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The Childhood Experience of Being a War Orphan: A Study of the Effects of Father Loss on Women Whose Fathers Were Killed in World War II

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Asking the research question, "What is the lived experience of women whose fathers died in World War II?" led to awareness of the unexplored impact of war loss on children. It was hypothesized that this research would show that women who experienced father-loss due to war would share commonality in certain areas. Areas of exploration including current demographic information; circumstances at the time of the father's death; data on the mother, father, stepfather, grandparents, and siblings; life perceptions; family relationships; romantic partnerships; and midlife experiences, were addressed in a heuristic interview process. Seven women were interviewed and told their father-loss stories. Inquiry into the experience of childhood bereavement due to father loss is integrated into this study.

As an American World War II war orphan, left fatherless with a young grieving mother before I was a month old, my life has been shaped by this loss, which was never explained to me or to those like me whose fathers were killed in the Second World War. I have worked my way through what I consider lifelong yearning rather than grief for a father I never knew but whom I missed for "what might have been." In my process and against all I was told was possible, I searched for and found my father's long-lost crash

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site in the former East Germany; I held my father's bones in my hands and then buried them in Arlington Cemetery decades after all efforts to find out what happened to him were abandoned. The story of my father quest, "Finding My Phantom Father: A World War II Daughter's Quest," was published in this journal in September 2009 (Taylor, 2009).

No government agency kept a list of the American children whose fathers died in World War II. Benefits have been paid to individual dependents, as in my case to my mother, who kept the money in trust for my future; no records were kept on the orphans themselves. "After the children reached eighteen or finished school on the G.I. Bill, they disappeared from government records" (Hadler, Mix, & Christman, 1998, p. xix). The Department of Veterans Affairs estimates that 183,000 American children received benefits from their father's death in World War II. Many received no benefits because their mothers did not apply for them or the children were considered illegitimate. Despite the sheer numbers of those left fatherless from World War II (and all subsequent wars), "cultural ignorance of the existence of war orphans in this country goes so deeply that even those of us who are these orphans are surprised by this designation" (Hadler et al., 1998, p. xvii).

In Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address near the end of the Civil War, children who lost a parent in war were designated as "orphans," even though most had a remaining parent. Lincoln spoke of the dead soldier's child as "his orphan" when he said:

> With malice toward none: with charity for all: with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in: to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan. (Hadler et al., 1998, p. xviii)

Lincoln's words bring little comfort to World War II orphans, who remain mostly unknown, unnoticed, and disenfranchised in their grief. After the war, the government consoled our mothers with monthly checks and our mothers consoled us and themselves with new fathers who sometimes adopted us, denying forever our original identity. The common thread throughout this postwar fabric was denial of grief and sorrow, which was expected to be held within the silence that enfolded us.

According to Hadler et al. (1998, p. xxi):

> American society...defined the lives of women whom the war widowed. Many women in the 1950's had minimum education, little training, and few job skills. They were unprepared to provide for themselves or for their children. Many young women moved in with relatives when their husbands left for the war. If the father were killed, many mothers with children found it necessary to extend their stay. Some young widows never left their parents' homes again.

Significant statistics defined the World War II widow's experience: "Of the 405,399 dead in the war, 93,242 were buried overseas while 78,773 were missing or buried at sea. Whatever the circumstances, the long-term result for the surviving children was that many were left with no ceremonies to help them grieve. There was no complete closure for those families" (Hadler et al., 1998, p. xxii).

Instead of grieving, everyone got busy. There were few answers about what happened to those reported missing in action, and for the survivors that called for endless written inquiry of the United States government. This was a slow and laborious process that occupied the time and space where the loved one once stood. I stood between my mother's desire to forget and a burning curiosity about what happened to my ethereal ever-perfect father. Among all of those misnamed feelings was the emerging possibility that he might return home to us at any moment. Research shows that unless a body is recovered and we actually experience a ceremony of closure we can recall, not just be told about like a story, we continue to share that secret wish (Taylor, 2002).

