

ARTHUR CLIFFORD HARRISON

My Father

Born 10th May 1911 Died 29th June 2003

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One afternoon there is a phone call to tell me that my 91 year old father has taken to his bed because he feels too tired to get up any more, and he is also losing his appetite. My father lives alone, very independently, close to his 'roots' in the North East of England since my mother's death 22 years ago. I live and work 290 miles away, and usually visit him for a long weekend every month.

As I make the journey to see him the following day, I know that my father is not himself asking me to come. I reflect on our "father-daughter" relationship and how he is always at pains to reassure me he is perfectly all right on his own. Perhaps there is something characteristic about this special generation of old people born at the beginning of the last century that makes them particularly independent and proud. They have lived through a World War, even two, a long time before the National Health Service and the welfare state was introduced. They really had to learn to "stand on their own feet."

My father has had a wonderful life and has really rich memories. He is the youngest of six children, born to a Hartlepool couple, William and Ann Harrison (nee Thompson). He was born at home on 10th May 1911 and there was some concern over his health as a newborn, however he is nearly 92 and has always had wonderful health. There were 20 years between the firstborn child and the last born and they are affectionately known as "Alpha" and "Omega"!

As he grows into old age, my father loves to relate all the family stories and I cherish our time together. I am now studying the Hellinger work and am astonished that he has no need to learn. A particular ritual that gives him great pleasure is to tell me all the family members using their full names and all in their order. They are all dead now. This ritual brings them all to each of our "family meetings", making sure no-one is missed out, and I feel very grateful to be a member of this large family: "*Via the soul, the living and the dead continue to be in contact*" (page 101, *Images of the Soul*).

He tells me that the family always call their parents "Mother" and "Father". Never any other form of address. Once out of curiosity he asked his mother how she came to meet his father. He learns that questions like this are not to do with him and he never gets an answer. Hellinger believes that it burdens children to know about their parents' happiness or unhappiness in their relationship to one another and the parents shouldn't tell a child anything about their intimate relationship. It's none of the children's business (page 206 *Loves Own Truths*).

A cousin called Alice Maude Hill also lives with the family. She takes on the role of looking after Cliff, and putting him to bed each night listens to his prayers, "*God bless Father, Mother, Grandfather, Alice, brothers, sister, aunts, uncles, everybody, and please make Clifford a good boy*".

Great Grandpappy Thompson, Cliff's mother's father, who also lives with the family, lives to the healthy old age of 98. He is still apparently riding a bicycle at that age. We are not sure how he died.

Cliff met Betty, my mother, when they were very young schoolchildren because the Glovers live in the same street, and he generally walks to school with her older brother.

Thomas William Glover, born August 1882 (also known as "Confucius") and his wife Elizabeth have four children, Esther Bell, the first, Thomas Anthony, the second, Dorothy the third, and Elizabeth or Betty the youngest. Very sadly, Dorothy was to die of peritonitis in 1925 when only 14 years old.

The families grow up together and after a somewhat tempestuous courtship Betty, the youngest of the Glover family, marries Cliff, the youngest of the Harrisons on 9th May 1936 at St Hilda's Church. Their honeymoon is spent at a hotel called "Stormy Hall": an apt choice for a couple whose marriage appears to thrive on friction! They do go on to celebrate their golden wedding together.

I am born on New Year's Day 1937, arriving prematurely while my father is playing rugby in the local New Year's Derby game against West. I am the Glovers' first grand-child and they all argue what I shall be called. Eventually my Godfather stops all argument by writing 'Christine', which is Betty's choice, on the necessary form. The rector of St Hilda's Church is called The Reverend 'Sammy' Salter, and is well known by all the families in Hartlepool. He takes one look at this scrawny underweight baby presented for baptism and announces that she looks more like "Minnie Mouse". Perhaps this explains why I have never been sure what to call myself.

My father decides to join the Territorial Army so when war is declared in September 1939 he is quickly called up as a Gunner, first of all serving in the Orkneys protecting the convoys and then in East Africa for five years.

