

Kaddish

My father was a man of mythic proportions.

"Whenever Ed Johnson entered a room you knew he was there," his mother, my Grandma Mary, would often say. Because he'd let everybody know when he arrived, whether by a boisterous series of greetings, or more often, by singing at full voice something profane or profound. With his deep baritone voice and 6' height, 200 lb. frame, he burst into a room, full of himself, and most everyone there would be grateful he'd come.

He was a charmer, an entertainer, an iconoclast, an original.

He was the kind of dad other kids wished they had as a dad.

In many ways, he was a big, noisy boy, a man who never grew up, and his children, and I suspect many an adult, loved him for that. He was always fresh energy and, as my cousin Nancy once said, the first hippie before there were ever hippies.

He was a businessman who owned his own business and therefore his life. He never wore ties except when he absolutely had to, and he was outrageously irreverent in private and in public, a source of constant embarrassment to my mother but a secret delight to us children.

At the prime of his life, at 45, the father of five children, of which I was the second, he was killed on February 12, 1966, Lincoln's birthday; like Lincoln, the victim of gunshot wounds. He had re-entered a grocery store from which he had just bought some food for a camping trip with his girl friend of some years (whose presence in my dad's life, of course, eventually led to his divorce).

He'd returned to the store, apparently to see what was going on or to stop what was transpiring. He had heard some "pop pop" sounds from the store, and as he went back in he stood in the way of the two ski-masked kids running out. They, having taken the till of some \$28, shot him in the chest three times.

Born Oscar Edward Johnson, Jr., on October 8, 1920, in his parents' house on Taylor Street in Northeast Minneapolis, he was the third child and only son of Mary Pupp Johnson and Oscar, Sr., an engineer of steam locomotives for the Soo Line.

Though he refused to attend the private school his older sisters graduated from, knowing how much that cost his parents during the Depression, but also wanting to impress the girls at Marshall High by being able to play football and star in the amateur musical productions, he was the be-all and end-all of the Johnson household, the center of his parents' and sisters' and friends' attentions.

If you had to sum him up, he was, throughout his life, a constant receiver and yet seeker of approval and attention, and a bundle of guilts. His high school annual praises his musical talent as piano player and singer (but less so his football prowess, a sport that gave him a broken nose and little else, a nose that was always a bit off center the rest of his life).

And his mother would later often tell anyone who'd listen that Ed was a faithful Episcopal acolyte, a good boy who helped Father Grier with the mass each Sunday. A boy who had a father who could be very stern or very forgiving, depending on the circumstance. When Ed burned a park bench for a weenie roast, his father let him spend the night in jail to think about it. But when in some foolishness Ed made a total wreck of the family Ford, its prized and hard-won possession, miraculously killing nobody in the event, my Grandpa Oscar took one look at my father, who had to explain what happened, and apparently my dad was so terrified and ashamed that Oscar said, "You've been punished enough," and left it at that.

I'd be a beneficiary of that moment, when, as a 5-year-old, I pushed my sister Susan's head through a window, causing her to bleed profusely from the head. I thought I had killed her, though, thank God, it was a small gash to the forehead. My mother took Susan to the hospital, with blood all over a towel held to her head, and my world had come to an end. I remember "hiding" next to my Red Ryder wagon that I hauled stuff around in, cowering next to the wall of our house, next to the brick exterior of the chimney that served the family fireplace, imagining beyond imagining the punishment I would get at the hands of my father. When he came home and found me there, shriveled, miserable and helpless, he took one look at me and said, "You've been punished enough."

My father married my mother, Mary Jane Palmer, when he was 19 and she 21. They eloped, with only my mother's mother present, Bernadina, born van der Haegen, later shortened to Verhagen, in Antwerp, Belgium, an opera singer at one time with the New York Met chorus and a romantic who'd married my grandfather after just a three-week whirlwind courtship in Spokane. She thus understood things like passion and the forgivable foolishnesses of youth.

