

PERSONAL VOICES

My Father's Name Was Sam

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ONE SPRING DAY WHEN I was about three years old, I hunkered near where my father and the hired man were treating seed grain with formaldehyde. Father handed me the bottle to smell, but apparently I misunderstood, and tried to taste it. There followed a rush to the house with me riding on my father's shoulder. I do not remember the raw egg mixed with ashes or whatever it was they gave me to make me retch. All I remember is that desperate sprint and the wind in my face as I rode atop my father's shoulder.

I'm grateful for that memory, because I have not always been conscious of Father's concern. About a year after the formaldehyde incident, he came home leading a pinto horse that snorted and switched its tail and flashed a wild white eye at me. As I recall, it was a tri-color, with dark patches shading to tan and then white. I'm sure I had never seen anything so beautiful. A childish impulse prompted me to ask Father if I could have the horse, and when he said yes, my astonishment was almost equal to my joy. Life had nothing more to offer me—my days were complete. All day I sat on the stairs in the barn and watched my treasure munching in its stall.

But one morning when I reached the barn, my horse was gone. I ran into the farmyard, frantically, looking. Finally, I hailed the hired man to ask if he knew where my horse was. In the pig pasture, he replied. I raced to the pasture, where I saw the pigs hungrily surrounding some object in the grass. Screaming, I tried to drive them back. The pigs paid no attention, but I got close enough to see beyond their flopping ears and smacking snouts a tattered patch of tri-colored horsehide gleaming in the sun. My older brother had followed me—and explained that the horse was no good: a neighbor had given him to us, and early that morning Father had shot him for pig feed.

Life on the prairie was hard, and if people were to survive, they had to become hard as well. Still, I don't think the incident was a conscious lesson

in toughness by my father—only an example of the degree to which he himself had become desensitized. If I had ever mentioned it to him in later years, I doubt if he would have remembered it.

My father's name was Sam. As I grew up, it became a special delight for me to introduce myself as Sam Harker's son. Everybody knew him, even miles from our home. Most men, it seemed, had worked for him at some time, and many referred to him as the best boss they ever had. And I was indignant when I overheard a hired man say, "That's *one* thing old Sam knows how to do, butcher a beef," as if there might be something that my father couldn't do.

What I could do was draw pictures. By age seventeen I was probably the acknowledged artist in the community, and I went to Banff one summer to study painting. There I worked hard and waited to be discovered, but nobody was paying any attention. When a roommate who was taking theatre stage-craft dashed off a quick portrait of a friend that was far beyond anything I could do, my gifts as an artist finally came into focus. William Carlos Williams said that he thought if he had turned his efforts in another direction, he could have become as good a painter as he was a poet. I don't feel that way. My sparser gifts are not so evenly spread. I think I have the capacity to write better than I can paint, but it took me a long time to accommodate that thought. By about age twenty, though, the shift was complete, and I went out and bought a typewriter.

I recall my wife encouraging me years ago with the fact that Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote eight hours a day for fifteen years before he had anything published. I took heart too from the story that Robert Frost worked patiently for almost twenty years after his first poem was accepted and before his second sale. I hope these stories are true. It is good to think that I share a long incubation period with Hawthorne and Frost if nothing else.

At the end of my own fifteen years, after I had accumulated several hundred unpublished short stories, everything fell in on me. I didn't come to my senses—my heart was broken, that's all. For more than five years I scarcely wrote a line.

When I was ten, a bull elk wandered down from the mountains and had been seen in a neighbor's wheat field. We children arrived at school with nothing on our minds but the elk, while our fathers grabbed rifles from the cupboard and drove off to find it. We spent an agonizing day at school, wondering who had been the successful hunter. In the evening, we learned that the elk had escaped. Later still, my father told us how he had been the one to find the animal and stalk it. He even had it in his sights. But as he drew down on that wild, free creature, he realized that he had no desire to kill it; he raised his rifle, and fired into the sky. The elk leaped away toward the river, and was not seen again. The next day I proudly bore the taunts of my school friends, glad for evidence of a tenderness in my father that I had never before suspected.

The five year hiatus included some of the blackest days I had known. Not

only was my career in limbo, but it seemed that my judgment was faulty, and I augmented my discouragement with foolish, half-desperate measures.

What I didn't know was that help was on the way; some of it had already arrived. I moved back into the area where the writer, Ross Macdonald, renewed his encouragement and guidance. I began writing a weekly newspaper column, and more and more I found myself turning to my childhood experiences for a subject. For the first time, I seemed to recognize my material.

