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SEARCHING FOR OUR FATHERS

By Don Hudson

I tried to find out for myself, from the start, when I was a child, what was right and what was wrong—because no one around me could tell me. And now that everything is leaving me I realize I need someone to show me the way and to blame me and praise me, by right not of power but of authority, I need my father.

—Albert Camus, *The First Man*

What do we do with our fathers? They teach us right from wrong; they forsake us. They praise us; they blame us. They show us the way sometimes by power and sometimes by authority. In the end, even the best fathers must leave, and to this day I do not know what is more tragic: losing a bad father or losing a good father. Either way, losing the father is infinitely sad. But there is more. Losing our fathers—whether through death, divorce, disillusionment, abandonment, or abuse—rends our hearts and flings open the door to desire. Even those who say they hate their fathers are captured by their intense desire for their fathers. It seems that we either love them or hate them—or both. We cannot escape our fathers.

Life continues to open me up to search for my father, any father for that matter, and life continues to disappoint me, only to leave me yearning for a father even more. What should I do with my search for the father—that one who will show me the way so I don't have to go at it alone? My desire for a father feels way beyond my control.

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On January 4, 1960, Albert Camus, novelist, essayist, playwright, husband, and father, died in a car accident near Sens, France. He was forty-seven years old and at the height of his career. He had written lucid modern works that grappled with the beauty and tragedy of life. Camus had a clear eye for the human condition. In *The Stranger*, most likely his best work, Camus writes of the alienated existence that every human lives. He invites us to throw off nihilism and absurdism in the name of moral commitment.

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In his essay, *The Rebel*, he warns of the danger that any absolutist philosophy brings whether it be Christian or Marxist. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he reminds us that we should be aware of our condition and boldly rebel through our use of freedom. The absurdity of life provides an opportunity for freedom: the freedom to choose and the freedom to construct one's own value system. In *The Plague*, the absurdity of death and suffering confront humanity. Camus invites us to uphold human dignity, to relieve suffering, and to defy tragedy. In *The Fall*, Camus reminds us that a rational understanding of the universe is beyond our finite grasp.

Death horrified Camus. Absolutism terrified him even more. Suffering grieved him as much as freedom exhilarated him. He felt alone as a human, but he loved making his own way, and he invited us to do the same. In 1957 we rewarded him for his honesty and his profound humanity with the Nobel Prize for literature. When he died, he left behind a wife and two children.

He would leave behind something else too: an autobiographical work in process entitled *The First Man*.¹ The manuscript was found in his briefcase. Camus's widow, fearing harsh criticism from Camus's philosophical enemies, decided not to publish the manuscript but thankfully, his daughter, Catherine optioned to print the unfinished manuscript a few years back. The book follows the tender journey of a man who searches for his father. His journey includes a return to his father's grave (his father had died when the boy was two), the memory of his boyhood growing up among women, and the influence of his teacher, a father, who for just a brief moment of time, set him on his way.

A few months back, I completed reading *The First Man*. I have found that at certain curvatures in my life, what I am reading artfully joins what I am living. I haven't quite determined if the work I am reading speaks to what I am living, or instead, if my present circumstances drive me to the work. I suspect both are true. What has amazed me at times is how the novel I am reading, or the film I am watching, or the music I am listening to speaks to me in my personal conversations.

The quotation at the beginning of this essay is spoken by the main character of Camus's novel, Jacques Cormery. He is a forty-year-old man who visits his father's grave only after his mother's insistence. So begins the quest of searching for his father's identity. Cormery, even though he lost his father when he was just two years old, suspects that his own identity is inextricably entangled in his father's identity. In essence, he never knew his father. He comes to his father's grave to visit a man he knew but could not remember. Standing by the grave he reads the dates on the tombstone, "1885-1914." Cormery realizes that he has never known the date of his father's birth, and when he adds up the years, he was "struck

1. Albert Camus, *The First Man*, trans. by David Hapgood (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

by an idea that *shook his very being*." Suddenly, Cormery was gripped by the idea that "the man buried under that slab, who had been his father, was younger than he." Something about this discovery sets Cormery on the path to know his father who had lived a mere twenty-nine years. "And the wave of tenderness and pity that at once filled his heart was not the stirring of the soul that leads the son to the memory of the vanished father, but the overwhelming compassion that a grown man feels for an unjustly murdered child." Strangely, the son himself experiences the "overwhelming compassion" that a father would feel toward his own son.

