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My Many Selves

Wayne C. Booth

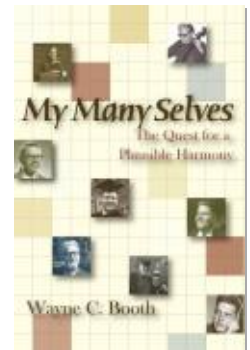
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Chapter Three

The Cheerful Poser Comforts a Griever *or, A Would-be Tough Guy Meets Grief and Conceals the Tears*

Griefs, at the moment when they change into ideas, lose some of their power to injure our heart.

—Marcel Proust

Well, every one can master a grief but he that has it.

—Don Pedro, in *Much Ado about Nothing*

*What, man! ne'er pull your hat upon your brows;
Give sorrow words: the grief that does not speak
Whispers the o'er-fraught heart and bids it break.*

—Malcolm, in *Macbeth*

Grief is itself a medicine.

—William Cowper, *Charity*

To put on a cheerful face, disguising one's grief, saves the world immense pain.

—Anonymous

*Disaster #2*¹

In late July of 1969, Phyllis and I and our fifteen-year-old daughter Alison were on a three-day drive from Utah to Chicago. At the end of the second long day we checked in at a motel in Grinnell, Iowa. Alison's brother Richard, three years older, had flown back to our Chicago home some weeks before, and he had reported that things were going well both with his girlfriend and with Donico Croom (Nickie), the student who had been living in our house instead of with his mother in the projects. Richard's older sister, Katherine, was in Minnesota on a summer job.

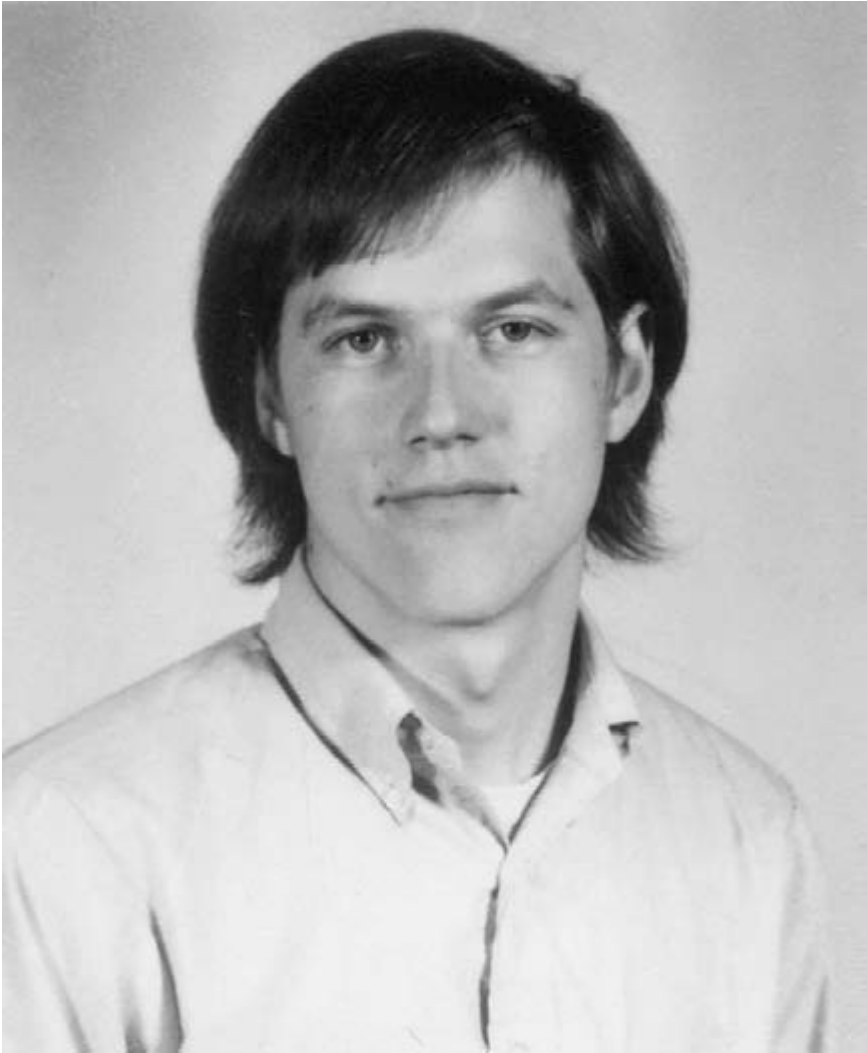
After the three of us had dinner, eager the next day to be with buoyant, witty Richard, I phoned home to say, "we're almost there." The phone was answered by Nickie, who had been sharing the house with Richard. When I said "hi," he seemed to be choking, or even sobbing. After a moment I intruded. "What's up?" And finally he said,

"Richard's dead; he got killed by a car."

The fact that we felt our lives totally *shattered* by that should surprise no one. And you readers can predict that my attempts to write about it will land us all in muddy waters. If the organization of the next few pages confuses you, please forgive the Griever, now having to pose as a disciplined author (you will be reading the seventeenth draft). I've attempted a whole book about the death and the grieving, but diverse other Selves have always cancelled it. Why torture yourself day by day, dealing with all that? What good will it do the world? How can you reconcile the claim of total grief with the obvious evidence that the grief has not continued to be total?²

Only much later did it occur to ThinkerB that the tragedy curiously had unified my life for once, wiping out the conflicts among Selves. By destroying all ambition, all vanity, all hypocrisy, all thought about anything but the loss,

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1. We've already met disaster #1, the death of my father when I was six years old; I say more about it later.
 2. Grieving memories were revived recently when Nickie died, in his fifties, after years of coping with diverse illnesses.



John Richard Booth, age 17, 1969

it had produced a total focus—by no means deserving the term harmony but a weird kind of total centering.

Grief took over everything. I felt, we felt, the inexpressible sense of having had our lives utterly destroyed by an infinite loss.

How long that miserable “unity” lasted I can’t say now, but for quite a while there were no rival Voices intruding; there was only the sobbing, the despair, the hopeless effort to console Phyllis and the girls. As anyone who has experienced such a disaster knows, nothing anywhere about anything matters

except *that*. You have been stricken, and only one “you” has survived: the Griever. And for the rest of your life such moments crop up again and again. As I write now, grief intrudes. What I’ll finally call “temporary miserable unities” take over—but they are a far cry from achieving the “plausible harmony” that this book pursues.

