oriented identity, wrapped in a cynical, critical, self-deprecating, comic style, was channeled into scientific ambition in the post-Sputnik era. I was inspired by the ideologies of pure science exploring the far limits of the universe and the innermost secrets of the atom. I only later understood how this idea of pure research served to insulate post-war science from the entanglement with nuclear weapons development, ever-present in news of nuclear tests, and the cold war arms race, even as research remained robustly funded by government programs. I read biographies of the leading scientists and stories of great discoveries, in which I saw models for what I could accomplish. These stories appealed to my sense of elite possibilities and special talents. The Columbia Science Honors program, in particular, gave me the opportunity to meet every week with the top students in the New York metropolitan area and to be taught by Ivy League university faculty. Sometimes the material went over my head, and some books I brandished more for their prestige than something I could make sense of, but we were learning things way beyond what

was available in high school, we participated in meaningful research projects, and sometimes we heard stellar talks from leading figures. I remember, for example, a talk from James Watson about his recent work on DNA.

I was a bit of a hick all my years there as many of the students were from magnet science high schools like Bronx Science and Stuyvesant or from elite schools in the more prosperous suburbs. I was from a good high school, but in an economically modest area without the resources they had. Yet I felt that I fit in, and could even excel (the rumor was that one year I got the highest score of all the students on the entry exam). It was affirming to be among the elect and among students who shared my sense of humor, attitudes, and interests. While I didn't write papers as part of the Columbia program, I read advanced science textbooks, learned to appreciate data and reasoning, formed expectations of theoretical coherence and analytic precision, and enjoyed the production of knowledge—dispositions that were to inform my writing in the university and as I became a researcher. I dreamed of discovering elegant theories that would make visible and explain unanticipated phenomena in the world. I brought some of this knowledge back to my high school classes and took on the identity of a budding physicist among my friends. I also tried to keep a low profile among the many others in the school who were not so academically inclined.

On my weekly Saturday trips to Manhattan, I explored bookstores and international newsstands and attended concerts, operas, and plays. I also had access to the Columbia University library, which put my high school research papers several notches above those of my classmates, though giving me some puzzling texts to deal with. My weekly adventures fed all sides of my growing intellectual and cultural life, and often I would not return home until the last train on the Long Island Rail Road, walking home the three miles from the train station in the early morning hours. In retrospect, I realize how little supervision my mother had over me in those years, or even attempted, except when she needed me to substitute for her vanishing social life by going out to dinner or movies. I increasingly resisted these outings that invariably turned unpleasant. She in turn became increasingly enraged and even violent when I would not cooperate.

During the summers, from about the age of eight onwards, I was sent away to summer camps. The first six years of sports, activity, and scouting camps were mostly painful and unpleasant, given my incompetence in sports and my weight which made me the butt of bullying. But when I was fourteen my mother identified an arts camp filled with budding musicians, dancers, actors, and artists that finally fit my tastes and her cultural ambitions. I suspect the camp owner/director spotted my personal dilemma and my mother's financial straits living off the remains of the divorce settlement, and accordingly provided a fee discount. I spent three happy summers there among kids equally cynical, snarky, and arrogantly self-possessed as I was. Though I was less artistically talented and less trained than my campmates and I was not from a family in the arts as most of them were, I was accepted as an intellectual with cultural ambitions. I got to do some

acting, take a few music lessons, and even participated in a few dance classes. As well there were creative writing classes and discussions of the arts. My friends and I would wander off campus to the small progressive bookstore in the nearby village. This was my first taste of living among a crowd of people I liked and who appreciated me—and it was built around expression and production. After one of these summers, I took up letter-writing with a young woman with whom I practiced my wise-guy faux-Twain, Brecht narration of high school life.

My humanistic and scientific interests collided when, toward the end of my junior year in high school, I was selected for two special programs for top students in the nation at a time when such programs were rare. One was to participate in scientific research at the General Electric Laboratories in Schenectady, New York and the other was to be part of a six-week political theory seminar run by the Telluride Association at Cornell University that same summer. I felt intensely special being selected for both and had quite a dilemma to pick between the two, feeling I was at a juncture in my life. Surprisingly and fatefully, I chose Telluride to read the founding documents of American democracy and think about the nature of our political system. What I told myself then was that since I was headed for a life in physics, this would be the last opportunity to immerse myself in other domains of knowledge.

