

How the Mirror Betrays Us;  
or Why Literature Fails Fatherhood

Charles Dickens, the august author of some of the greatest books of all time, was hard at work on his new novel but couldn't come up with the right title. This frustration haunted his waking hours. One day, unable to bear it any longer, he pushed back from his writing desk and walked down the street to a bar.

When he entered the darkened room, the bartender looked up and said, "Good afternoon, Mr. Dickens. What can I get for you on this gloriously dingy day?"

"A martini," Charles Dickens responded dryly.

"Ah, very good, sir. Would you like an...olive or twist?"

Aside from wanting to begin with a little literary levity – because, as we all know, there just isn't enough book humor in the world – I'm doing what my father used to call pussyfooting around. Why?

It's not fear, no, that was the first paper. Instead, this Muhammed Ali shuffle is due to the tonnage of the subject and my struggle to wrap my arms and thoughts and words around it. Instead of carefully fitting it all together like Lincoln logs, which at 8:45 p.m., would reveal a solid construction and rational denouement, there's this Hitchcock-like box, metaphorically ticking, and I've stared at it for months. I feel its weight and think:

No man is ambivalent about his father.

While drafting this paper, I've sucked on that line like piece of hard candy. It's a recollected taste, a flavor from yesteryear – like molasses cookies. Not distasteful, but not sweet. Not bitter, yet likewise not better. Almost impossible to pin down. Which, by those defining terms, makes it a uniquely male acquired taste.

Like coal running deep through the nearby Appalachian foothills, a semi-precious, smudged and dirty commodity mined with toil and pickaxe, I gather the carbon under the pretense of providing a glow in this twilight's dimming. But the process has generated so much smoke and gas that it's unclear whether the by-products did more damage than any benefit derived. Nonetheless, I've strapped on the headlamp to follow the vein.

No man is ambivalent about his father. These feelings can be positive or negative, but never squarely in-between, there's no "meh" here. The psychological load of those seven words have anchored our lives; sometimes good, sometimes not. That line should have been first out of the gate as the title, but in literary club tradition, the marquee name given is more about bobbing, feinting and parrying. The other phrase my father sometime employed was "don't get cutsie" so let me reassure you that the title and sub-title will have equal resonance, all in short order.

Before we go further, let me acknowledge the unfortunate fact that it's been a very difficult year for our Monday night family. We've lost too many literarians; as well, members have suffered hard losses within their respective families. While death is inevitable and democratic, that does not make it easy. I don't embark lightly on a paper that plumbs the role and meaning of family, a struggle with feelings bound up tighter than the twine inside a baseball. As there are many in this room who still feel the Biblical admonishment of Death's sting, I want to very sincerely say that our hearts still go out to you and our hands still reach to support you. When casting a message for many, I remind myself to remember all the individuals whose hearts still ache. Life passes, but love goes on, and so with that in mind, we'll commence along a path that will meander, some times reflective, some times reflecting, until we'll finish in a room filled with mirrors...although as we'll see, some of those shiny surfaces are something else entirely.

The emotional bond between fathers and sons naturally runs hot. As we know, depending on the circumstances, hot can be good or bad. To extend the earlier metaphor, men are taught to bank the coals, which of course keeps a slow burn that stretches long after we forgot what might have upset us. When we strain to stay calm, cool and collected, we don't vent the heat and it builds inside. I would posit that the father-son relationship as the second hottest connection in our lives. If anyone wonders what the first one might be, call home and inform whoever answers that you've decided to stay out all night with the boys.

No man is ambivalent about his father. That notion is as deceptively deep as a jungle ravine and as precarious as the rope bridge that sways hundreds of feet above. Yes, the premise is straightforward, but the result is very tricky as it holds, and withholds, the power to change the way we live. That line challenges our very and varied intentions. The ways in which we view and regard our fathers has marked every one of us, molded our actions, influenced our character, and possibly seared our souls. Most certainly, it has dictated how we act toward our offspring -- like a virus immune to antibiotics, it affects, or is that infects, our progeny the same. But we don't seem to retain the vocabulary or the willingness or the courage to address it publicly.