The long war years pass and eventually he arrives home one day without any notice, standing on the doorstep without ceremony. Goodbyes and Hellos tend to be like that, no matter how long you are away. The long separation during the war for me, his only child and daughter, means that he stays distant, forever a "hero" in my heart, always in awe of this man, my father. His experiences in war create a distance between us. Hellinger observes powerful and unexpected loyalties between veterans of war and their fallen comrades. (*page 312, Loves Own Truths*).

The most vivid memory is being called out of the singing class at school. The teacher explains "Her Father's come home". The phrase engraves itself in my heart. Without a second wasted I fly down the school steps towards where they are standing; my mother and father together for the first time in memory. To welcome the father I know so well and do not know at all.

However, it isn't so easy after the war. It isn't easy at all sometimes. A lot of men find it very difficult after their war experiences to come home and settle into their old lives again. All the rejoicing that the long war is over is followed by the difficulties of rejoining their families, resuming the old relationships and marriages where they left off, and their old jobs. In fact my mother has become an alcoholic during the war years and I have become her carer. She says at this point it is harder to get back together with my father than it is to stay apart.

The experience of travelling abroad has made its impact. My father goes abroad again to the Far East, with the plan that my mother will follow him and I go to boarding school. It doesn't quite work out as planned. My mother stays behind and four long years later my father eventually comes home for six months' leave. I am

13 years old. Being at a strict boarding school, I am not allowed much time away from school to spend with my parents.

In a constellation that I asked to set up some 50 years later, I place the three of us as far apart as we can go. It is a very simple piece of work. My father and mother are moved to be on either side of me, and I am asked to turn first and look at my father. My shoulders start to shake and I sob. It is suggested that I say, "I missed you, Daddy", which I do, and it is true. The representative replies, "I missed you too". Though I could not be more surprised to hear this, the words enter my soul. It has never occurred to me that my father has missed me also. That he loves me. Do we really know each other?

I eventually go to live with them in Kuala Lumpur. I am now 21 and have become independent. At this point it is difficult to accept his authority as my father, and he is surprisingly strict and Victorian. It is the first time in our lives that we three people live together for any length of time. We live as three individuals rather than as a family, which isn't so surprising. This is the way we do it.

My father makes the decision to retire from working in the Far East at age 50 and return to the UK before he is too old for another permanent job. So we all travel home. Typically, we travel separately. I come home first by cargo passenger ship via the Middle East, my Father flies home in the Comet, and my Mother sails home via Hong Kong and Japan.

My father and I become a little closer when he is left on his own after my mother suddenly dies in 1981. By this time I have been married for 20 years and have six children of my own, following in Grandmother Harrison's footsteps, five sons and a daughter (*This is a pattern in the Harrison family: Great- Grandmother Harrison also had five sons and a daughter*).

My father insists on continuing to live on his own until it becomes obvious that the house is too big and he begins to have trouble with his eyesight so can no longer drive a car. Just before he leaves there we learn he has fallen off a tall ladder, aged 84, trying to get onto the garage roof. He lost his front door key and hoped to climb into an upstairs window. He lands on his back on a concrete path in the garden and winds himself pretty badly, but otherwise no bones broken.

So from there he comes to live in a sheltered flat right beside St Hilda's Church, where he was christened, confirmed and married and tells us he will be buried; back to his roots. He arranges it all himself. He continues to visit Twickenham to watch the Five Nations rugby and to lunch weekly at his Cricket Club. He attends Church every Sunday up to the last. Going to Church is the last outside thing to go.

His only medical treatment has been for malaria in the early 1950s in the Far East, and a dislocated shoulder playing rugby after the War, then a chesty cough more recently. He is now registered blind, and can't watch television, more importantly he can no longer read. He listens to the radio instead. The doctor has been to visit to give him flu inoculations each winter but he sends her away.

He does his own shopping and cooking, and a good family friend comes in every Saturday to do washing, ironing and cleaning.

Sometime last Autumn we notice he is losing weight. His GP persuades him to have just a little bit of help during the week. Knowing how much he loves porridge for breakfast, we put this indirect pressure on him to accept a carer coming in each morning to make a bowl of porridge, no more. When the carer arrives he tells her to

go away, he doesn't want her. Fortunately she persists and after a while he grudgingly lets her in. Since then he has accepted the "Porridge Lady" as part of his daily routine.

