

1

Finding Your Father's Secret

The Importance of Feeling

It was the summer of 1984.

I was eleven. My brother Chris was nine. And our little brother Damian was seven.

One Saturday in July, my father said to us, “Get in the car, we are going to the mall.”

Upon arriving, my father guided us toward a booth in the mall that had the word “Ticketmaster” plastered in purple italic lettering above the walk-up window.

Dad walked up to the window and, much to our surprise, purchased tickets for all of us to attend a New York Giants versus Philadelphia Eagles game at Veteran’s Stadium in the fall.

We were *ecstatic*. It’s a moment I’ll always remember: The excitement I felt holding that green and black Eagles ticket. The anticipation I had for the game. The pride I had for my father—that he would do this for us, for *me*.

I began counting down the days...

The summer unfolded with lots of backyard football and neighborhood adventures, and before we knew it, it was time for the day we had all been waiting for: the Giants versus the Eagles at the Vet.

It was a chilly, October day in 1984 when we made the four-hour drive from our home in Ravena, New York, to Philadelphia—my dad in the driver’s seat, my stepmom, Patty, in the passenger’s seat, and my brothers and me in the backseat. I remember pulling into the gigantic parking lot at the Vet, seeing the stadium in the distance, and being mesmerized by the atmosphere—the sea of green and blue in the parking lot as fans from both sides tailgated and prepared to watch their teams battle it out on the gridiron.

Dad parked the car, popped the trunk, and removed his cooler. He reached in, pulled out a Budweiser, cracked it open—*psssst*—and began to drink.

A couple of hours later, it was time to go into the stadium.

The entire day is still extremely vivid to me. The sights. The smells. The sounds. I remember handing my ticket to the burly man at the entrance and making our way up the circle of ramps toward the infamous “700 Level,” a section that is notorious for its hostile, mean-spirited Eagles fans. I remember emerging from the tunnel into the openness and looking down at the splendor of the field—wide-eyed and in awe and feeling as if I was looking behind a curtain, like I was gazing into an entirely new world. I remember taking a seat and flipping through the game program, which had Eagles head coach Dick Vermeil on the cover, and reading each page with childlike wonder.

But unfortunately, I also remember the confusion of that day—the conflicting emotions of happiness and sadness, the excitement and the angst. That’s because, by the time we sat down in our seats, my father, Joe Romano, was drunk.

When some people drink, they become goofy or joyfully outgoing. My dad became the opposite. He would go from quiet and reserved to hostile and antagonistic, from kind and jovial to irate and tormenting, from selfless to selfish, and from loving to downright mean. And that day at the game, my dad, a diehard Giants fan, kept getting into verbal fights and spats with the Eagles fans sitting around us—yelling, cursing, antagonizing, and treating total strangers horribly. I remember thinking to myself, *So this is what it’s like to go to a game, huh?*

I had never been to a game before, but something deep within me told me that something wasn’t right.

As the game unfolded, his anger only got worse. Not only did the matchup feature a big divisional rivalry, but the game was also extremely close—for three quarters, at least. The teams were tied 10-10 entering the final quarter, but Eagles quarterback Ron Jaworski threw two touchdown passes in the fourth to lead Philadelphia to a 24-10 victory.

My dad’s anger was on full display. His lack of control made the entire experience terribly confusing.

That particular day epitomized the paradox that is my father—a man who loved his family and wanted to give his sons a special experience, yet a man who interrupted those memories with his alcohol abuse. The

day should have brought us all closer together, but instead, it helped create instability and insecurity in my and my brothers’ psyches. The day was a representation of both the loving side and the dark side of my dad—a chaos that became our reality.

Unfortunately, things got even worse that day.

After the game, Dad insisted that he was sober enough to drive us home. And all I remember from the next four hours on the road is lots of uncontrolled swerving and unreserved screaming.

“Joe, what’re you doing?!” my stepmom kept yelling from the passenger seat.

“Stop it, Dad! Stop it!” my brothers and I kept screaming from the back.

That was the first time in my youth that I felt legitimately frightened and upset under the care of my dad—someone who was supposed to help us to feel safe and secure and loved.



The very thing that should have brought us together is what tore my dad and me apart: *sports*. Much like during the Giants-Eagles game in my youth where I saw my dad’s alcoholism on full display in a traumatic way, throughout my life, sports continued to be a place in which my underlying shame and pain rose to the top. Sports became a battleground where my dad’s shame, stemming from his addiction, was revealed, and my deepest pains, stemming from his abuse, were also revealed. Like when my Dallas Cowboys played against his New York Giants. Or my New York Mets faced his St. Louis Cardinals.

These matchups oftentimes became outlets for us to project our unprocessed hurts onto one another. Why? Because the truth is that I was failing to deal with my pain in a healthy way, and it had to come out somehow.

As I got older, I sometimes rooted against my father’s teams because I wanted him to suffer, and I knew how much a Giants or Cardinals loss would crush him. Looking back, I can see that doing this was an attempt of mine to deal with the pain—all the emotions swarming around within me, stemming from all the hurt my dad caused when he was drunk, which I will dive into later.