At times this paper became a braided cable of so many lines, and liens, and lies that while it was a lifeline, unwittingly, I kept unraveling it so I could find the single sustaining wire to pull through. The process of untying the genetic Gordian knot is akin to unpacking a snowball to see what's in the middle. The undertaking is transparently impossible, although the two parts of that word -- trans + parent -- conjure up an interesting verbal conundrum: the sheer idea that anything to do with parenting might be clear -- ha!

Here we should pause and revisit the first half of the paper's title. "How the Mirror Betrays Us" is not a red herring, nor is it pussyfooting. Fatherhood is a mirror. Familial resemblances across generations can at times be so identical it's unsettling, speech patterns and idioms can echo across from an earlier life. Even physical characteristics, like the way one walks or places their hands on a table, can conjure up another. When I cough, I'd swear my father is in the room with me. It's the only way in which I sound like him, but it's identical.

It's remarkable how it is that we see and perceive things. Neurosurgeons can detail the neural pathways that flip the upside-down image projected by the lens on the back of our

eyeballs for our brains. Remarkable indeed. Accordingly, sometimes what's upside down in our families is likewise invisible to the mirror, those things we harbor inside. Mirrors are beguiling surfaces... surface being a term that carries at least one unflattering meaning, specifically when inferring that we pay undue attention to the unimportant. We aim to transcend surface appearances in hopes of illumination and depth. But the mirror is inherently myopic. Social scientists and psychologists report that a human being can gaze at a mirror and if there are ten different areas of that reflection that discourage us (that wrinkle, that blemish, the decreasing hairline, the expanding waistline), if there's even one spot that pleases us – thank goodness the dimple is still there – our brains will “not see” all those unfortunate marks of age and fallibility and just focus on just that one that makes us somehow likeable.

By Lincoln's math, I've successfully skirted this subject for two score and two years. As a teenager, if asked how I would act and react when I became a father was simple – my bull-headed response would be “exactly the opposite of however that inflexible, unfeeling, closed-mouthed and closed-minded man who sat silently at the head of the dinner table did.” He judged with a stern look and sentenced with a single word verdict. I felt shackled and branded. My sisters were fortunate in that they obscured the lineage upon marrying, shucking off the family name as well as moving out of the house; let's just say they were motivated. The rebellion of youth was in full force field around our home. The equal and opposing measures of his stubbornness and my righteous indignation were topped only by our shared refusal to acquiesce even one half-inch to the other.

First he left. Then came college, and I moved out. But I failed to move on. The hundreds of miles that lay between home and the classroom allowed all the heat to disperse, but like the lava fields in Hawaii, it hardened and blackened when it cooled. Five years later, while I was off at grad school, he repented his transgressions to my mother's satisfaction and they remarried. I was left solo but steadfast, stoic upon my island. The metaphor worked but the reality was that the island I was stuck upon was Manhattan so if I wanted to survive amidst the 12 million other NYC residents, I realized that I had to find some way to go forward, I needed a new perspective.

Not surprisingly, I turned to books for answers, insight and comfort. Books were my friends and guides ever since I could read. I so wanted these volumes to enlighten me – both in terms of illuminating his behavior and, to stretch the implied double meaning of the word, to lighten the load. When I am stumped, unable, or unwilling to descend into any personal depth, I turn to books and art so that I can look out instead of in. And it is therein that this paper focuses...and begins in regards to the second phrase in the title: How Literature Fails Fatherhood.

Way back when, I read for hours while tucked away in a crawlspace upstairs, a pillow and a lamp my only company, it was a safe haven. Yes, I was at home, but wanted to be away, to find a place, as the stories promise, far, far away. Those were children's books and I was a child. Finally an adult, at least age-wise, I opted for the classics that I had skipped over or somehow evaded in high school. I was hoping that these works and words, which stood the test of centuries and centurions, would provide the pinpoints of light in the sky to show the way in the dark.

Here's what I found: bupkis.

The dynasty of Greeks and their dysfunctional pater familias didn't particularly fare well. Let's take, for instance, the oldest extant work of Western literature: Homer's "Iliad." Boasting a canvas of characters, we'll use Priam as a case study. The good soldier retired after fathering fifty sons and fighting in the Trojan War. As a quick aside, you have to wonder if indeed Priam had fifty sons, was the Trojan War correctly named? One of this crowd of boys is Hector, a warrior who earned a reputation as a man equal to his father in both strength and his commitment to family. Commitment to the family? Priam scarcely engaged with Hector, in fact, there is only one occasion when the two of them spoke to each another. Certainly a classic father-son relationship, but probably not the bright shining example of a doting father.