METHOD

Since a qualitative approach lends itself to the study of a few cases in great depth, this method served me best as I met with and interviewed women whose fathers died in World War II. These women were diverse but connected by the experience of being World War II orphans. Their lived experience as women whose fathers died in World War II became apparent in the in-depth heuristic interviews I conducted as part of my doctoral research (Taylor, 2002). In this study, I primarily relied on the method of heuristic inquiry developed by Carl Moustakas (1990) to collect and analyze qualitative data:

1. *Initial engagement* during which the researcher invites an inner search to discover the topic and question that ultimately form an overall question.
2. *Immersion,* enabling the researcher to become intimate with the question once it has been discovered, defined, and clarified.
3. *Incubation,* when the researcher is detached from the question but another level of growth is transpiring.
4. *Illumination,* a breakthrough in conscious awareness of qualities into themes inherent in the question.
5. *Explication,* a more comprehensive and complete discovery and apprehension of key ingredients. Dominant themes develop and the researcher organizes them into a depiction of the essence of the experience.
6. *Creative synthesis,* illustrating the core meanings derived from the themes through narrative depiction or other artistic form.

Participants

In preparing to interview other women whose fathers died as a result of World War II, I contacted women I knew through membership in a national war orphans organization, the American World War II Orphans Network (AWON), and solicited the aid of World War II veteran groups. I inquired of the full membership of AWON as to their interest in participating in this research. I received more than 100 responses but based my final selection of seven women on their willingness to participate fully in the study. Each co-researcher was self-defined as a World War II orphan whose father died in World War II. All were born between 1941 and 1945, all were Caucasian, and all lived in the United States now and at the time of their father's death.

I enlisted three additional women who would not be involved in the final study to participate in a pilot interview prior to the actual data collection. These pilot interviews contributed greatly to the quality and viability of the final questionnaire. I completed the questionnaire in advance of the final study so that my perceptions and responses would not be influenced by the stories of the co-researchers. The questionnaire was designed to solicit the following information about the co-researcher: personal demographics, demographics at time of the father's death, information about the father and mother, the structure of the family, and eventual romantic relationships. These categories of questions included gathering information sufficient to contrast and compare the co-researchers' lived experiences as war orphans of World War II.

Data Collection

Most interviews with co-researchers were conducted by telephone, but several were conducted in the co-researcher's homes. Each woman chose a pseudonym for use in interpreting the data, and each pseudonym held deep meaning for these women. All interviews were recorded, whether in person or by phone, and each woman was aware of and agreed to being recorded. Each participant signed an informed consent form and the copyright explanation. One co-researcher amended the copyright explanation to include some additional mutually agreed upon wording. Interviews were between 2 and 4 hours in duration after which I wrote a preliminary narrative of the interview. In some but not all cases, I sent the interview narratives to the co-researchers for their review and amendments. Follow-up interviews were not necessary, though I contacted some co-researchers to verify information.

I incorporated the co-creative aesthetic inquiry research method of Lea Barbato Gaydos into my inquiry by gathering data in a conversational interview format that encouraged expression and disclosure of self-experience, gathering transcribed interviews to be viewed concurrently, fully immersing

myself in the material by reading and rereading all materials, setting the data aside, and later revisiting the interview materials. Finally, I wrote a second narrative for each co-researcher that included additional impressions gleaned from this process (Gaydos, 1997).

Then I began identifying words and phrases within each interview that seemed relevant to the question. I created a spreadsheet that included an abbreviated form of each question with the co-researchers' pseudonyms across the top of each page of questions. From that, I highlighted clusters of similar words and phrases and identified initial emerging themes. Connections between themes then rapidly became apparent, and from that information I was able to synthesize the data into a creative expression. According to Moustakas (1990), the creative synthesis "invites the scientist-artist to develop an aesthetic rendition of the themes and essential meanings of the phenomenon" (p. 52).

EMERGING THEMES

Themes emerging from these interviews represent only a portion of what it would take to understand the effect of father loss in World War II, though they illuminate commonality among the co-researchers' lived experience.

Feeling Different

Feeling different was a prevailing theme throughout the interviews. Women whose fathers were killed in "the war," as it was known in the 1950s, expressed feeling incomplete, stigmatized, and unacknowledged. In some cases, it was the experience of living in a father-absent home, for others a new father figure appeared on the scene. In each case, a certain unease is shared. Stigmatization occurred with these women in what was unspoken. The subject of their father was, to a woman, off limits at home. Even with a stepfather or other father substitute in the picture, all of those interviewed yearned for a "normal life" in which the family consisted of both original parents.

