

Narrative Inheritance: A Nuclear Family With Toxic Secrets

H. L. Goodall Jr.
Arizona State University

A narrative inheritance refers to stories given to children by and about family members. Using the case of his own "nuclear family," the author explores the power of these stories in our lives, particularly when they are later shown to have been constructed out of serious omissions, distortions, secrets, and lies. The implications of this personal ethnographic account speak to issues of family communication, narrative inquiry, and the relationship of work and home life in families whose everyday lives are defined by codes of secrecy.

Keywords: *family communication; secrecy; cold war; espionage*

NARRATIVE INHERITANCE

Harold Lloyd Goodall Sr. died, either in Virginia or Maryland, at the age of 53 on the night of March 12, 1976. My mother told me that he died at home in his bed in Hagerstown, Maryland, but the Social Security Death Index indicates that he died in Virginia, although it doesn't say *where* in Virginia.

I have my doubts he died at home.

My mother also said that she requested an autopsy because just 3 days before he died, he had been told that he had a bad cold and just needed some bed rest. A doctor he saw at the Veteran's Administration Hospital supposedly gave him this advice, but my mother couldn't recall the name of the doctor and hospital records do not show that he had any appointments in March.

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Nor did I ever see a report of an autopsy. One year later, close to the anniversary of his death, my mother told me that she had been told—by “the government”—that he had died of “multiple bleeding abscesses on both lungs.” This was about the time of a news report that Legionnaires’ disease was responsible for the deaths of several men, all veterans, in Philadelphia, all of whom had also died of multiple bleeding abscesses on their lungs. My mother claimed that “the government” now believed that my father, too, had died of Legionnaires’ disease.

That may or may not be true.

My mother never showed me the letter “from the government” that supposedly provided her with this information. She told me she had “thrown it away.” I have no doubt that she had done precisely that, if, in fact, there had ever been a letter in the first place. But by then, by March of 1976, I was so disillusioned with the idea of truth in relation to my father’s life, much less his death, that I didn’t pursue it.

He had led a secret life. And even in death, she kept his secrets.

* * *

My disillusionment with the truth began the day after his funeral. Gilbert Hovermale, my father’s attorney, gave me an ordinary key to a safety deposit box at our bank with the words “your father wanted you to have this.”

My mother and I were in Hovermale’s small cramped office for the reading of my father’s *Last Will and Testament*. My mother was in bad shape, barely functioning in the daylight over the heavy sedation required to get her to sleep, and I worried that she might commit suicide. She had told me, repeatedly, that she “just wanted to die.”

I took the key, put it in my pocket, and didn’t think any more about it. In fact, I didn’t visit the bank to open the deposit box until two or three days later, and I really went there then only because it was on my way to the grocery store.

I don’t know what I expected to find. Papers, perhaps. Another insurance policy, maybe. I can’t recall.

Instead I found a diary and a dog-eared, heavily marked up copy of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel, *The Great Gatsby*. These items were what my father wanted me to have? Why?

I opened the diary and recognized his signature in the top right-hand corner of the first page. My father’s signed name, like his life, was a carefully constructed series of perfectly composed, by-the-rules actions, angled slightly to the right. To the casual observer, his handwriting was entirely ordinary and his penmanship, like his life, easily readable. If it is true that a man’s signature reveals something about his character, then the character revealed here was that of a man who cared what people thought about his handwriting and on further reflection, about his life.

If I thought anything was odd about his handwriting, it was only the raw fact of it being used to keep a *diary*. I didn't know he kept one. As far as I knew, my father never had been a literary man. So the fact that he kept a diary, coupled with a clearly well-worn copy of *Gatsby*, and that these two items were the sum total of my personal inheritance from him—*that* was what I thought was unusual.

"Your father wanted you to have this," Hovermale had said when he handed me the key. I wondered if Hovermale knew what these items were?

I turned the page and began reading. What my father had given me was the story of his life. Not all of it—it was, after all, a diary and not an autobiography—but enough of it to present me with what I would later learn to call "a relational identity crisis." He had passed along to me a story of a man whom I had called "Dad" for the past 24 years but who was not really my father. My father had been an ordinary government worker who had retired on full disability from the Veteran's Administration. The story I read was about a man with my father's name who worked for a clandestine organization, a man who ran illegal operations during the cold war, a man who communicated through codebooks.

The Great Gatsby in my hands and his Holy Bible were codebooks.

The diary was not addressed to me, nor did it come with instructions. What was I suppose to think, or to do, with this new information? I confronted my mother about the diary—and "confronted" is unfortunately the right word—and she denied knowing anything about it. When I asked her how much she knew about his "other" life, she said only that "of course she knew" he worked for the government. "Of course" he did things he couldn't talk about. That was the way it was when you worked for the government. I offered to give her the diary but she had no interest in reading it. If he had wanted her to read it, she said, he would have given it to her. But instead he gave it to *me*. It was mine.

For her, that explanation was enough. For me, it obviously wasn't.

Due to the sudden and unexpected nature of my father's death, there were now unresolved tensions that weighed heavily on me. I had moved away from home, and away from him, and away from what he thought was right in ways that he could not have failed to read as signs of a definitive rejection. The last time we spoke I had said as much. He had dutifully walked me to my car after another one of our unhappy Christmas holidays, and we had shaken hands as if that settled something that it didn't really settle, just to keep the appearance of family peace. I remember that he held my eyes as if he wanted to tell me something else, but in the end he couldn't manage it. Instead, his eyes teared up, and then, because it was embarrassing to both of us, he said simply, quickly, and now I realize *finally*, "I love you, goodbye."

I don't remember what I said. I wish I did.

I told myself that I felt sorry for him, sorry for my mother, sorry for their small, wasted lives. But really I felt sorry for myself because of what they had

reduced themselves to and because, at the sophomore age of 24, I thought I knew so much better.

