

The Use of the Arts in Family Therapy: I Never Sang for my Father

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*Death ends a life, but it does not end a relationship
which struggles on in the survivor's mind toward
some resolution which it never finds. . . . Alice
said I would not accept the sadness of this world.
What did it matter if I never loved him, or he never
loved me? . . . Perhaps she was right. But still when I
hear the word "Father" ... it matters.*

Robert Anderson, *I Never Sang for My Father*

The use of the arts in family therapy is a natural spinoff from the use of displacement material in other areas. Therapists, educators, theologians, and parents have used displacement materials for generations to help people focus on problems that they are too involved in emotionally to see clearly. Long before the arrival of family therapists, people sat in open fields and in darkened theaters and watched skilled performers acting out situations that were a part of their own everyday existence. The externalization of the process of day-to-day family life seems to facilitate a more objective view of how it works. Children's literature, for instance, is often concerned with stories that teach lessons about how to handle most of the problems of childhood, including stories about imaginary creatures, fashioned out of their own fear and uncertainty, and assorted ways to outwit parents and siblings. Child psychiatrists frequently use displacement techniques in play therapy with an individual child. The story about a baby bird who falls from the nest while his mother is out searching for food can serve to open up to verbalization and examination the child's own anxiety about being separated from his mother.

One of the reasons frequently given to explain the effectiveness of multi-

ple family therapy is that it enables families to gain a new perspective on their own emotional process by listening to other families describe the problems that they are experiencing. In the early 1960s, Bowen began using the technique of telling families in treatment about other anonymous families that he was working with in order to prod them into new ways of thinking about their own problems. I became intrigued with this technique, which I called the use of displacement stories, and expanded it to include the use of movies, plays, and other displacement forms. I will illustrate the technique here using the film *I Never Sang For My Father* as an example—first from a historical perspective, and then from a more operational, practical perspective.

In 1970, Columbia Pictures released the film of Robert Anderson's play *I Never Sang For My Father*. It is a story about the Garrisons, an upper-middle class WASP family. Its major thematic thread is the relationship between father and son over two generations.

The father, Tom, and mother, Margaret, are in their eighties. They live in Westchester County in a house that has been theirs since their children were small. The father is a successful businessman, who was also a former mayor of the town. He has been retired for fifteen years. The mother is in poor health with a deteriorating cardiac condition. Anderson tells us nothing of the mother's extended family, and she is clearly idealized by the author; however, there is a pattern of almost continual criticism from her aimed at her husband.

The father's extended family is presented through the father's eyes. He was the oldest of three children, and his mother died when he was ten years old. She had been deserted by her husband who was an alcoholic. Tom clearly bastardized his father and idealized his mother. The process of idealization began while she was alive, and became further intensified following her premature death. Tom Garrison is portrayed as a self-made man, pompous and opinionated, invulnerable to feeling, who sees himself as devoted to his wife Margaret whom he also idealizes.

The marriage of Tom and Margaret Garrison has produced two children. The older, a daughter Alice, is married and living with her husband and children in Chicago. She has been cut off from her parents and her brother after having been "banished" by father for marrying a Jew. Gene, the younger, is an author who lives in New York City, but who travels on tours to other parts of the country. His wife has been dead for approximately a year. She died of cancer, and the couple had no children. On a recent tour to California, Gene has met and fallen in love with a woman doctor who has been married before and has children. The fate of her first marriage is not made known.

The film opens with Gene picking up his parents on their return to New York from Florida. They drive from the airport to their home. During the

ride home, certain parts of the family process become clear. The brusque pompousness of the father is contrasted with the soft over-tolerant mother, whose faint twist of bitterness lies somewhere just beneath the surface. The distance between the parents becomes evident. This and later developments in the film define the father as an emotional distancer, one who moves toward objects, productivity, and material markers of accomplishment. He is somewhat addicted to ritual, and his prevalent mood varies from negative to hyped-up enthusiastic.

Mother on the other hand is a normalizer, more of an optimist, emotionally more tuned in and more relationship-oriented than her husband. She has obviously handled her husband's distance by emotionally overinvesting in her children. She has accepted his distance, and resigned herself to his negativism. The father has been relieved of the job of dealing with his wife's intensity by her overdose relationship with her children, especially with her son. Only at times has the father allowed himself to feel that he is on the outside looking in.