Feeling different exhibits itself in ways that some of the women had not named until the interview. The women without father replacements in their lives differed somewhat from those whose mothers remarried. In both cases, the absence or presence of a male in the house did not replace the connection they observed or imagined existing among their peers and their birth fathers. However, those with stepfathers reported having the ability to blend in as a member of a "normal" family. Those with no father in the home could not. Some women said they would feel more comfortable speaking about their fathers outside the family, but very selectively. It was a rare occasion that this major part of the women's lives was acknowledged.

Except for one woman who was raised on a military base, the overriding theme in feeling different was that the women knew of no other person who had lost their father in the war. These women each felt they were alone in their confusion and disconnection and they had no experience with others who might understand. The only people who could understand would or could not comfort them.

Yearning Versus Grief

Yearning descriptions are copious and resonate with this kind of loss in the deepest sense. When asked if what they feel is grief when they thought of their father loss, the women identified, instead, a more pervasive sense of yearning "for what could have been." Embedded in these yearning feelings is the persistent theme that normalcy was unattainable. Some of the more poignant perceptions were feeling that consistency was missing, along with acceptance and appreciation. Life felt insecure for some of these women and dangerous for the others. Yet, nothing was named, and no effort was made by anyone in their lives to notice or intervene. Eventually the women became hyperdependent upon others or so self-sufficient that they could not accept care without fearing loss of control.

One woman reported not feeling grief as much as curiosity. She expressed in several ways "how great it would be to see him." There is a yearning for the smallest piece of evidence that connects these women to their fathers. The phrases "what could have been" and "if only" were applied as descriptors when the women were asked what yearning meant to them. The women each have a clear notion of what it "would have been like" to have their father present in their lives. It is as if the father took with him an integral piece of the daughter that she could never again discover either alone or in partnership—as though they are being held in loving hostage by their father's memory. This captivity is constructed from a strong need to hold and be held in safety and love. To release the yearning seems for these women to be an abandonment of their father as well as themselves.

Fear, Anxiety, and Monsters in the Dark

Fears are rampant among these women: fear of abandonment; fear of being left behind, either symbolically or in reality; fear of trusting and of letting go; fear of getting lost, with symbolic overtones as well as with feelings of sheer panic; fear of others close to them dying unexpectedly; fear of death; fear of the dark; fear of being hurt after giving too much of themselves; fear of loss; and the overwhelming fear of "being replaced."

Selective close friendships were not uncommon among these women, but few have multiple friendships. There are evident feelings of "being lonely" despite the presence or absence of friends. Several expressed a

complete mistrust of men as friends or partners; another said she trusts everyone "too much."

Every woman interviewed identified fear of abandonment as a primary issue and as a life theme. Some called it "the biggest fear I have." Others portray it as hyperdependency upon others and a tendency to attach themselves to others, even to the exclusion of their own needs. Each describes a life marked by underlying anxiety and insecurities. Several women spoke of experiencing violent night terrors and of having an irrational fear of the dark. They believe this was more prevalent when they were children, but some attribute it to the violent deaths of their fathers. Darkness triggers the deepest sense of loneliness for them.

Extra Responsibility and Caretaking

These women consider themselves caretakers in their postwar families. For some, it was the responsibility of their mother, who never seemed to recover from the loss of her husband. For others, it was as surrogate mothers to their siblings or step-siblings. For still others, it was the instinct to take care of others in an attempt to maintain control and gain acceptance. Self-care was not an easily embraced concept.

A life of caretaking from childhood is replete with consequences for these women. As mothers themselves, they most fear letting go of their children, and those who felt responsible for their mothers believe their mothers never took care of them. There seemed to be a resolve in each of the women interviewed that they wanted to take better care of themselves. For some, it is the release of hope that "my prince will come and save me."

As frustrating as this behavior is for the women who identify themselves as caretakers, the cycle of caretaking continues. The common theme attached to caretaking for this group is frequent disappointment in life and in relationships. They connect this, in some cases, with losing their fathers and the accompanying belief that they were somehow responsible for that "disappearance." Those who know this is illogical realize that is where the urge to overcompensate began.