One by one all his old friends have become infirm and died. He has been to all their funerals. He stops going out as much but attends Church each Sunday morning and that is the highlight of his week.

Each time we visit he recounts stories from his boyhood, his school years, and he sometimes sings for us; he has a wonderful voice, very pure and absolutely on the note. Not a sign of a quiver.

Because he has now taken to his bed, the GP comes to see him shortly after I arrive. He is not on any medication and she can't find anything wrong. His blood pressure is rather low but nothing to worry about, and his blood test has come back pretty good. He used to get up to sit in his chair each morning but fall asleep there before going back to bed sometime in the afternoon. He cannot understand why people are now making such a fuss. He doesn't want to go to hospital for investigations. There is nothing wrong with him. He has had a couple of falls at home, but picks himself up and, as they say, he always knew how to fall.

The consultant physician comes two days later to examine him, and after a thorough examination can find nothing wrong. He says he would like my father to be assessed by his colleague, a geriatrician, involving a trip to the Day Hospital. However, he says as he leaves -

"If he has turned his face to the wall, there is nothing you can do".

Even though he is not ill, perhaps my father is facing his death.

"The soul wants to return to the source of being at the time when it's right. Someone who accepts age with dignity and yields to this movement can sink back peacefully when the time comes. That is the fulfilment of life" (page 134, Supporting Love).

My Father has talked about dying. He checks if his Will has been made. We talk about some of his favourite hymns. He sings an old favourite for us one day: "Will Your Anchor Hold?". "Will you anchor safe by the heavenly shore When life's storms are past for evermore?"

He checks once again about his Will -

"Have I made a Will ?"

"Yes, its all been done, Daddy."

"And my investments?"

"Yes, all in order. Everything's in order. All taken care of; nothing to worry about."

(pause) "Then I can go then".

(long pause) "Yes, Daddy, you can go. When the time is right."

The nurses think this is being depressed. I cannot agree. I think he is looking forward to being reunited with my mother which he believes will happen after death. Having been an accountant all his life, he wants reassurance that everything is in good order. It is in character.

I don't want him to leave me; a voice inside me cries, *"Not yet, please!"* However there is something very much more powerful than both of us guiding the way here. It is Fate.

He is upset about all the fuss, all this sudden attention from doctors and carers. From my father's point of view it's all about other people taking over and being in control. What has it got to do with them? One weekend it seems very clear that he is feigning sleep so that they will leave him alone. While saying goodbye to the nurse I hear a voice from the bedroom, *"Get rid of them all, will you!"*

The most difficult decision is whether we should listen to the doctors' advice or do what my father wants. There would be no conflict if instead of trying to "rehabilitate" him and keep him going, the doctor could speak to him of dying. Perhaps this is not what doctors do.

Each day my father seems a little less interested in the whole process, letting it pass over him. Everything they suggest he refuses. A nurse comes to explain about the day hospital appointment next week. Somebody from Social Services telephones. They need to come and do an assessment of my father's needs. They didn't realise that the Nursing Team had already done two assessments. They didn't realise that he is now "In The System".

My Father Is In The System. We go to the Day Hospital to see the geriatrician. He suggests physiotherapy to keep his legs strong, visits to the Day Hospital to meet other people, tablets to cheer him up. My father reiterates there isn't anything wrong with him; he's all right as he is. He wants to go home. He just wants things to go back to how they used to be.

Next morning my father says to me -

"Will you look after me? Will you stay with me until I die?"

I love his courage! This is one request there is no doubt about, and it is the first time he has ever asked anything of me, ever needed me to stay with him. *"If you need me, I will take care of you as is appropriate"* (page 274 *Loves Own Truths*).

I still find it very difficult to believe that he could be facing death because he is well and enjoying life.