And now this *diary*. This deeper story—this *true* story—that lived inside of the story I had lived on the outside of. Why didn't he just *tell* me? Why didn't he let me in? Why didn't we *talk* about it? Why did he wait until he died to reveal himself, who he had really been, and what he had been doing all those years? I felt as if my whole life was turned inside out.

I had been betrayed by the truth.

* * *

In Evan Imber-Black's (1998) words, when I opened that diary I became the inheritor of my father's "toxic secret." She wrote,

Toxic secrets poison our relationships with each other. . . . Key family stories remain untold and unavailable. These are secrets that take a powerful toll on relationships, disorient our identity, and disable our lives. (p. 16)

Knowing my father's secrets, even though I didn't discover them until he died, did poison my relationship to him. Like a lethal toxin released in memory, it killed whatever remained of my respect for him and tainted what I recalled of our shared times together. As a result, I experienced the identity disorientation Imber-Black (1998) described.

For many years, I refused to talk about it because I was deeply ashamed, not so much because of the clandestine work he did but because he kept who he really was from *me*. Had our relationship become so fragile that it couldn't handle the truth? Had I proven unworthy of his trust? Who *was* I to him? Was I anyone very much at all?

* * *

I never removed his diary from what became my mother's house, although I did change its location. When I returned to my job in South Carolina, I shelved it—cleverly and ironically, or so I thought at the time—in between John Le Carre's *The Spy Who Came in From the Cold* and some forgotten title that had been a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. My mother belonged to the Book-of-the-Month Club, but I guess my father read Le Carre. He liked spy stories. At any rate, I left the book on the shelf. I walked away from it and all that it represented.

The following year I moved home to care for my mother, who had become clinically, and I think psychically, depressed. I left my teaching job at Clemson University and became an "account executive" for a local FM radio station, WWMD. I was a lousy salesman. Instead of booking appointments and doing cold calls, I drove around aimlessly most of the time, took in afternoon matinees, and read a lot. I had convinced myself that this move was only temporary and I didn't see a future in selling spots. One day, cruising my mother's

bookshelf for something to pass the time instead of making sales calls, I saw the diary and got it into my head that it didn't belong there. I placed it in an old wooden chest down in the basement that still held my father's World War II uniform and his medals.

My mother died in December of 1983.

This time I went to Hovermale's office alone. Making small talk prior to executing her will, I reminded him that the last time I was here he gave me a key to a safety deposit box and I found my father's diary.

"A *diary*?" he asked. Then, "Really?"

"Yes, but I'm sure you knew that." He was my parent's attorney, my father's friend.

"No," he replied. "I didn't know that." He paused. "What did you do with it?"

"It's still in the house," I replied.

He smiled thinly and said only, "Well, let's get started then."

He read her will and there were no surprises. The key he gave me this time was the key to her house, which was now my house, which I promptly put up for sale. I was teaching in Alabama. There was no good reason to keep it.

I returned to Alabama and asked Hovermale to handle things for me.

One day I returned to my office from teaching a class at the university and there was a message to call him. I thought this could very well be good news because the only reason he would have to call me was if the house sold.

"I've got bad news," he began. He didn't sound like a man with bad news. He sounded more like a man who had just seen some damn thing happen and had to tell someone about it. He explained that someone had broken into my house and removed everything from it.

"*Everything*?" I asked, incredulously.

"Right down to the floors," he replied. "Damnedest thing I ever saw." He explained that the local police thought it was a job done by a professional. "The house was for sale, no one was living in it. Pretty easy pickings for a thief nosing around. Your neighbor saw a truck pull out of the driveway but didn't think anything of it."

"What truck?"

"Whoever did the job used a moving truck. That's why your neighbor didn't think it was unusual. She figured you were getting rid of the furniture."

"What should I do?" I remember feeling deflated and thinking this was just another bad thing involving my family that I had to put up with. I didn't care about whatever furniture or clothing or knickknacks the thieves had taken. Most of the memorabilia that had value to us had been lost or destroyed when Hurricane Carla flooded our first Maryland house back in 1972. I had already moved out by then so nothing my parents had acquired in the interim had any deep personal significance for me. I had removed a few things of my father's when I moved to Alabama, not out of any real connection to the items but because my mother insisted I keep something of his with

me. So I had his war medals and a small men's jewelry box with his Foreign Service and Lion's Club lapel pins, studs for his tux, collar stays, a nail clipper, some old bullets, and a small gold stiletto.

I didn't take the diary. I thought it ought to remain in the house. I also thought if I did take it, it would always remind me of everything that had been lost between us. A relationship we never had. I didn't need that in my life. It was hard enough to live with the reality of it. I didn't want the damned thing.

So when Hovermale offered to handle things for me, I was only too ready, too happy, to agree. He added, "I've got a cleaning service I use. I'll get them to go over there and tidy things up."

"Fine. Just send me a bill." "Just be done with it" is what I was thinking.

Before we hung up he said, "Sad as this is and all, now that the house is empty it should make it a lot easier to sell."

It did and it didn't. Hagerstown was in an economic downturn and interest rates were hovering at about 11%. Hovermale talked me into lowering the asking price twice before he found a buyer. By the time I paid him for all he had "handled," I had precious little to show for it. But I didn't care. I had my own life and I had finally, *finally*, closed the book on my family.

Or so I thought.

* * *

Narrative Inheritance

I use this term to describe the afterlives of the sentences used to spell out the life stories of those who came before us. What we inherit narratively from our forebears provides us with a framework for understanding our identity through theirs. It helps us see our life grammar and working logic as an extension of, or a rebellion against, the way we story how they lived and thought about things, and it allows us to explain to others where we come from and how we were raised in the continuing context of what it all means. We are fundamentally *homo narrans*—humans as storytellers—and a well-told story brings with it a sense of fulfillment and of completion.