Career choices among these women define them as innate caretakers. Among them are social service workers, teachers, secretaries, a librarian, and a nurse. They seem, as a group, drawn to extending themselves to everyone who needs them but rarely to receiving nurture in return.

Loyalty, Romance, and the Ideal Man

The lived experience of father loss produced a significant impact on relationships with men. These relationships are marked by lack of trust, fear of abandonment, a variety of ambivalent feelings, seeking a caretaker but

finding exactly the opposite, and an overriding fear of intimacy, which could lead again to losing love.

Most obvious was the role of the women in this relationship dynamic. Each had an idealized view of what constituted an ideal partner. Some felt that they had "awful" taste in men and that they had no experience or education judging the character of men. They attributed the absence of their father, upon which all standards for other men are set, for this flaw. Some women married men who looked like their fathers, while others married their father's opposite.

In examining loyalty among these women, many were unwaveringly loyal even in marriages in which they received little nurturing or love. Four of the women had been married twice, the rest once. They place a great deal of emphasis on "seeing it through," reluctant to be the person to abandon the relationship. There is, among these women, an almost heroic sense of loyalty to family, especially to their children. There is a pattern of approach/avoidance with men in some cases. They seek independence while soliciting care and dependence at the same time.

Fear of intimacy is common in the father-loss persona. Losing control is a major concern and is manifested by remaining at a distance from people, especially romantic partners. This is manifested in the expression of certain sexual fears and an intense need for privacy. To become helpless is the paradox of what these women say they truly want, which is the obverse of the heroic proportion of accomplishment they admire in their fathers.

Always Seeking Daddy and Daddy Substitutes

These idealizations fall under the yearning category but also point to a high degree of loyalty to a man and to a memory. Among these women, the void within their lives created by father loss produces an inordinate ability to speculate about their fathers' existence. An emotional hunger permeates their lives and results in the realization of a missing father/daughter relationship.

The emotional deprivation of the father/daughter relationship still causes these women to speak poignantly, some with fresh tears, about their loss. All who acquired stepfathers as a result of their mothers' remarriages were told they were "lucky" to have these men in their lives. Some were far from lucky and suffered greatly. Either through neglect, or sexual, physical, or emotional abuse, or even disdain, few gained much and lost more in their acquisition of a stepfather.

Unresolved Issues

Amidst all the facts, some things are unattainable when seeking to know one's father who has been dead more than six decades. Something is truly absent from these women's lives. They continue their search, but the void

remains. Even the fantasy that "he might return" lingers faintly. Meanwhile, the women make plans to continue their quest to honor their father's existence. The spiritual connection between these women and their father is mythical. These are bonds developed over time with the certainty of their existence. All of the women interviewed for this study felt their father's influential presence in their lives.

COMPOSITE PORTRAIT OF A WORLD WAR II ORPHANED DAUGHTER

The woman whose father died in World War II reflects a symphonic arrangement of themes that define her life. She felt different from peers whose fathers were present, even if she had a father substitute. She perceived other families as whole and intact and was often envious of them because their fathers had gone to war and returned unscathed, or escaped the war altogether. She grew to know the feelings that swirl around injustice and to repeatedly question the twist of fate that altered her life.

She is convinced that her life would have been far more peaceful and fulfilling and that she would have had the constant presence of deep love and adoration from her missing father. She believes that her mother would never have suffered in life as she did after her father died, and that she would have felt loved rather than spending her life searching for love among the ruins.

Death, even unnamed, defined her life. Her earliest memory is of someone dying and of the darkness that moved in and forever altered her idyllic life. Whether or not her life before her father's death was indeed idyllic is irrelevant. There is a distinct before and after feeling that left an indelible mark in her psyche. She believes that these things supersede what followed and that her life was forever altered, and not for the better.

Ever apparent in her formative years and beyond are feelings of yearning, longing, unrequited love, and incompleteness. She feels an absence in the essence of her soul and from it she perceives emotional loss. An inordinate amount of worry, insecurity, hypersensitivity, and fear construct her norm. She grew skilled at avoiding asking about what she most deeply needed to know. She learned that she was a living legacy to a man whom everyone wanted to forget on some level—if not forget, then grieve; if not grieve, then elevate to sainthood providing her a level of expectation in men that could never be satisfied.