Cormery approaches the grave with detachment but walks away with the troubled need to understand this man, this father that he could not recall.

He [Henri, Cormery's father] had died unknown on this earth where he had fleetingly passed, like a stranger. No doubt it was up to him [Cormery] to ask, to inform himself. But for someone like him, who has nothing and wants the world entire, all his energy is not enough to create himself and to conquer or to understand that world. After all, it was not too late; he could still search, he could learn who this man had been who now seemed closer to him than any other being on this earth. He could. . .

These words recall a familiar Camus landscape. Man or woman as stranger, cut off from any certainty of life, gropes for that which will give life meaning. There is no easy faith. Reading Camus, one is awash in mournful desire, feeling unknown and lost. Few writers in the history of humanity show us our utter need as does Camus. He reminds us that as humans we are fleeting, anonymous, strangers, destitute, alone.

But in *The First Man*, ironically, Camus reminds us of another, though less familiar landscape. To the degree that he is desolate is to the degree that he wants the "world entire." He dreams beyond the reality of loss. In the above quotation it is essential to see that I have not broken off the last sentence. The text breaks off here according to Camus's artistry, or perhaps this is a paragraph that Camus never finished. At any rate, the paragraph ends very simply but majestically with "He could. . . ." Emptiness is the threshold to desire; meaninglessness opens the door to the search for meaning. It is when we are fatherless that we quest for the father. Camus's writings manifest this infinite enigma of life. If the father is with us, we have no need of him. It seems to be that only when the father (finality, meaning, certainty) is gone that we search for him.

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I went back home to see my father this past summer. At the time, I was reading *The First Man*. I was scheduled to fly back east to administer a wedding for some dear friends. At the last minute I tacked on a four-day visit to spend time with my father. Was it the book? Did Camus nudge me to return?

I think I can say that this last summer was quite simply the worst of my life. My family and I had just moved to the Seattle area to assist in the beginning of a new seminary. We were strangers, we were alone, we were out-of-our-mind pilgrims. The dream of my life had turned into something sensual—I could see it, taste it, feel it. The week that I went back to see my dad, though, the dream was dying. The school was not working out, my wife and I owned two houses, with one on the market that should have sold in days. In a few months, we would be in serious financial problems if not outright bankruptcy. I have worked hard most of my life to guard against loss whether it be career, finances, or relationships. All of these were crumbling.

But there was a deeper, more uncanny struggle. What if I achieve my dream? Will I be happy? Will this make me more content or will it be the doorway to even deeper discontent? Bob Dylan laments on his new CD, *Time out of Mind*, "I have learned that pain is behind every beautiful thing." I felt jammed between the absurdity of failure and the futility of achievement. I was ashamed that I had let myself dream so out of control.

Looking back, I returned to my father to hear him say that I had not made a foolish choice. I wanted him to tell me how to navigate the rough waters. I wanted him to help me get over my disillusionment with others and myself. I needed my father to. . . . But as the days developed, I slowly began to realize that I had come back home a different man with a very different purpose. But more of that later.

. . .

Let's return to the passage at the beginning of this essay. Cormery is ambivalent toward his father. On the one hand, his words speak of a liberation from a man who would limit the child, hold him back, blame him even. There is an exuberance of freedom that the child feels when he makes his own way. Freedom, though, exacts a terrible price. The liberated child yearns for the father, gropes for the father, wants the father to show the way. Camus's words reflect most poignantly what I suspect most of us feel: we want to get away from the father but the further we get away from him, the more we desire him. We cannot live without him and we cannot live with him. His very presence is the *mysterium tremendum*. We are wildly attracted to that which terrifies us; we are repulsed by the very one we yearn for.

However, at the end of this quotation Cormery breaks into a most clarifying moment with the words, "I need my father." Cormery stands at the intersection of a double abandonment. "I tried to find out for myself, from the start. . . and now that everything is leaving me. . . ." But Camus does not have Cormery collapse into the exhaustion and hopelessness of abandonment. Perhaps the most startling words in this whole narrative are these: "I need my father." Everything else in this quote is vintage Camus: loss, abandonment, making one's own way, and forging one's own ethical code.

But in *The First Man*, Camus brings Jacques Cormery back to his father. He brings him back to the brink of desire. If you know Camus's work you understand how radical this is. No longer do we do good works while resigning ourselves to the absurdity of suffering. This is the stoicism of his earlier work. Life teaches me that the father will not come through. Hope reminds me that I still want him. Life teaches me that the father will not be enough. Desire prods me to open my heart to the unknown. "I need my father." Infinite desire collides with an infinite universe.