But we don't always inherit that sense of completion. We too often inherit a family's unfinished business, and when we do, those incomplete narratives are given to us to fulfill. Consider President George W. Bush's war on Iraq. It is clear to me, as it was to some political commentators, that this war was, in part, the mission of a man suffering from an incomplete narrative inheritance. His father, former President George Herbert Walker Bush, is remembered as a man who didn't finish the job in Iraq during the Gulf War of 1990-1991. Having found himself, as a result of the tragic events of 9/11, with his own Middle East crisis, George W. Bush found himself historically and narratively in a

time and place, with ample motive and an available opportunity, to finish the story as well.

An unfinished narrative is a difficult fact to live with. My interest in my own narrative inheritance—the unfinished story of my father’s life—is *not* the story I wanted to write. It is the story I ran away from for most of my adult life, but it is one that I find now that I *must* write, now that I have become a father. Now that I have my own son, Nicolas, who asks questions I have a difficult time answering about *my* parents.

I have found myself repeating to Nic, automatically, the same story line I grew up with—that my father worked for the government, that my mother was a nurse, and so on—until I realized I was essentially doing to him what had been done to me as a child. I was passing along the lie by keeping secret the rest of the story. So, in one sense, this is a story I must tell because I don’t want to keep it a secret any longer. I don’t want to pass the family secret, this toxin, this silent poison, on to my own son. He deserves better than that. *We* deserve better than that.

It is also true that I will never know “the whole story.” Although I have devoted the better part of 2 years to intensive archival research, interviews with former intelligence officers, and visits to various European and North American locations where my father worked, in the end the story I have constructed—although far richer and more nuanced than the one I inherited—remains incomplete. I learned that my father had been a spy. He devoted his life to fighting a clandestine war against Communism, and in the end, it cost him his life. Along the way he had made powerful enemies, but none more powerful than James Jesus Angleton who, for more than 20 years, served as the director of counterintelligence for the CIA. My father’s meteoric rise within the clandestine service; his successful tours of duty in Rome and London during the 1950s; his fateful encounter with East Germans in Berlin; and his “exile” to clandestine hell in Cheyenne, Wyoming, were all the result of his dealings with Angleton. So, too, was his final assignment, bought with his soul, to perform illegal domestic surveillance against the antiwar movement in Philadelphia during the late 1960s. It was here, finally, that the years of stress and duplicity took their toll on his mind and body. And it was here, in January of 1969, that he officially left the clandestine service, a broken and troubled man at age 47, on a 100% medical disability retirement. And he died, whether in Virginia or Maryland, 6 years later.

However, I didn’t know the intricate details of his story—or even of my own mother’s—at the outset of this project.¹ What I knew was *my* story, a story of an only child in a nuclear family with toxic secrets. So I began my account there, because doing so revealed how secrets emerged through specific communicative events in our lives but were seldom-isolated forms of talk in my family’s relationships.

I begin the story of my father, of my family, with the first secret I remember, in February 1963, a secret about my mother, but a secret kept within the family

to protect my father's career. Beginning with that first moment when I chose to keep quiet, my story reveals an ever-widening pattern of complicity and participation within the web of secrecy that finally defined and ensnared us all. . . .

* * *

A life of secrecy begins with the first secret.

February 1963. I didn't know what a "straight jacket" was, and the word wasn't in my Thorndike and Barnhart *Student Dictionary*. I couldn't ask my father, because then he would know that I knew and that would be the end to my nocturnal pajama spying.

Finally, out of frustration and believing that teachers were both kind and the legitimate repositories of all knowledge, I asked Mr. Finkelstein. Finkelstein was a small thin immaculate man who wore a permanent smile above his red bow tie and who taught music by waving a baton while making us imitate the dancing ball that prompted the people at home to sing along with Mitch. He was also responsible for taking our sixth-grade class on a "special field trip" to the Francis E. Warren Air Force Base. We were escorted by armed military men into a fully functioning ICBM silo, and Mr. Finkelstein encouraged us to "go ahead and touch the missile, boys and girls, it's the most powerful thing on earth." The look in his eyes was one of pure love. Even at eleven I knew there was something wrong with that. Nevertheless, Finkelstein was the one I asked.

His smile evaporated on the word *jacket*.

"Where did you hear that term?" he demanded.

Sensing danger, I automatically shrugged and lied, "On TV."

"You're lying," he said. The ends of his lips curled into a menacing grimace. "Come on, Buddy, tell me." He quickly searched the hallways with his green eyes and then turned back to face me. "It's just you and me here. I won't tell anyone." He paused. "Who is *wearing* this straitjacket?" he sneered.

Did he *know*? Did he know about my mother? Why was he treating me this way? All I did was ask a question about words. Maybe *straitjacket* was a bad word, like the F word, which had gotten Mark Wingo and Charley Rowley into so much trouble last week. But *straitjacket* didn't sound like a *bad* word at all. It sounded like clothing.

I refused to tell him. I stood in the main hall of Henderson Elementary and stared past Mr. Finkelstein and his red bow tie.

I kept my silence. And my first secret.

* * *

My mother, Naomi May Saylor Alexander Goodall, had always been a West Virginian beauty with an out-of-state plan for her life. She was a proud, alluring five foot four inch woman with big smoldering brown eyes and a

Daisy May figure who had purposefully lost her Appalachian accent, invented a fictional heritage that included being “from Virginia,” and narratively omitted a divorce from her first husband (the “richest boy in Charles Town,” whom she ran away with on the night of her senior prom) so that she could attend nursing school.

She fell in love with nursing and was very good at it. She was a registered nurse in Virginia, then in Baltimore (at Johns Hopkins), and when the war came, she tried to join the Army as a nurse but was denied entry on the absurd grounds that she had flat feet. So, instead, to “do her part,” she got a job at the Newton D. Baker Veteran’s Administration Hospital in Martinsburg, West Virginia, where, family legend has it, she fell in love with my father, who had checked in with tonsillitis and checked out with a fiancée.

