

Depression in a Warrior Father

Michael Trout

Abstract: While perinatal depression in men is not unknown and is occasionally mentioned in the literature, we do not have clear models for intensive treatment when the depression is immobilizing and persistent. This article follows the progress of a man who collapsed in the final month of his partner's pregnancy for their first child, through a hospitalization and a period of psychotropic drugs, discovery of the meaning of his depression, and eventual recovery. While this clinician approaches perinatal depression as a non-random event—indeed, likely full of meaning related to the coming child and, possibly, to the patient's own early life—no overarching model for treatment is proposed, except for this one: that depression in pregnancy and after the birth of a child is never innocuous, and that outcome is often enhanced when we join the patient in the search for its meaning.

Keywords: perinatal depression, fathers

*Mysterious pain
Hidden, buried under ground
No tests, no pills, hear*

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How We Began

I had never run into anyone quite like Albert. I would come to know him as a warrior, determined to protect his unborn child from a fate that was unknown, but mysteriously familiar to him. For now, he was profoundly depressed and acutely tormented by a pain he could scarcely describe. He

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just sat there in my waiting room, folding his body into a ball and rocking back and forth, boxing himself in the head, pulling roughly at his forearms and hands as if trying to peel something off. He bit his hand. He rubbed his head so furiously that his blond hair flew in all directions. I suppose he looked something like the wild and dangerous person he believed himself to be.

It was only a month until the first child of Albert and Nancy would be born, and this is when Nancy collected the remains of the handsome, articulate, professional man who was her husband and brought him to my waiting room. She did it out of self-interest and she did it because she loved him. She wanted her man back. She wanted her friend back. She wanted a father for the baby she had been so joyfully anticipating until Albert fell apart.

If thinking happens with gears, then his were slogging their way through molasses that day. However, it would be a long time before I would understand how much of the molasses was depression and how much of it was self-censorship of a magnitude I had rarely encountered. The simplest phrase would come out in single words or even part-words, with long pauses between each, so that it would take minutes for a complete sentence to be expressed. Ever so slowly, however, Albert painted a picture. Later he would write that he experienced his unborn child as a freight train, screaming down the tracks and on its way to smashing everything: "...an imminent disaster of which I was perpetrator, casualty, and witness."

Albert was an identical twin. His brother had always gotten away with being a rebel, whereas Albert had always struggled to make himself pleasing to others. He gritted his teeth as he spoke of his capacity to know what people wanted even before they asked him for it, and to deliver it to them with such grace and flourish that they could scarcely help but be amazed and to like him. Someone, somewhere, had punished him for trying to be his own person. He had no idea who.

Except for asking questions and expressing interest, I said only one thing during that first session: that both his feelings about the baby and the sense of impending doom that had characterized nearly all of his feelings for the previous many weeks were probably reasonable, and we would be able to find a way to understand them. He responded only with tears. It would be some time before I would come to understand why my simply paying attention—along with believing that what he was experiencing was both real and meaningful—meant so much to him.

Following this initial consultation, Albert voluntarily admitted himself to the psychiatric unit of a local hospital. Hospitalization seemed an acceptable choice, as I had heard him clearly when he expressed his

conviction that death by suicide was preferable to the inevitable harm he would bring to his unborn child if he remained in this child's world.

Albert emerged from the hospital a month later, after Thomas was born. He said he had been grateful for the safety of the institution but experienced the treatment as a hopeless mismatch with his own needs and struggles. Later he would write, "Although I willingly took the doctor's pills... I intuitively knew that there was something I desperately needed to say or think or hear that would make sense and would stop the anguish and the panic and the rage."

We agreed to begin work I would define in infant mental health terms, but which we would format differently. Instead of dyadic home visits, I would see Albert alone, for the most part, and at my office. My sense at the moment was that Albert was in such a fragile condition that any competition with his little boy for my attention could prove disastrous. The purpose was to understand the depression, of course, and to unravel the transferences that had produced it. But the end result we both sought was not just relief from symptoms for Albert, but protection of Thomas from the unknown dangers, and securing something approaching optimal development for him. Nancy was absolutely supportive of the goals and the format.