Ed Johnson's death was premature and senseless, and I suppose I have never really come to terms with it. If truth be told, however, until he died my life, as it was with my brothers Paul and Eric and sisters Susan and Sylvia in varying degrees, was oriented towards pleasing him. Not that I didn't have the freedom to choose things as I wanted. For example, when I quit the undergraduate program at the University of Minnesota that would have led to my becoming a doctor and decided to study languages, I was afraid he'd be disappointed and even angry. But he took that in stride, saying "I'd love ya if ya washed dishes, if that's what you wanted to do."

Shortly after he died I was accepted by both Yale and Harvard by their graduate schools, both offering generous fellowships. I was sad that I couldn't tell him of that

triumph. But also, after he died I felt a certain guilt-inducing kind of liberation: I would live my life without having to look over my shoulder to see if he approved; and so the guilt from that feeling, too, has contributed to my not coming to terms with his death. *[editorial note: that sentiment was true when I wrote this in the 1990s; now at 74, closer to my own death, there is serenity in knowing I will join up with him in whatever state of being or non-being that may be, there is nothing for me to come to terms with — I see him in my future, not my past].*

I tried at first. As an immediate way of dealing with my grief, I sought to collect the images of him that existed among his surviving friends and family. I asked them to send letters. I got some, but didn't do anything with them. But back in 1966 I had written this prologue to that effort, before I did nothing with the letters:

"My father was a man who had his ghosts. One of them was his Aunt Amalia. She was a gentle-looking woman who used to come back from his happy boyhood days on the farm to haunt him in a friendly if somewhat persistent way.

"In the middle of some big decision or sitting late at night in the darkness of the living room smoking a pipe (you could always hear it clink against the ashtray as he went off to bed) he would suddenly be confronted with her presence, and he'd talk things over with her. Out loud. Who knows, perhaps that little framed picture of her was his last great source of comfort and inspiration, a place to hang his secret thoughts and fears. It meant a lot to him, anyway, that picture. He wept when his mother gave it to him. He had not been able to recollect all her features, and seeing her again must have brought him a little closer to his beloved aunt and ghost.

"Now he spends eternal summers on that farm of hers and gets a little bored from time to time, so he comes around here to see how things are. He gets in the way, but you don't mind. Still, it's not always that pleasant having a ghost drop in on your thoughts, whenever he feels like it, demanding attention. He barges in with snow or mud on his hiking boots, singing loudly, carrying a bag or a crate of something he has just picked up down at the tracks. (He was a produce broker and often came home with crates of grapes or plums or cantaloupe or strawberries -- we had fruit all over the place!) He never shuts the door gently! After a hearty and hasty meal he has to have something with chocolate sauce poured all over it, or several graham crackers with peanut butter on them.

"It's for him and not the earthly man who was my father that this is written. When I'm finished, maybe his ghost will go back to the farm and just come by on weekends, like other civilized people.

"My father hated to save old photographs, albums, letters, etc., precisely because the happiness of those things past was gone forever. He liked Philip Wylie's phrase, 'Let the dead bury the dead,' and he believed we have to live for now, for the living, always.

"But, ironically, for him the dead also survived in the present: Aunt Amalia was probably more important to him in his later years than in his boyhood. But he seldom dared to look at something old which he was throwing away, it was always 'Let's get this crap out of here and burn it!' That proves just how deeply sentimental he was. What for others might be simply happy memories were for him unbearable losses, great pieces of himself irretrievably floating down the river of time. He was fascinated by Thomas Wolfe's novel on that very subject, *Time and the River*.

"In a rare mood of touching sentiment he once remarked to me: 'I used to look at your big wide eyes when you were just a baby, and I'd be late for work, I would just have to stand there and look at you. Those big dark eyes staring up at me, I'd wanna bust, I loved you so much. I don't see now how I made it to work. Just once I should have stayed home.' Unforgettable words of tender happiness mixed with regret.

"Sometimes he gave you the feeling his best days were before you were born or when you were just a small child. But I think I know better now. He was simply somebody else then. His present self burning the death of his earlier self. Like all men, he had died many deaths in his lifetime. And his ghost is calling on me to summon his many lives to appear again, to gather together the stories of those who knew him for his grandchildren, who will know the giant he was by the different measures taken by us dwarves.