My father, Harold Lloyd Goodall Sr., also had out-of-state dreams, although they took a little while to fulfill. They first acquired definition when, after World War II, he went to work “for the government,” ostensibly as a contact officer for the Veteran’s Administration Hospital in Martinsburg from 1947 to 1954, and then at the Veteran’s Administration Hospital in Beckley from 1954 to 1956.² That definition expanded considerably when he was appointed vice consul of the United States to Rome, Italy, by President Eisenhower in February 1956,³ and then again to London, England, in 1958.

These high years of embassy cocktail parties and all kinds of shows; of diplomatic privileges and European travel; of hobnobbing with artists, actresses, musicians, and refugees; of hanging out with ambassadors, generals, presidents and vice presidents, secretaries of this and that, directors and their many minions; of having their own cook and drivers, of being important people wherever they went—these high years must have seemed to my parents like they would go on forever. But they didn’t. They stopped, suddenly, in May of 1960, when my father, while doing something clandestine, was exposed as a spy.

Of course, I didn’t know that then.

All I knew was that one fine morning I was off to the American School in London as usual and the next morning I was getting off a DC-9 in Washington, D.C. By that autumn, my family was living in Cheyenne, Wyoming, population 34,000, and my father was working again as something called a contact officer at the local Veteran’s Administration Hospital.

That was not true, either. At least, not entirely. Cheyenne, Wyoming, at the time of my father’s posting there, was the site of the largest ICBM command on the planet Earth. This was during the height of nuclear paranoia caused by the cold war, and the Minuteman I warheads that surrounded us were capable of reaching Moscow in precisely thirty-six minutes. I am still to this day working out the unspoken connections between what my father was actually doing there, but I know it had almost nothing to do with being a contact officer. Contact officers don’t carry top secret security clearances, nor do they regularly take trips to Washington, D.C., to make reports.

When I was a kid, I never asked why we left London or why we moved to Cheyenne. Or at least I don't remember doing so. In my reality, which was a carefully narratively constructed fiction, my father worked for the government and my mother used to be a nurse. I was an only child. That was the story. That was the way it was. Simply the way it was.

I didn't question it and my parents didn't offer any answers.

I was too young to think it odd that our tiny, two-bedroom basement rancher was loaded with European finery, including the ornate Italian marble coffee table that seemed to have conquered our small living room. Or that the large, gilt-framed oil painting of me as a child posed in a red velvet chair, and done in the Italian High Renaissance tradition by the British portraitist Leonard Creo, was in any way unusual.

Or that the white Opel Rekord, our family car, was a make and a model that had never before been seen in this state. Or that it was just *my* father who kept a collection of hand-carved African mahogany nudes in his bedroom, each one of them a "trick piece," as my father called these clever devices designed for concealing things. Or that our bronze bust of Winston Churchill, which graced our bright yellow and black art deco kitchen table was somehow out of cultural step with current Wyoming decorating fashion, which then consisted of red and white wagon wheels as yard art, colorful Indian blankets as wall hangings, and imaginative household uses for empty bottles of tequila or rusty spurs.

Slowly, as I grew into preadolescent material consciousness, these things and what they represented about our family, and about our family's stark differences from this prairie surround, deepened and annoyed me. I realized that something *must have happened* in London because why else, dear God, would we be *here*, in Cheyenne, Wyoming, so far away from the persons, places, and things—from life as I, as *we*—had known it?

Something must have happened to my father.

Something *bad*.

I did not know the words *persona non grata*.⁴

* * *

My mother was a natural beauty, but she also had a beauty secret. She had discovered these little yellow pills in London that really did the trick. All of the "best women" secretly used them. Over there, amphetamines were readily available without prescription as over-the-counter "diet pills," and they were in demand in my mother's crowd because the State Department encouraged the wives of diplomats to be picture perfect. We were Americans, after all. We had to not only be the best at everything but also look the best if we were to continue to inspire the world's lesser peoples against the evils of Communism.

My mother had continued her thin existence, and no doubt also elevated her mood, in godforsaken Cheyenne on whatever stockpile of pills she had

managed to smuggle in under diplomatic cover when we returned to the States. Once they ran out, she didn't want to admit to her amphetamine addiction—it would have been bad for my father's career—so she toughed it out on her own, going cold turkey on the Q.T. during the winter of 1962 to 1963. She resolved to keep her Daisy May figure picture perfect by simply not eating whenever possible and when it wasn't, by doing what the other middle-aged housewives were secretly doing these days, swallowing laxatives.

In February of 1963, my forty-six-year-old mother keeled over in the Safeway and "cracked her head open" on the linoleum floor. This "accident," as I was told to call it, was no doubt the result of going off her diet plan, not eating properly, not being able to talk freely about our miserable Wyoming exile.

This "accident," which I didn't witness and which nobody would tell me about, may or may not have happened the way I was told it did. If she had "cracked her head open," wouldn't there have been a scar? There was no scar. I don't think that is what happened. I don't think that is what happened *at all*.

I think she just finally lost it that morning while shopping for self-help along the laxative aisle in the Safeway. Something indeed may have "cracked her head open," but only if we understand that phrase and its covert ambiguity as a covering metaphor, a way of covering up what really happened by stating what could easily be interpreted as a statement of fact. When you live within a web of family secrets, you learn to see into language a certain available lateral conspiracy in words. This availability is particularly true of words used as metaphors, because metaphors are by their very nature language tricks, words used to create analogues, analogues which themselves can hide the truth as well as reveal it.

It's an old spy trick, coded language containing secret messages, a real poetics of the clandestine.

So I am now suspicious, deeply suspicious, of that available metaphor. I don't think my mother cracked her head open so much as something finally cracked *in* her head. What opened up had less to do with spilling her blood than it did with her soul already having been bled dry.

She couldn't take living in Wyoming anymore. Not this damned life, not these damned people, not this goddamned windswept merciless prairie. Having worked so long and so hard to control herself, her body, and her behavior for the singular purpose of obtaining her out-of-state dream, she finally came undone in the pharmacy aisle of a grocery store. She would later tell me, much later, near the end of her life, that the ambulance boys found her face down on the linoleum, writhing, screaming, and completely out of control.