Albert had two worries about working with me, he said. The first was that his illness was too big for me to handle: that he might harm me with the great power of his struggles and that he would have to protect me from himself.

The second was that that I might take his "whining" about his family of origin too seriously. He shouldn't *really* be listened to.

In that very first post-hospitalization session, Albert made an announcement that would prove importantly symbolic. It turned out that first-born sons of first-born sons in his family had been named Albert for some generations. *This* Albert decided that enough was enough, that the responsibilities of this name should not be pressed upon any tiny baby; Thomas had a right to his own name and his own opportunity to find a place in this world. Albert took the first big step in releasing Thomas from a transference—the width and breadth of which we hadn't even begun to understand—by giving his son a name of his own. This was one set of family traditions (whatever they all were, we still did not know) that would stop here.

Searching for an Elusive and Mysterious History

One of Albert's first steps in therapy was to call his parents and ask a question he thought dangerous: "What were things like when he and his twin brother were born?" It was during that call, when Thomas was seven weeks old, that Albert learned about Gretchen, an older sister about whom

the family had never before spoken. He admitted that he knew something about a baby girl in the family, as he had once spotted an unidentified figure in a photo album. Adhering to the family tradition of never asking and never questioning, Albert pretended to himself that he had seen nothing.

Now he found out that Gretchen was a “blue baby,” born in the late-1940s, the first child of the immediate post-war marriage of Albert’s parents. A heart condition took her life, whereupon Albert’s parents immediately became pregnant with Albert and his twin brother. Had they been encouraged to get pregnant again right away—a common practice of that day, following the death of a baby?

Albert’s mother went on to mention another story never before discussed in the family. She had taken ill immediately upon the birth of the twins. She was transported to another state, where she would be cared for over the next several weeks by a wealthy relative in an elegant home, while her sons were whisked away to begin life alone. A Mrs. Franklin was hired to provide the essentials of care for the newborns, mysteriously held in the hospital for ten days, in spite of being entirely healthy and weighing seven pounds each. The story about all this seems to presume that mother was contagious, which must have accounted for the complete absence of visits—except for one, during which there was no physical contact.

Even this little visit would never have happened, were it not for the interference of Beulah, mother’s best friend, on behalf of the two new babies. Albert would later write of this event, about which he only learned following the birth of his own son:

What comes next is what matters most to me. It is the one moment at which, as far as I can tell from this distance, someone acted clearly and cogently on behalf of those two babies who were beginning to make their way in the world in circumstances which no one quite explains or remembers, wherein no one seems to have taken note of the fact that two newborns had, for all intents and purposes, lost their mother. For me this moment is also a touchstone for a beneficent outside world.... Beulah’s response was to get in her car and drive [across two states] to affect a meeting between her best friend and her best friend’s newborn children....

Albert’s mother wrote of this first greeting in a letter:

Even had the infectious prohibition not lingered I felt no inclination to sweep you into the embrace I’m sure all expected. You looked very much as I think I expected you to look, though not as much like one another as I’d thought, and the three of us examined one another with

what I fancy was a quite neutral expression. Withholding judgement, we could all three wait. Until later, you were of another's care.

I was astonished. Albert and his brother had been separated from their mother for the first six weeks of their lives, while also separated from their father by his emotional aloofness and depression. They were then separated from the only mother they had known when their real mother came home and summarily dismissed the woman (Mrs. Franklin) with whom Albert began his life. Albert's mother would later write:

Of Mrs. Franklin? I think, when I was at last allowed home, she stayed a few hours for a couple of days but, a perfectly nice woman, dependable, talkative, moderately (shallowly?) fueled, she was unendearing and, no, she didn't return out of either love or curiosity. She formed no patterns with you that I either noticed or continued....