My wife and I saw the film a few short months after the death of my father-in-law, and it set off a lot of emotional triggers in me. After seeing the movie, I spent a lot of time thinking about how quickly time and life pass by, and how very important fathers are to the quality of one's own life. I had a lot of thoughts about my wife's relationship with her father, and also about my own relationship with him, which led me to think about my relationship with my own father and his relationship with his father and so on through the generations. I also thought a lot about my kids, and how I might make myself more knowable to them as their father without occupying too much of their life space. Although the movie was thus a very moving experience for me personally, as a family theoretician and clinician I also could not help thinking what a beautiful piece of teaching material the movie would make for family therapists and families in therapy. A few weeks later I discussed this aspect of the film with a colleague; it turned out that through a combination of circumstances and people, she was able to get the rights to use the film for study, teaching, and noncommercial showing.

The full-length film was first used for family therapy training at the 1970 Fordham-Einstein Family Symposium. The audience was made up of about 300 mental health professionals from throughout the country, and their responses were mixed. Some walked out about half way through, while others left in the middle of the confrontation scene. Some people cried, while their neighbors appeared bored and indifferent. In the discussion that followed, it was evident that the audience for the most part quickly personalized the story, especially in terms of the difficulties entailed in trying to attain a person-to-person adult relationship with one's parents. Some were angered at the father, and saw him as an impossible bastard; others

were angry with the son for not confronting his father sooner. The movie clearly triggered intense affect, but the question was, how to channel this affect so that it became more than just another emotional experience. How could we use this film so that its effect could be carried over into a new way of thinking about a different relationship with one's own family?

Over the past five years I have used the film with large groups, such as the Fordham-Einstein Symposium; with Therapists-Own-Family Seminars and Community Education Programs with Families; and also at specific points in therapy with an individual family. In this last context, it is usually used when a family is having particular difficulty seeing the importance and relevance of their extended family to both their present and future emotional functioning. What has been developed is a teaching structure, the major components of which are the genogram, capsulized theoretical concepts, and a series of questions that can be proposed to the audience prior to showing the film or segments of the film. A genogram is a structural representation of the family relationship system which allows facts about the family to be organized in such a way that the process in the important relationships is easily demonstrated. The pertinent information available in the film is then pulled out and placed into the structure of the genogram.

A brief attempt is then made to teach a few basic concepts about viewing the family as a system, and the meaning of an emotional relationship system as it pertains to the family. The basic concept that no family member exists in isolation, and that each member occupies a place in the family emotional field is discussed. Each family member is seen as constantly receiving inputs from the field, and depositing his own outputs. What affects any one family member in some way has an effect on every other family member. After these basic assumptions are established, a scenario is proposed that takes the Garrison family as it appears in the film and uses the genogram that has just been drawn.

The audience is asked for example, to suppose that they are entering a time tunnel which will take them back thirty-five years to a time when the Garrison children were still young. We know from the genogram that father has an intense sensitivity to alcoholism and drunken behavior as a result of his experiences with his father. Suppose that on his way home from work, while stopped at a traffic light, the father sees a disheveled, obviously intoxicated man staggering down the street. He feels a tightness in his stomach, and begins to replay in his head a lot of painful stuff from the past. He forcibly blots it out of his consciousness, but on arrival home the toxic parts of his own behavior become prevalent. He is edgy, critical, and wants somebody to listen to a hero story about his latest business accomplishment.

This type of behavior will predictably trigger an emotional reaction in mother. On the one hand, she feels criticized and undervalued, on the other somewhat guilty and responsible for her husband's unhappiness. There is

also a trace of anger in her at his self-preoccupation and his not coming home ready to move in and take over with the kids. This reaction on mother's part gets converted into behavior. She moves toward a more intense involvement with fixing dinner and helping the children with their homework. Father senses the move away. To some degree he's bugged, and the thought runs through his head that no one cares about him here anyway; all he is is the money-making machine. On the other hand he's relieved to be able to go up to his study, be alone with his miseries, and take refuge in the leftover work from the office. A short time later at dinner, daughter becomes whiney and demanding; father quiets her with a more than adequate dose of "for your own good" criticism. Mother is quiet, somewhat sulky, and subdued. Son tries to cheer everybody up, especially father, by telling his own hero story about winning the prize essay contest at school. Father responds by telling son how nice that is, but that he'd better put more effort into becoming proficient in math, because that's what will serve him well in the real world. Father then proceeds to tell another hero story of his accomplishments in business. As he proceeds, mother, daughter, and son, at varying rates, slowly sink into their mashed potatoes. At the end of his story father senses this reaction, and, becoming somewhat embarrassed, excuses himself and returns to his room to take refuge again in his work. Mother excuses daughter to do her homework. She and son clean up after dinner, and then he plays his latest piano piece for her in the livingroom.