Cracked her head open? Well, yes, that is one way of putting it. Another way is to say that she suffered a complete nervous breakdown.

* * *

I have been studying communication for thirty years. So imagine the irony of surprise I felt when I discovered that my father, on his application for government work in 1946, listed “public speaking” as one of his primary skills. Another was “cryptography.”

My choice of field is probably also part of my narrative inheritance, part of the personal that comes wrapped in the professional, part of the legacy of our unfinished conversations, my questions about secrets and silences. Even my seemingly professional scholarly focus on identity as it is constructed in everyday lives at work and in families reflects a pattern of issues that date back to what I couldn’t figure out growing up. There is no mystery anymore in why I wrote my thesis, “The Analogy in Rhetoric”; or why I wrote my dissertation on the interpersonal communication of F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald (with its longest chapter on its influence on the analogues of *The Great Gatsby*); or why our son carries forward the Carroway first name Nicolas, the young man who finds in Gatsby a spiritual father.

A narrative inheritance touches everything, one way or another, in our lives.

* * *

In my communication studies, just as in my work and family life, I have learned that all families have secrets, and I have learned to believe that not all secrets are necessarily harmful.

There are many, many reasons for that.

Countless thousands of children grow up in families where one or both of their parents cannot disclose what they do. In some cases, this is because what they do is classified, or clandestine, or both. In some cases, it is simply illegal or immoral. In some cases, if the children, or even the spouse, *knew*, it would put the family at risk. It is clear to me now that my father was one of those people for whom issues of security, national defense, and protection of his family in one way or another figured heavily into his lack of disclosure. As Thomas Powers (2003), an astute author of many highly regarded books about American intelligence observed, “Dishonesty in intelligence organizations is not personal but institutional” (p. 224). However, family life is inherently personal and it is also true that there was a lot more going on in my father’s life, and in my mother’s life, than can be fairly accounted for by institutional sanctions. Sanctions run deeper than that, into and throughout patterns of family communication, which in turn influence our perceptions of relational honesty, question our need to ever disclose what we really do or think or feel, and ultimately shape the inner complexities that define personal identity.

I also have learned that most people live double lives. The usual divide begins with the traditional narrative separation of home and work, which, in some cases, may demand that we perform radically distinct roles that require us to talk and act very differently in them. A little more complicated are the

lives (and narratives) of seemingly ordinary married people who maintain long-term love affairs outside their marriage, or individuals who search out and conduct illicit trysts that they never speak about, or women and men who live their lives as serial adulterers, appearing one way in the daytime and quite another way at night. Similarly, we probably all have, or have had, gay and lesbian friends or relatives who deny they are gay or lesbian to maintain jobs or to dwell within their family's myth of who they should be. I have also known a singularly respectable and respected Pennsylvanian gunsmith who signed on frequently for government contract work as an assassin; college professors who strip; and lawyers, accountants, chief financial officers, and CEOs who function overtly or covertly as common criminals.

Most of us *are* capable of conducting ourselves dually, and the life narratives that emerge from plural identities seldom tell all of either story. That we may choose to live that way is certainly "our business"; that it is a narrative domain protected by laws of privacy is a good thing, and that it is our right as a free and independent person to behave that way is all well and good. Raising this point of personal plausible unaccountability to a national level, Powers (2003) suggested that we ought to understand our nation's CIA files as our collective unconscious and learn to "think of intelligence organizations as the instrument of a nation's id—the desire of a government to do certain things without having to explain, defend, or justify them" (p. 356). In this way, he underscored something fundamental about the importance of studying intelligence organizations, in that such work inevitably teaches us a great deal about what is largely unspoken about ourselves and about our culture.

One of those unspoken lessons is that whether the puzzle is about the complexity of our country's clandestine operations or ourselves, the desire to "do" without those supposedly closest to us "knowing about it" is part of the tale of who we are as a people and as a culture. That part of the *story* of our "doubleness," our "hidden self," our "past" that we pass along to others as incomplete or inaccurate or even as an outright lie may never bother *us*. But it may bother those swimming alongside us who inherit it on some near or distant shore. Or who later have to live in its brutal wake, or its unfortunate cultural legacy. Or thinking again of President George W. Bush, the innocent people who die despite having had nothing to do with the narrative exigency that is at least in part now producing our particular international nightmare. Narrative inheritance has *ecological consequences*, a family systems as well as a human systems aftermath, and although it is certainly the result of lives lived any which way we *do*, it should not be left unexamined, nor may it be told any which way we *can*.

There are narrative reasons for what we do and narrative motives locked into who we are. Identities are indeed the stuff such stories, such life sentences, are made out of.

* * *

Since returning from his ill-fated trip to Washington in July of 1963, the one where his meeting “with the government” went badly and the one he had hoped would transfer us out of the hell of Cheyenne but didn’t, my father was a deeply changed man.

On the surface, you couldn’t tell. He went to work in the morning and came home in the evening. He wore the same dark suits, starched white shirt, and conservative ties. His shoes were always polished. His fingernails were meticulously well maintained. He still smelled of Old Spice and cigarettes.

The first clue to this change in him was that he didn’t make us go to church anymore. He and my mother had been adamant about going to church for so long that it took me a few weeks to get used to *not* going. I had been forced to attend Sunday school, which met an hour before the regular church services, and thoroughly hated it. Church was a snore, but Sunday school was torture. Our teachers—there were two of them, both stern older specimens, Miss Petersen and Miss Black—made us recite the books of the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, and then commit entire passages of it to memory. No questions or comments were allowed. I could see clearly where this was headed. The point of Sunday school seemed to be what my Thorndike and Barnhart *Student Dictionary* defined as “brainwashing.” I was against it. God was fine with me, although I favored the New Testament version, but this whole religion thing was deeply suspicious. One grumpy Sunday morning I said so at the breakfast table and that was it. I didn’t have to attend again. And neither did my parents.