Before describing how we coped with that moment, a few facts about the boy we had lost and how the loss occurred. Brilliant, generously loving, challenging—Richard was a boy who had given us hardly any of the “adolescent torturing” that was so common in his generation and that seems even more common today.³ He’d been away in England for a year, taking a break before college, and he had decided on a career as an actor. Teaching English was his fallback position, if and when the choice of acting didn’t pay off (as was likely: there were, he had heard, ten thousand unemployed would-be actors in London at that time).

Back in America for a few months, he was driving with his girlfriend, Tucker Lincoln, to visit her parents. Our aging second car heated up. He unscrewed the lid of the radiator; it exploded into his face. He staggered into the highway. A nurse happened to be speeding along, and . . .

Even now, as I write that, I am suddenly in tears again. I turn off the computer and only slowly pull myself together—which in this context means a slow acknowledgment of how I am actually again almost torn apart. There, a few moments ago, sat the Griever, and here now is the LIFER posing as a productive ThinkerB writing *about* grieving: utterly different Selves.

Loss of a child, says ThinkerB, has to be ranked at the top on the scale of relative grief. It’s true that to rank griefs can be silly; losses of all kinds can feel infinite at the time. But I can’t resist making the claim that to lose a long-loved child is even more shattering than to lose an aging father or mother. That’s because you have invested more in that child than you have invested in your parents. The science-fiction writer Orson Scott Card gets it right as he deals with the death of his seventeen-year-old son: losing a child “is the worst thing in the world. Once you have children, you realize that you are held hostage by those children. They are more important to you than yourself.” To lose one is an “infinite loss.” (The only losses I can now think of as perhaps even worse are the recent reports of adolescent boys, hopeless druggies, bankrupting their families by misusing credit cards; those kids are *really* lost, while our Richard is still the Richard we loved.)

3. Katherine, who surely knew Richard more intimately than I did, writes on the manuscript: “That’s not true. You worried about him and fought with him a lot.” Well, yes, I’m sure you’re right. But by *comparison* with . . .?”

A memory about ranking that still annoys me dramatizes the problem of the phrase “infinite loss.” A friend came to console us, once we were back in Chicago. “Oh, I do feel so sorry for you,” he said. “It must be awful. Of course it would be even worse for my wife and me because we have only the one child and you have the two remaining daughters.”

I was tempted to slug him. And I never forgave him, though of course I hypocritically suppressed my fury. I even realized, thinking about it long afterward, that in one sense the friend was right: in sheer terms of *future* calculations, loss of one in three is easier to recover from than loss of the only one. But his stupid (was it cruel or a botched attempt to console?) offense was his not realizing that in the moment of such grief, no calculated ratings make sense; infinite losses cannot be ranked by some cost-benefit analysis.

HOW DID MY SELVES COPE WITH IT?

The first intrusion of another Self sometimes distresses me even now: how quickly the Griever came in conflict with VainB, who insisted on presenting an image of a man *not* destroyed. Even in the first moments, I pretended that I felt totally competent to drive back to Chicago. It was as if I were saying to myself, “I am a *man*; I am too tough to be destroyed. Let me take charge.”

Fortunately, my friend and boss, Provost Edward Levi, hearing the news back in Chicago, insisted on sending a driver to drive us home. VainB protested, “Thanks a lot, but we don’t need it.” Levi rightly overrode me, knowing that no one in danger of uncontrolled sobbing should try to drive a car for several hours.

It wasn’t long before other Selves intruded too. Shouldn’t the guilt-ridden father/husband blame himself for not having instructed his son more effectively about car radiator dangers? Shouldn’t the money-hungry Self take the advice of the insurance lawyer and sue the innocent nurse whose car hit him as he staggered into the highway? (I’m still deeply grateful to MoralB for refusing that one.)

And how should the increasingly questioning Mormon deal with it all? My doctor-bishop had predicted that my lapsing might destroy my child (chapter 1). Was there any sign that we thought he had been justified in his prediction? Were we personally to blame? I think the subject was not even discussed, except when we were angered by hints from devout Mormons that at worst God was punishing us or at best he had need of Richard on the “other side.”

By then I did not, and I do not now, think that a meddling God decided to kill my son, whether to punish us or for any other reason. And I am strongly convinced that belief in a literally meddling God is about the most

spiritually destructive of all “religious” beliefs. At the same time, I still cringe at the pain or anger I may be producing right now with that statement for any devout Mormon reading here. For them nothing is more scandalous than rejecting the notion of providential intervention.

What surprises me even now is that I had a clear moment when the event produced a quarrel with God-the-Meddler in a dream shortly after the crash. I am in a huge card game—about twenty of us squatting on the floor in a large room. God is dealing the cards in total chaos: flipping them this way and that, upside down, off to one side. I suddenly jump to my feet and shout at Him, “I will have nothing to do with a dealer who deals nothing but chaos,” and then stalk out of the room. Clearly, my unconscious was still wrestling with questions that my conscious self had thought were long settled after I had declared myself an atheist during WWII.

As we longtime “fringe Mormons” suffered, did we appeal to Mormon counselors for spiritual healing? Not at all. But we did debate about where Richard should be buried—in Chicago, our home at the time, or in Utah, the spiritual home still in my heart. It was clear to me that he should be buried in “my mountain home.” We purchased a cemetery plot in Alpine, my ancestors’ hometown, and took part in a fine, generous memorial service in the church there. Somehow Phyllis and I both felt that though Richard had been totally inactive in the Church and we were obviously fringers, we were still in the deepest sense Mormons.

As we tossed the soil into his grave, surrounded by those beautiful mountains and those loving people, I felt absolutely certain that I would now again become totally active in the Church. What did it matter that I had this or that disagreement with this or that official doctrine or practice?

Did I keep that “promise” to myself? Obviously not. When we visited Earlham College, we joined in an equally moving memorial that the Quaker Meeting held for Richard. I spoke, sobbingly, in that “silent” meeting and felt (dramatizing the problems of chapter 1) just as strongly tied, emotionally, to that congregation of Friends as I had felt in Utah with the Mormon brothers and sisters.

After that, other somewhat shallower conflicts among Selves emerged. Quite soon there intruded the Self-Reproacher, who would occasionally rebuke me for not being more helpful with Phyllis and the daughters. And soon the “world” intruded. I had a talk scheduled for a conference, and I pulled myself together and gave the talk, showing no signs of grief (I think), while still inwardly miserable.