"He would have loved to end his life surrounded by new life, a gray-haired man with lots of his children's children at his feet and in his lap. The more his life was clouded over with care, the more he would exert himself to be gay, loud, singing. The lonelier he got the more he needed people, lots of people around him. 'L'chaim! To life, to life, l'chaim!' he used to gleefully shout with that other Fiddler on the Roof. He wanted life simple, straightforward. He was 'Ed' to everybody, hated business suits and ties, and was happiest when he could 'make like Heidi's grandfather and go inspect the leaves' on a beautiful afternoon.

"His biggest pleasure was the outdoors, where he could sprawl out on a picnic table and 'conk out' for a while. The food tasted good outdoors, too, especially hot coffee: 'Baaa-aaaah, geez that's good coffee!'

"Bad coffee was always 'battery acid,' and anything mixed together was 'gunk'. This is how I remember him, forever alive, forever young.

"For me this is a modest monument to the man we all loved so much as son and father, as brother, husband, and friend, as a teacher and a mystery, as a man. May this be worthy of your bones, your immortal soul, dear father of my blood, bones and soul, my thoughts and feelings, great man!"

I guess you could say, since I never read this without tears, that in some way I did come to terms with his death.

But I know that isn't so. Sometimes I think his ghost has simply inhabited me, and the frail, introspective, overly sensitive, skinny me that was there when he died gladly abandoned the shell of my body and turned it over to my dead father. So maybe that has been grief's wages in all this.

Still, I tried again to revive that moment and meaning of his departing, recently, on the eve of the 30th anniversary of his death. Here's what an older me had to say about him, somebody who is now eight years older than the father I lost at age 22:

* * *

Ed Johnson did not believe in dwelling too long on those who had passed on. I remember a time, when I was just out of high school and getting settled into the routines of college, when a kid in my high school class by the name of Bill Wolfe died at age 19 of cancer. Bill was a great drummer, a short guy with a ready smile and joke, always acting up and trying to please, in the way of short people.

His brother Steve was in my brother Paul's class and a good friend of Paul's, as were Steve and Bill's parents, the salt of the earth. It was the first time I experienced premature death this up close. After his funeral my Dad said this, "You don't have to mourn for Bill, Larry, he is at peace, he is now forever free of pain. He has gone home to God." Pointing to his grief-stricken parents, he said, "Those are the people you have to mourn. They're walking away from here with a big hole in their hearts. But don't feel sad for Bill, he's just fine."

Words I would remember when my father died.

It was only a year before my dad died that we children learned that for 13 years he had been living a dual life, that in all this time he had maintained an affair with Pat Scott, a woman he had gotten to know in a church choir. She grew up in Winnipeg, Canada, of Scottish parents.

When my Dad picked Paul or me up somewhere in his sports car (he always drove sports cars with room for two up front, and a small kid scrunched up in the back, Triumphs [TR2, TR3] were his favorites, he also owned in between there a Porsche, and finally, a Morgan, he loved speed, drove recklessly, and usually alone. To my mom was left a workhorse Chevy station wagon which had room for everybody.

When he'd pick us up after a choir practice or rehearsal for some civic opera or community theater thing he was in, Pat Scott was often in the car with him, his "friend," and we never gave it much thought when we were along for the ride. Though Paul would sometimes drive Dad's car on a date (that my Dad would allow), and he would find cigarette butts in the ash tray with lipstick on them, and wonder...

Anyway, just before I left to study a year in Berlin at age 21, my mother told me Dad had been having this affair for some years, and that she had silently borne the cross of that knowledge, not wanting to divorce Dad for the sake of us kids. I understood her misery, and I realized while I would be in Berlin something might happen, as it did, they divorced while I was gone. So for years my Dad led a secret life, and I thought then, as I do now, that he died with many secrets, and maybe I never really knew the man.

[editorial note: does anybody really get to know anybody other than how they want you to know them?]

The last time my dad got really angry with me is when I wrote letters from Berlin to my siblings and grandparents, trying to rally them to take steps to stop the divorce and bring the parents back together again. Dad intercepted my letter to his parents, Grandpa Oscar and Grandma Mary, so they never saw it. He wrote me a furious letter, telling me to mind my own business, that I was acting like a holier-than-thou, moralizing horse's ass. He resented my adding fuel to a fire that was already hot enough. Some day I would know more about life, but for now just stay out of his.