Another thing that changed about my father was his attitude about going to work. He used to get up in the morning bright and early and be enthusiastic about “getting to the office.” Now he slept later and when he did ready himself to leave, he appeared resigned to it rather than happy about it. Of course, I still had no idea what he actually *did*. Or why he was unhappy. Or why my mother pretended *not to be* unhappy. Our family mantra on this issue of what my father did was the simple declarative sentence, “He works for the government.” If pressed for details, the only thing I ever heard him say was that he “pushed paper from one side of his desk to the other side of the desk.” So, in addition to learning that married men who worked for the government were unhappy but that women often pretended not to be, so that’s what I said, too. The part about “pushing paper across a desk, one side to the other, all day long” always made my friends laugh—it was a strange mechanical image, like a flickering bit from an old Harold Lloyd silent comedy. Saying it, for some reason, was also a code, another metaphor, another language trick. It made my childhood friends laugh, but it also made some adults who wondered about the work of my father shut up fast.

I never knew why.

And he never told me.

My father had also gradually moved most of our personal items from Europe into the basement, supposedly “for storage.” This relocation of furni-

ture left our house almost bare, at least compared to how it had looked, and if we still didn't reflect the Wyoming wagon-wheel-and-Indian-blanket sense of style, nor did our home look so very different from anyone else's. We fit in. We blended. Our basement, I now understood clearly, was where we kept the past.

But what bothered me the most about the changes to my father and mother was the bowling. They joined a bowling league that kept them out late on Friday nights. I was just old enough to stay home alone, heat a Swanson TV dinner, and watch my favorite television shows. Anyone who has ever been a kid might think that a little Friday night independence would be perceived as a very good thing.

I was a kid, but it wasn't *me being left home* that was the problem. It was that my parents couldn't be trusted to go bowling by themselves. They didn't go for the bowling. They went for the drinking. And then, somehow, they drove home.

I was only eleven years old, but I already knew the expression *falling-down drunk* wasn't a single action but a *process*. It began when the back door flew open and smacked against the wall, and my father lurched through the kitchen searching for something to hold on to. It was then followed by my mother admonishing him with the astonished (and to my learned ears, astonishingly obvious) phrase, "Lloyd, you're *drunk!*"

"Yep," he replied, sometimes hiccoughing and sometimes not. The hiccoughing was not a good sign. It caused him to lose his balance and, therefore, was immediately followed by a loud "clump," which was his body slamming, often face first, against the floor.

"Lloyd! You *are* drunk!" My mother would repeat as she made her own drunken careful waddling way unsteadily through the kitchen and hallway, where his sprawled body now groped for a wall to steady his crawl down to their bedroom.

"Yep," he repeated. If he managed to stand and hiccoughed again, he fell over again, and this Punch-and-Judy-like routine repeated itself until he banged from wall to wall and finally fell into bed. If he didn't hiccough he tried to hide the fact that he *was* falling-down drunk and would yell back at her, "Am *not*" or—more likely—"No, I need *another* drink." In either form, this gin-soaked taunt was delivered in a slurry singsong voice, the voice I associated with somebody in the schoolyard saying "na-na-na-na-na" and pointing a finger at someone who just got caught being bad.

Clump. His trying to speak was a mistake. I had learned by simply listening to this part of the process of being falling-down drunk that my father couldn't walk and talk at the same time while in this condition. I would have thought *he* would have learned that lesson as well, but apparently not. This was a process, and as my Thorndike and Barnhart *Student Dictionary* defined it, "a characteristic of a process is that it is repeatable." The amazing thing was—and this was truly amazing to me then and is to me still—that he didn't hurt him-

self, or even bruise his face, even after it had repeated hard contact with the wooden floor.

Nor did he suffer hangovers. Saturday mornings we would rise together at seven o'clock as if nothing had happened, eat breakfast, and drive to the barbershop for our weekly trim. If we talked about anything, it was sports.

"*Naom-ah?*" Usually after his second or third hallway collapse he would call for help. By this time my mother, in her astonished fit of annoyance at his admitted drunkenness, had already stepped over his sprawled body and bobbed her way on to bed. Usually she remained fully clothed, passed out immediately, and proceeded without fail into a deep sleep. So she wouldn't—or couldn't—answer him.

"*Naom-ah?*" he would cry out again, this time a little more incessantly. After a few more cries I would hear his final plaintive "*Help me.*"

This last plea signaled to me that he was truly in trouble. The sound of my father was pitiful. So I would get out of my bed and help him to his. Wordlessly, I guided him unsteadily to his feet and helped him use the wall to steady and move his body to the bedside or failing our ability to accomplish that, simply pushed and/or pulled his body into the bedroom. Because he was larger than I was then, and more or less dead weight anyway, if I couldn't get him into bed, I left him lying on the floor and put a pillow under his head and a blanket over him. He was generally out cold by then anyway.

Each time I enjoined his process of being falling-down drunk, which was at least once a week during bowling season, he grabbed my hand, put his index finger to his lips, and said "Shhhhh. Don't tell your mother."

So I didn't.

But in truth, I never thought I had to. After all, she had to know. It was just another part of our increasingly unspeakable life that remained hidden, that remained *secret*. Secrecy corrupts. And as former intelligence officer Frederick Hitz (2004) put it in his book *The Great Game: The Myth and Reality of Espionage*, "Absolute secrecy corrupts absolutely" (p. 127).

* * *

Families, as we all know, are complicated to the point of ultimately frustrating most scholarly attempts to celebrate them. Not celebrating mine, which seemed natural to me given how I grew up, also helped me acquire a certain twisted way of looking at things, or what Kenneth Burke (1984) identified as a "comic" perspective. Of course, by carrying my father's name "Harold Lloyd Goodall"—himself named for the great silent movie comedian Harold Lloyd—perhaps acquiring a comic perspective was a natural identity evolution, another line drawn down from my narrative inheritance. He never called me Harold, or Lloyd either, or (thank God), *Junior*. He called me Buddy, and when I got old enough to ask him why, he said that my nickname came from an old Army buddy of his who used to help him get around after the war.