The tragic tale of Oedipus serves as exhibit two in "How to Be a Bad Dad from a Greek POV." First, Father hears a prophecy that his son will grow up to kill him and marry his mother, a.k.a. the wife. So King Laius pins his son's feet together and leaves Junior, i.e., Oedipus, on a mountainside to die. At this point, most of the studio audience is calling 241-KIDS. But the *coup de grace* is that decades later, after Oedipus was saved and raised, by another set of parents, he does indeed kill his father...because unwittingly they met while traveling the same road and both of them are too ornery and vexed to give way. Of course, the punch line which everyone remembers is that Oedipus did indeed get hitched to Mom in the Mediterranean version of a Vegas wedding, probably with country western music playing at the reception. So much for being a besotted boy with an afternoon of longing...so much for fatherhood. At least with the Greeks, it's hard to draw any lessons on fatherhood in the bookshelf from Athens.

So we move on to the Romans, who are best remembered for their mythology and panoply of gods. Juno does swell our tides, casting the soft light of her moon, (that is my favorite phrase in this whole paper) and generating a full library of sonnets and songs that praise her kindness and love. Big Daddy Jupiter, on the other hand, is the badass who creates storms filled with thunderbolts and high winds. Warm and fuzzy and caring – not so much. Cold and bristly are more common descriptors. Mom smelled like powder and perfume, Dad was sweat and brimstone. The reason we cannot skip blithely down the ancient path to the Adriatic Sea while whistling a tune is because it's a Janus/genus exercise; we must look forward and back at the same time. It's hard on the neck while simultaneously hard on the heart. Et tu, Brutal One?

If we examine other classics from the next major historical and cultural period, the literature moves to Egypt. One apocryphal story there is Moses, who as a baby was – to put it kindly – sent away. When they put all their eggs in the same basket, thankfully, they also included baby Moses. Many, many, many fatherless trials happened thereafter; it is only too easy to imagine, and too hard to not comment on, being certain that when lost in the desert for 40 years, someone in the group, probably someone with longer hair, at one point uttered "If he'd only stop and ask directions, we wouldn't have to keep walking..."

This is where literature crosses over to Biblical history, and although not always categorized as a work in the Western Civ canon, I included the Good Book as it fits the

general definition of a classic: it has certainly stood the test of time, it's in the public domain so there are no royalties due authors, and it seems that every publisher has their own edition. Without being blasphemous, the whole book is about the Holy Father so it strongly suggests there could be parenting tips. Plus, the father-son gestalt is all encompassing once the curtain rises on the second act, so you'd think that, if nothing else, at the very least, it should offer up a few solid pre-Spock (as in Benjamin) lessons. But that's not the case. Adam, Cain and Abel might make the cut for our former mayor's daytime TV show, while Abraham offering up Isaac has all the elements of weekend investigative crime docudramas.

Instead, the Biblical family relationship that fares best, no surprise, is Mother and Child. Countless European and American museums are stuffed with paintings and statues of Mutter and Kinder, complimenting the many books in the Bible commenting on the same. I'm far from a religious scholar, but I have never seen the words Joseph & Son appearing on the nameplate of any Renaissance artwork. So the Bible too, even though seasoned with ample measures of detailed genealogy with all those "begats" and testosterone, ultimately falls short of delivering any lessons for fathers during moments of need.

Let's pause again for another minute or two about mirrors, specifically, whether by their very nature they're untruthful. Supposedly they reflect back exactly what is shown to them, essentially flipping it around so the subject can also be the viewer. But a mirror's image is not an exact reflection. When you look in the mirror and raise your right hand, then reach straight out with that right hand, when and where it meets the silvered surface, it's the left hand of the subject cast in the mirror that touches it. How can that be? Physically, it seems clear but psychologically, it's weird. Otherwise, it's exact in its representation – that mole is a mole. But it's exactly on the wrong side of our face.