He was right, of course. I can't remember what I wrote back, but I did back off.

All was forgiven after the divorce happened and Dad had a life he probably always wanted, on his own and free. I will never forget the huge bear hug he gave me when I saw him again after being away for a year abroad. He was seated at his piano in the cozy bachelor pad he had devised for himself, just one flight up over his office in the big house-turned-into-various-rental-units he called the "Queen Mary."

He was cursing and fighting the piano as usual to get it to behave the way he wanted to, dressed, as he often was, in an open-collar white shirt. When I walked in on him, he saw me, his mouth gaped for a second before letting out a shout of glee ("There he is!!"), he jumped up from the piano bench, ran to me, and enfolded me in his big arms with a hearty, joyous gusto.

If I were to name the most lasting image I have of him, it would probably be that moment. We laughed and sang and drank, just so happy to share the same room together again. I had missed him terribly.

On February 12, 1966, Lincoln's birthday (another great man felled by a senseless bullet!) I was over at my fiancée Hita's parents house. That afternoon, after classes Hita and I jumped into her old 1954 Chevrolet and drove to her house, to grab an amorous moment before her parents came home. It was a frequent routine. She'd then start dinner and do the dishes from the night before, and I began to read my homework upstairs in her bed.

Later, Papi, her father, would arrive home from work, say hi, and do his usual routine, which was to make a batch of manhattans for before-dinner cocktails. He made the

perfect manhattan (by adding a little cherry juice to the mix), made it in a way that was better than any manhattan I'd ever had before or since.

At about 8:00 PM the phone rang, and Papi said it was for me, it was my Uncle Doug (married to Helen, my Dad's sister). I went to the phone and cheerily said, "Hi, Uncle Doug, how are you?", wondering why he would be calling me at the von Mendes, he'd never done that before. He said, "Larry, something's happened to your dad, you better come over here right away. Come to your dad's office now." There was something so grave and shaken in his voice, I knew something terrible had happened, I could just see it: Dad had finally crashed in one of his sports cars, and he was seriously hurt.

I said, "Doug, what's happened, tell me now." And he said, "Larry, are you sitting down, you better sit down." Then I knew it was not only terrible, he was dead. "Just tell me what happened...is he dead?" And with a quivering voice, he said "Yes." And I felt all the stars fall and the world swallow itself and pull away from me, leaving me faced with the impossible, the unbelievable. I don't know if I said anything then, I know there were a lot of "No's" in it. Then this to Doug: "What happened, tell me what happened..."

And I sensed Mami and Papi and Hita suddenly sensing the gravity of the situation, stopping everything and standing frozen, staring at me. "Your father was shot by a couple of kids at the grocery store at 50th and Xerxes. They were all hopped up on something, they say your dad was trying to talk to the kids, to stop the holdup, and they just shot him as they ran out of there. Pat Scott was with him. He died in her arms. I'm sorry, Larry, I'm so sorry..." And he and I then just cried together.

I hung up the phone, and I remember going into the von Mende's kitchen and hanging on to the refrigerator, and wailing God only knows what, it was so unreal, I couldn't believe it.

At the corner of 50th and Xerxes, at a place we kids knew as Grossman's, where every week we'd go in and buy groceries and charge it and come home, the store right next to Hansen's Pharmacy, where I tried to drink malted milks my mother gave me money for to fatten me up, where Paul and his friends used to hang out for hours, reading comic books off the stands and then putting them back, as they drank cherry cokes or lime rickeys...this little hub of Southwest Minneapolis, this crime-free white Protestant middle class neighborhood...the scene of a holdup, with my father dead as bystander.

I got more details from the father of my classmate Tommy Myers, who witnessed the whole thing. In the days of grief that followed, he came by our house and felt he had to tell us how it all happened. And, of course, eventually, from Pat Scott, who had to witness this awful event, I got her perspective.

Here is what happened: He and Pat were going to spend a weekend camping or shacking up somewhere (more likely, it was hellishly cold that night). They stopped to

buy some groceries. They had left the store and were about to get back in his car when he suddenly heard the popping sounds of .22 caliber gunfire go off from within the store.