With all my heart I want to stay and look after my father until his time comes like they used to do in the old days. I won't need to do a single assessment. We are flesh and blood. I know what he likes, the wonderful, difficult, frail, grumpy, vulnerable, independent old Hero. I read the paper to him, telling him bits of news:

*"England are all out. They have to follow-on".
"Surrey beat Kent by 109 runs."*

Occasionally we can have a bit of *"What would my Mother say to this do you think"* We share lots of "Do you remembers" and happy memories.

I find myself remembering the constellation where my father's representative had said he had missed me during all the years apart, and for a moment my mind goes back to that experience in the constellation.

My father suddenly intercepts my thoughts, "We should have taken you to Malaya with us!" It feels amazing. I cannot decide whether this has been part of the

constellation or real life! However, there is no doubt. It is real. I hear those words, and feel my soul move to heal from the painful absence all those years ago.

I feel closer to my father than I have ever done. It is a very special time. Sometimes he will sing a song, sometimes we sing together. Sometimes we have music, an old vinyl long-playing record. Sometimes I am in one room with my computer or book, and he knows I'm here. We are fine. He has such a wonderfully rich inner world of memories and experience. When he doesn't remember exactly, he applies a little artistic licence and creates a slightly different version of the old story. He confuses me with my mother, and my daughter with me. His memory is back in the time when we were all young. It is such a different world for me now, here with my father, away from my husband, my family and my work.

I wonder how it will be when the day comes for me to return to my other world. *"The adult child does not exist only for the parents. Thus children cannot always do what their parents want, but it is usually possible to do what is right"* (page 274, *Loves Own Truths*).

Over the following weeks I notice he gradually he eats less and sleeps more. His blood pressure, pulse and heart are still very strong. There is a slow quietening down of all his physical needs and loss of function but spiritually he is magnificent.

We are enjoying the closest relationship we had ever had. I am so grateful he is my father. My respect for him grows beyond bounds. It feels true that *"To honour one's parents is to honour the earth"* (page 324, *Love's Own Truths*)

I ask for more time away from work to care for him during this precious time although there are many questions about the future. Head office pressure me to specify the date I will come back. I am told my father could go on like this for months, even perhaps years. It is all unknown.

He celebrates his 92nd birthday and an old friend arrives to see him. He insists on getting dressed and being up in his chair again. He has many cards and presents and the chance to recall old times and old memories with his friend. I have written his life story down as my gift to him, and read it to him after he is back in bed. He listens very carefully, very alert, correcting a few details, but I have got all the family stories mostly right.

Another six weeks pass in the same way. It is now nearing the end of June. My husband decides that he will come for the weekend.

Saturday morning; the day my father has enjoyed so much all his life it is known as "The Feast of St Clifford!" The sun is shining and a blackbird is in the habit of coming outside his window to sing to us. There is an air of expectancy in the room. My father seems much more alert than usual, talking more, though often too quietly for me to hear. He is talking to his ancestors. *"Our body is not just a body, it is united to our soul and the soul is united with all the members of our families"* (p4, *Systemic Solutions Bulletin, 2004*)

I take the morning paper and a little breakfast. I find myself wondering about the air of expectancy and thinking to myself,

"He won't die on the Feast of St Clifford, I know that for sure!"

and promptly wonder why I have thought this. We were reassured that he was fine only two days before.

He seems comfortable and peaceful but purposeful. It feels he is preparing himself for something. He talks a great deal, sometimes to us and quite a lot apparently addressed to other people. We are not alone in the room, the ancestors are with us. *"All those who can be remembered, back to the grandparents' generation, sometimes great-grandparents, have an effect as if they were there"* (page 57, *Acknowledging What Is*)

The day passes and my father sleeps less than usual. At the end of the afternoon he suddenly asks me *"Is this the end then?"*

With a shock I find myself replying:

"I think it may be, Daddy".

"Well, I'd better get out of here then!" he says!

He starts to inch forward and swing his legs over the side of the bed. I ask him if he wants to be in his chair. I put my arms round him and gradually position him in the armchair next to the bed. However this doesn't seem quite right, and he doesn't stay there long. I can't make out what is happening but he is quieter after this. Eventually he sleeps and as darkness falls we pass a quiet night.

