

MY FATHER'S BLESSING

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(Translated from German by Raphael Rapstoffs)

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Several weeks ago, my colleague Heidi Schoeller and I again led a Gestalt therapy training workshop together. During the workshop Heidi had done a very remarkable piece of work with Birgit, a participant, concerning her deep love connection with her mother and the loyalty involved. This still shows now in the fact that Birgit – perhaps 25 years after the death of her mother – seems to be repeating the fate of her mother: that is to say “not belonging.”

Birgit's mother, already pregnant with Birgit, had married her husband and had moved to his home village in the Swabian Alps. However her parents-in-law had never really accepted Birgit's mother into the family. In fact they had always rejected her as “unsuitable.” Birgit had likewise experienced herself from childhood onwards as “inadequate” and “flawed.” In actual fact, Birgit did not really belong either. Even as a child at school she had been a loner and in the afternoons often wandered around on her own in nature. She had few friends and often her friendships ended in a tragic way with exclusion, rejection, degradation and yes, even being outcast. Later she was accepted as a particularly talented student into a college of music. But she never really belonged there either and never became a proper member of the musical community. After she had had different, but always equally unsatisfactory occupations, over several years, she finally did another training as a speech therapist, because she really wanted to help people in order to feel that she belonged. But there too she was “not good enough” and was terminated during her trial period. So also this attempt to belong failed.

It was strikingly clear that everything that has been briefly outlined here was completely hopeless. And at the same time, this clarity was something of a relief, because it also made it clear that we have choices. When we become aware of our entanglement with our parents, we can then decide whether we want to continue this form of childlike love and loyalty, or whether we want to look for a way out of this entanglement. In this context, Heidi quoted a saying from the North American Indians, “You can only walk through life wearing your own moccasins.”

Until now Birgit had been going through life wearing her mother's moccasins. Through this metaphor several other participants discovered their own entanglement with their parents, their grandparents, their kinsfolk, their people. It called to mind my work with the Gestalt therapist Jerry Kogan during the first father/son workshop, in which I had participated in with my father.

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My father had talked about his relationship to his father, my grandfather. His father had always treated my father like, and had called him, a “weakling.” My father was a small, delicate man who wanted to become a fitter. For my grandfather at that time, physical strength counted arguably above everything else. As a grandchild I experienced him many years later quite differently, perhaps because his own physical strength had diminished in old age?! Anyway, he had simply forbidden my father to begin the fitters training. “You would not manage that anyhow, you weakling,” my grandfather had said to him. Rather, he should learn an office job or else remain on the farm. But that was the last thing my father wanted to do.

As a child my father had been his mother's favourite. Perhaps that had always been a thorn in his father's side. Who knows? Today, seven years after my father's death, unfortunately I cannot ask him any more about it.

My father found his father's rejection so definitive that he – broken-hearted in view of this hopelessness – wanted to take his own life. He grabbed a rope and ran into the woods not far from his parents' small farm. And there he clambered up the hill. Fortunately his sister Anni had noticed. She followed him crying and screaming loudly. That finally dissuaded him from his plan. Full of shame, he then returned home with his sister at twilight.

I do not know whether his parents ever knew anything about it. Anyway then the Second World War prevented my father from doing any sort of professional training – regardless which one. My father was called up into the armed forces after taking a so-called “emergency” Middle School leaving-exam as a 17-year-old. After a makeshift basic training in Berlin, he arrived pretty soon afterwards in a French -prisoner-of-war camp in Tunisia in the southern foothills of the Algerian Atlas Mountains.

My father received a blessing in disguise. He became a military orderly in an officers' camp, where the Geneva Convention for prisoners of war was actually in effect. That is probably why he survived the imprisonment. Many ordinary ranked soldiers perished from epidemics in terrible conditions.

But that was not the only good fortune. My father started studying mechanical engineering at the camp. Older officers among the prisoners, who had been professors of mechanical engineering, soon began training the younger officers, who had usually learned no other occupation than the “trade of war.” My father was a simple private first class and was put to work in the military hospital. He did his job well. The head physician liked him and released him for several hours every day for his studies.