What are the problems in that family? Is the father's isolation his problem? Is the daughter's whiney behavior and unhappiness her problem? Is mother's distance from her husband and overinvolvement with her son her problem? Are son's anxious attempts to please his problem? Or are they all symptomatic representation of what isn't working well in that family? Everyone will answer on cue. This leads to a brief consideration of the concept of triangulation, which also serves to reinforce the idea of the family as a system. At this point, I usually defer to those people in the audience who have had ten years of psychoanalysis by mentioning that this way of conceptualizing the process in a family is only one of many ways of doing it, since any theory is an abstraction of a natural process, and as such is merely one explanation. The suggestion is made that any theory should be tested by its usefulness as a guide to producing change, which usually detoxifies any ideological warfare that may be brewing and simplifies and enriches the experience for most of the participants.

In introducing the concept of the triangle, it is often useful to explain briefly what it means and then return to the previous scenario for a short elaboration. The concept of triangulation is based on the premise that in a dyadic relationship the process between the two people involved is an unstable one. Think of your best functioning personal relationship. Now imagine isolating that relationship in time and space. Having done that,

imagine attempting to confine all communication to personal thoughts and feelings about your own self and the other. It won't be long before you are talking about the Mets, Aunt Suzie, or somebody or something else. The process in the relationship has moved to stabilize itself by triangulating in a third person and/or object.

In order to understand how this process operates in a system, suppose that the Garrison son develops a symptom of fear of darkness to the degree that he can't sleep, and neither can the rest of the family. To make it even more incredible, let's suppose his parents bring him to a family systems therapist. The therapist listens to the family, asks some questions, and decides on a plan for engaging the family and responding to the symptom. The central triangle as viewed by the therapist is one in which the distant conflictual relationship between the parents has been covered over. The mother ends up in an overdose relationship with the son, the son and father have an overly distant relationship. In his initial intervention, the therapist has the father take over responsibility for dealing with the son's fear of darkness; he also assigns the father the task of taking his son to work with him for two days in one week, and the following week take his son to the city to see a play. The result is magical. Son's symptom disappears, father and son become closer. Hey, but what about mother? How is she taking all of this? It is impossible to tamper with the father/son relationship without disturbing the mother/son relationship. Mother is now on the outside looking in. She becomes depressed. The triangle has shifted, and so has the symptomatic focus in the family. The problem is no longer a son problem, but has now redefined itself as a family system problem.

After this discussion, a brief description of how family scripts tend to pass from generation to generation is elaborated. This can be done by using the script of distant fathers, and its reoccurrence over the generations in spite of pledges to the contrary. An interesting point can be used here—namely, that the generational repeat of distant fathers involves people carrying a last name from the paternal side of the family, while emotionally being a part of the mother's side of the family. Raising this point is often an effective way to get distant daddies to see the relevance of extended family to their present relationships with their kids.

The stage is now set for offering a set of questions to the audience to serve as a structure for viewing the emotional process in the film. The questions most commonly used are:

1. What are the conflictual issues in the family?
2. What are the central triangles, and how do they appear to operate?
3. What is your idea of a personal relationship? Is it possible to have a personal relationship with the father in this film?
4. What are the nodal point or points around which, if one member of the family changed his/her predictable, behavioral pattern, a whole new

series of options might have opened up for the family?

If the entire film is being shown you are now, as they say, ready to roll. When restrictions of time make the use of ninety minutes of film, plus teaching time, impossible, however, selected segments of the film may be used. Ideally, it is best to have a group view the film in its entirety, and then rerun segments for review and study; but the use of segments, plus teaching and discussion, generally is more practical. The choice of segments from this film will vary according to purpose. Segments dealing with the process of aging and death may be chosen, but for general family process teaching, I usually use two segments. One I call the "garage scene"—it begins in the parents' garage and ends as the son pulls out of his parents' driveway to return to his own apartment. The second segment is the last thirteen minutes of the film, which I call the "confrontation scene."

In watching the garage scene segment, the audience is asked to keep in mind the first two of the four key questions.