Father loss deeply influenced her relationships with men. She missed having a loving man to model a father/daughter relationship. Everything, outside of her immediate world, was deemed "normal." She grew uneasy in the presence of men, often masking it with overt flirtatiousness and seduction. She seeks men who are heroes, appearing first as competent

and strong. However, as he evolves into his own humanness with expected frailties, needs, and imperfections, she feels disappointed and disillusioned. These men are either her rescuer or her nemesis. Her expectations are great, her tolerance low, and her sense of frustration high. Disappointment in the face of the smallest or largest infractions is monumental. There is no balance, and she becomes fragile and easily damaged.

The things she deals with in relationships and in life are often organized around deep fears of abandonment and betrayal. Loyalty and fidelity are paramount to her. When scorned, she strengthens her resolve never to trust in that complete way again. Yet, she remains in marriages and tolerates abusive relationships long after others may have fled.

She is haunted by the question "Why did he leave me?" as it applies to her father loss, which is sometimes transferred to her romantic relationships like a self-fulfilling prophecy. She strives to paint a clear and stunning portrait of her father by gathering impressions and information from anyone who knew him. She wants to go beyond photographs, letters, and memorabilia. She wants to really know her father, to understand his character, to find out what pleased him, to earn his acceptance. Father-as-person becomes a more urgent question for her than for women raised with their fathers. It is a deep need to know the man who fills her rhapsodic fantasies with poignancy and meaning.

She believes, in the deepest part of herself, that her father may not be dead but waiting to return to her from a war-induced amnesiatic state. She may have grown up always searching the faces of men in a crowd or catching her breath when she saw a man in the uniform of her father's branch of service. She is either fascinated or repelled by war movies. A battle scene can reduce her to tears or elevate her pride in her father's service and sacrifice. It affects her in a deeply personal way. She finds it difficult to connect fully with other men in her life when she feels compelled to remain steadfast in her vigil for her perfect father. He remains, above all, the benchmark for all other men.

Her birthday falls between 1941 and 1945, and in this study she was between 3 weeks and 9 years old when her father died. She was left with a mother who was irretrievably altered by war widowhood. Her mother coped by withdrawing from the painful reminder of a life she, too, lost to the war. She became her mother's caretaker either symbolically or in a harsh reality. She perceives that what her mother saw in her was a bitter reminder of the husband she lost and a loving reminder of his existence. Her life as a surviving daughter of an emotionally detached mother was paradoxical.

Either her mother overcompensated and overprotected her or she felt neglected and unnoticed. Her mother hastened to remarry to provide a sense of nuclear family and to bring a man into the picture who could serve as a surrogate father. In most cases, this was a disaster for her and even worse

for her mother. She then assumed the role of protector and frequent interloper in matters of her mother's life from which she should have been insulated.

Where she feels a yearning for a lost father, she also experiences the loss of her mother. As a result, she focuses on family unity and extraordinary motherhood and attempts to maintain an intact family at all costs. She wishes, above all, for her children never to suffer the pain of father loss, and her attempt to be both parents to her children often overrides her self-care and personal development.

As a child, she was fond of fantasy and imaginative. As an adult, she is wistful but courageous. She is a force to be reckoned with and is fierce in her protection of those she loves. She tries to emulate her father's best traits and is determined to earn his pride, even from an ethereal distance.

She is easily wounded but is able, if unwilling, to forgive her transgressors. She considers herself a patriot and a proud daughter. She is a proud woman with pioneer and survival skills honed nearly at birth. She came in to an arrested childhood and compensated by becoming an adult in advance of her years. She is willing and anxious to reexperience lost freedom, and in midlife she seeks carefree expression and is willing to take risks.

The lure of education, either formal or in new training and experience, moves her toward her future. She is less willing to risk it all to find the "perfect man" and more willing to turn her attention inward. She will remain faithful to her father's memory and she will stop at nothing to honor his existence. Memorabilia in the form of precious letters and photographs fill her life to the extent they were preserved. It is not uncommon for her to beg and steal these items away from relatives who failed to realize how much they mean to her. She treasures the smallest things that hold the essence of her father and displays her quest to hold him in scrapbooks, elaborate albums, in her writing and poetry, in memorial tributes, and in the names she gives her children and grandchildren.