This past summer I listened to Camus while meditating on fathers: my own father, the men in my life who mentor me as fathers, being a father, my eternal Father. To guide my thoughts I used the opening quote as a template or an outline. Something struck me very deep when I first read that discourse by Cormery. Life had sacramentally prepared me for those words, and I wanted to discover what it was that tugged at me.

Ironically, the entire quotation is a footnote or notation in Camus's rough draft. Would he have left the quote in if he could have finished the manuscript?² I don't know, but the words are raw and close to the bone. "Finding out for myself. . . no one around me could tell me. . . everything is leaving me. . . I need someone. . . someone to show me the way. . . to blame me. . . to praise me. . . I need my father."

In one eloquent paragraph, Camus plunges us into the dark emptiness of abandonment only to bring us back to the incendiary light of desire. If we listen carefully, Camus is telling us the stages of life. We read *The First Man* and we shadow Cormery's journey back to his father: a journey that begins when the father leaves, of a child trying to find his own way for most of his life, of a lost child who is compelled to remember his forgotten father, and then, in the end, the child who searches for his father.

Stage One: The Father Abandons Us

I tried to find out for myself, from the start, when I was a child, what was right and what was wrong—because no one around me could tell me.

WE WANT TO
GET AWAY FROM
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2. Interestingly, Camus's daughter, Catherine, says this in the Editor's Note: "It is obvious that my father would never have published this manuscript as it is, first for the simple reason that he had not completed it, but also because he was a very reserved man and would no doubt have masked his own feelings far more in its final version. . . ." vii., *The First Man*.

LIFE TEACHES ME
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The father leaves or we leave the father. This is the first stage of the journey. In many ways, one's story does not begin until the father is out of the immediate picture. Otherwise we would just hang around the house and do what is necessary. We would bask in the father's presence. We would never be lost. We would not know sin. We would not know redemption. Ironically, we would not seek to know the father. The father's absence casts us out of the garden and into the journey.

This is also one of the great scandals of Christianity: the Deus Absconditus. The God who is hidden. The God who got away. "I will open my mouth in a parable: I will utter dark sayings of old." The God who is there but is hidden. God said to Moses, "And I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen." The Father who will not be cornered. Jesus said to his disciples, "all these things are done in parables: that seeing they may see, and not perceive; and hearing they may hear, and not understand." God has said that he will never leave us or forsake us, but I also know that the Father has been more absent in my life than he has been present. Most days I agree with Camus. I feel abandoned to make my own path. Why won't he reveal himself and show me the way? That is why I wanted a father this last summer when everything was going wrong. I wanted God, my Father, to tell me that I had made the right decision. I wanted my father to tell me that I had not taken a foolish risk. But neither one spoke to this area.

This hiddenness of God is also one of the neglected truths of American pop-oriented Christianity. This is the reason why I would rather listen to Bruce Cockburn or Henry Gorecki than contemporary Christian music. Cockburn and Gorecki have not found the father in a way that corners and captures him. When we limit the father, we limit ourselves; we end the journey. When we pretend that the father is always with us, we become the older brother of the prodigal son, and we stay home and take care of the farm. We learn obedience but we never learn forgiveness. We learn what the father demands, but we never get to know the father's heart. We learn to be content, but we never lose our hearts to desire.

"... [T]o not have is the beginning of desire," said Wallace Stevens. Absence evokes presence. Silence rouses language. Hate begs for love. Hunger demands fulfillment. Losing the father constrains us to yearn for the father. Would we ever search for the father if he were always with us? Losing the father puts us on the path of searching for the father.

In *The Silence of Adam*, I have written about Adam's presence at the temptation but his stubborn silence as he stood before the serpent. Adam was present in body but absent in word. There is

another silence in Genesis 3, though. God is silent too. Why didn't he say something? He knows the future. Why didn't the Father stop his children from such a foolish act that would give birth to a world of suffering and woe? Perhaps he had something else in mind. Though God is not the author of evil, he is a Father who invites his children to the journey—the journey of redemption, the journey of knowing the Father's heart. There is something respectful about God's silence at the temptation. He invites his children to choose, to fail, to sin, to be redeemed. In essence, he invites them to the journey. Camus hits the nail right on the head. The search begins in the absence of God.