1. What are the conflictual issues in the family?
2. What are the central triangles, and how do they appear to operate?

In order for the therapist who is presenting this film to clarify the process he should review the script of the play before the showing and keep these key questions in mind.

Here is the garage scene, with a running commentary about the main points in the family process.

(GENE can hear FATHER trying to start the car in the garage. He starts out the kitchen door toward his FATHER, and gets there as his FATHER starts the old Buick. Tom shows immense satisfaction that the old car starts. He guns it a few times and then shuts it off)

Tom: Where did you say your mother was?

Gene: In her garden.

Tom: You know, Gene, the strain has been awful.

Gene: Well, she looks well.

Tom: I know. But you can never tell when she might get another of those damned seizures.

(he looks at the ground and shakes his head at the problem of it all)

Gene: It's rough, I know.

(puts his arm around his FATHER'S shoulder)

Tom: Well, we'll manage. She's a good soldier. But she eats too fast. The doctor said she must slow down ... Oh, well. . . .

(GENE moves toward the door of the garage.)

Tom: Gene ... We got your letters from California.

(fishes in his inside coat pocket)

I've got them here someplace. Well, we do look forward to your letters, old man. . . . there isn't much else for us these days. . . . But this girl, this woman you mentioned several times. . . .

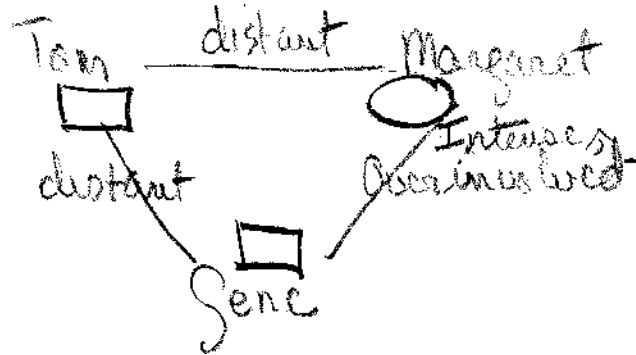
Gene: I'll tell you all about California at dinnertime.

(he starts to move.)

[The development of the central triangle in this family evolves from the beginning of this scene.]

Father talks to son about mother, transmitting his anxiety about mother's health and his inability to deal with her in Gene's absence. Gene's letter about a possible move to California has triggered his father's anxiety, and he moves to reinforce son's position as his mother's emotional lifeline and anxiety sponge.

The configuration in the triangle is:]



Tom: You seemed to see a lot of her.

Gene: I did.

Tom: Carol's been dead, let's see now, what is it?

Gene: Over a year.

Tom: And there's no reason why you shouldn't go out with another woman.

Gene: No.

(*GENE just waits, puzzled.*)

Tom: I was in California once many years ago. Beautiful country. I can understand your enthusiasm for it.

Gene: I liked it a lot.

Tom: But, Gene . . .

(*he bites his upper lip and his voice is heavy with emotion*)

If you were to go out there, I mean to live, it would kill your mother.

(*He looks at his son with piercing eyes, his tears starting. This has been in the nature of a plea and an order. GENE says nothing. He is outraged that his father would say such a thing.*)

God, you know you're her whole life.

(*GENE is further troubled by his father's expressing what he knows to be the truth.*)

Gene: Dad . . .

Tom: Yes, you are! . . . Oh, she's fond of your sister, but you . . . are her . . . life! Don't you suppose I've known that all these years?

[Father pulls out all the stops, and continues the triangulation. He makes no statement about what effect the son's leaving for California would have on him. Father reinforces son as Mother's emotional lifeline.]

Gene: Dad, I realize we've always been very close, but . . .

(*MOTHER appears in the near distance. They both notice her.*)

Tom: Just remember what I've said. Well, now let's look after the luggage. [

After getting settled in the house, Gene takes his parents out to dinner. During this restaurant scene, the distance between Tom and Margaret is demonstrated.

...

is an important part of the process that ties Gene to Margaret in an overly intense way. The scene also introduces Father's oft-repeated diatribe on the horrors of his boyhood. The central parts of this are the bastardization of his father, and the idealization of his mother.]

Tom: Have I ever shown you this ring?

Margaret: You've shown it to him a hundred times.

[Mother's reactive intolerance to Father's ritualized story telling.]