The following morning, Sunday, there is the same air of expectancy in the room. I bring some breakfast and he eats a spoonful. My jaw drops as he suddenly announces -

"I think I'll have a large glass of beer!"

I can't believe my ears! I think I've misheard. But there is no mistake.

"Is that really what you want, Daddy?"

It definitely feels as if we are celebrating something and it's still only 9 o'clock in the morning!

I fetch the beer in his favourite glass, and give it to him. He takes two sips and puts it on his bookcase by the bed. *"I'll have the rest later!"*

My husband takes turns sitting beside my father. Apparently the conversation goes like this,

"Is all my work done?"

John replies, *"Yes, all your work is done, and done very well."*

The day passes as yesterday, with lots of talking, some audible and some not. We sit in comfortable silence sometimes. Once again the ritual of naming his mother and father and all his brothers and his sister, one by one, in order, then my mother and her family, and all the ancestors. I remember Hellinger's conversation about death (p58, *Acknowledging What is*) that when the dead have their place, they are peaceful and are experienced as a positive energy. This is certainly true for us today as we sit together.

For some reason I am prompted to say,

"They'll all be so pleased to see you again."

I really do not know what is prompting me to say these things, but my father is very pleased at this idea. He repeats, *"So pleased to see me!"* I am being guided and our souls are connected, very sensitive to some presence greater than ourselves. It feels true that the family and kinship group all share the same soul and conscience (page 124; *Insights*).

Later that afternoon it becomes apparent that my father is still worrying about the responsibility of looking after us, his family. I know what I am doing when I am prompted to say very certainly:

*"There is no need to worry about us any more, Daddy.
We are perfectly fine. You don't have to worry about us any more."*

On hearing this, his body relaxes, as if at long last he can let go of all feeling of responsibility. It was right.

Then he sits up very straight and turns towards me to say very solemnly and clearly:

"Then Goodnight and God bless you all."

I recognise the importance of this blessing. *"They wish the living to live on, with their blessing"* (page 125; *Insights*)

Once again my father moves to the edge of the bed and, as yesterday, I put my arms round him so that I can gently lower him into his chair.

Even before I can relax my arms and lean back to see his face, I feel and hear his breathing change. He takes several very deep and slow breaths, followed by lighter irregular breaths, further and further apart. I keep hold of him close to my heart with my head on his, and quite soon his breathing stops, along with his heart.

My father has left us. I stay holding him for a while, knowing he is no longer here.

His manner of going is the most gentle and wonderful I could imagine, the separation between life and death so small. I did not believe that death could be so gentle: so much easier than birth. I am left feeling only amazement and wonder.

His lovely wise doctor writes on the Death Certificate that the cause of death is "Frailty of Old Age."

His funeral is held in St Hilda's Church where he was baptised, confirmed, married, and is now being buried, just exactly as he planned. The large Norman Abbey Church is full. My father's coffin is carried high, borne in by his five grandsons and my husband, my daughter and I walking behind.

There are some marvellous and very personal tributes and all his favourite hymns, including "Will Your Anchor Hold" which rises to the roof. He is taken to be buried in the cemetery alongside many other family members in the grave that he bought 22 years previously for my mother and himself.

*A man asked his companion along the way,
"Tell me what counts for us".*

*The other answered,
"First what counts for us is that we are alive for a time,
Before that began, there was much, and in the end,*

*it returns to that which was before.
 Like a circle which joins its beginning and
 its end and they are one and the same.
 What comes after our life joins with what came before
 as if there had been no time between.
 We have time only in the now.
 The next thing that counts is what we do in our time here
 carries us with it as though it belonged to another time.
 And although we believe we are creating, we are held only as a tool
 used to achieve something beyond ourselves and then set aside.
 We are complete when we are released.”*

*The man asked,
 “We and our creations exist and end, each in our own time.
 What counts when our time is finished?”*

*The other spoke,
 “What counts is what came before and what comes afterward, as equals”*

*The two parted ways
 and their time together was at an end.
 And each paused and contemplated.*

*(Bert Hellinger)
 Quoted in “Loves Own Truths”, 2001*

*Christine Wilson (nee Harrison)
 January 2005*

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