I worked hard to relegate my expressions of grief to the private journal, while enacting a *somewhat* cheerful recovery everywhere else. I even attempted, as Phyllis remembers gratefully, many little “affirmative sermons” to my three fellow grievers about the meaning of life and how to place this major

loss within the larger picture. Was I doing the same cost-benefit analysis that my dastardly colleague had done when he claimed that his loss would be greater than mine? Not really—or so I'd like to claim. I *hope* that I was groping for a version of “religious language” that could genuinely console.⁴

As every griever could predict, comfort for all of us was elusive—for a very long time. I had a dim hope that the beloved literary works we'd read in the past would help us cope; they did not. I reread various poetic elegies; they bored me, as I found myself thinking something like “That bastard Milton couldn't have been feeling as bad as I feel, or he wouldn't have been able to turn out anything as complex as this ‘Elegy.’” I tried several times to write effectively about our sense of loss, but the effort was too painful. I tried reading various novels in which death or disaster is coped with: Dostoevsky, Kafka, Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*. No go. Even music failed to console for a surprisingly long time.

Then it happened that Saul Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet* came out, and for some reason Phyllis and I both found that it really did help. With all its faults (as I see it now), the way Bellow reveals Sammler's grappling with loss and disaster pulled us, partially, back into life. And meanwhile, real solace was gradually emerging from music—from both listening and playing chamber music together. Why music consoled us more than literature I'll never be able to explain.

Even so, the comforting was at best only partial.

After a few months I tried to write a brief memoir of Richard's life, but that also proved far too painful. I finally did pull myself together and assemble and publish the letters he had written us during his year in England—wonderful letters that still arouse both grief and joy when we reread them or discuss them with friends.

On through the years, Phyllis and I both have often posed publicly as less shattered than we have felt. And that posing, I would argue, has been useful—in fact, one of our best tools in coping with the grief. Grappling together with the problem of how to deal with it, we have only rarely had disputes of the kind that produce a rise in divorce rate among couples who have lost a child. We went on grieving (in a sense, even until today). But we learned that if you can put on the mask of good cheer, the mask sometimes

4. I have to confess that the *public* displays of grief and comfort after national disasters—Oklahoma City, September 11, President Reagan's death, and on and on—almost always annoy me; they're too full of self-touting and obvious pretense. But one can't say that without confessing, as my next paragraph dramatizes, that no words, no ceremonies, are adequately consoling at such a time. What is really annoying is the way the media play up trivial “disasters” while playing down daily disasters like the fact that every fifteen minutes an American is killed in a car accident.

becomes—at least for the moment—the real face. Acting out cheerfulness cheers you up.

A recent study claims that 92 percent of couples who have lost a beloved child end up in divorce. I can't believe the rate is nearly that high, but I do understand how the new relation that emerges can prove shattering. The grieving father looks at the grieving mother and sees not the cheerful, vital, witty woman he had been living with but a ten-years-older, weeping, spiritless lost soul; the grieving mother looks at the grieving father and sees not the cheerful, vital, ironic man she has been living with but a ten-years-older, sobbing, spiritless lost soul.⁵ In other words, death of a child is a *temporary* death of at least two others, not to count the changes it produces in the lost one's siblings.

Just how much hypocrisy, then, did we practice over the years? Quite a lot. Usually when chatting with new acquaintances who asked, "Do you have children?" we would both answer, smiling cheerfully, "Yes, two daughters," without mentioning the loss. Only after decades did we sometimes say, "Well, we had three, but one child was killed." Sometimes that would lead to embarrassing tears, so even now the honesty is rather rare: why impose our grief on strangers?⁶

For now I'll put on a cheerful mask and spare you most of the sobbing that went on from July 25, 1969, through the next few years, except for one key sample:

Nov. 28, 1970 [O'Hare Airport, sixteen months after the death]

Dream last night

I am singing, and someone says, "You don't sing much any more—and especially that song." I go on singing:

Wa-atch the stately ships
From their moor-orings slip;
Spread their wings, and die
In the after-glow.

I wake, that is, *half*wake—oh, yes, I realize that it is Richard who spread his wings and died. Only now as I write about it do I remember that the words of the actual song are really "Spread their wings, and *go*." My dream ruined the rhyme in order to do some healing.

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5. Phyllis continues to claim that this portrait of me exaggerates—that I was steadily a comfort, helping her to survive. What I'm sure of is that we both helped each other.
 6. As I am doing now?

Sometimes Phyllis and I still wonder how we managed to survive that potentially annihilating loss. Our answers are often an underlining of the claim that our willingness to pose was one of our rescues. And for a great deal of that affirmative posing in the face of disaster, we are in debt to the Mormon upbringing that dominates so much of this book. As Mormonism had taught us, even when disaster strikes, you should sing that wonderfully moving hymn, “Come, Come, Ye Saints”:

Come, come, ye saints, no toil nor labor fear;
But with joy wend your way.
Though hard to you this journey may appear,
Grace shall be as your day.
'Tis better far for us to strive
Our useless cares from us to drive;
Do this and joy your hearts will swell—
All is well! All is well!

Is that why I've always been so deeply moved by the ending of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*?

Quick now, here, now, always—
A condition of complete simplicity
(Costing not less than everything)
And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flames are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.

OTHER DISASTERS, STARTING AT AGE SIX

I suspect that most people who casually encounter me see me as among the most cheerful of men, at least among those my age. As this book often suggests, I actually feel cheerful a good deal of the time—probably much more often than the human average among us creatures from the time of the Fall (millions of years ago) until now. “Things” have mainly gone well for me. One British reviewer of my recent book, *For the Love of It*, gave as her reason for hating it: “I just can't stand an author who tries to sound so relentlessly cheerful and nice.” Was she right in assuming that the “nice” author implied throughout the book actually had many unnice, uncheerful moments as he wrote it? Of course. The very act of writing affirmatively about our



My mother, Lillian Clayson Booth



My father, Wayne Chipman Booth

chamber-music playing, always treating the negatives lightheartedly, was a kind of masking-over of my actual musical life. There are, for example, few references to the deaths or illnesses of friends and relatives that occurred during the several writing years. That I relentlessly detest that reviewer for detesting my being “relentlessly nice” is in no way a claim that the relatively unified Booth encountered in the book is the one *real* Wayne Booth.

As ThinkerB reminds himself of the many similar examples of cheerful posing, he becomes—I become—increasingly aware of how often such maskings have actually merged into self-deception. I would think of myself as having recovered good spirits, and only when looking back on it would I discover that I had really been almost in total despair, deep down inside. Yet somehow the posing often helped—especially when it avoided producing despair in others.

Putting such spiritual comfort aside for now, let’s have a look at some other major disasters, along with a few minor losses, and consider how the Griever has been treated by other Selves.