Tom: (ignoring her remark)

I never thought I'd wear a diamond ring, but when T. J. Parks died, I wanted something of his. Last time I had it appraised, they told me it was worth four thousand. Of course, when I go to see a doctor, I turn it around.

(a sly smile as he turns it around)

Don't want them to think I'm rolling in money.

[Father, undaunted continues.]

Margaret: It's his favorite occupation, getting that ring appraised . . . that and telling everyone the gruesome details of his life.

[Mother escalates her complaints.]

Tom: Now wait a minute!

[Father tries to draw the line.]

Margaret: I can't have anyone in. Your father won't play bridge or do anything. He just wants to watch Westerns on TV or tell the story of his life.

Tom: People seem to be interested.

Margaret: What?

Tom: I said, people seem to be interested.

Margaret: He keeps going over and over the old times. Other people have miserable childhoods, but they don't keep going over and over them. That story of your mother's funeral.

[Mother continues complaining to son, describing her social isolation, father's distance from her, and his involvement with objects (TV), along with his ritual story telling. Almost by the character of her complaint she paradoxically encourages father to add yet another of his ritualized tales.]

Gene: I don't remember that one.

[Gene, sensing his father's hurt, moves to placate him. The stage is set, and in two more steps the father will fall into his predictable pattern.]

Margaret: Oh, don't get him started. He keeps telling everyone how he wouldn't allow his father to come to his mother's funeral.

Tom: Are you suggesting I should have let him?

Margaret: I'm not saying—

Tom: —He'd run out on us when we were kids—

Margaret: Can you imagine going around telling everyone how he shoved his father off the funeral coach.

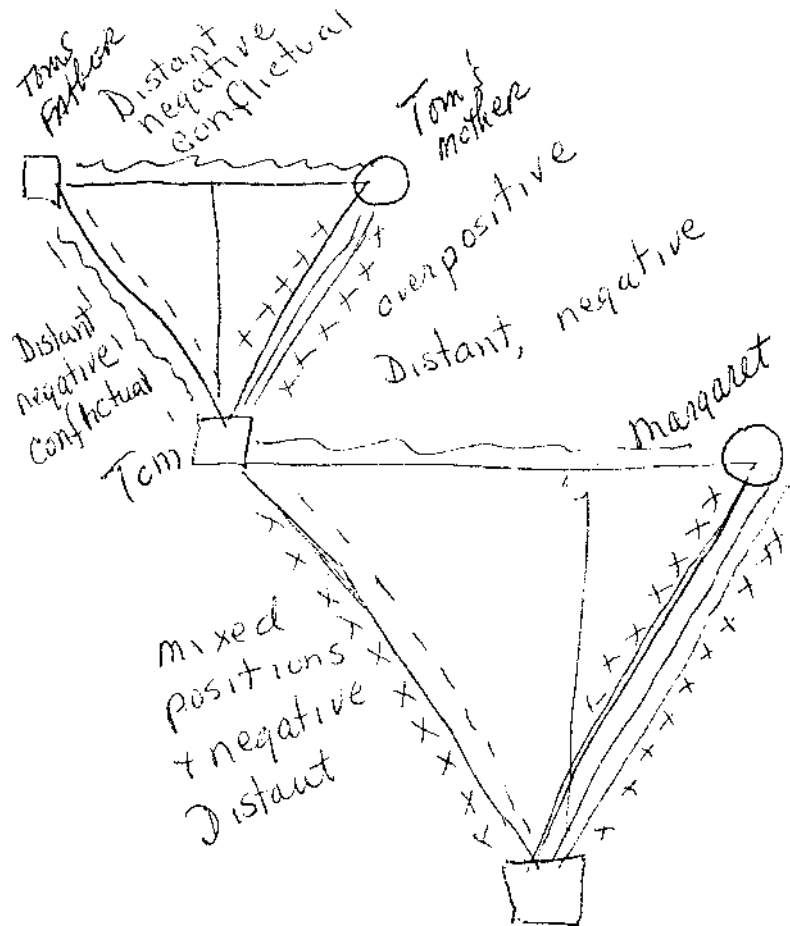
Tom: And I'd do it again. I was only ten and we hadn't seen him in over a year — living, the four of us, in a miserable two-room tenement, and suddenly he shows up at the funeral, weeping, and begging and drunk as usual. And I shoved him off. I never saw him again till some years later, when he was dying in Bellevue . . . of drink.