We are taught early in life not to fixate on our reflection in a mirror. Classic and contemporary texts agree as to the potential dangers of obsessive and uncontrolled self-worship: Aesop's dog gazing into the mirrored surface of still water showed us the avarice of greed; the Greek tale about Narcissus foretold us of the dire fate awaiting those who linger on their own likeness; and as a more current example of the peril of self-affection, we need not look any further than Chad "Ochocinco" Johnson. Seriously, you have to wonder about somebody who changes his name to a number – an act usually that only happens in the army or when assigned a Leavenworth return address.

After the Greeks, the Romans and the Egyptians, aka the Bible, the score remains Classics 0, Fatherhood 0. Next up, comes the Bard. Recently reading the print version of an interview with Patrick Stewart, the actor, the author of the piece writes: "It started when he [Stewart] played Macbeth in both London and New York...one day he looked into the mirror in his dressing room and recognized the man in a greatcoat and moustache, holding a rifle. 'It was my father staring back at me.'" Even though Shakespeare penned thirty-seven plays and created a legion of characters who now epitomize certain human behavior models, one might argue that only "Hamlet" features a central father-son pairing, or in this case, three pairs. In all three relationships, the respective father's death precedes the son's, but two sons, Hamlet and Laertes, seek personal revenge for their fathers' murders and they are in turn murdered. What lessons are learned there? Shoot first, ask questions later? Or don't follow dad into the same line of work? The third son, Fortinbras, prince of Norway, seeks only to complete his father's life work and survives the tragedy. The plot does give one

food for thought, but for the most part, it reads like a gangster movie set in Merry Olde Denmark. As an interesting footnote, scholars of Willie de Shakes, which is his DJ name, have often surmised that the death of Shakespeare's father inspired a lot of father-son dynamics in "Hamlet" as it was first performed soon after John Shakespeare's death.

We have to read forward another 300 years before written works, either for the publication, stage, or film, truly began to spotlight fathers and the roles they play in terms of influencing, protecting, and providing for their offspring. So many of the notable works in the interim, from Defoe to the Brothers Grimm, from Mark Twain to Charles Dickens, from Jack London to Melville, the protagonists are usually males whose early "family life" featured orphanages, indentured servitude, or desertion from the armed forces. At best, custodial relationships were an odd aunt or uncle who could probably be described in today's terms as a desultory foster parent. These non-nurturing episodes were neither kind nor revelatory. Roots, rocks and various rodents of the human stripe tripped up the unwary.

Let's pull one out like a lottery. In D.L. Lawrence's "Sons and Lovers," Walter Morel is crude man, more animal than cerebral. In many ways, he's the opposite of the Mrs., which probably explains why he drinks so much. He loves to drink and dance, preoccupations that his wife considers sinful. Critics cite three ways to look at Walter's failure to be a good husband, father, and breadwinner: 1. He is the result of a brutal industrial system, or 2. He is the result of an overly demanding wife, or 3. He is his own worst enemy, inviting self-destruction through drink and irresponsibility. I would add: 4. All of the above.

It is at about this point in the history of the written word that photography also burst onto the scene. As mentioned earlier, we are skilled at looking "away" from our true selves. How then should we feel when we examine family photographs taken 40, 60 or 80 years, specifically, photos taken before we had been born? It can be shocking to see one's own face clearly in the looking glass of previous generations. Ironically, as I am the son of a someone who had his own photo studio, there were only 3 or 4 photos of my father and myself together. In those shots, of course I didn't look a thing like him; I was either in short pants or in high school, he was bald, bespectacled, and bad tempered. But when my sisters and I were cleaning out the house after our parents had passed away, we found a cache of photos taken before he shipped out in WWII (as my grandfather was a photographer as well and we believe these shots were taken to provide the newly engaged couple a visual keepsake to remember each other by when half a world away). It was as if at that very moment I had been transported back to the 1940s and into his Navy uniform. Holy scheist, I thought. It took my breath away, later, I realized I was brokenhearted.

For not terribly long before their passing, aside from publishing during the day, I was taking photography classes at International Center for Photography. My mother told me in a letter that between high school graduation and when he was old enough to enlist, my father had gone to California to study photography. This undeniably revealed that he and I tread the same path, pursuing the same personal aspiration but never talking about it. What it meant is since I looked at the world through a lens, I needed a new one because the old one was all fogged up.