I guess it’s fitting that sports became such a battleground for my

father and me. Not only was sports a door into the complicated realm where I caught a glimpse of the dark world of my dad's alcoholism—where I was confronted with an aching feeling within me that there was something deeply wrong with him—but it was also through sports that Dad began his forty-plus year drinking problem.

My dad liked going to bars, being around people at the bars, and watching sports at the bars. The bar was his safe place, I think—because at twenty-eight years old, he was already divorced with three kids (a split-up that partially had to do with his festering addiction). The divorce happened when I was five years old, and I unfortunately have no memory of my parents being together. I'm no therapist, but as I evaluate all of this, I get the feeling that my dad was already beginning to feel like a failure at that point. At the bar, however, he didn't feel judged for his drinking because everyone else was drinking.

The alcohol helped my dad numb his pain. Sports also helped him escape and distract himself from who he was becoming.

But like most alcoholics, my dad's drinking didn't stay at the bar. And most of my childhood memories of Dad's drunken stupors were connected to sports in some way.

There were the Saturdays during the spring and summer that were filled with Little League baseball. I can still remember the exciting feeling of slipping on that Little League uniform as a nine-year-old boy and taking the mound as a pitcher. And though baseball was my favorite sport to play, there was often an intruder at my games: my drunken father. My dad was very vocal when he drank—not only toward me but also toward the umpires. I cringed on the mound whenever I heard my dad's voice.

Then there were the Sundays during the fall and winter—a time to watch football but also a time for my dad to feed his addiction. One time, I remember the Giants losing on a last-second touchdown, and my dad was so angry in his drunkenness that he picked up a pot in the house and fired it at the television. The pot broke. Dirt went everywhere. He didn't care. He was violent. It was scary.

My father and I did have one team in common: the Boston Celtics. We *loved* Larry Bird, and some of my fondest memories with my dad in my youth involved watching the Celtics with him on the Sunday CBS "Game of the Week." Throughout my life, watching the Celtics was an opportunity for us to relate to one another and connect, despite the

existing tension in our relationship. Although sports became a battleground for us, the Celtics were always a safe place.

The truth is that my brothers and I have always loved our father. And we could tell that he loved us—when he was sober, at least. We naturally gravitated toward him, like any son would with his dad. I think the fact that my brothers and I all love sports might be a reflection of our deep craving for connection and intimacy with our father. The fact that we all chose different teams to root for might be a reflection of the tension that was always there. The fact that I inherited my dad's love for the Celtics—that we always had this connection no matter how complicated things became—might be a reflection of how I never gave up on him.

Overall, sports was arguably what Dad cared about most in his life, so maybe the underlying feeling in all of us was that if we could meet him on that level, then perhaps we could gain his affection.



Needless to say, my father's Jekyll-and-Hyde existence made our childhood extremely unstable. There was always a longing for a father who acted like a father should. A deep unsettledness that something wasn't right.

Adding to the instability was the fact that both Mom and Dad remarried different people in 1985, when I was eleven years old. I don't remember much about Mom's wedding. What I remember about Dad's is that he had me stand up as his best man. This is a vivid picture, I think, of how his alcoholism was pushing away his friends and family and preventing relational intimacy.

Both my parents' second marriages also ended in divorce—Mom's marriage ended because the man she married was physically abusive, and Dad's marriage ended because of his alcoholism. Our tumultuous childhoods were replete with marriages ending and relationships falling apart—and through it all was our dad, a man who we loved and looked up to and whose love toward us was always a roller-coaster ride. It's crazy to think that having a loving father hinged on whether or not he was drinking that day.

Luckily there was at least *some* stability—a form of consistency—in our childhoods.

And that is mostly because of my mom, Linda. In our formative years of middle school and high school, Mom sacrificed everything for her boys. She worked multiple jobs. She paid the bills. Took us where we needed to go. Supported us. We received what every child deserves from a mother.

That feeling of safety and stability was also in our relationship with our grandparents (my father's parents), who we called Nana and Pa. If it weren't for them, I know that Chris, Damian, and I wouldn't be who we are today. In many ways, they were our second set of parents. Though my dad was the metaphorical starting quarterback, he was always inactive because of his alcoholism; Pa, however, came in as the backup quarterback and filled in for my father perfectly. He became the father I never had.

Living only a couple of blocks away from my mom, Nana and Pa provided the assistance their daughter-in-law needed as a single mother. Though Mom had full custody, we spent a lot of time at Nana and Pa's house, especially on the weekends. They took us to every single game and practice we needed to go to. And not only did they love us unconditionally in my father's stead; they also spoiled us! They bought us nice clothes and sneakers and any toy we ever wanted. Most importantly, just like my mother, they showed us that safety and love existed.

What's interesting about my grandparents' relationship with my father, their only child, is that they let him live in their house after the divorce. My dad took full advantage of this, and my grandparents never had the guts to kick him out—even years later when he was *still* living with them. I think my dad's alcoholism prevented him from ever really "growing up." Though my grandparents' presence during our childhood ultimately helped to stabilize us and position us for success, they enabled my dad's bad behaviors because of their inability to create boundaries with their son. My dad always had a place to live and never really hit rock bottom.