[Father's tale spells out clearly his intensely negative relationship with his own father. His intense idealization of mother is left until after Margaret's death, when in the casket room of the funeral parlor Tom weeps over a casket that reminds him of his mother's. His idealized version of his mother flows spontaneously. At this point in the play, the repetitive intergenerational triangles and the family scripts are obvious.]

(His hatred and anger are barely held in. GENE is fascinated by the intensity and hatred after all these years.)

Margaret: (has been looking at menu)
What looks good to you?

Tom: I have not finished yet. . . . I went down to see him, to ask if he wanted anything. He said he wanted an orange. I sent him in half a dozen oranges. I would have sent more, except I knew he was dying, and there was no point in just giving oranges to the nurses. . . . The next morning he died.



(There is silence for a moment, while GENE and MARGARET look at the menu, and TOM grips and ungrrips his hand in memory of the hatred of his father.)

Margaret: (gently)

Look at your menu now, Father. What are you going to eat?

Tom: I don't feel like anything. I have no appetite.

(he lights a cigarette)

Margaret: This is the way it's been.

INT: MOTHER'S ROOM IN THE HOUSE—NIGHT

(This is a nice room with family photographs, a comfortable old chaise longue, which is mother's "place," sewing table nearby—comfortable old pieces of furniture. As GENE enters the room from the upstairs hall, we can hear the blare of the television downstairs, a Western with plenty of gunfire. MARGARET is looking through Gene's new book of short stories.)

Margaret: This is lovely, dear.

Gene: Thank you.

Margaret: I don't know how he can stand listening to those Westerns hour after hour.

[As the process continues in the parents' home, we see a further elaboration of the central triangle.]

Gene: I think he always wanted to be a cowboy.

Margaret: He won't listen to the things I want to hear. Down in Florida there's only one TV in the lounge, and he rode herd on it. And then he'd go to sleep in two minutes. . . . Still, he's a remarkable man.

[Mother catches herself, and shifts to excusing father's idiosyncrosies. She seems to want Gene to know that his parents' relationship wasn't always so distant and empty.]

Gene: Good old Mom.

Margaret: Well, he is. Not many boys have fathers they can be as proud of.

Gene: I know that. I'm very proud of him.

Margaret: *(she catches his tone)*

Everything he's done, he's done for his family.

(GENE just looks at her smiling)

So he didn't dance with me at parties.

(she smiles at GENE)

You took care of that.

Gene: You were just a great dancer, Mother.

Margaret: What a shame that children can't see their parents when they're young and courting, and in love.

Tom (O.S.): Gene . . . Gene . . . Come and watch this one. This is a real shoot-'em-up.

Gene: I'll be down in a minute, Dad.

(closes door)

Margaret: *(as she moves toward her chaise longue)*

Now . . . tell me about California.

Gene: *(uneasy . . . but he has decided to tell her)*

Well, I liked it a lot.

Margaret: It was good for you to get away for a while from the apartment and memories of Carol.

Gene: *(wonders for a moment if he'll pick up that "for a while" . . . then:)*

Yes.

Margaret: I didn't want to suggest it earlier, but I think you should consider moving out of that apartment. It's so bound up with Carol.

Gene: *(after a moment)*

Mother . . .

(There is a long pause. . . . MOTHER has some sense and fear of what is coming.)

Gene: I wrote you about the woman I met out there, Peggy.

Margaret: The doctor with the children.

(There is a long look between them. She now knows . . . but waits. He goes on very gently.)

[On Mother's prodding, Gene proceeds to tell her about California, his new woman, and his plan to move out there and marry her. Up to this point the configuration in the central triangle has put mother and son as overdose and father in the outside, distant position. As she senses Gene's leaving for California his mother pulls somewhat back from him and toward father, almost as if she were trying to loosen the bond between them to shield herself and allow him to go. True to form, she says little about her own reactions to Gene's leaving, denies it will kill her, and instead translates that to father. We thus have each parent talking about the other's response, and not his or her own.]

Gene: I'm thinking of marrying her.

Margaret: She sounds like a lovely person. And people would expect a man of your age to marry again.

(She apparently hasn't gotten the whole point.)

Gene: She has a practice out there, and her children have their friends and school. . . .

Margaret: (tears come to her eyes . . . she nods)

Well . . . there are still trains and planes. And Alice comes from Chicago once or twice a year with the children.

(GENE smiles gently, understanding her pain. He takes her hand.)