Photos can play the same tricks as mirrors. Supposedly they reflect back the truth of appearances, but our world is stuffed with ways to enhance photos. During my younger years, I occasionally fell under the editorial spell of Hugh Hefner and remember a friend telling me, “Well, those certainly aren’t real!” What? I thought, obviously innocent to the magic of airbrushing, no way! With that visual recollection in mind, let’s see if we can switch our focus back to books; p.s., I had this same exact challenge back in junior high English.

Certainly we know the perils of painting the pantheon of literature with a broad brush, which means that any exception to the rule gets covered over. In full disclosure, I suspect that Turgenev’s “Fathers and Sons” featured some classic father-son dynamics – with that title, how could it not – but the page count of the Russian novelists put me off. To counter this Putin-like intimidation factor phenomenon, it might not seem fair to use literary quotes to substantiate or prove a point. Common wisdom tells us that one can always find a line or two to extract and be applied out of context. But for those folks today who pay attention to the long tail of numbers in order, often employing terms like data management or sample size, we’ve become accustomed to having bits fill in for larger bites.

Here are some particularly illuminating ones: “To be a successful father... there's one absolute rule: when you have a kid, don't look at it for the first two years.” So said Ernest Hemingway. Considering the Hemingway family history, one must approach his parenting advice with discretion and caution.

“A father may turn his back on his child, brothers and sisters may become inveterate enemies, husbands may desert their wives, wives their husbands. But a mother's love endures through all.” Washington Irving

“The most important thing a father can do for his children is to love their mother.” That’s from Theodore Hesburgh, the esteemed president emeritus of Notre Dame, who offers no advice or direction on how to father, but in business speak, but we’re advised to use a third party vendor.

Three more, this one catching my eye next: “It's a father's duty to give his sons a fine chance,” penned George Eliot in *Middlemarch*. This sounds like spot-on and relatively supportive advice, until we remind ourselves that George Eliot was *nom de plume* for Mary Ann Evans, so suddenly the line sounds more like an admonition than a compliment.

“It is easier for a father to have children than for children to have a real father.” Pope John XXIII. On the surface – there it is again, that slippery surface word - this seems a wise and insightful thought. But as the Church has its hands full with other thorny issues, but the listener has to wonder how a celibate priest, admittedly the grand poobah of priests, has any true experience about fathering sons. Call me crazy.

I’ll offer ten dollars to anyone who can identify who said this: “When I was a youngster I lived with different families. I nearly always felt closer to the man of the house. Maybe because I always dreamed of having a father of my own.” That would be Marilyn Monroe. Freud, the National Enquirer, Henry Miller, Joe DiMaggio and JFK all would have a field day with that quote.

Moving on from the sound bites, it is within our lifetimes that literature and theater, and even music – have started publicly discussing and lighting up what our fathers might have been thinking, and doing, and feeling. It certainly was a mixed bag: Arthur Miller’s “Death of a Salesman” blew “Father Knows Best” out of the water; likewise, Archie Bunker’s role in “All in the Family” made us recalibrate Fred MacMurray in “My Three Sons.” I had the honor watching Neil Simon’s “Lost in Yonkers” a few times as our youngest son played the role of one of the boys...whose father is most often just a voice off-stage: either via a written letter or in the adjoining room with Grandma -- who will actually be the matriarch/patriarch raising his two sons as Dad doesn’t have enough of a spine to do so nor can he hold down a job that will put a roof over their heads. Darth Vader’s confession to Luke Skywalker was dysfunction-family-junction at warp speed. Suddenly, we were all living the Chinese curse: “May you live in interesting times.”

We live with Petri-dish, male-order-catalog pregnancies, so while the cloning clock keeps on ticking, for the time being it still takes two to make one. So why does the predominant declaration of connection, at least that in the media, on bookshelves, and in greeting cards, seem to run 8:1 in terms of mothers and sons, yet the steel cable that connects us to our fathers is as twined and taut as the swooping lines of the Roebling Bridge, far stronger than an umbilical cord which is cut as the metaphoric and literal moment of children being separated from their mother.