When he was released from the prisoner of war camp in 1947, after nearly four years, he had already completed his intermediate level exams. But back again in Germany it was not possible for him to continue his studies. Instead, he had to be thankful that he could hire himself out as a farmhand on

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a Bavarian farm. Two years later, he was finally ready to begin his longed for fitter's training, which he also successfully completed. In the theoretical work he was the best of his year. In practical work he was – as he himself explained “only” good.

He earned very little money during his training. So he had to work on a farm for his room and board, but he was used to that from his youth.

In Germany there was still very high unemployment. My father was recruited by the employment office in Munich for work as a skilled mechanical engineer in Sweden. Sometime at the beginning of the 1950s he went there, more precisely to Trollhättan, where he worked for the Saab company building aircraft engines.

In Sweden my father earned “good money.” Already during his first Christmas visit to his parents, six months after going to Sweden, he bought his parents, German refugees driven out of their homeland in Czechoslovakia, living-room furniture for their new flat in Breisach on the River Rhine. He was proud that he had made his money in Sweden as a fitter.

But he never heard a single word of acknowledgement for his vocational success from his father. Not even when, soon afterwards, he became a master craftsman. And that twice – because the Swedish master craftsman certification was not recognized upon his return to Germany, so that my father had to do it a second time.

His father gave him no recognition, even when my father began his correspondence course in mechanical engineering at the age of 50 – with training sessions every Saturday for three years in Bad Hersfeld. It remained this way until his death – my father never received any word of appreciation from his father. By doing the course, he had so much wanted to prove to his father that he was not a failure or a weakling.

The men at the father / son weekend listened spellbound. I was proud of my father and told him so. I was very grateful that he had come along at all to this Gestalt therapy workshop. I had invited him and, in order to get his agreement, I had “made up” a reason why he should come. I had said that his participation would help and support me on my vocational way as a Gestalt therapist.

And actually – when I look back – it really worked out that way. But first things first. Now, as I am writing all this, I am realising again how differently my father treated me from the way his father treated him. Just the fact that he readily participated in this and also one other Gestalt therapy workshop showed his extraordinary interest in my vocational (and beyond that, also my personal!) journey.

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But not only that, he had supported me on this journey even beyond that. I received a part of my inheritance in advance so that I could go several times to study with the American Gestalt therapists Erving and Miriam Polster in San Diego.

Additionally, for three years my father did the bookkeeping at the "Gestalt Therapy Institute of Cologne (GIK)" which I had founded, although he had never learned any such thing as a "fitter" of course. Even then he had had to work himself into it. My parents had asked me, how they could support me in building up the Institute, and I had mentioned the bookkeeping. My mother contributed something in her way by "releasing" my father to do it, as he liked to say.

And now I return to my work with Jerry Kogan. It followed immediately after my father's story. The work did not last very long, but was effective and immensely unburdening – when I think about it today, it still is.

I told the men's circle that I had been working endlessly. "Since I became self-employed a few years ago, I have been working ten, twelve, sometimes even fourteen hours a day. Sometimes I am completely exhausted by it. My girl friend has absolutely no sympathy for it any longer. I don't dare to mention the topic of 'work' when I am with her any more. I receive no acknowledgement from her at all for what I have achieved in my occupation. She simply dismisses it harshly, even when others are there. Often with biting sarcasm."

Jerry quickly interrupted my description. "At least there is an interesting parallel here to your father. He also had to always prove that he was not a failure, not a weakling."

I had never seen this connection before. In Heidi's words – I had taken my father's moccasins and walked off in them.

Already this comment alone had an infinitely releasing effect on me. Not only that, I also felt an even stronger connection to my father. From my perspective today, I would call this a consequence of my still continuing entanglement. After all I was living my father's "issue." I was repeating it in my own life.

So while at first I felt relief, my father was very sad. He said that it was not at all OK with him that I should have to drag the same issue through life as he did. But I saw his sadness only as an indication of how close he felt to me. So his words did not reach me in a deeper way

The men's workshop ended soon afterwards. As I would later see, however, my father had not given up trying to reach me with his words.