Margaret: Your father and I can take care of each other. He makes the beds, which is the only housework I'm not allowed to do, and I'll remember where he put his checkbook.

Gene: I'm sorry it's worked out this way.

Margaret: (holding herself in control with difficulty)

We've been fortunate to have you so near us for so long. . . . Have you told your Father?

Gene: No. But he guessed something from my letters, and told me if I went out there to live it would kill you.

Margaret: Why can't he say it would kill him? He doesn't think it would hold you or mean anything to you.

(she shakes her head)

(GENE doesn't want to go into that, and just looks down at their hands.)

Margaret: I'll talk to him. He'll make a dreadful scene, but—

(MARGARET looks down at their clasped hands. At last her emotion is beyond control, and she cries. GENE understands that this was inevitable . . . but his MOTHER does not mean it to deter him. She just can't help it. He touches her face gently.)

Gene: —No. You always have done that for Alice and me. I'll do it.

[The triangle operates in such a way as to prevent a mutual personal communication in any twosome. Mother talks to Gene about father, father talks to Gene about mother, he talks to each of them about the other, and on it goes. Momentarily we have seen the triangle shift so that Gene is on the outside; however, mother's anxiety about father's reaction to Gene's news pulls her back into offering to be his spokesman. Gene, hoping to be grown up, refuses her offer. He goes downstairs and finds his father has moved from one object of his distance, the TV, to another, sleep.]

INT: NIGHT

(As GENE enters the room where his FATHER is watching TV, he pauses. He is saddened by the picture of the old man asleep in front of a babbling TV screen.)

... He wonders too, if he should talk to his father tonight. He turns down the volume knob on the TV.)

Tom: (waking up at the silence)

What? What?

(sees GENE crouching near him)

Where's your mother?

Gene: She's all right. She's upstairs, going to bed.

Tom: (sits back)

Oh . . .

(blinks his eyes to wake up)

Gene: (hesitantly)

Dad . . .

Tom: (looking at TV)

Oh, this is a good one. This fella can really handle the guns.

(he reaches past GENE to turn up the volume)

Gene: Dad . . . I want to talk to you.

Tom: Just a minute.

(he adjusts the picture, and leans forward to watch)

Gene: (gives up, after watching FATHER a few moments)

Well, I've got to go now.

[Gene makes a valiant effort to connect with his father. He stands in front of the TV, and wakens him. Father physically moves Gene out of the way, re-establishing the link between himself and the TV, with Gene on the outside. Gene's reactive triggers are fired, and all hope of connecting fades.]

Tom: Oh, so soon? We see so little of you.

Gene: I'm up at least once a week, Dad.

Tom: Oh, I'm not complaining.

(but he is)

There just doesn't seem to be any time. And when you are here, your mother's doing all the talking. Well . . . "All's lost, all's spent, when we our desires get without content. 'Tis better to be that which we destroy, than by destruction dwell with doubtful joy."

(GENE is always puzzled by his father's frequent use of this quotation. It never is immediately appropriate, but it indicates such unhappiness that it is sad and touching to him.)

Gene: We'll get a chance to talk, Dad. Maybe you could have lunch with me in town in a couple of days. I'd like to talk to you.

Tom: That's a wonderful idea. You set the date.

Gene: I'll call.

(They move to the porch.)

EXT: PORCH—NIGHT

(Single light in roof of porch) . . .

[Father puts the finishing touch on by adding a ritualized quote, and by instructing his son on how to pull out of the driveway and what directions to take on his way home.]

Tom: I can't tell you what a comfort it is knowing you are just down in the city. Don't know what we'd do without you. No hat or coat?

Gene: No.

Tom: It's still chilly. You should be careful.

(GENE *kisses* FATHER *on cheek*.)

Tom: . . . You're coming up for your Mother's birthday, aren't you?

Gene: Yes.

Tom: It'll be my party. . . . And, Gene . . . remember what I said about California.

Gene: (*pauses on the step for a moment, then turns to go*)
Good night, Dad.

Tom: (*calling*)

Drive carefully. I noticed you were inclined to push it up there a little. (

GENE *moves on*.)

Tom: Make a full stop going out of the driveway, then turn, right . . . traffic is terrible out there now . . . take your first left and second right. It's a little tricky down there.