That was it.

Albert would later write about this "...infuriating lack of feeling on her part. She seemed to regard us from the outside as a curiosity almost. We were physically okay. The rest could wait until she damned well pleased. What, I asked, were those two infants supposed to do with this kind of response?"

Chaos, Destruction and Murderous Impulses

I understood that I was to listen quietly to all of this, comment minimally, and most certainly not make too much of what I was being told. Albert was having a hard-enough time, without having to worry about managing me, and creating a proper and balanced perspective for me. Throughout the sessions, his voice would rise and something that looked like passion—if not rage—would start to emerge in his reddened face and his wet eyes. He would then inhibit it all, grit his teeth, clench his fists, rub his head, stir about in the chair and draw it all back inside. When I asked what he was doing, he informed me that total chaos and destruction lay just barely on the other side of his feelings, to which he dare not give full expression.

Over the next few days, Albert continued to wrestle with what he had always perceived as murderous and evil impulses lurking inside him. Curiously, he had no idea what the impulses actually were. He only knew that if he said too much about his feelings, if he stood up too much for himself, terrible things would happen. He frequently referred to the "mayhem" he would wreak, if he failed to check himself. He seemed to be

implying that he had awful thoughts, for which he should be convicted. They had to be kept secret.

I proceeded with this probability: that Albert's collapse into near-psychotic depression, and his contentions about the danger represented by his newborn, were in response to profound fears that something awful might befall Thomas. Albert wouldn't exactly be the one to hurt him, but *something* would.

Albert told me all of this when Thomas was almost precisely the age (two months) that Albert had been when his mother finally came home, recovered from her "pneumonia" and ready to resume motherhood. This is when Albert began to notice, for the first time, stirrings of love for his son.

He began to dream about victories and struggles of all kinds. He dreamt that he was a quarterback on a football team and was amazing everyone with his wonderful tosses. Two nights later he dreamt that he was engaged with particular joyfulness and exhilaration in skiing, making wonderfully successful jumps. Invariably, however, upon speaking of such joy in his dreams, he would rebuke himself for being so confident when, in actual fact, he was evil, not worthy of such success. He was a bad boy.

Nancy and Thomas had been away for a few days; upon their return, Albert told me a story that had been his little secret for a great many years. It was a story that would surely reveal the depth of his evil and murderous impulses, as a child.

In the story, he sneaked off with his brother's stuffed bunny rabbit—one of a pair of "identical" stuffed bunny rabbits given Albert and Charles when they were very small—and he had "wreaked mayhem" (a favorite phrase) on his brother's bunny rabbit. Only my very pushy questioning got the actual facts of Albert's terrible deed into the sunlight: he had hidden away with his brother's bunny and took the tiniest snippet of fur from a concealed place under the bunny's chin with scissors. This "wreaking of mayhem" was symbolic of Albert's essential badness. He admitted that neither his brother nor anyone else in the family ever noticed it. He looked at me, nonetheless, as if waiting for my expression of disgust at his horrific assault on his brother's bunny rabbit.

Why did he choose to "annihilate" (his description), no matter how impotently, his brother's stuffed bunny rabbit? He had always believed that his parents had secretly chosen two different bunny rabbits and given the one that was somehow superior or more valuable to Charles, awarding the inferior one to Albert. I asked him for details about the characteristics of the bunny rabbits. Over and over he insisted that they were identical in every regard, and that it was only his own miserable jealousy, his insane and immature insistence on primacy in the twinship, that distorted the appearance of the bunny rabbits so that Charles' seemed better.

Oh, there was one small thing, he remembered: they were different colors. Charles' was blue; Albert's was pink.

