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## **His father's pain: a personal narrative**

**Peter Clothier**

All his life Peter had carried the pain about with him. Sometimes intense. sometimes no more than a dull ache. Sometimes for months at a time he was hardly aware of it, but it was always there. He knew that. It had a precise location, always the same, a spot below the ribs, an inch inside, four fingers from the point where his lower ribs met. He could put his fingers in there, feel it.

All his life he had been aware of it. He had taken the pain to doctors. They had poked and probed at various intervals. Once they had diagnosed ulcers. They had prescribed milky medications, which had relieved it only for the moment. Then it came back. Sometimes it was so intense he feared it could be cancer, a burning growth expanding inside him. Sometimes he was afraid of dying. It was like a death inside him, so intense, so obdurate. And sometimes the pain would lie low, more of a shadow than a pain, a dis-ease lurking quietly in the rib cage.

The pain was with him thirty years, the length of his adult life. Until he found its healer. At first he did not know this would be the healer of the pain. For many weeks, they talked. They talked about the fears, the insecurities, the longings, and the needs. They talked about the rage he had carried with him all his life. They talked about his weakness and his strength. Some of these things he knew, some he didn't.

Some of these things they enacted. Always there was the empty chair, his partner, his antagonist. Whoever came to mind was invited there, to sit in it: his wife, his father, his anger, his fear. Whoever came to mind, whoever was necessary to the occasion, whoever needed to be addressed, whoever needed to be heard from - there was always someone. They came unbidden from wherever it was they lived, from dark, hidden parts of him, from unexamined corners of his body: the awkward tilt of the head, the crick in the back, the back, the avoided gaze. There was always someone.

It was weeks, months even, before the healer touched him. When the trust was there. Once the defenses had begun to fall. When the body was ready with its invitation. The first time, the healer went only where he was invited, his fingers probing the depth to which the pain was tolerable. He would say, "At any moment I can stop, but you must tell me where."

It seemed there was pain everywhere that first time. Everywhere in the joints. The hips. The neck. The shoulders. The healer would say, "I want you to ask yourself what the pain is, that you're holding there." He said, "The answer is not important. It will come. Perhaps not now, perhaps later, perhaps not for a while, but sometime you will come to realize what it is. It is enough now simply to be aware. For now, it is enough to ask yourself, 'What is this pain? Why am I holding it in here?'"

That first time, at the end, Peter found himself weeping uncontrollably. He didn't know why. He lay there on the table, his body convulsing deeply with the sobs. There was so much pain, so much retained there, in his body. He knew now how much pain he carried with him, everywhere he went. He knew how much he needed to be rid of. The task seemed immense, immeasurable.

There were more sessions. There were first some particular, immediate problems to address: a muscle spasm in the lower back, a shoulder pulled and twisted by a mistimed action at the beach when the surf was high. There was a summer cold, a congestion in the chest. All these they worked through, slowly. Then the healer started working deeper. One afternoon he started working deeper and the pain seemed often near unbearable. While the healer worked, Peter lay there on his side, eyes closed, experiencing the pain in all its depth. The healer said, "Ask yourself now. Ask yourself, what is this pain I'm holding in this part of my body?" In his hips Peter felt the pain of self-protection, of weight transferred to protect the groin, to hide the genitals away in shame. He felt the pain of protecting his vulnerable male parts, of holding them back, the fear of inadequacy. He felt the pain of the fear of his own weakness. In the shoulders he felt the pain of responsibility, of bearing burdens for himself and others. He felt the anger of doing always for others, as he had done, the gentle man, the concerned father, the considerate husband. In the neck he felt the pain of control, the terrible work of the head in keeping all his pains coordinated, as though it were thanks to head's control that the body stayed together. As though without its constant effort the limbs would fly apart.

He felt these pains as the healer worked. First one side, then the other. It seemed like hours. He was lost in the darkness of himself, the darkness inside his body. He was absorbed utterly in the inner darkness of his pain, it seemed like hours he was gone.

Then the healer helped him turn to lie on his back, eyes closed, still drunk with darkness. And the fingers found, it seemed at once, unerringly, the single spot where Peter had carried that one familiar pain for all these years. Found it out. Dug into it, under the rib cage.