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Perhaps a good year later I held my first Gestalt therapy workshop on the island of Crete. My girl friend at that time wanted to accompany me in order to support me in the running of the workshop. She promised to take care of the organisation – setting up the rooms for the arriving participants, preparing the group room, etc. – to free me up for the actual therapeutic work. However, shortly before the workshop we separated.

I certainly did not want to travel alone to Crete, and in the end I asked my father whether he would accompany me. He agreed – again after consulting with my mother. This consultation – seen from today's perspective – has become very significant. I feel in it that my mother, by “releasing” my father, was unburdening and supporting me in her own way.

So my father accompanied me to Crete for the first time. What began at that time, and ended up continuing for nearly ten years, I could never have dreamed of.

We prepared the group house together, bought the drinks for the participants and both of us welcomed them together. While I worked with them in the group room, I heard my father outside in the yard preparing tea and coffee for the breaks. Dishes rattled, as he set the table for us.

I was emotionally affected and very grateful. The participants felt this, and spoke about their amazement that my father would accompany me and help me in such a way. Of course, they talked about how they had mostly missed something similar with their parents. So at the same time a lot of sadness arose in the room, in addition to the joy, which we then worked on during the group sessions.

When a crying female participant did not want to sit at the laid coffee table during a break, my father said that it was totally OK to not to do that. He understood it, because he had also had to cry a lot when he had participated in a Gestalt therapy workshop. This empathy increased even more the amazement of the participants about my father.

We spent a delightful week with the participants. In the mornings and evenings we worked in the group. During the long lunch breaks we swam, naked of course, in the Lybian Sea in the mild autumn sun, and then – lying on the sand we let ourselves be warmed by the sun. Later in the evening, after the workshop, we went for Cretian meals and were happy drinking together into the night not only the Landlord's house wine but also freshly distilled raki, the Turkish national drink. In the morning my father always woke me up with a large cup of coffee. He placed it on the floor in the middle of our bedroom. In order to reach it, I had to get out of bed. He did it with this purpose in mind. In no time at all, he had begun to take apart all the bed-clothes, so that I could not creep back into bed. After all, soon I would have to start working with the group again.

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After the group had left, we took another week holiday together. We walked a lot. We visited the Minoan excavations of Knossos and Festos. We ate rabbits at Maria's. And naturally also the Cretian food for real men at Katharini's – squid cooked in its own ink, to which incidentally a slightly intoxicating effect is attributed.

We had so much fun together and we also talked a lot. We told each other things about our lives that we had not shared before. My father answered many questions, which I now more easily trusted to ask. Neither did we leave out topics such as women and sexuality.

Maybe it was on the last evening but one that we were sitting on the balcony of our room and watching the sunset. My father opened a bottle of Greek sparkling wine which he had secretly bought for us and had hidden in the refrigerator. He poured us two glasses. What he then said changed my life.

“I came here very gladly to accompany you in your work. I have been observing everything very closely. How you deal with your participants and they with you. Your work has left a visible effect. It is as if you have “opened” the people. The mood here in the house has become ever friendlier. I am sure that you do your work really well. I can feel that. And I am proud of you.”

Today, seven years after the death of my father and nearly sixteen years after that remarkable evening, I am – as I write this – again deeply touched by father's blessing and grateful for it. Since then, I have been much more in touch with my strength when I am working. I love to work hard. I work today above all, because I enjoy it, and significantly less because I would like to be recognized for it. Of course this desire has not completely disappeared. But it has become less and less important. Because of this, I feel substantially freer, more independent as if I am standing on my own two feet.

After the sudden death of my father I experienced myself weakened for nearly a year. But afterwards it was almost as if my strength had doubled itself. Sometimes I imagine that his strength has now been carried over into me. It is a beautiful image. And again I feel that gratitude and the deep connectedness with him. At these times, he is very close to me, even today.

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He has written several articles and books about Gestalt therapy in German language (www.gestaltkritik.de).

His first book in English language: “Touching the Soul in Gestalt Therapy: Stories and More.”

Another of his publications, “An Invitation to Gestalt Therapy: An Introduction with Examples” (with Stephan Blankertz), will be available soon as an English language edition.

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