Then an early copy of *Dialogue* fell into my hands. It is hard to explain the impact of this magazine on someone who has lived alone with questions that he dared not admit to himself much less share with others. Over the years I had satisfied myself that my faith was grounded in my own experience and that it no longer depended on the testimony of others. Still, I was troubled at times, if by no more weighty question than why I was the only one to be troubled. For me the famous line about the "myth of the unruffled Mormon" was a liberation. I grew up in a small Mormon community, had been "active" all my life, had never been to a university. I don't believe a person accustomed to an open market on ideas can understand isolation of the mind. When a professor friend of mine read my novel *Turn Again Home*, he said he doubted there could be a nineteen-year-old Mormon who had never heard of Mountain Meadows. But I was over thirty before I heard of it—and then from a Catholic, of course. I mention this because I want to emphasize to Eugene England and Robert Rees and Mary Bradford and those other dozens of committed people associated with the magazine that yes, it is worth the struggle. They have extended the Mormon dialogue to thousands who did not know that it existed. Somehow, *Dialogue* seemed to put me in positive touch with myself, revealing to me for the first time the concept of a Mormon as a man.

In the midst of my doldrums, I one day read a quotation, Chesterton, I believe. His thought was that we all think the treasures of life are wealth and fame and power, when all we need to make us truly happy is something to be enthusiastic about. I was ready for that aphorism, and it literally turned me around. By chance I got an afternoon job, and every morning I rose with the birds and wrote until time to go to work. Five years later, Random House published my first novel.

This was not the end of the story, but it was a culmination of a sort for me. On my next income tax return I gave my profession as "writer." Since then I have found that the struggle to maintain that title can be almost as grueling as the effort to achieve it. But every morning I approach the task with gratitude.

One autumn, as we worked in the field, a shiny new car drove through the stubble toward us. We boys didn't recognize the man who got out of it, but Father did, and went out of our hearing to greet and laugh and talk with him. After he left, Father told us that he was a local man who sometime before had moved away and become rich, and I felt proud that such an important man had walked upon our humble farm.

For several years, he visited us in the midst of our harvest, each time driving a bigger automobile and with reports of another promotion by his company. His easy air seemed to taunt our long days in the field, doubly so when I grew old enough to understand that his reason for coming was to collect money my father owed him. About the time he became president of the corporation, Father made his last payment, and the man never visited us again. It was some time later that Father explained to me how rich he always felt when he looked out across the waving grain fields, and how badly his fortune had shrunk by the time he got the harvest in and finished paying his bills.

One night Father was late coming in with the sheep. By this time I was married and living in the city with children of my own, but we were home for the week-end. We sat down to supper, and wondered where he was and why he was taking so long. Just before dark we went out looking, and found the herd scattered, and finally our father, lying alone in the field. Hours before he'd had a heart attack and, as we learned afterward, very nearly died.

I am now about the same age my father was when he had his attack. I take courage from the fact that I am also about twenty pounds lighter, but I have no assurance that I can look forward to another fifteen good years, as he did. Even granted that, I'll really have to hustle my pen, considering the time lost, to get all the books out of me that are in there. One of them, I hope, will be worth something—I mean in a human way, the way that one of Father's lamb chops gave people something they could sink their teeth into.

As I sit here, trying to solve the problems of my most recent novel, I remember a July hailstorm many summers ago. When the fury had passed, we looked out to see the sun glistening on hail piled against the fence like rhinestone golfballs. Father took the family for a drive to inspect the damage. The grainfield, which an hour before had waved in tall young shoots already beginning to head out, was now as black as ploughed ground. But the next spring, Father planted again.

The other day at the beach, I watched a young fellow bucking in the waves on his Jet-ski. For an hour he ridged the water back and forth, awash in foam and noise and as I looked at him his posture seemed familiar. I remembered Father hunched above the walking plow, his strong hands guiding it, his feet awkwardly straddling the furrow as he trudged against the fading light. I remembered too, his telling me, "I never especially wanted to be a farmer." Nor did I. Am I exempt because I knew what I did want? Father and I were different sorts, and yet his blood flows in my veins. I feel him urging me beyond myself; I feel the dogged motion of his life steadying mine; I feel his shoulder underneath me, bearing me swiftly through the wind and hail to save the remnant years.