The first major disaster, perhaps even more influential on my life than the death of my son, was the loss of my father not long after I turned six. To sense fully what that loss meant to me, you must receive hints about the Daddy he was. Memory, no doubt selective and unfair to Mama here, portrays him as an absolute ideal, practicing none of the nagging and punishing that Mama flooded me with.

1925, Provo

We’re living in a tiny apartment in Provo, Utah, where Daddy is working toward his A.B., financed by Mama’s elementary school teaching.

Daddy says, “Clayson, would you like to help me milk Blackie?”

Thrilled, I run after him out to the cow shed. As he’s done before, he squirts a stream of milk into my mouth, straight from the teat: warm frothy milk, much of it dripping down my chin. Wonderful! On other occasions he fills my cup to the brim, and I drink it while he goes on milking. Daddy smells like the cow, warm, a mixture of milk and manure.

Same Location

Daddy says, “There she goes,” and Mama and I run to the front window.

“Who?” I shout.

An old woman is riding her bicycle down the street (Fifth West, in Provo) in a long black dress, looking like a witch. Daddy says, “She says the world will come to an end tomorrow.”

I am not just puzzled; I’m terrified. But Daddy comforts me. “It’s OK, Clayson. We don’t believe she’s right.”

1926, *American Fork*

Daddy is playing the violin and I am singing along with him. Ecstasy.⁷

Daddy is working summertime as the “Smith-Hughes Representative,” the government consultant to farmers to help them make their farming more scientific. One day he takes me with him on a visit to Alpine, six miles away. We drive up in his new Chevy, and as we drive home just before sunset, he allows me to sit on his lap and pretend to be driving. I notice that the setting sun travels fast, behind the trees to our right, keeping up with us as we drive south. I ask him how that could be. “How can the sun move as fast as we’re moving?” He explains it in detail, making me feel almost like an equal. I feel very good, sitting on his lap, “driving” the car, in the light of the sun whose traveling my Daddy can explain.

I am pumping my little red wagon up the slight hill, on the sidewalk, to meet Daddy when he comes down from his teaching at the high school. I have learned that he teaches “agronomy”: how to be a good farmer. He longs to be a farmer. (I later learn that Mama had talked him into leaving the farm in Highland, three years before, to go back to college, because she refused to live miserably on that comfortless farm any longer.) He comes down the hill, I meet him, he hugs me, and he pulls me home in the wagon as we sing together. Bliss!

Daddy is singing:

Old zip coon he played all day.
He played till he drove his friends away.
He played and he played by the light of the moon,
But he never played anything but . . .
Old zip coon he played all day.
He played, etc., etc. (an endless repetition, with me picking it up more and more as my solo).⁸

Daddy is singing:

Good morning, Mr. Zip, Zip, Zip

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7. Gramma Booth told me later, long after his death, that when he was in his late teens he played in a dance band! I can't believe it—that saint playing dance music! And she confessed, he actually came home a bit drunk one night. I never met that Daddy.
 8. It never occurred to me until recently that the singer's being a “coon” might have been racist. I can't reconstruct whether Daddy was thinking of a black singer as he sang. I certainly wasn't; I'm pretty sure I didn't even know that African Americans existed.

With your hair cut jessas shortas mine.
 Good morning, Mr. Zip, Zip, Zip,
 Yore shorely lookin fine.
 Ashes to ashes, an dust to dust
 If Camels don't kill ya
 Then Fatimas must . . .
 Good morning, Mr. Zip, Zip, Zip,
 With yore hair cut jessas shortas
 Your hair cut jessas shortas,
 Your hair cut jessas shortas mi-i-ine.

Daddy has driven us somewhere, through the winter snow. On the way back, I've gone to sleep in the bitterly cold car, wrapped in a blanket on Mama's lap. When we get home they wake me, and I am shivering and miserable; it feels like the end of everything. But as Daddy wraps me more warmly, hugs me, and carries me through the snow into the cold house and puts a hot water bottle into my cold bed, I feel his love warming my soul.

Fall 1926

We have moved from the rented "Croppers" to a purchased house and small lot, a few blocks further west—a house less well finished: only cold running water, no indoor toilet, no telephone. Daddy has big plans for remodeling. And he now has a large lot behind him on which he can do a little farming—just two or three acres, but for him the apple and peach trees and small potato lots are much better than nothing. We still have Blackie the cow, which I pretend to help him milk. But Daddy is working very hard in the second year of teaching. I can't remember seeing as much of him; fewer games together, fewer songs. . . .

February 22, 1927

Daddy gives me a fine pocketknife as my birthday present. He demonstrates carefully how to use it without cutting myself. Mama objects to the present: "You should have waited until he's older." I try to cut into a hard piece of wood, the knife slips, and I cut my left index finger badly. Daddy doesn't chew me out, but he teaches me again how to hold it. The scar is still prominent.

Early April 1927

Daddy comes home from the high school one day and goes to bed midday, obviously feeling very sick. He has been working too hard all morning in the spring sunshine, helping to put in the grass for the high school. A doctor comes; more doctors come. Someone takes Daddy to the hospital in

Lehi—a *long* way away, three whole miles—for tests. They conclude that he has Addison's disease.⁹

Now Daddy lies in the little living room that smells of medicine and lilies. Mama is obviously anxious, but she tells me that he'll get well because she and I have prayed about it hard and long with "sincere and contrite hearts."

April 27, 1927

I am out playing in the backyard with my new pocketknife, remembering Daddy's warning about being careful, and someone screams: "He's gone!" A lady (Mama?) comes to the door and shouts to me, "Run across the street to the Jacklins' and have them phone your grandma to tell her your daddy's dead." I carry the message, feeling unsure about what it means.

I can't remember any feelings for the next few days, only something awful about the room where we viewed Daddy in the coffin, looking utterly unnatural; the room now smelled not just of lilies but embalming fluid. The house was filled with Mama's sobbing.

A Few Days Later

Daddy's funeral is to be held not in the ward meeting house but in the huge Tabernacle downtown. That is because so many people admire and love him. I feel rejected because I am not taken to the funeral. Later people often say, "Your Daddy drew the largest crowd we've ever had for a funeral" (or did they say, "the largest for a young man, only thirty-five"?).

Everybody loved Wayne Chipman Booth; everyone thought he was the most virtuous, most promising man in town. My only surviving aunt, Ann, now says that he was her dream man and that his marrying my mother, her oldest sister, was her dream marriage. Everyone felt an immense loss—and I rather slowly discovered what a transforming loss it was for me.

