

July, 11, 2003

Dear Dad,

You've been dead about 10 years, and in that time I don't think a day has gone by without my thinking of you. Nor can I remember a visit with Maya in which you were not brought up as a topic of conversation, either by her or by me. So you remain alive in my thoughts, and one could say our relationship continues. Accordingly, I'm writing this letter to get a few things off my chest and try to settle some unfinished business with you. I have a fantasy that you will read it, and discuss it with Mom. Perhaps you'll even find a way to answer it. I would welcome that, believe it or not. Maybe as a follow-up exercise to this one, I'll try to write your answer myself. That will be more difficult than writing this letter, because I can't imagine what you would now think about your own life. The dead must have ample leisure for reflection, so if you can still reflect you may have gained a few insights by now.

I remember you saying to me, on more than one occasion, that I would be haunted by guilt toward you. You denied wishing for this, but I think unconsciously you must have wanted it so. Actually, what I feel about you is not guilt, but a mixture of anger and sadness. The collapse of our relationship after Mom's death was more your doing than mine. Probably, the issue was decided when you and Mom moved from Montreal to Los Angeles a few years after Maya was born. Or maybe it was earlier than that, when you left New York to live with me in Montreal. Or earlier still, when you discouraged my friendship with John McKeefery, or organized that coercive Russian class with David and Michael, or insisted on my studying the flute after I had given up the piano. Probably the roots of it go way back in my childhood since, insofar as I can remember, by age 6 or 7 I was already having difficulties.

Until the age of 25 or so, I was rather a mess with lots of interests but clueless about what I wanted to do with my life. That, I think, was largely your doing. You wanted nothing but the best for me; and you worked very hard, and made real sacrifices to provide the best. But it was always your idea of the best, rather than mine. Until I got out from under your thumb (and you followed me half around the world trying to keep me under it) I could not begin to find out what I wanted for myself. It was as if you needed to relive your life through me, instead of getting on with your life, and letting me have my own.

If I turned out pretty well eventually, it was because you left me the power to rebel. As John told me once, comparing you to his own father, you were an ineffectual tyrant. I don't think you wanted to crush me; if you had, you could easily have done so. I think you genuinely thought you knew the best for everyone – for me, for my mother, for your brother and sister, for Varda and for Maya. Sometimes, perhaps, you did. But with all your reading, all your culture, you were incapable of understanding that people needed to live their own lives and make their own mistakes – would, in fact, thrive better on

their own mistakes than on your supposed wisdom.

God knows, this is not an easy lesson for intellectuals and teachers to learn. I have the teacher's itch myself, and have been guilty of the same thing on occasion. One of my aikido students, in irritation with me, once gave me a card that said, "Never try to teach a pig to sing. It wastes your time and it annoys the pig." Therefore, up to a point, I can sympathize with your frustration. But the trick is knowing when to stop – and beyond that, being able to recognize that people may have values, priorities and even valid knowledge of their own, that may be incompatible with yours. I have been able to learn that pigs have a right to be pigs – even that people can disagree with me, can refuse all my gifts and suggestions, and still be perfectly valid people, and not pigs at all. You, for reasons I can only guess at, could never bring yourself to accept this. That failure cost you dearly enough: Charming, intelligent, cultivated and well-meaning as you were, it made it very difficult for people to love you. Everyone who tried to be close to you had to accept that you thought you knew how to manage their lives better than they did. As a much-wanted only child, I got an especially heavy dose of this treatment; but I saw the same pattern with everyone around you. That's why I don't feel much responsibility for what happened. While we were still on speaking terms, I said all this to you, and warned you not to do this with the precious human grand-daughter, Maya. You couldn't hear it. I broke off relations with you because you were putting pressure on me to put pressure on Maya to drop her own life and fly out to Los Angeles to take care of you, in addition to the pressure you were putting on her yourself. I broke off contact with you, telling Maya who was 19 or 20 years old at that time, what I was doing, that her relationship with you was her own affair, and that I certainly had no expectations that she comply with your wishes. From what I understand, she also broke off all, or nearly all, contact with you at that time. I felt, and still feel, that both of us were fully justified in doing so.