Well, he must have screamed. The pain seared through him like a bolt of lightning, the culmination of all those years gathered into a single moment. And he heard the healer say, "Now you can ask yourself, 'What is this pain?'" He said, "You have a very clear image, a very clear understanding, why you continue to hold this pain at this place in your body." And this time Peter heard the answer, coming out of the depths of the darkness where he found himself. He heard the words, clearly as though they were not his: ***"It's not my pain!"*** He knew he was weeping now, felt great sobs rising through his chest as he heard the question, "Whose pain is it, then?" And again Peter heard the answering words, heard them in what he knew was his own voice, coming out of that darkness:

*"This is my father's pain."* And wept.

There was a silence, then, before the healer spoke again. This time he said, "Now you can feel your father's presence in this room. You can feel him here beside you." And in the silence Peter could feel his father there, now some time dead. He felt him there, his living presence, a kind of shining. And when his father was there, the healer asked, "What is it you would like to tell him? What words do you need to say to him?" And once again Peter heard himself say the words, as though it were some other person speaking through him in his voice. He heard himself say, "It's not my fault," He heard it clearly, out of the darkness, not understanding why he would have said it. The tears kept coming, the sobs. He could do nothing to control them.

For some time then the silence grew still deeper, darker, the pain flowing out of it like lava. Then the healer spoke again, softly, so he could hardly hear the words: "What is it you would like to hear your father tell you? What are the words you need to hear from him?" And the first words that came were a spontaneous *"I love you."* And then came more tears, more silence, before he said - the father said, through him, *"I understand now that it's not your fault."* And for a good while longer he lay there in tears, until the healer laid a hand there on his belly, where he carried the pain, saying, "I want you to hear your father's voice. He says. 'Peter, I now release you from all responsibility for my pain. It was never yours in the first place. From this moment, you have no need to carry it with you. You can return it to me now.'"

The voice came out of the darkness that surrounded him, and the pain rushed out of him like an evil wind. The pain was sucked up into the darkness, and the image of his father faded. And the silence that surrounded him was a sudden peace.

He opened his eyes. Waking, he remembered for the first time in years, and told the story to the healer: How it was that his father's pain was the central fact of his life, of all their lives, the whole family, in his early childhood. How they had left the city where he was born when he was only eighteen months and moved south, to a country parish (his father was a minister) because the doctor warned that the stress of city life was aggravating the pain. How it had ruled his father's life, how he had taken it to doctors as far away as Switzerland to be healed. How it had been diagnosed as an ulcer, the milk diet, the eventual operations to remove a good part of his stomach. How his father had then turned to psychiatry, how the psychiatrist had come to stay in their house and then refused to leave. How they had finally had to drive him off, in the car, to leave him somewhere far away. And how the pain had been so terrible on their return that his father thought he was about to die. How strange it was that he, the father, himself a healer, who had healed so many others of their troubles through his understanding, through the laying-on of hands, had never been able to shed the burden of his own pain - the pain which he, the son, now saw with certainty, on waking, was the symptom of his, the father's loss of his own beloved mother when he was in his early teens.

And he saw how he, the boy, had accepted the pain as his own. To relieve his father. To spare him suffering. Out of his own sense of guilt, as though he had caused the pain. He assumed it. The others dealt with it as they could - this central fact of all their lives. His mother nursed it, worried over it, cooked for it, covered for it. His sister, that dark one, the spiteful one, must have been struggling to reject it in her anger. She must have known all along it was not hers. He knew now why she was always mean to him. And he, the good little boy, the little round boy whom everybody loved, had accepted it as his own. If he had always been good, it was in order not to make his father angry, not to arouse the pain. For he saw how the pain returned to his father's face when he was bad. So Peter had taken the pain inside him and had hidden it there. He had carried it with him all his life. His father's pain.

He woke, and returned it to his father. He said, "*It was never my pain. It was not my fault.*" He realized this now, for the first time in his life. And he wept for the pain he had carried with him ever since he could remember. His father's pain. And the time had come to return it to his father.

**Peter Clothier** is a novelist, art critic, and new adventurer into personal growth.  
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P.O. Box 76, Bellmawr, NJ 08099  
Phone (609) 714-1885 - Fax (609) 714-3553

Email: [center@ijhc.org](mailto:center@ijhc.org) Web Site: <http://www.ijhc.org>

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