Everyone now seemed to expect me to grow up quickly and be as admirable as he was. My name was quickly changed from my middle name, Clayson, to be his replacement: the second "Wayne C." Mama would say often, weeping, "You have to be my man now, *Wayne C.*, now that Daddy is dead. You are so much like him!"

9. Would I have learned that term then? I've looked it up in medical books again and again over the years, always shocked at how soon the description, which I just looked up again now, gets repressed: "progressive atrophy of the adrenal cortex." My memory does not want to record details about that death.

Thus the puzzled little boy was driven to emulate the imagined father, and I see myself still doing it, in both constructive and destructive ways. At age seventy-two, when VainB was for no good reason wondering how many people around the world were at that moment reading one of his fabulous books, he wrote a silly journal entry: “When I die, I can be sure at least that a lot of people all over the world will be sorry to lose me.” I didn’t note that I was thinking of Daddy, but now I feel some mystery in that entry. Is that what I’ve been working to “achieve”—the image of my father as the ideal man? Well, I have to answer, “Yes, partly. That *is* what some of my Selves—not just VainB but many others—have hoped to become.”

From that catastrophe on, memories of griefs and responses resist being fitted into any clear pattern of Selves. The LOVER in me is shocked, for example, to find almost no memories throughout this tragic period about my sister Lucille. She was then one and a half years old, to be two in June. (She died in 1997; I felt considerable grief then, in a sense infinite like all major losses, but not as intense as the event in 1927.) I do have many memories of her from the year before—my cute baby sister. But Daddy’s death had apparently wiped her out from my scene—temporarily, of course, though I still often reproach myself for having never honored her as much as she honored me and for having teased her so much. She later told me that she didn’t remember anything about the death—or about the next (minor?) disaster.

A Few Weeks after Daddy Died

One night my cute little dog Tricks, the gift of Uncles Eli and Joseph, does not return. Next morning he’s still gone. I can’t find him anywhere. A neighbor comes and tells me that he has seen Tricks lying beside the road, maybe hit by a car. I run up to the place he has described and find Tricks, dead. Killed by a bulldog, a neighbor says.

My instant grief was even stronger than what I had at first felt when I heard “He’s gone!” It must have felt like just one more blow proving how awful life can be. Intense sobbing. From today’s perspective, that loss seems relatively trivial. But that’s not how it felt then.

A Few Weeks Later

I am playing in the sun, lonely, near the east entrance of our house. Mama comes out to order me to do one of my daily chores.

“I won’t.”

“Wayne C., why are you being so naughty these days?”

“Mama, you keep after me so much I’m gonna run away!”

“Do you know any more good jokes?”

And she stalks back inside.¹⁰

That does it. I’m furious. I quickly walk to the street and start out on the six-mile walk to Highland, where I know my cousin Jim is again visiting from Canada. I walk and walk, not having realized just how long this runaway would take. A farmer I happen to know comes along from behind in a wagon.

“Where you goin’, Clayson?” (He hasn’t learned the “Wayne C.” label yet.)

“Up to Highland.”

“Your Mama know where you goin’?”

“Yep,” I lie.

“Like a ride?”

“Sure would.”

I climb up on the seat, and he takes me most of the way there, at one point through a water-flooded gully that presents no problem for a horse and wagon. When I get to the farm, Aunt Relva, Jim’s mother, is horrified, knowing that Mama in her grief will be doubly distraught at my disappearance. Neither she nor my mother has direct access to a telephone. (For all I know, the self-centered kid didn’t think once about how miserable his Mama’s life was or what anxieties he was adding to hers.)

Making it clear that I have been very naughty, Aunt Relva loads me into her Model A Ford that she manages to drive even though she has lost one leg. “We gotta get you back, right now; your Mama must be very upset.” As we head for American Fork, we soon come to that rain-flooded gully, and Aunt Relva does not dare drive into it. There was nothing for her to do but take me back up to the farm, where Jim and I play throughout the afternoon.¹¹

I have no memory of how I got home or how Mama reacted. She must have been deeply hurt, even furious, but perhaps too grief stricken to know what to do about a naughty boy who would treat her so cruelly as I had with my little runaway from tragedy.

10. The memory of the last two speeches here is firm and precise—unlike many memories. Those were our words, I am confident, partly because of her later confirmation.

11. Was Mama still totally ignorant and anxious about where I might be? I now believe—or I hope—that Relva managed to find someplace where she could phone one of our neighbors to find Mother and reassure her.

1928

With mother now teaching third grade, we cannot afford to keep Daddy's chosen house and lot, and we move to the cheapest apartment available—just one inside cold-water tap; no inside toilet.¹² With a stove in only one room, when winter comes, the house is bitterly cold. As I climb into the icy bed, I shiver and sob, crying, "I want my Daddy." Then I dream, night after night, that he is alive again—ecstasy! I wake to face the disaster and sob again.¹³

As these night miseries continued, Mama would sometimes come into the room to comfort me. But too often the comfort would turn into the basic exhortation, "You've got to be the man of the house now," with explicit instructions not to cry so much.

1928–1929

I am in second grade, enraptured by beautiful Virginia Shelley, with whom I sang duets at the county fair. I dream about close companionship with Virginia, both asleep and awake. I repeat the fantasy of taking her hand and, using my magical powers, floating both of us up over the crowds. Everyone looks up at us, enviously. It starts to rain, but I just silently wish, powerfully and successfully, that we remain dry, while the rain pours down on everyone around us. It is thrilling, flying over the crowds of people down there looking up at us as they get soaked in the rain. My Daddy may be dead and I may be a weeping sissy inside, but up here I am a beloved hero, possessing powers over the falling rain of life.

The misery of Daddy's death was reinforced a year later by the death of my most warmly loving grandparent, Gramma Clayson. Like Daddy, she had won my heart with everything she did.

Autumn 1928

Gramma is lying on a cot—is she ill?—out on the east side of the house up the street from us, at Third North. The lawn, the large tree, the hedge, and her face are vivid in memory. (I can recover little else about the scene—not what I was wearing, not what she was wearing, not how the house was

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12. I remember longing for the inside toilet we'd had a year and a half before, for the first time, at the "Croppers," just a block north of Grampa Clayson's. Whenever I could, I would go up across the street to use Grampa Clayson's inside toilet.
 13. That's the reverse of our usual awakening from nightmares, when we're relieved to find the everyday—if the reality isn't even worse than the dreams.

decorated. After reading many memoirs full of vivid physical details—clothing, furniture, scenery—I’m shocked by how few such “grabbers” my memory provides.)¹⁴ Gramma says she may have to go to the hospital, but she offers to read to me. I accept. She reads from *A Girl of the Limberlost*.