He had to leave; there was nothing more for him to do here. But he could not turn away from this name, those dates. Under that slab were left only ashes and dust. But, for him, his father was again alive, a strange silent life, and it seemed to him that again he was going to forsake him, to leave his father to haunt yet another night the endless solitude he had been hurled into and then deserted. Turning his back to the grave, Jacques Cormery abandoned his father.³

Cormery turns from his father's grave and begins the search for his father who "was again alive."

Stage Two: Someone to Show Me the Way

And now that everything is leaving me I realize I need someone to show me the way and to blame me and praise me, by right not of power but of authority.

"Someone to blame me." What a strange way to speak of a father. How could a father who blames show us the way? On one hand, it is easy to understand a father who blames. Almost every one of us knows what it means to be blamed by a father or a father figure. On the other hand, Cormery as a forty-year-old man is saying he needs someone to "blame" him. I dare say that few of us would say that we need a father who would blame us. But we must listen closely to Cormery's words especially in light of the rest of the novel. Cormery grows up in a world without men. Cormery is raised by a stern grandmother and a weak but caring mother. The one man in his childhood is Monsieur Bernard, a teacher who sets the course for his life. He demands much of the young student, and calls him to live a disciplined life. M. Bernard is exacting and relentless. He "blames" Cormery when he fails. In fact, the teacher cuffs Cormery to straighten him out. We want and need a father who will teach us to live. We yearn for men—exacting, relentless men—who will teach us the code: whether it be fly fishing, hunting, dating, marriage, vocation, children. We want a father who will provoke us to more.

THE FATHER'S
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JOURNEY.

3. *The First Man*, 28.

WHEN WE LIMIT
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"Someone to praise me." If blame provokes, then praise evokes. We need a father who knows our story better than we know our own stories. We need a father who can show us the way because he not only knows the way of the Father, but he also knows us well enough to point out our own individual way. Simply put, he intuitively sees our giftedness and our calling. He sees what we are not only to call us but also to be who we really are. My young son begs me to watch him while he practices some childlike feat. I respond with amazement. He glows and begs me to watch him again and again. Are we much different as men and women? We want a father who watches and is amazed. Praising us shows us the way by affirming our unique manner of walking the journey. M. Bernard has a tender relationship with Cormery looking out for this orphan of World War I.

When Jacques at the blackboard had given a good answer and M. Bernard had patted his cheek and a voice in the classroom whispered, "teacher's pet," M. Bernard had pulled him close and said with a kind of solemnity: "Yes, I am partial to Cormery as I am to all those among you who lost their fathers in the war. I fought the war with their fathers and I survived. I try at least here to take the place of my dead comrades."⁴

"... [B]y right not of power but of authority." Again Camus's discernment is razor sharp. There is a world of difference between power and authority. It is the difference between a father who is an authority and a father who is an authoritarian. An authoritarian demands unquestioning obedience as a dictator would demand of his or her subjects. One who practices authoritarianism holds to a belief that the system or the ideology is greater than the individual. Too many children are damaged by the authoritarian father. An authoritarian father provokes the child to anger and eventually to despair.

Authority, however, gives permission. An authority is provocative. A father or authority provokes the child to beauty. We need to recall the root word of authority—"author." In my writing, there are times, especially in my more academic work, that it is important to quote an authority, another author. Authority here does not mean hierarchy but knowledge and experience or wisdom. An authority is one who has gone before me and can help show the way.

A child left alone cannot make his or her own way. This is the arrogance of modernism as well as the arrogance of Camus's early work. Yes, we must make our own way and walk our own journey. The father cannot walk the journey for us. Camus's best work reminds us of the dignity of courageously walking our own path. To ask anyone else to walk the path for us is philosophical suicide. We diminish ourselves and others when we demand that they show

us the way or ask them to walk the path for us. But we need guides. This is the subtlety that Camus seems to come to in this work.

Again we see God's immense respect for our human dignity. He invites us to search for him and to listen to him. Sometimes he blames and sometimes he praises. A father who forces us to walk his path would be an authoritarian. But a father who is an authority gives us the permission and the freedom to author our own stories, to weave our stories with his, and to carry on his story through ours.

Stage Three: Returning to the Father

I need my father.

How many times have I come to the father to ask him to walk my journey? This last summer, I returned to my father so that he would show me the way. I thought "the way" would be his telling me what to do or what would be the *right* decision. I needed my father, yes, but I needed him to do something for me. As I said earlier in the essay though, something else developed during the four-day visit. In the first place, I became truly comfortable with the decisions I had made to move to Seattle and start a seminary. I had taken a risk I believed in. I had pursued the dream of my life. This was my path. Even if my father had told me that I had made the wrong decision, I would have disagreed with him.