That doesn't mean I feel good about what happened. I didn't and don't, though I don't know how she or I could have acted differently without an impossible surrender of autonomy. Nor how you could have acted differently without abandoning that stance that you were everyone's moral and intellectual superior, and that we were all ignorant ingrates.

Given your needs and my own, nothing that happened could have happened much differently. What I regret though is that we never had the opportunity nor, at that time, the ability to exchange a proper good-bye. I want to try to do that now.

I forgive you. . .

Please forgive me. . .

At a workshop I recently attended, given by a very wise and experienced hospice nurse, it was suggested that five messages need to be sent between the

dying person and his survivors. The first two are an exchange of forgiveness, "I forgive you," and "Please forgive me." For my part, I can say that I know how much grief I caused you, and I ask your forgiveness. I know from Maya who, after you died, learned it from your friend Carol, that you wrestled for months with the idea of disinheriting us. In the end you decided not to. I don't know whether this was your way of laying a guilt trip, or affirming the family bond in spite of everything. Probably both motives were at work, but it doesn't really matter. I choose to understand your will as a gesture of forgiveness from you, and am writing this letter as my own gesture. I think you made it unnecessarily difficult for me to grow up, but in the end I managed pretty well. So did Maya, by the way. If you can let go of the pain I caused you, I can let go of my grievance also. In the end, I know you got hurt a whole lot worse than I did.

I love you. . .

"I love you" is the third message. I do love you, and know you loved me also. That your love was partly a technique of control, was more your tragedy than mine. The crucial point is that you left me strong enough to rebel, and fight you off. In the end, I have to understand that your love was stronger than your possessiveness, and give you that much credit. I had to distance from you in self defense, but remember the struggle with sadness and not much satisfaction at the way it turned out. It wasn't easy for me while it was happening, but for you it was a disaster. I can imagine how angry and lonely your death must have been. I would like you to know that I know this. I'm incapable of feeling it as deeply as you would have liked, or as deeply as you would have in my situation. But part of our story is that I am (and had to be) at least partly North American in the way I handle my emotions, while you were entirely European. I probably don't feel anything as deeply as you did; but I do and did love you even if not as you expected.

(By the way, I still remember the running argument we used to have about *King Lear*, with you trying to convince me that it is Shakespeare's greatest work. I am aware that many think so, but for me, the play is marred by Lear's fundamental silliness. My favourite of Shakespeare's plays are *The Tempest*, also about a doting father, but one wise enough to let go, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*).

Thank you. . .

In a way, the fact that we could have such an argument, reminds me of my debt to you how much I learned from you. I wonder if you ever realized how much of you I took over, how many of your tastes and interests and values I internalized, even if we disagreed on many points, and even if I took some very different directions. Actually, I don't think the acorn fell all that far from the tree, and have long been aware of that fact. It doesn't bother me at all, though I am very sad that you never seemed able to acknowledge either our similarities

or our differences. You wanted me to be a musician; I became an aikidoka, and by now a pretty good thinker and writer; my daughter, your grand-daughter, became a dancer. You wanted me to enjoy English and Russian literature; I preferred philosophy and history. I am enough of a post-modern to be involved in the current re-thinking of the Enlightenment's attitude toward religion and the irrational. Rather like Matthew Arnold, you were completely a son of the Enlightenment, and you made your religion out of art. If you could have accepted that I belong to a different milieu and generation, we might have been friends. As it was, I don't think you ever really knew me.

I had other teachers after you, some very good ones, but, like you, ended up largely a self-taught man, not properly affiliated to anyone. But you were certainly my first, and in some ways my most important teacher. From you I learned how to read and how to argue. From you I acquired a passion for ideas, and for a certain (unfashionable) kind of learning. Not at all the same as specialized expertise.

Apart from all this, you were in many ways a good and loving father, though in other ways a very difficult one. Thank you.

Goodbye.

This is supposed to be the fifth and final message but, after the above, it doesn't seem appropriate. I don't think I can really say goodbye to you because you'll always be part of me. Nor would I have it any other way. Whether you're an angry ghost or a peaceful one is your issue, not mine, as it always has been. But I can wish you peace, and I do. Therefore: shalom rather than goodbye. Shalom, father.