We sat in silence. Albert laughed, nervously. We sat some more, looking at each other, as if neither of us dared say what was obvious. Albert stammered out that he guessed maybe the stuffed bunny rabbits were not actually identical. I mused (only to myself) about what role assignments were being given to these infants, symbolized by the gift of bunny rabbits of different colors. Did the boys' parents have an agenda (albeit an unconscious one), assigning one twin the role of normal little boy and another the role of the female half, perhaps even the role of the deceased sister? Was Albert a replacement for the lost baby girl, Gretchen?

It seemed too early for me to toss my musings into the circle, so in that session and the next, I settled for simply affirming for Albert, once more, that his feelings did not come out of the blue, that his memories and his experience of the world were meaningful, and that we would come to understand them.

He cried deeply about this in the next session, as if the switch from believing himself crazy and silly to believing himself sturdy and understandable was staggering. He could barely stand the notion that he was not always the bad guy; it was so dangerous to be blameless. Nonetheless, he took another risk: he said that he was caught between Nancy's request that he go with her to a doctor's appointment the next day, and our therapy appointment. He seemed disabled with respect to practical problem-solving about the matter, as if it were somehow better to be trapped. I finally suggested the simplest of solutions: that we begin our session 10 minutes early, thus allowing him to keep his therapy appointment and also be free to join Nancy. He wriggled about furiously in his chair, certain that this "solution" would secretly anger me, and that my anger would result in his losing me. He was afraid to take anything from me because I would surely punish him.

But he did take the "gift" of my 10-minute compromise, and he survived. That afternoon he rose to several challenges at work with clarity and confidence.

At 7:50 the next morning he was strikingly calm and peaceful, and spoke with exuberance about his affection for Nancy, and his enormous pride in Thomas—whom he was seeing as an actual, real, other-than-Albert baby. He said he had looked up the previous afternoon, and the freight train that had been on a runaway course toward him was no longer there. At least part of the transference was dissolving.

Slightly less than one month into our new therapeutic adventure, I heard Albert laugh out loud for the first time since I had known him. We told the stuffed bunny rabbit story back and forth to each other several times, wondering about its importance, laughing about Albert's act of

terrorism with the scissors. In spite of my concerns, he tossed away his psychotropic medications.

Taking Baby “Home”

He said that he would have to miss a couple of sessions the following month, because he had made the decision to take his new family to meet his family of origin. He made an odd slip, saying that he was going to “show Thomas the baby,” quickly explaining that he meant he wanted to show Thomas to his parents. I wondered if he wanted Thomas to see where he came from, to “see” Albert as a baby, by introducing him to his origins. This would turn out to be an important theme.

Albert’s twin brother was there for this homecoming and introduction of Thomas. His very first words to Thomas seemed reminiscent of the family commandment: “Now you better not cry, or you’ll be in trouble.”

On the night he returned home from this family visit, Albert had a painful dream in which he dropped Thomas.

Memories and Dreams

Albert began to tell story after story about dead or dying or maimed babies and small animals. He had a dream in which he was assigned the responsibility of killing a child. He messed up the assignment, such that the child did not quite die, but was only terribly injured. After telling me of the dream, he recalled a George Orwell story* in which Orwell—as a young British soldier—is assigned to kill a huge elephant. Due to his own ineptness, Orwell succeeds only in enraging the elephant and causing him great suffering, but never quite killing him.

Albert seemed unable to stop the flow of memories about sick and dying things. He recalled a time during his boarding school years when he discovered a very sick porcupine in the woods near the school. The porcupine was evidently in such grave condition that Albert was able to pick it up and carry it back to the dorm, where a discussion ensued with his friends about what should be done. The consensus was that the animal’s suffering was too great, that he had to be killed, and that Albert was the one to do it. He decided that the best method was drowning. He cried while describing to me the feeling of the life force going out of the porcupine that he did, indeed, drown in a bucket.

*In Orwell, G. (2009). *Facing Unpleasant Facts: Narrative Essays*. Boston: Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 29-37.