Secondly, I wanted my father to tell me that everything would be all right. But no one can do this. In the Bible, God called people to faith, not certainty. We all want a father who gives us certainty, though certainty tears us from faith. Living for certainty assures us that we will be children the rest of our lives and thus never strike out on the journey. There are times we hate the father because he will not or cannot tell us that life won't be wild and dangerous. All of a sudden, I realized that I had come back a different man. So what did I need?

The first day back my father said something very profound and moving. "Son, you will always have a place to stay here if everything goes wrong. We would love to have you." At first I was angry. "Is that all you can say? Is that all you can offer me at this point?" I asked myself. Then slowly the words sank in. I began to slowly discover what I had been looking for. I wanted to be with my father. That was all. The young child says, "I need my father *to do this or that*." "I need my father *for this or that*." In my moment of desperation I was echoing Cormery's cry, "I need my father." For once in my life I did not hate my father because he was not, could not be enough. I did not push him away because he would not walk the path for me. Instead, I embraced his words, and I embraced him.

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4. *The First Man*, 152.

WE WANT A
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For the next three days, we sat together on the front porch of his house and looked over the blue hills of Virginia. We didn't talk much—we didn't have to. By the time I left, the seminary was on, our house was on the market, and I had a contract to teach. But for the first time in my life, I left my father's house still with desire way beyond control, not what he could do for me, but to be with him.

In the Old Testament, to repent is to return. The Hebrew word is *shuv*—"to return." As a result of the Fall, we all hide our faces from one another and from God. To sin is to turn our face away from the father, to be in exile with the mark of Cain. To return is to bring our face back to the Father. If we forge ahead without the Father, we will continue to be lost children wandering in exile. If we bring our faces back to him—which is what our hearts desire—then we will find the one we have been searching for. Camus's Cormery was abandoned by fate, he struck out on his own, and then he came back.

This reminds me of another text. I believe that there is an infinite intertextuality to life. One text echoes another text. Theme calls to theme. "Deep speaks to deep." In other words, Camus's words remind me of the prodigal son's words in Luke 15. Out of the abyss of abandonment the prodigal will return. Many secular existentialists will argue that the Christian's return to the Father is too simplistic and naïve. I would agree with their assessment on every account but this one. It is the prodigal who learns to be a father, is compelled to be a father. It is the son who has lost his way, and in so doing, searches for the way back. By returning to the father he is called not to a life of simplicity but a life of love and responsibility. He is called now to yearn for his children.

Cormery said it so well to Malan, his mentor. "Even the most gifted person needs someone to initiate him. The one that life puts in your path one day, that person must be loved and respected forever, even if he's not responsible. That is my faith!"⁵ Is Cormery speaking of himself or his mentor? To whom is he referring when he says "your"? I see it both ways at once. The father is responsible for the child, and the child is responsible for the father. Can the child love the father when the father abandons and betrays? Can the father love the child when *he or she* abandons and betrays?

Camus leaves us with desire, with the search. Returning to the father opens our hearts to the world. Returning brings us back only then to send us out in love. How can I love unless I let myself be loved? It is not enough to say that I need my father. I will take one more step. I want my father. This opens my heart to a world of hurt but much more importantly, infinite possibilities. Even when he is silent, when he ignores me, abandons me, betrays me—I still want him. I cannot escape my thirst for him. The subtle beauty of

5. *The First Man*, 33.

the story of the prodigal son is the "moving toward" of both father and son. There really is somewhere to go in the most confounding moments of life. The father is looking for the child; the child must only return. Revelry awaits the return of the child.

Then I will say with the dissolute, lost son: "I will get up and return to my father, and I will say to him. . . ." I will let him put his arms around me. I will party with the father. I will let him enjoy me, and I will enjoy him. And then I will go out from the father's presence to be a father, to make my way and to show the way, to need and be needed. Father and son living in one heart.

"Go my son," said M. Bernard. Jacques, trembling, went to the door, and, as he was going through it, he turned back to his teacher. He was there, big, solid; he was smiling calmly at Jacques and nodding reassuringly.^{6,7}



6. *The First Man*, 156.

7. I want to thank Jim Vescovi for his invaluable critique. Also, thanks to Wes Roberts who invited me back to the Father at a key moment in my life.

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CERTAINTY
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