My application to the Telluride Summer Program required several essays that articulated my thoughts and interests, as well as included some of my earlier papers. I don't have a copy of what I wrote, and I don't remember exactly how I answered, but from what I came to know of the application process and evaluation, my answers must have forced me to be more explicit about what I was learning and how it affected my understanding of the world, my place and projects in it, and the meanings and values I held personally.

During the seminar I wrote a paper on the potential psychological impact of thermonuclear war and the challenges it would present for rebuilding a political order in a post-apocalyptic world. I scoured the Cornell library for whatever I could glean from historical, psychological, and sociological studies of disaster and traumatic events, but in 1962 I was able to find little beyond some post-hurricane evaluations and historical accounts of the wake of the Black Death; there wasn't even much post-apocalyptic, dystopic science fiction beyond Orwell and Huxley. I was shocked to find out so little was known or thought through beyond rosy predictions from a military perspective suggesting we could survive easily and move on—such as Herman Kahn's *Thinking About the Unthinkable*, which had come out earlier that year. From this I learned that even the most informed adults didn't know or hadn't studied what you might think they ought to have; this contrasted with the impression I had gotten from science, that although the boundaries of what we could know were always being pushed, it was based on a coherent, codified and well-grounded knowledge laid out in foundational texts that articulated well with each other. I have since found out that knowledge is not as comprehensive as it appears to be, even in the hard sciences. Work is selective and follows

researchers' interests and opportunities, whether intellectual, economic, ideological, or political. What people haven't found a reason or way to study has not been studied. Further, what is difficult to study has been limited by the ideologies and assumptions people have held, the approaches available, and the methodologies of epistemic communities that would warrant the evidential credibility of what people claimed. This complexity of human knowledge creation leaves great spaces to explore and many phenomena as yet unseen to be made visible.

My seminar paper I would now characterize as a typical undergraduate critical and analytical synthesis from sources. For me it was the most ambitious paper I had written to that point; I had to develop ways of characterizing several bodies of literature and criteria for evaluating them, revealing the limitations and biases of their approaches. I then considered the policy and political implications of the absences and offered critical conclusions with recommendations for needed knowledge. While the work was based on sources, I had to carry out the synthetic, analytical, critical, and deliberative components on my own, without benefit of authority. While some of these skills might now be covered in undergraduate teaching of writing, at that time I had not gotten instruction in any of this, nor did any of the undergraduate writing textbooks of the time include much beyond basic bibliographic instruction. Later, when I started to develop my own pedagogy leading to the *Informed Writer* and *Involved*, I attempted to address just these skills.

Forming an Intellectual Identity through Writing

In this chapter the story of my writing has shifted gears. Before this chapter, the story was about the context I came from, the dispositions and emotional needs I brought to and developed within schooling, and what I learned as I addressed the tasks and challenges schooling offered. The story was about the forming of an academic orientation that led to school success and increasingly fortunate opportunities in enjoying institutional sponsorship. As I participated in these new forms of emotional and intellectual engagement, I increasingly left behind my earlier personal struggles in order to participate with high motivation in elite academic institutions, inflected by values, needs, and puzzles arising from my early troubled family life. Here the story shifts to one of intellectual development, underpinned and motivated by my evolving understanding of values and what was worth accomplishing.

Now with my academic, proto-professorial identity and ambitions taking shape, I returned for my final year of high school contemplating the world I felt I really belonged to and which provided a home for people like me (whatever that was). Writing wide-ranging speculative papers based on reading professional research and thinking now was centrally important to my sense of being. While I felt even more out of place in the limited world of high school and what I took to be the narrow vision of most of my classes, I took the opportunity of my assignments to write lengthy treatises on Brechtian anti-tragedy and the rise of German

nationalism—as I discussed in the previous chapter. I also remember some rambling papers, now lost, where I wondered about philosophy of life and values, and speculated over where I was headed.

During this year I fell in with some other music-loving, political, college-bound people in the next town, and participated in some local civil rights demonstrations. At the end of the summer, I went to the 1963 Civil Rights March on Washington and then headed off to college. My mother moved to an apartment in New York City to live off the proceeds of the sale of the house, as she had exhausted the money from the divorce settlement (including the money that had been designated for my education), and was only minimally and sporadically employable. When I could not find a plausible alternatives or employment elsewhere, I stayed in her apartment, but psychologically and socially I was moving into the world I wanted to belong to.