Or who now helped him get to bed after bowling, I thought. But I didn't say it. It was a secret.

Burke (1984) said that when confronted with history, or with a communication crisis that will become history—which is frequently the case in family histories and usually the case with incomplete identity narratives—a person either develops a tragic or a comic perspective on it. Either perspective, or “framing device,” or—Burke's favorite, “corrective”—enables sense making to occur, but only the comic corrective does so on the promise that you will survive the crisis. This is what I think Burke meant when he observed that a comic corrective offers us a chance to be observers and students of ourselves while continuing to act in the world, “making it possible to transcend situations where he [*sic*] has been tricked or cheated” (p. 171).

When I was in graduate school, I studied Burke and found a comic corrective, a new “perspective by incongruity,” that allowed me to begin to understand my family, and my past, in a way that didn't make them or me seem so crazy. I also studied interpersonal and family communication and learned that families are best thought of as “systems” and that our webs of interdependence make no bad act or absence of love the particular fault of anyone, because it is *the system* that produces the dysfunction. Gerald M. Phillips taught me that systems are complex, authentic communication is a rare achievement, and people are deeply flawed, so as a deductive result, I concluded that most families are inherently dysfunctional. I felt strangely relieved. Or perhaps *affirmed*, although not necessarily in a good way. I also learned that this convenient therapeutic label provides most of us with a good enough covering excuse for every family's oddities and weirdness—to say nothing of outright cruelty, stupidity, cowardice, coercion, sexual abuse, or violence.

I have a sister who is Satan. And you?

Oh? My father was a spy.

Wow, *really*?

Whatever.

Later I would learn that families are also cultures. Well, *minicultures*. Think of Mini-me in Austin Powers and then amplify it a little. The relative upside of treating a family as a miniculture is that it allows us to understand a family through its particular (and often peculiar) rituals, small vain rites of self-proclaimed passage, more or less shared—wired if not barbed—language codes, our sense of the sacred as it is revealed in the lyrics of Bruce Springsteen, a meaningful personal way of defining our relationship to Kevin Bacon, and so on. The downside of treating families as minicultures is that families, like cultures, actively brainwash their young. They teach them that the way we “are” is the *right way to be*, that the way *we* think about things is the *best way to do that*, and by and large the world would be fine if most people *just settled down and acted the way we do*. (Look: If you can't see the humor in family culture, you lack a sense of one and don't belong in the other.)

I also learned that marriage might be the institutional root of all evil in most families. I mean, really, most people don't know how to be married together given that their largest lesson in the subject is usually acquired by watching their own, often dysfunctional, parents. We have also been brain-washed to believe that how our parents "did" being dysfunctional was the right way to accomplish it. Most first marriages in the United States end in divorce, as do a great many second and third marriages. The causal link between "doing the work" of being dysfunctional in marriage relationships—however they are learned—and how we "do the work" of being dysfunctional families—however systemically or culturally they are defined—is applied knowledge that is fairly easy to document, if difficult to live with.

A comic perspective helps. Or at least it has helped *me*. It's not so much a cure for the past as it is an *attitude toward it*. And attitude can help get you through the night by not taking yourself and your own misery so seriously. Anyway, we can't be blamed for our families. Hey, if your sister *is* Satan it ain't *your* fault.

I've also learned to think differently about what constitutes "normalcy" in family relationships, if *normalcy* even rhetorically approximates anything near such a dangerous label. The communication scholars Leslie Baxter and Barbara Montgomery (1996) suggested, rather strongly and I think rightly, that "dialectical tensions" are not only present in but also *define* most friendship, romantic, love, and family relationships. The term *dialectical* refers to opposites and *tensions* is academic shorthand for a kind of felt nervousness or anxiety that permeates everyday life. Specifically, Baxter and Montgomery said we suffer "autonomy-connectedness" tensions that make us want to be intimately close but keep our own space; we fret "novelty-predictability" tensions that make us seek out the known safety of routines but then create in us a desire for the wild, the different, the unusual; and we worry over "expressive-protective" tensions that cause us to want to disclose everything about ourselves but need to protect ourselves from what might be done later with that personal information.

It is in the last of these dialectical tensions that I initially found theoretical release. The expressive-protective dialectic was—and is—the "Mother of all tensions" that partially explains my parents. Further reading in the family literature revealed another prism for viewing the dialectical issues of privacy, dubbed by Sandra Petronio (2002) "the dialectics of disclosure." In her elaborately organized communication privacy management theory, every family develops rules for the maintenance of its secrets, with whom they might be privately shared and under what conditions. Her communication privacy management theory also adopts Anita Vangelisti's (1994; Vangelisti & Coughlin, 1997; Vangelisti, Crumley, & Baker, 1999) findings about how family secrets function to orient family members toward each other's roles, functions, stories, and identities within the unit. Transgressions contribute to what Petronio called "boundary turbulence," which is a term capable of

describing a range of unwanted or unwarranted disclosures of family business. But there is no term in her communication privacy management theory for the long-term effects of an *absence of disclosure*, for uneasy secrets that remain uneasy and secret, for known dishonesty that is never made right, for lies that echo.

This echo, it seems to me, and at least in my life, creates a turbulence of a very different kind.

* * *

Which brings me right back to the idea of narrative inheritance.

My parents lived in a relationship that thrived on dialectical tensions and boundary management issues; only I didn't know that then and neither did they. But knowing it now may help me understand them better. For one thing, it helps me appreciate the delicate balance in my father's decision to not tell me who he was or what he really did, but to leave me a diary that told part of it. If ever I had evidence of this expressive-protective dialectic in his relationship with me, there it is. That I buried it in a wooden box and that the box was stolen along with everything else is a loss I cannot repair, a dialogue I can never really have. But it is a narrative, a life story, I can rebuild. It is a broken thing that I can, with this project, help to make whole again.