To challenge Teddy Roosevelt’s view on power, while the male carries the proverbial big stick (and I hope my careful enunciation of that last phrase was clear), I would respectfully say that too often men also get the short end of said stick, and we’re left carrying the cudgel so often that we’re more comfortable with its pain than we are with a caress.

Akin to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, there are countless men, a literal army of men, their names and faces rendered to dusty pages and forgotten photographs, who never got to know their sons. In our lifetimes alone, there have been a six generations of L.M. Barrie’s Lost Boys, casualties of casualties of a foreign war. It would seem, based upon written accounts and social worker reports, that the predominant, daresay even palpable feelings of growing up fatherless are sadness and wonder. Ambivalent, no; yearning, yes.

At the same time, there are infinite men who never got to know their fathers...even though they spent twenty years under the same roof or even sixty years in the same town. Like the mighty Ohio, what swims silent and hidden under the surface is all well and good until it gnaws the meat of your leg bone. Herein, the range of feelings for our fathers are as strong as the currents, as deceiving as mossy stones, full of cold spots and hidden holes.

For about everyone in this room, we’ve been masters of the magnificent and the mundane, responsible for ourselves, our families, and depending on the circumstances, friends, relatives, employees, colleagues, pets, pen pals and more, for at least thirty years, if not fifty. In all likelihood, the world at large sees us as responsible, truthful, forthright and willing to lead a charge if called upon. Still and all, there is still a simple six-words that can reduce us all to a quivering state of twelve-year-old protoplasm, and that is: “wait until your father gets home.” We catch our breath while our hearts race.

Why are we so reticent about this? Is it a fear of revealing the mortal intimacy we seek, and yearn for, as we grow, sometimes literally, into our respective father's shoes? On Facebook there are almost a thousand likes for the category Mother-Daughter Quotes. For Father-Son...no such listing even exists.

Or is it because we don't talk? I've been told that time and time again, by my wife, my sisters, my mother, ...but never once by my father. For fun, I sometimes tried to imagine the scene around Ripley's dinner table. "Guess what I saw on my way to school today?" Then launch into some tall tale that is so very common amongst twelve-year-olds. "Son, I don't believe it." "Honest, Dad, it's all true." Instead, I ate healthy, nourishing, comfort food prepared by my mother, while blanketed in uneasy silence prepared by my dad.

After 30 years of railing against prose so purple that it looked and read like a deep bruise, I may not have ever before composed such an understatement as no man is ambivalent about his father and imagined the four-letter words it would conjure up...like rage, fury, and love.

In an earlier draft, I returned to the Bard as a way of tying it all together. For even though only one play and parts of others focused on fatherhood, as he wrote so many great lines, surely many of those pass muster. He sets up this last passage: "It is a wise father that knows his own child."

It's not too wild a wager to say that we all hold within us the wish for a bold, grand gesture. A clearing of the dinner table with a sweep of our long arm to signal that perhaps the asparagus was a bit overcooked. A door slammed loud enough that everyone in the house, in town, in Hamilton County would hear and hold their collective breath, all thinking "oh my, I never thought he'd get that upset about that." Just enough of a wild hair that people would give us an extra helping of wary respect in advance. What folly.

This was the third paper in this literary year that deals with fathers and sons, and I'm in debt to Tuck Asbury and Bob Vitz for opening this door. Yes, I realize this challenged the common wisdom to beware of things that happen in clusters of three: celebrities succumb, three strikes and you're out, and when three children live under one roof, it means that you and your beloved are officially outnumbered. But here in this hallowed hall, the number three is more friendly and familiar, like the knot in our neckties.

So if there's a mirror held up to this Monday night group, it'd reflect a well-read, mild-mannered gathering of individuals that are wise in many ways. We're men of letters, not members of the Gambino family, right? So to invoke familia shouldn't be a blood oath, but a group hug. Well, probably not a group hug...somebody's bound to crack a rib or get hurt.

Although we ruefully tease ourselves as to our collective age, for the gathered group here at 500 E. Fourth St., although we're a diverse group in terms of professions, there are a few ways in which we're alike: we're lifers in terms of being polite, punctual, and able to punctuate with the best of them. We're more silver-haired than silver-backed, so there's no thumping on our chests or swinging from tree branches. Heck, our dental work might fall out if we bared our teeth. For what it's worth, we are well read, and I believe that counts for

something. At least as a start, but thankfully, not a finish.