December 1928

Gramma Clayson is much more visibly ill, lying in the bedroom. Someone has brought her a milkshake. As I sit beside her bed, she offers me a taste of it; it is the first milkshake I have ever tasted, and it’s as good as the ice cream we make for ourselves on rare celebration days (like the 24th of July, “Pioneer Day”). She offers to read to me, but I can tell that she is too weak to do it. And then she says,

“Wayne C., I have something very important to say to you. Will you promise to do what I now ask?”

I promise.

She takes my hand.

“What I want you to promise, Wayne C., is that you’ll always be good to your mother and take care of her. Won’t you?”

Recording that event, at age fifteen, I wrote, “I promised her, in tears, that I would but I don’t know how well I have succeeded although I have tried.”

I have remembered that promise often for the rest of my life, sometimes feeling guilty.¹⁵ I was seldom as good to Mama, or even as appreciative of her good qualities, as she deserved or as I might have been had I not been such a damned ambitious egotist, myself the absolute center of God’s universe and maybe destined to become a God of another planet,¹⁶ trapped as a would-be “intellectual” living with a mother who had read hardly anything of importance! In any case, Gramma’s plea is fixed forever in my soul.

December 23, 1928

Someone comes to tell us that Gramma has been taken to the hospital in Lehi. Then someone calls to say that she is dying. No adult with a driver’s

14. Of course, I could provide irrelevant details—for example, the precise color and shape of my shoes on the day, at age four, when I learned how to tie a shoelace, or the precise shape and location of our first telephone, or the color of my proudly worn first long pants at age five. But such memories don’t help the people appear as vividly as they must have appeared at the time.

15. This account was first written back when I had just turned 72; I’ve doctored it only a bit in recent drafts. Now in 2005, my feelings are the same.

16. Oh, yes, we Mormon males were taught that, and still are—though a bit less aggressively.

license is around. So Uncle Joe, age twelve, insists on driving us in the old Model A Ford, scary-fast, but we get to Lehi too late. Gramma is dead, like Daddy. I do not remember the funeral (was I even there?), but I remember Joe boasting that he had driven that car at thirty-five miles an hour. And the memory of grief-stricken loss is *almost* as great as the loss of Daddy.

Meanwhile I had already heard of the deaths of two male cousins about my age, and my Booth grandparents had told me often about how Daddy's death was for them the climax after having long since lost three younger sons. How often they told me about Uncle Irwin's having been killed, at eighteen, trying to hop a freight train!¹⁷ The lessons of infinite loss and of how to grapple with grief were thus reinforced from age six on.

THE POSING NONGRIEVER, HYPOCRITEB, IS BORN

Throughout my early school years, teachers at the beginning of the year always asked us, "Who are your parents?" I would name my mother and then would have to say, "My Daddy's dead"—and burst into tears. To cry in front of the whole class became increasingly humiliating, more and more proof that I was a sissy.

Fall 1933, Beginning of Seventh Grade in a New Building

The teacher makes the standard request, and again I sob. I can hear some giggling in the room. After class, alone in the hall, I swear to myself—crossing my heart—that *I will never cry about anything ever again* in my whole life.

The result of that weird oath—which I literally obeyed for some years—now seems a bit pathetic, especially given the following sad moment:

1935

Junior Halliday lives across the street and has become my closest friend. He is slight, not really healthy; he has had bad sinusitis from childhood. But he's bright, lively, fun to talk with about ideas. When *Monopoly* first comes out, we play it at least once a week for months on end. We bicycle together. We ride down to Utah Lake and picnic in the water willows. We go on a "six-mile" hike for our Boy Scout merit badge, far above Highland on the foothills. We watch a lizard in the sun. We grab its tail, and it drops the tail and escapes.

17. The coincidence of my uncle and my son both being killed at eighteen has often been talked about by the family—sometimes implying that God had something in mind.

Soon after we've turned fourteen, I learn that Junior has to have an operation for his sinusitis, so he cannot go with me to Mutual Dell up in the mountains for the annual weeklong, wonderfully exciting holiday. Enjoying myself blissfully, I am one day told that Junior is terribly ill. Next day Junior comes up to Mutual Dell, and we have a quiet farewell beside the mountain stream; I hug him goodbye and never see him again.

I feel grief stricken, but—here is the horror—*I do not weep*.¹⁸ I am a man! Men do not weep. I have learned to fake nongrief.

It took me many years to stop feeling proud about that hypocrisy and recognize the cruelty of it. What must it have meant to Junior's parents as we later stood in his bedroom, which they had kept exactly as he left it, when I failed to weep as they sobbed and hugged me?

But back now to the times when I openly grieved.

1928, Age Seven

My mother as widow and my grampa as widower decide to pool resources and join our two families. We move into Grampa's much nicer house, and I find myself not only with a good toilet but surrounded by relatives: Uncle Joe (twelve), Aunt Ann (fifteen), Uncle Eli (eighteen). Aunt Lourena, wonderful pianist, is in college. Uncle Merrill, clarinetist, is already teaching in a seminary somewhere. Aunt Zina has just been married. Aunt Lucy and Uncle Roy and cousin Lucy and the other "insignificant younger ones" live in Preston, Idaho, as later will Aunt Lourena and Uncle Orvil.

The point of that prolonged listing is that upon moving into that crowded setting, the boy who had been his Mama's center, especially after his Daddy's death, has now become not much more than a troublesome peripheral. Not only are Daddy and Gramma gone, but VainB's previous sense of being at the center, maybe even Number One, is now lost. So I inevitably experienced what looks to me now as an "identity crisis"; VainB must find new ways to restore his status in the world. I'm now sure that at least some of the cheating I reported in chapter 2 was a response to the world that was now demonstrating itself to me.

18. Dream, September 26, 2000: After writing that yesterday, I dreamed last night that I was saying farewell to my beloved friend Max Dalby, both of us now (in the dream as in real life) getting old. It is clear this will be my last time ever with him. And I break into uncontrollable sobs, going on for minutes; it feels like the end. And it is obviously related to having recorded yesterday the fact of *not* weeping over Junior.

1929

In spite of my uncle Joe's constant mean teasing, I want to play "manly" games with him, and he won't let me. I hate him and he hates me. We quarrel whenever we're together, yet I want to be with him all the time. His pa (Grampa, of course, no doubt miserable because newly widowed) often beats Joe with a razor strop because Joe does very bad things: he sometimes does not come home when he's supposed to; he talks back; he doesn't keep his promises. He makes alcohol by fermenting fruit juice. Worst of all, he is mean to me, and Mama then tells Grampa, and Grampa beats him.