For too many years I have blamed my father for what became of us. I had been ashamed of him. I was ashamed of my mother too, although I had a somewhat better—and longer—relationship with her. But a family narrative is a shared system and I, too, have to accept responsibility for *my* part of our family story and for *my* complicity in our miniculture of family secrets. I also have to admit, again from a comic perspective, that I must have been a *fool*. There were so many clues to his identity that I failed to read and so many questions I just never asked. Those failures are part of this story, part of my contribution to the family that must be accounted for, and even laughed at. I mean, *really*, how many ordinary government workers keep bullets and a gold stiletto in their jewelry boxes?

Broadening my view of family also has shown me the need, the wisdom, of including the further influences of grandparents and even great-grandparents on the narrative evolution of a family story. After all, my father and mother had their narrative inheritances, too. These inheritances reach much further back in place and time, through story lines that travel through family genealogies and social histories to whatever distant memory first gave birth to our original forebears' tale. But my point here is that my parents collectively had an extraordinary life before I was born, and individually, they had remarkable—if even more mysterious—lives prior to that. The story I have to tell is, therefore, part of a pattern of secrecy, and of a family, as it was written into *their* earlier lives.

* * *

Eric Eisenberg (2001) has proposed a theory of identity that “connects a person’s communicative choices with their personal narratives, their personal narratives with their bodily experience of emotionality and mood, and each of the above with the environmental resources available for the creation and sustenance of particular identities” (p. 542). Eisenberg began his account with the idea of a “surround”:

At birth, each of us emerges from the womb into a social world already in motion, complete with preexisting languages, relationships, social networks, and culturally-prescribed patterns of behavior. In this sense, the world is external to the individual, inasmuch as the traces of other people, both living and dead, exert an influence on each of our lives. (p. 543)

Eisenberg (2001) then continued his explanation with a connection that many people, as well as many scholars, find troubling, but whose commingling in our experience of life cannot be denied—the ways in which biology, economy, mood, and story interact in the formation of identity. It is the biology part that is perhaps most troubling, but there is no point in denying that we do inherit genetic predispositions as well as our economic status in the world, and many of us suffer anxiety, fear, loneliness, and crippling depression that unless properly treated (which assumes the economic means and technological know-how to do so), seriously interferes with how we interact with others or learn to think about ourselves.

When I think about what my father and mother inherited, both narratively and genetically, and when I consider the probable impact of world war and its resultant experimental pharmacology on my father, or what he went through every day of his clandestine life, or the demands of being a State Department wife in the 1950s and resultant mental illness of my mother, to say nothing about my parents deepening troubles with alcohol, I can better understand their “surround.” I can better appreciate how uncertainty and despair filtered into their silences and shaped their perceived need for keeping secrets, managing boundaries, pretending that some things never happened. I now find in my heart a sympathy, and a compassion for them, to replace what for too long I didn’t understand and so glossed over as shame.

* * *

In an NPR interview by Bob Edwards (2002), the fine Carolina writer Pat Conroy said that when he initially wrote about his own father in *The Great Santini*, he thought he did it because he hated him. But what he discovered instead was that he was writing *to have a relationship with him*.

I was driving home from work when I heard the interview and that sentiment stunned me. I, too, am doing research for a book about my father—and doing it not because I hated him—I didn’t hate him, I felt sorry for him and alienated from him. But when I heard Conroy speak, I realized that I, too,

wanted to have a relationship with him. And I wanted our son Nic to have a tie to him, a coherent story about my parents and, I suppose, also about me.

The relationship I had with my father had not been enough. The time I had with him had not been enough time. And he died—whether in Maryland or Virginia—before we finished any of our conversations or had a fair chance to have the really important ones.

I miss him.

I miss the *truth of him* in my life. To get to those truths I have had to open up his secrets, the secrets that poisoned our relationship but may now heal it and perhaps, help others. At least, that is my hope.

That is my exigency.

This story is my narrative inheritance.

NOTES

1. The complete manuscript is *In Search of My Father's Shadow: Uncovering the Secret Life of a Cold War Family* (Goodall, 2004).

2. The CIA was chartered in 1947. The “contacts division” was used to generate intelligence from immigrants, refugees, businesspersons, and military personnel returning from overseas. Contact officers were strategically placed in a variety of government agencies, including the Veterans Administration.

3. I have since learned that this assignment involved working closely with William Colby to develop and deploy counterintelligence for the purpose of turning the elections in 1956 away from the Communists and toward the more centrist Christian Democrats while at the same time bringing the Italian Socialists into the government. It was a highly successful campaign. My father was rewarded with a transfer to London, where he could follow his intelligence leads about whom H. A. R. “Kim” Philby was really working for. Colby (1978) was rewarded with what he called in his memoirs, his “dream assignment” to Southeast Asia. He later served as the director of central intelligence from 1973 to 1976. His revelations of “the family jewels”—the illegal, covert, and clandestine operations carried out by the agency—were provided at the request of President Gerald R. Ford and were later included in his testimony before the Senate Select Committee on Government Intelligence Activities (known as the Church committee because its chair was Senator Frank Church of Idaho).

4. The term refers to someone either alleged or caught performing covert or clandestine operations in another country. My father was declared *persona non grata* because of his work in East Berlin in the spring of 1960. He was brought “home” and reassigned. The specific location of his reassignment is a clear indication of James Jesus Angleton’s decision to effectively encourage my father to end his career. It may also be read as a sign that Angleton was displeased with my father’s continuing pursuit of Philby, whom Angleton had personally vetted. Philby officially announced his defection to the Soviet Union in July of 1963. My father’s judgment was vindicated, but his exile in Wyoming continued. Angleton had been deeply embarrassed by Philby’s defection. One can only speculate about his personal motives in keeping my father away from Washington, D.C.

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H. L. Goodall Jr. is professor and director of The Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University, P. O. Box 871205, Tempe, AZ 85287-1205; e-mail: Bud.Goodall@ASU.edu.