It sounded like firecrackers, but he knew what it was. So he slowly, deliberately put down the sack of groceries on the hood of the car, heaved a sigh, looked up at the sky, and turned around to go back in the store.

My dad always felt he had to intervene in fights and stop them. He even once waded into Lake Harriet to stop two dogs from tearing each other apart, miraculously not getting bitten himself! And as he re-entered the store these two ski-masked kids came running in his direction, having gotten all of some \$28 from the till, and my imposing big father suddenly stood in their way. He never even got a chance to speak to the kids, they shot him point-blank then and there, and escaped.

His last words, "Oh, my God. My God!"

The kids were never caught. As teenagers they never would have served jail time.

And all for \$28.

He had on his hiking boots and in his pocket a black billfold he had carried for years. Paul still has the billfold. And we made sure the funeral parlor buried Dad with those boots on! When he'd send me letters to Berlin, which was often, he'd usually include a \$10 or \$20 bill, and he'd end his letters by saying, "Well, I got to go find Heidi's grandfather and inspect the leaves." He loved the special quiet of lone walks in the woods.

He loved to tromp through forests and set up illegal campsites, usually along the St. Croix river, far from the officially approved campsites. Once, he took Paul and a bunch of his friends to a secluded woods, to give them a real camping experience. A state trooper or game warden or some kind of park official came upon them and told them he had to leave. He took the guy aside and slipped him a \$20 bill, telling him he was trying to show the kids some real nature, and to leave them alone. The guy took the bribe and left.

My father always had a pleasant way of breaking all the rules.

As a kid in high school, he once chopped up a park bench to make a campfire. For this he had to spend a night in jail. My Grampa Oscar didn't come to bail him out until the next day, figured a night in jail would do the kid good. I doubt if it did!

And so, Paul and I wanted him buried with his tromping boots on, so he could be equipped to look for Heidi's grandfather and the leaves in Elysium. I'm not worried about him, he's at peace, he has gone home to God. My tears are for me, for Mom, and Paul

and Sue and Sylvia and Rick. And for all the many people who were touched and made different by him, by the people who would often say to me when they learned Ed Johnson was my father, "You mean he is *your dad*, no kidding!" As if I were related to a rock star. And, in fact, I was.

He sent me a number of tapes he recorded when I was in Berlin, he loved the chance to sing and play some of the new songs he was learning, and he'd have people come to the microphone to say hi, my sisters and brothers, and even Hita, who had become my fiancée just before I left for Berlin.

These tapes reveal a jolly, thoughtful, sentimental father. At one time many years later, at Paul and Tracey's house, Paul brought the tapes out and started to play them. I got to crying, and I couldn't hear them, I had to make Paul turn off the tape recorder. It was only a few years ago I could listen to them all again, and it was like magic, he was in the room again, full of life and vitality, enjoying himself immensely, and sending me, in so many slow passages of his giving, for the first time, some of his intimate thoughts, and he was there again, so alive. This time, there were no tears.

So I'm glad that those tapes are there. His grandchildren, whom he would so have loved on his lap -- he talked often about that -- have the shadow of the man in their DNA, he lives on in their genes.

There are moments when my 17-year-old son Jesse does something that I have to take a second look at...it is the movement of my dad, his gesture, his laugh...passing through from Oscar to Edward to me to him...life's wonderful chain!

Or as Goethe put it:

Was unterscheidet
Götter von Menschen?
Daß viele Wellen
Von jenen wandeln,
Ein ewiger Strom:
Uns hebt die Welle,
Verschlingt die Welle,
Und wir versinken.

Ein kleiner Ring
Begrenzt unser Leben,
Und viele Geschlechter
Reihen sich dauernd
An ihres Daseins
Unendliche Kette.

Translation:

What distinguishes
Gods from men?
That many waves
Evolve from the former,
An eternal river:
But the wave lifts us up,
The wave swallows us,
And we sink.

A small ring
Encompasses our life,
And many generations
Row upon row continuously gather
To the infinite chain
Of their being.

In some ways, my father's death became a liberation. Only in his absence did I realize how almost everything I did was aimed to please him. His approval was the sunshine of my life, I went extra miles to gain it.