Thomas was nine months old at the time Albert was being overrun with these memories and dreams and feelings—just the age Gretchen had been when she died.

Part of Thomas' individuation included periods in which he seemed to prefer Albert rather dramatically over Nancy. Of course, Albert felt guilty about this, but he also enjoyed it immensely. He asked for some guidance about why this might be happening, but it also brought up his sorrow over the unavailability of his own father as an alternative figure of attachment. What would life have been like, he wondered, if dad had really been in the family, if he could have moderated the intensity and narcissism of mother's bond to the boys, if father could have beckoned them to try new things or to "step away" from home, still in relative safety?

As Thomas' babbling began to suggest that speech was coming, Albert told me of the family legend regarding his and Charles' expressive speech as infants. The story is that he and Charles first spoke at about the same time, when they were four. The family narrative had it that the boys, prior to this time, had their own language system, and that they had no need to talk to the outside world. Observing his own son now, however, Albert came to believe that there was a great deal more to it. He began to wonder if it was possible that he had heard his parents implied message that he not "speak" the family story. If he and his brother could speak, might they have asked father, "Why didn't you take care of us when mother was gone?" If they could speak, might they have asked mom, "Where did you go when we were born? Why didn't you stay with us?"

One of the emerging understandings about Albert's longstanding terror that he might ever get what he wanted, and then have to pay an awful price for it, came as he described having been "the sick child" in the family. He could only vaguely recall chronic problems with his upper respiratory system and tonsils as specific roots for this identity as "the sick one," but he was very much aware that he was home from school a great deal more often than Charles. He recalled some of the exceptionally warm times he had with his mother when he was home alone this way, and we began to wonder whether he might have orchestrated the opportunities. The problem was that this also increased his debt to her, cemented his devotion and his unwavering efforts to please her, and put him in the frightening position of having temporarily won the unannounced competition with his brother.

I wondered if we were glimpsing something of the cause of Albert's profound perinatal depression. It was not merely that he saw the unborn and newborn Thomas as himself and fretted horribly that his firstborn son would suffer just as he had. It may also have been that Albert somehow knew that Thomas' arrival would establish Albert as a separate person in his family of origin, capable of accomplishing things outside the family in

his own right, even able to have things that other family members could not have and could not control. Albert had spent a lifetime learning that life outside the family was not survivable, that separateness would cause chaos and destruction, and that fusion with the family was his only hope for survival. If he failed to please his mother, he believed that he would lose her love instantly, and that Charles would quickly fill the gap. The one sure way of displeasing his mother had always been clear: to be himself, to assert himself, to want something on his own, to be separate, to be seen as independent and making it *out there* in the world. The birth of a firstborn, same-sex child meant all of these things. I came to understand that Albert was terrified that Thomas's birth would actually give him what he both needed and feared—himself, his separateness.

Albert had a dream that distressed him greatly. As usual, his dream was not only instructive in its own right, but seemed to help Albert prepare for Thomas' next developmental step. He was willing to tell me about it only after an inordinate amount of time spent reminding me that his mother had been a loving caregiver, and that neither he nor I should be too critical of her. In the dream, Albert's mother is lying in bed and is castigating Albert for the way he was handling money [coincidentally, an issue between Albert and Nancy at the time of the dream]. After listening patiently to his mother's lecturing, Albert then says to his mother in very clear terms, "You did a very bad thing by not letting me grow up." In the very next scene in the dream he is banished to a lake. He is trying to swim to the opposite shore as he becomes aware that a gigantic avalanche of snow is tumbling into the lake behind him, creating a huge wave. He is in grave danger; nonetheless, he calmly swims toward the shore where several bathers are standing. It seemed clear to Albert that the people on the shore represented "the outside world" to him. He knew he must swim toward them because the avalanche was at his back; the poignancy, of course, was not only in the "escape," which he survived, but also in the certainty that he could "never go back" to the shore from whence he came—to the shore from which his mother had banished him into the lake.