I can only imagine how difficult and confusing it had to have been for Nana and Pa to see their son waste his life. After all, Dad had been an exemplary son throughout his childhood, high school, and college years. He was responsible and driven. He was smart, too—and he would be the first to tell you. He made good grades in school, making honors in both high school and college. To this day, he is one of the smartest men I know. Dad can recall exact dates, statistics, and specif-

ics in his memories—especially when it comes to sports. I will often talk to him as if I am consulting a historian and ask him all kinds of sports questions about specific players, seasons, and stats. I get my photographic memory from him—there is no doubt about that. But it's always been baffling to me that my father could be so intelligent and yet so dumb and reckless at the same time.



Amidst all this turmoil in my youth, what I witnessed growing up was an unemotional family, except when my dad would drink. My grandparents, as kind and loving as they were, harbored a great deal of anger and sadness—but they never expressed it. They kept their emotions buried deep down inside. These emotional tendencies of my father and my grandparents were handed down to my brothers and me. We were either very reactionary, like my father, expressing ourselves through anger and rage; or we were very passive, like my grandparents, suppressing the pain that we did not want to confront.

My mother was the only one who presented us with any kind of emotional awareness or agility. When my brothers and I were in grade school and middle school, Mom decided to take us to counseling. Mom had gone to therapy herself because of the scars my dad and her second husband had caused, and she had a general understanding of some of the long-term psychological effects that my dad's alcoholism could have on his children.

We reluctantly went with Mom to the counselor on Wednesday nights. Memories from those counseling sessions are vivid to me. The offices were on the top floor of a thirty-story building in Albany. Though I didn't realize it at the time, now that lengthy elevator ride feels symbolic of the long emotional journeys we were embarking on in our lives—the long, hard work that it would take to transcend the hurt.

In the waiting room, gentle jazz and piano played through the speakers, but my brothers and I were always loud and obnoxious. Mom would hush us, over and over, and eventually the therapist, an Italian man named Tony, would emerge from a back room. There was always an awkward exchange between us and the family who was leaving Tony's office. I remember always thinking, "I wonder what's wrong with them."

Tony's office had a big couch with two chairs on each side. He would sit in front of us, as if it were an American Idol audition. Mom always cried during the sessions. I'm not sure if we were able to get in touch with our feelings then, but Mom showed us that it was okay to reveal them in such a setting. We didn't know it at the time, but seeds were planted then that later helped us deal with our emotions.



Much of my childhood and adolescent years, however, were reflective of that terrifying car ride on the way back to Ravenna after the Giants-Eagles game. Chaotic. Confusing. Complicated. In the car, but not in control of its direction. With your family, but knowing deep within you that something wasn't right. Feeling so much confusion and anxiety, but not knowing how to express it. Trapped in some sort of purgatory, with no idea how to find heaven, health, and happiness.

Now I can see that the fear and angst I experienced that day as a child were emotions that served as gateways for deeper insights into reality. My emotions were internal sirens letting me know that something in my life was horribly wrong. They were road signs pointing me toward a greater awareness of what was unfolding in my life and within my soul.



Your emotions can be insights into reality.

In their book *The Cry of the Soul*, authors Dan Allender and Tremper Longman explain the importance of our emotions: "Ignoring our emotions is turning our back on reality. Listening to our emotions ushers us into reality. And reality is where we meet God...Emotions are the language of the soul. They are the cry that gives the heart a voice."

Though I had little idea what all of this meant, say, when I was a terrified child watching Dad swerve all over the road because he was drunk, this "emotional awareness" became one of the most important journeys in my life. The emotions that always welled up within me, as they related to the abuse stemming from Dad's alcoholism, pulled me deeper into two realities:

- *An external reality*—the unresolved issues in my dad's life and the problems they caused for those he loved, which I *couldn't* control; and
- *An internal reality*—the unresolved issues in my own life and the problems they were causing for me, which I *could* begin to acknowledge and work through.

The challenge is that emotions are typically downplayed as misleading and unimportant in our culture. In our society, men and women are both told—directly or subliminally—to hide their emotions. Expressing sadness is often viewed as a weakness. And so we naturally create facades to hide what we do not want others to see.

Even when I became a Christian in the early 2000s, internal troubles like depression, sadness, or anxiety were sometimes viewed as things that stemmed from a problem with a person's relationship with God. As a result, many people downplayed what they felt. This led to avoidance, detachment, and suppression. However, in moving toward forgiveness, it's vital to allow ourselves to feel our emotions.

Though my emotions are not always reality, I have learned that my emotions can point me *toward* reality. Especially reoccurring emotions. Our emotions can be an enter sign for the internal work that we have to do or an exit sign for a situation that we need to get out of. I believe that mending a broken relationship can only occur with an awareness and acknowledgment of the internal chaos and havoc—our emotions.

If we bury our emotions, it's easier to live in an unnatural reality. And for a long time, this is what I did. Learning how to listen to my emotions was a struggle for me.

"Though my emotions are not always reality, I have learned that my emotions can point me toward reality. Especially reoccurring emotions. Our emotions can be an enter sign for the internal work that we have to do or an exit sign for a situation that we need to get out of."