As it almost always does when humans are involved, the fault lies deep within, below where the mirror can see, deeper than the underground mother lode of coal. I've come to realize that it wasn't literature's fault that it provided few role models upon which to fasten my fatherhood. Those books weren't written for me, or my needs, they were written to carry forward the culture and goals of that time and place. The flaw is that we believe what we see, and we also believe that something in the past was created for us in the future. Back then, fathers wanted their offspring to be brave, rise above the dire conditions of the feudal village, conquer women and countries, to be a hero; like Moses and to lead others to a promised land.

How audaciously arrogant and wrong that I judged my father's behavior from an adolescent POV. Heaven help the world if anyone had sent me off to war, as they did him. Even worse, when he was in the belly of the plane, taking photos of enemy territory from a glass bubble on the bottom of a flying bomb with no gun to shoot back, perhaps it was heroic on his part not to overload my fertile memory with the bloody battle scenes. Like oh-so-many fathers at that time, he was responsible for virtually everything and was meagerly appreciated. And to think I was upset that he didn't talk. That might have been his greatest gifts and displays of strength. What pitiful high moral ground was I on to not understand how he made it through work every day, looking back on many lives and possibly even loves, while I had not even had my first kiss.

Perhaps looking at civilization through the mirror of literature was a mistaken path from the beginning. What I should have attempted was to use literature as a window to look forward, beyond me and through me to these times, to see what I can share with those who will follow. I now believe that the best thing a father can do for his sons is to say, "Let me show you where I've gone. Let me train you in the one or two things that I did every day, for those are the only things that perhaps I've mastered. As to what I might think, or any weak advice proffered, listen politely and then dismiss it. The world is full of blarney; you should jump to avoid it as you did the cowpies in the pasture. Then when time foreshortens my abilities, when my body and brain falter, you will be able to forge on further, using what little from my lifetime that might still have application in yours." And the most magic words you might utter at that time will be, as testament to what I tried to impart, "Hey, Dad, I got this" then take the heavy end of whatever we were moving downstairs. I'll know that I did the best I could and you were prepared and able to step in and take over the work that lies ahead for all of us.

I can say now, yes, I've read the books -- well, at least many of the books -- and tried my best with the task I set out to do is complete. Trust me when I say that you won't find the answers there. But it's unreasonable and unfair to think that you might. Instead, you'll find the hard-won insight from your peers, your mentors and your elders and your conscience. Listen to those instead.

No man is ambivalent about his father. Because of tonight's assignment, thankfully I am no longer silent about him either. Nor bitter, nor judgmental. I am grateful for what he provided and deeply appreciate his letting me read, and in turn make up my own mind, instead of being consigned to the factory or the farm.

As we know, time is the great healer so it's easy to accept the months and years being the sanding cloth to smooth the hard edges. But the proposition that it's seeing ourselves look like our fathers as we move along the same timeline – a mirror, a window, the same face looking back

To Taylor and Ian, I suspect you now realize this was finally the chance I got say to your grandfather who you never really knew – Dad, I got this. And this is, in turn, the most I can give to you. Don't wait forty-two years to share yourself with your sons. Or forty-two more to share you with me, because frankly, I probably don't have that amount of time left. It is no stretch to see that the Literary Club, over a century and a half, "outperformed" the market as a remarkable number of fathers and sons have gathered here to learn from the papers of their peers. I'm grateful for the chance to likewise stand here tonight and see you in the audience.

When I no longer tread upon the five stairs up from Fourth Street, and that those who remain in this hall uphold my memory, they'll do the right thing by saying "It's your time now." So most of all, if you're ever lucky enough to find a group like this, make sure to join in for a man is only as good as the company he keeps.

Literature hasn't failed fatherhood, because it never was intended to be a self-help guide for wayward males. As almost all writers will say, they're writing a story of the times, which reflects the culture and curiosities of that populace. Mirrors are tricky – don't count on them for direction. In fact, just like when driving, they're unfortunately most often used when backing up. Look for the window that lets light in and allows you to see through yourself to the others, those with whom you will go forward.

Here now, I must end, with indeed a classic line, from Shakespeare: "When a father gives to his son, both laugh; when a son gives to his father, both cry."