Albert frequently told the story of his wish, in grade school, to have a paper route. With uncharacteristic naiveté, he approached his mother about the matter. Her response was classic: "You don't want a paper route." Didn't he realize that? And that was that. Two months later, Albert brought up the paper route story in another session, and wondered about it in a new light: What was the problem, really, with his having a paper route? Would it have been a problem for his family if he had had other friends, if he had developed support systems in the "outside world," if he had built friendships with children whose parents were not cello players and academics but mechanics and plumbers, who were interested in things like cars and girls and other "delights"? Albert then giggled with

embarrassment as he acknowledged how critical he had been (only to himself) of my ownership of a convertible, which he had spied in the parking lot. It seemed to him an “illegal” level of pleasure.

Some months after Albert first asked his mom about what things were like when he and Charles were born, a letter arrived from her. It was 23 pages long, and typewritten. She described her own mother’s loss of a first-born child, also named Gretchen—a girl who lived only one day, and about whom little was ever said again. She talked about spending four months in the hospital before her own little Gretchen was born. She acknowledged her indifference, on the day of Gretchen’s death, about seeing her one last time or dressing her in the clothes she had brought from home. She wrote of her pregnancy for Albert and Charles only four months after Gretchen’s death, and her weakness and pneumonia. The new babies—Albert and Charles, exactly seven pounds each—were “not to be infected” and were evidently carted away to the nursery with no protest from the ailing mother. She wrote lovingly of the exquisite care she received after discharge from the hospital, far away, and that she gave little thought during those two months to what was happening in her own home:

You asked whether I was anxious at all about my motherless babes and I would have to say, ‘Never for a moment.’ This didn’t, and doesn’t, feel strange to me; I was willing to wait, and I suppose part of the reason was knowing that you and Charles were all right. During Gretchen’s lifetime, I’d known always that she wasn’t...

Albert often wondered how it was that he and Charles had never developed an alliance. He had an image of two separate baby birds in a nest, each oriented solely to getting nourishment from the mother above, and so preoccupied with survival that they could scarcely look to each other. He asked me whether losing one’s mother at birth might have made the intensity of the struggle for survival greater, and whether having to make a relationship with a stranger (Mrs. Franklin) would have kept the babies a bit off-guard, unable to relax. Finally, he wondered whether the loss of Mrs. Franklin when their mother came home might have exacerbated their worries about whether they were going to get enough. He had a dream in which he was in a concentration camp, along with many others. They were all being herded about, convinced of their lack of power, unable to do anything to save themselves from the inevitability of death. Most importantly, however, the people in the camp failed to make alliances with each other that might have enabled them to overpower their captors. No one would stop his narcissistic striving for survival long enough to either reach out to others for support or to form the others into a group so that they could keep each other warm or increase their power

as a group. The orientation of each and every prisoner in the dream was toward the door through which the captors came, bringing them food. As a result, they never allied with each other.

The Project: “A Letter to Thomas”

In our second year of work, Albert conceived the notion of putting together some sort of photographic essay about Thomas’ infancy and his own. He had decided to ask his parents to ship him all of the photographs they were willing to let out of the house—anything that had Albert and Charles in them. He had something he wanted to say, he thought. He didn’t know exactly what it was, and he worried that it would injure his parents, but he wanted to exercise his voice and see what came out.

Soon a box of materials came from his family, and Albert arrived for a session with a large briefcase. He began to show me photographs of his grandparents and his mother and father and made the most striking remark: “The funny thing about doing this is that I end up having to see other people as children, too.” It seemed an important thought.