Paul did the same thing. Everything Paul discovered, from a boy bringing home turtles to his homework assignments in high school and college, went into Dad's mill for reworking and approval. Paul's sun rose and set with Dad. When Paul suddenly decided to marry his first wife Alice in 1962, almost in secrecy, the only ones present were my father and mother, and his best friend. I was in California, mooching off a rich aunt, getting tanned by a pool, unaware of the wedding until the very day it happened.

Dad taught us how to sing and laugh, how to help strangers, how to cheer up the gloomy, how to see life in all its colors and rejoice in them, how to show an irreverent reverence to God (of his times in church, he used to bellow out in a big bass voice, mimicking a famous black gospel singer and booming his words: "Ah came here to SING!"), how to cook a steak in the woods and relish it, how to swim, how to order food in a restaurant, how to treat women kindly (in words if not always in deed!), how to respect old people (he'd often take his parents to the Episcopal church, much against his druthers, to "bow and scrape" with them, followed by Sunday homemade bread and jam and non-stop monologues from my talkative sparrow of a Grandma Mary), how to make "gunk" out of whatever leftovers were in the refrigerator, how to make "battery acid" coffee, and to sense melancholy in his late-night musings, as he sat in his favorite chair, in the dark, smoking a pipe and communing with the mystical influence of his life, his beloved aunt from childhood, who must have soothed and nurtured him in a million ways, his beloved Aunt Amalia.

He taught us poetry and awe before mystery, he gave us the courage to be clowns and iconoclasts, to be originals.

He gave us life.

I miss you, dear Father, but know you are there! You crawled into my veins and soul and sent me on the stage, to play the buffoon, the lover, the caring parent in Tevye,. When I play your favorite songs and your beloved Brahms on the piano, I feel you there, playing along, having a good joke on me, using me in your premature reincarnation!

As we once sang the Messiah together on your piano bench, so I sing it now, leaving a little space for you on my left, hearing your voice.

Sister Sylvia once asked me if I didn't think I was beginning to live my life in imitation of you. It would be easy to tell if it were just that. Often I feel as if, like a virus commandeering a cell, you have missed the Earth and decided to come back by inhabiting me. I resisted having your ghost come back, but you came back, anyway, you pulse through my genes and have parked your gear.

I accept it and welcome you. I have lived enough of my life for my own approval, and feel, now 7 years older than you when you died, the sager of us two. Like those grateful people stuck in the snows who thought they had been saved by your "brother" Paul and you in your unique red Jeep with its beak of a snowplow -- so out of place in yuppie Southwest Minneapolis! -- like them, I sense you now more as a brother than a father, and a younger brother, at that!

As I wrote so many years ago, I repeat those words now on this, the eve of the 30th anniversary of your sudden departure:

I am the blood of your blood, the bones of your bones, soul of your soul, great man!

As tomorrow approaches, I plan to say Kaddish, the Jewish day of dedication and prayer for a dead father, said in the temple on the anniversary of a father's death, when you shut everything down to meditate on the loss.

Oseh shalom bimromav, hu ya'aseh shalom, aleinu v'al kol Y'srael, v'imru, imru, amein:
He who makes peace in His high places, may he make peace for us and for all Israel;
and say you Amen.

On the Internet I found another Kaddish, and it could just as well have been written for Dad:

Kaddish - Robert Jacobs

Like Lazarus come back from the dead,
my father rises up in my soul,
wearing the same dazed look
he so often wore in life;
in torn grave rags he dances,
his heavy belly sways
to music's beat.

My father, scorned in his own house,
dancing, whirling, smiling,
kicks his legs back and forth,
toes to heels and waves his arms about;
the music swells,
Procession of the Sardar.

I am tossed about,
spectator in a whirling, sweaty crowd,
my father weaves his way in & out
the hastily cobbled levitical feast,
he tolls his pendulous belly,
he beats the earth with naked feet;
closer, closer he pirouettes,
face-to-face
his presence fills me;

I grab for daylight's railing.
"You once told me," I cry,
"That you wanted Valse Triste
for your funeral..."

Music's clamor drowns me out,
he shrugs, whirls on,
the corners of my mouth gather
the salt of tears.

Wonderfull!