1927–1932

Mama is very different from the attentive, playful mother she was before Daddy died. I can't remember her laughing very often, can't remember her playing the piano any more,¹⁹ can't remember even seeing her much after she began teaching school and doing a lot of Church work. My life includes little fun with anybody.

Even my memories of summer, when Mama was free of teaching, are mainly about working hard: housework; working all day with Joe weeding potato patches; picking fruit; mowing lawns (he and I did the "Tithing Office" lawn, a huge one, and were rewarded with something like fifteen cents, enough to buy a root beer across the street at the A&W); peeling peaches and pears for bottling; turning the butter churn.

So, much of our fun together was lost. The Mama who had doted on me earlier—reading to me, teaching me to march around the piano, singing with me as she played—that mother had "died" with Daddy. The Gramma who had loved playing games with us kids was also gone.²⁰ Grampa was so distressed by our presence that he sometimes said to Mama (so I was later told), "Lillian, I sometimes just feel like flushing them down the toilet." My only hope for fun in the house was Uncle Joe, and most of the time that was not fun but torture. Joe was miserable himself, and he had good reason to find me annoying. I was tall for my age; Joe short for his, and people would tease him: "You'd better watch out, Joe. Wayne C. is catching up on you." Joe found ways to handle that:

19. Decades later she "took up" the organ and became a church organist. Memory probably has suppressed ways in which she kept up on the piano.

20. The portrait of her by her daughter Ann, published in 2001, makes it clear that her presence had made the family scene a lot more fun-loving than it had become after her death when we moved in (*The Life and Blessings of Ann Clayson Larsen: My Personal History, 1913–2000*, private publication).

Joe takes me behind the barn and beats me up, just after his miserable pa has razor-stropped him.

Joe loves to tickle me on and on, with me pleading for him to stop, through hysterical laughter and on to tears. He won't stop until I vomit or until someone rescues me—Mama or our miserable hired helper, Alice Welsch. I want my Daddy.

Joe has wrestled with me and has thrown me down; he is sitting on top of me and is pretending to spit down into my face. The spit comes out of his mouth and almost drops and he sucks it back in—again and again. How can I ever get even?

Even so, I want desperately to play games with him; he plays basketball with neighborhood kids and won't let me join in. One evening when we go up to the barn to do our chores, Joe to milk the cow and me to throw the hay down, Joe jumps over the fence and starts playing basketball with the neighbors behind Monita Abel's. I want to play too, though Mama has told me I must come right back after doing the hay because she needs me for some other chore. I go under the fence and keep trying to enter the game, pretending to take part, jumping in from the edges but never really getting hold of the ball. After dark we go back to the barn and do our chores and return to the house, very late. Mama is furious. I claim that it was Joe's fault, but Mama whips me for the first (and last) time using a large stick. I cry only a little. Then, VainB goes to Joe and proudly exhibits his welts by taking his shirt off: I'm as tough as you are! I am becoming a *man*, taller than Joe, as tall as my father was!

Joe takes me to the County Fair, and after wandering around a bit we come to a boxing ring. Eight or ten kids are being blindfolded as the gloves are put on. Joe volunteers me for the "blindfold slaughter" (I can't remember our name for what Ralph Ellison calls the "Battle Royal" that he was subjected to).²¹ I put on the gloves as they blindfold me, stumble terrified into the ring, then blindly stagger about, swinging my gloved hands, hoping to ward off the blows but feeling really bitter, as I listen to Joe and the other spectators laughing hilariously at us getting struck and swinging back, almost always missing the striker.

Whatever that experience is, it is not being a man. Would my father ever do a thing like that to me? Of course not. Yet I didn't refuse to do it; that would make me even more of a sissy.

21. For Ellison's full account of how awful the blind slugging feels, especially when you're black and there are hostile white spectators, see *The Invisible Man*, chapter 1.

Did I ever get even? In a way, yes—as you’ll see later.

It’s clear to me now that from Daddy’s death on I was both trying to be a man and passionately longing for a surrogate father. Miserable and in his early teens, Joe wasn’t even close to filling the huge gap. Two of the more plausible candidates, Uncle Eli and Uncle Merrill, were soon off the scene. Grampa Clayson was the obvious choice, but in his unspoken grief he provided little solace. I’m sure that the other grampa, Ebenezer Booth, living half a mile away, would have served somewhat better had we lived with him and Gramma Booth. But unlike the daily, hourly Clayson intimacy, we visited them only about once a week.

That longing for a father went on for many decades, involving not only the teachers I’ve named and my mission president. I found no real mentors in the army. But in graduate school a father-hero did emerge: Ronald Crane, literary critic and historian. Without my ever thinking about it in this way, I now see my adulation—though he deserved it—strongly intensified by my sheer longing for Daddy.

All of those “replacements” are now dead, and the few tears I’ve shed over them have all been kept strictly private as I’ve maintained my cheerful pose, never breaking down while offering testimonials at their funerals.

Another and even deeper repression didn’t reveal itself to me for decades. I’m tempted to give it a title referring to a standard joke among psychologists: *Oedipus Schmoedipus, As Long As He Loved His Father*.

It was sometime in 1968, and I was chatting with Saul Bellow. Somehow the subject of the oedipal complex came up—how kids deal with fathers and especially with fathers’ deaths. Saul was defending Freud’s theory, and I replied, a bit impatiently,

That whole business about the oedipal complex is silly. Freud talks as if a child never gets over his feelings about his father—the whole business of wishing the father dead and then feeling stupidly guilty about having killed him. Saul, I have to tell you that my father died when I was six, and I can’t remember a single moment when I felt personally guilty about it. I’ve never been haunted by any sense of being blamed. Oedipus Schmoedipus, as long as he loves his *mother!*

A night or so later I had—for perhaps the fifteenth or twentieth time of my life—the following dream:

There is a man’s corpse in our family garden. The police are investigating a murder, and they think I am guilty. They are about to find the corpse. I

know that I *am* guilty. I killed the man, and they're going to catch me. I wake up, both terrified and flooded with guilt.

And then I was flooded with the sudden realization that such guilt had been with me from the beginning. In my unconscious, I “knew” that I had killed my Daddy.

It now seems impossible to deny that such unconscious guilt, reinforcing the oedipal complex, had deepened my grief, earlier and later, and at the same time reinforced the need to be a *man* and not show grief.