Albert was in the “white heat of completion” on the photo essay he was eventually to name “A Letter to Thomas.” He put the photographs on slides, placed them in a certain order, and wrote a narrative to be read during the presentation of the slides. A few weeks later, Albert offered his photo essay in a semi-public way: an invitation-only lecture at an art museum. He had put together dozens of photographs of family-of-origin members going back several generations and had tied them—and the family stories about them—together. The project was dedicated to Thomas. He told me—and said in his narration of the slide show—that he wanted there to be no secrets for this baby. He declared that the photo essay would, after the presentation at the art museum, go into a safe place, where it would be held until Thomas was grown. He was sure his boy would treasure it, one day. *This* child would be protected from the dangers of secrecy, especially about how things were in the world when he entered it.

He included in the slide essay a story from his youth about a cub bear whose mother is shot. The baby bear is adopted by one of the men at a logging camp, who turns the cub over to his wife for nurturing. She is nursing a baby of her own at the time, but seamlessly and selflessly makes room at the other breast for the cub. Albert included several photos from the original book that showed the cub nursing, alongside the human baby.

His invitation to me to attend the public presentation was full of his worry about my taking it all away from him, and his wish to be separate from me. Finally, at the end of a session and just a few days before the presentation, he searched through his briefcase, looking for the printed

invitation to hand to me. He rifled through the papers endlessly, seemingly unable to quite find the invitation. He then pulled three invitations from the depths of his pouch, shuffled through the three much longer than necessary in order to find mine, began to give it to me, and dropped it on the floor. We both burst into laughter at the roar of his ambivalence.

After the presentation, Albert fell ill. He said he felt like a “sitting duck” for anyone who wanted to run him over, and he went home early from work. He spent the entire next day in bed and stumbled over trying to describe why he went to bed and whether or not he had a right to. He declared that he had found himself taking his temperature three times that day just to assure himself that he still had a fever and, therefore, still had a right to be in bed. It seemed a profound full-body memory of his depression two years before.

Coming to the End

Just before the end of our two years of work, Albert spotted my pregnant wife in the office. He asked about the pregnancy. Overwhelmed by my own sorrow in the moment, I blurted out what had just been learned the afternoon before: She had been carrying twins, and one of them had just died. I regretted this revelation about my personal life. It seemed a particularly cruel thing to acknowledge to Albert, a twin. I suppose it was also a signpost, revealing that Albert and I were entering a new phase of relatedness on this planet.

I’ve questioned much about my work with this man who—in my view—went to bat on behalf of his child even before he was born. He knew of the power of the unknown—or, at least, that which is hidden—to hurt. He was determined he would never be the perpetrator of hurt by being the keeper of secrets from his own son. He would find his anguish, give it a name, and keep it from haunting his little boy.

He succeeded. Thomas had a strong upbringing by two loving parents. He did not lose his daddy to aloofness born out of fear and depression. He had a great mommy who, as she had hoped in the first place, brought daddy home, and got her friend back.

Follow Up

Many years later, when Albert was 65, I was able to find him. We had a marvelous 60-minute conversation by phone. He told me that he had “collapsed” (his word) into significant depression in the late 90s, at the time of his mother’s death and his separation and divorce from his wife, Nancy.

He was now in a long-term relationship with a woman he had known in high school. She is from his hometown. She is a cellist (as his mom was). Her name is Gretchen.

Thomas, now age 31, had grown into a strong and capable adult, although his adolescence was marked by delinquency and drug use beginning at age 14, around the time of the divorce of his parents, the death of his grandmother, and his dad's depressive episode. Albert believed that his son's acting out was about individuation and represented a determination to "...not be sucked in by his mother's neediness," especially her need that he lift her up and confirm her importance. Albert believes his son was, and remains, "determined to be someone in his own right." He is now a highly successful professional man.

As for the photo essay: Albert did, indeed, bring it out of its storage box when Thomas turned 18. They viewed it together and had some stirring conversations, but Albert acknowledged that Thomas' investment in it was, perhaps, a bit less than his own. Evidently there weren't many secrets in the family, by then.

I wept a bit, after that call. It reminded me of my gratitude for having met a warrior father.

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