This is a woman who has grown strong in her father's shadow and who walks on level ground with him, staking her claim to his legacy. She is persistent with the government, which will not look hard enough or long enough for her father's missing records. She is relentless with file-keepers who hold the keys to her father's military service and to her heart. She is willing to learn the secrets and the horrors of her father's last months and moments of life and to report them to her family.

She is protective of her mother and will remain so forever. She is always surprised at the depth of feeling she holds for her mother despite her relationship with her or because of it. Her mother is considered the only other woman her father ever loved. Even if she has siblings who share her father with her, she realizes her primary attachment to him. Why else, she wonders, would she be the one to delve so deeply into their connection.

This is a woman who accepts, sometimes to a fault, what she is told about her father, and her perceptions are often keen and clear about the implications of what she learns. There are no doubts about her father's perfection, along with a full realization of his humanity. In the end, after all of the information is gathered and the mythical swirl of fantasy and reality is parted, she is still her daddy's girl and she will never stop watching with some part of her being for his presence and his comfort.

LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study was primarily limited by the lack of established and historical research about father loss due to war and the absence of investigation into the effects of that loss upon daughters or sons. Studies of the implications of war death are based broadly on the effects of such loss on a nation rather than on individual families, or even more particularly, on individual family members. The literature on father loss among daughters is limited as well.

A nonspecific view of the topic is found in government statistics, but closer examination of this phenomenon would inform me, as a war orphan, and countless others who so identify. In addition, the experience of father loss due to war death holds certain unknowns and complexities not common to father loss under other circumstances.

The number of American war orphans who have experienced this phenomenon is significant. However, the war orphans interviewed for this study were few among many who were willing to tell their father story in its entirety. The women included in this study were concerned with protection of their anonymity and requested specific measures to assure they would remain anonymous. This deep sense of privacy seems to come from a need to protect their father's honor or family members who may be offended by the level of personal disclosure brought forth in this study.

Active and productive organizations such as AWON bring persons with similar loss together and give them a place to speak of their father-loss experience, often for the first time. Even so, AWON represents a largely unrepresented population and only a fraction of those affected by father loss in war. This study, though representative of the war-orphaned daughter's experience, does not include the experience of the same loss among sons, widowed wives, siblings, and parents. The study represents the seven co-researchers interviewed and analyzed; however, I spoke with other World War II orphans in the United States, England, Italy, Holland, Belgium, and Germany. There are uncounted others who, for whatever reason, have had limited interest or emotional attachment to their father lost in war. Not all of the 200,000 U.S. World War II war dead were parents at the time of

their death but for those who were, their children have resources available to them, and this study illuminates the similarity of an experience that is relevant today and applies to all parent loss in war.

Despite this early-life jolt from childhood reverie into harsh war-induced reality, the co-researchers who collaborated with me in this exploration personify depth and resiliency. Each carries her own private sorrow but has managed to balance it with outward manifestations of creative and empathic expression. There is a sense of relief among them when they are asked to tell their father stories, though each story is laced with fear and caution. Throughout, there is a distinct sense of pride and joy.

These are women who never had a chance to learn the art of "daughtering," who never realized the nurturing touch of their birth father or, for some, how to recognize the buffer zone between themselves and danger. Somehow, in the twisted remnants of life in the postwar 1950s, these women were disregarded and expected to cope as adults in a shattering shift of reality. They did, but not without a fight. Others managed differently, only realizing in midlife that their fathers were not the only family hero(ine). They, too, had survived an ongoing war that never ended for them. In truth, it was an unending war for anyone who lost a father in World War II.

My decades-long successful search for and recovery of my father's World War II crash site enabled me to understand the particular kind of grief associated with losing a parent in war. This research and lived experience provides a basis for further research, that is, investigations focusing on war-orphaned sons and widowed mothers. Conducting and analyzing this research offers validation that our fathers died for a greater purpose and that we have a right to remember them and stand as their daughters and sons, even if they were not here to guide us.

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