My proud resistance to grieving—even contempt for it—continued for a long time. When my beloved Grampa Booth died in 1939, I wrote about his funeral like this:

It was cruel the way Grandma Booth had to suffer over his death. Everyone coming in the house would loudly sympathize and emphasize her sorrow—till she was a nervous wreck. The funeral wasn't bad in this respect, but I don't like funerals in their present form—I don't know how to change them, unless we can change the traditional outlook on death as something sorrowful. All that . . . their crying amounted to was either self-sympathy at having lost a valued loved one, or sentimentality. There was [not], and never is, any sorrow for the dead ones, but people won't admit that they are weeping selfishly.

VainB, now eighteen, is still boasting that he is so manly that he can resist grieving. Shortly before, on the day his Grampa died, he had written, “I do not feel in the least bit badly about it, although I loved him more than most people do. He was a fine man.” No grieving!²²

I somehow learned over the years, as beloved teachers and colleagues died, that my grief need not be suppressed. My mother died at age seventy-two, and though I wasn't as shattered by hers as by the earlier deaths, for some time it was devastating. I suddenly felt that there was no “ceiling” left over my head: I was now the top among the living in the closest part of the family. That feeling gave no pleasure. That there was no “ceiling” meant that I no longer had a Mama to tell me, “Wayne C., you are the man of the family.”

By that time I had long since rejected the notion that grief should be suppressed. In the hospital in Salt Lake City, I had a wonderful final conversation with Mother, impressed by the way she was coping with certain death. Two years later I described it in a memoir as follows:

22. And too little attention to grammar.

Her death, which came from a sudden heart attack at the end of her world tour, was one of smiling courage and even good humor. She could not help knowing that she had lived a more steadfast, honorable, and unselfish life than most men or women achieve; she had nothing to regret and nothing to fear, and she faced death without complaint or self-pity. Those who saw her at the end felt, as all who had known her knew, that here was indeed a great woman.

We had been able to talk openly about many matters long suppressed (though I did not bring up the question of the afterlife, not knowing whether she still expected it). It was mainly about what we had meant to each other, with her teasing me a bit about always having blamed myself for failing to achieve. Her expressions of pride in Alison, Kathie, and Richie are still with me now. She showed not a hint of grief about her own forthcoming death.

Only a few hours later she did die, and I found myself there in the hospital sobbing almost as uncontrollably as I had over Daddy's death. A young doctor pulled me up from the shelf on which I was leaning and offered me a sedative "which will ease the pain." I was tempted to hit him, as I pushed the drug away and shouted, "No! I don't want to hide it!" The notion of suppressing the full grief seemed stupid, even wicked. Perhaps it was my memory of how I'd treated Junior's death that produced such an excessive response. But at least I had finally managed to defeat the hypocrite and express my feelings honestly.

So—three major losses by the age of fifteen, a fourth by the age of forty-four, and a fifth at age forty-eight: my father, my favorite grandparent, my best friend, my mother, and my son—not to mention the many later losses of favorite colleagues: Arthur Heiserman, Sheldon Sacks, Ronald Crane, Perrin Lowry. It won't surprise you, as I revise in 2005, that these increase day by day now: Robert Streeter, Charles Wegener, Chauncy Harris—and on and on.

How do I now feel about those diverse losses? Does ThinkerB still think of Daddy's death as a catastrophe? How could I? My whole life since Daddy died would have to be repudiated if I were to say that his death was a curse. I now would be an entirely different person if he had not died—maybe a better one but possibly a lot worse. I probably would have encountered a brother or two and some more sisters. I would certainly have been less weepy, less taken up by reading as a way to avoid social contact. I would have felt less pressure to "act like the man of the family." If that different man wrote his *LIFE*, it would also be entirely different—quite possibly that of a totally unquestioning Mormon. Mama would not have lost so much

of her faith. Daddy would have engineered my Church loyalty.²³ And my soul would have felt no explicit injury to its belief in a God who responds to direct pleas.

To reject this life that I have had since Daddy's death, including the maskings that have helped us all to cope, would be like rejecting the gift of life itself. And that is just the opposite of how I feel about that gift. My gratitude to "God" (as I define Her/Him/Them/It) is so great, especially for my life with Phyllis, that I am deeply puzzled when I read arguments by authors like Samuel Johnson (whom I admire greatly) asserting that human life is nothing but misery, that its only compensation is the hope for an afterlife.

But this is not the place for further speculation about that—and besides, if I were writing this a few days or weeks after Richard's death, it would be far less affirmative; it might sound like an imitation of Johnson. (Unless, of course, I were writing hypocritically for some audience whom I would try to protect from grief.)

One more point about the deaths: they do not now, not even Richard's, lead me to fear or hate death. My own losses feel—at the moment, though I know I won't feel that way when the next death of a close friend comes—"accommodated" into the universal path: "dark, dark, dark, we all go into the dark." Almost all of the authors whose poems I collected in *The Art of Growing Older* are dead, and I will before long be dead. Although I cannot say, "that does not matter to me," I can say that I embrace it as absolutely "entailed" by the very fact of creation, whether we think of it as a divine miracle or as evolution. If you are going to have creatures as highly individuated and mentally aware as we are, you must accept the death of each individual and thus a sense of loss in those left behind.

Conclusion? There is no conclusion to grief, unless one dies early. How will I deal with the next loss? Who knows?

What I do see, throughout this account, is the continuing effect of that earliest loss, Daddy. Even at this moment I see signs that VainB is emulating that heroic father. So that motive must be added to the sources of my ambition—which I sometimes defend as the *defensible* kind of striving. Such emulation is reassuringly different from VainB's mere competitive ambition. It is a defensible mixture of envy and rivalry and productive modeling: the desire to *achieve* Daddy's every virtue, not just to *appear* to have done so. It

23. But what do I know about what he would have done or how I would have responded? Prof. Poulson, who had taught Daddy at BYU, suggested to me that my father, before his death, was already "maturing" and having deep doubts about the literal historical claims of Mormonism.

could even be called the desire to re-create, or clone, the lost beloved. I must resurrect the most loving, cheerful, productive man in the world. I must love everybody, cheer everybody up, and thus become superior to those Selves who fail in that mission, those I do not love. And that can sometimes prove almost intolerable, as my beloveds have tried to teach me, when my cheering-up feels like criticism of their tears.

Of the many paradoxes in my life, this is one of the most striking—and confusing. When I lose control of the cheerful self and snap back or snarl or shout an angry attack, I afterward curse my Selves for violating my ideals. And I dread the thought of how I may behave when—as could happen any moment—I am stricken with another major loss.