[This segment defines the conflictual issues as the father's death, alcohol, emotional distance and closeness, physical distance, emotional cutoffs, bitterness, and business accomplishment versus artistic accomplishment. Each of these issues can be tracked through the relationships over the generations.]

EXT: DRIVEWAY—NIGHT

(GENE *has opened the car door and sat down. He now slams the door unnecessarily hard, and starts the car with a vengeance. He turns the car in the drive and leaves. TOM is left alone on the porch, under the one light, waving vaguely after the car.*)

This segment clearly illustrates the fact that one of the methods most commonly used by parents to keep from getting into painful issues with their adult children is to treat them exactly as they did when they were very young. Gene plays right into this by allowing it to happen; he eases his own conscience about not discussing his California trip by making an appointment to discuss it with his father at a later date. After this segment, Gene's mother has a heart attack, and is placed in an intensive care unit. Gene and his father retreat when she falls asleep, and go out for the evening to a Rotary Club meeting. During the night Margaret dies. The daughter, Alice, comes for the funeral, and she and Gene discuss what is to be done with Tom. Alice advises Gene to get out of town, remarry, and leave him to live alone with a paid housekeeper. They also talk about how sorry they are for not having found more time to spend with their mother, and Gene mentions that he became his mother's life because his father had "quit on her."

After the funeral Alice reiterates her position on what should be done with their father, and says that having him live with her and her family

would be impossible. She volunteers to approach Tom on the subject of hiring a housekeeper, and tells Gene to back her up when the father turns to him. Tom predictably dismisses her from any obligations, but hastens to add, "Gene will keep an eye on me." It is Alice who finally reopens the topic of Gene's remarriage and move to California, and Gene who just as predictably backs down and tries to get Alice to drop the subject. The scene ends with Tom telling Alice that everyone has gotten along just fine without her.

Gene's next step, after Alice leaves, is to visit nursing homes; he becomes thoroughly depressed. Peggy comes from California for a meeting; she comes to see Tom, who does his best to pretend that he does not know who she is. Their meeting leads inevitably to the final confrontation scene, which follows. Before screening it, the audience is asked:

- (1) What is your idea of a personal relationship?
 - (2) Is a personal relationship possible with this father? (3)
- What are the nodal points where the son could have turned the

process around?

(Tom is in his pajamas and bathrobe kneeling by his bed, saying his prayers. Again, a touching sight. GENE enters when TOM starts to rise.)

Gene: Ready to be tucked in?

[This scene begins with an enactment of a pseudobuddy-buddy ritual between Gene and his father. In spite of this ritual, the mutual longing for closeness comes through. Again they try. Earlier, while talking with Alice about the days following their mother's death, Gene complained that he wanted to talk with his father about his dead mother, but that his father wouldn't allow it. He is about to get his chance.]

Tom: (smiling at the phrase)

Yes . . . look at the weight I've lost.

Gene: Well, you had quite a little pot there, Dad.

Tom: But look, all through here. Through my chest.

Gene: Well, we'll put some back on.

Tom: (looking at his own chest)

You know, I never had hair on my chest. I don't understand it. You have hair on your chest. I just didn't have any. . . . Well, I'm confident if I could get some exercise. . . . Do you remember when I used to get you up in the morning, and we'd go down and do calisthenics to the radio?

Gene: (smiling)

Yes.

Tom: (stands very straight and swings his arms)

One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four . . .

(he totters a bit)

Gene: Hey, take it easy. . . . why don't you wait till morning for that?

Tom: And we used to put on the gloves and spar down on the side porch? The manly art of self-defense.

(he crouches in boxing position)

Gentleman Jim Corbett . . .

(he spars a moment with Gene . . .)

Oh, well . . . I intend to get over to the club and play some golf, sit around and swap stories with the boys. Too bad you never took up golf.

(he fishes in his top bureau drawer, which he has brought to his bed)
I was looking through my bureau drawer . . . I don't know, just going over things . . .

(takes out a packet of photographs wrapped in tissue paper)
Pictures . . . I think you've seen most of them . . . the family.

Gene: (very tentatively)
You know, Dad, I've never seen a picture of your father.
(Tom looks at him a long time. Then finally, with his hatred showing in his face, he unwraps another tissue, and hands over a small picture.)

Gene: (surprised)
He's just a boy.

Tom: That was taken about the time he was married. . . . Oh, he was a fine-looking man before he started to drink. Big, square, high color. But he became my mortal enemy. . . . Did I ever show you that?
(takes out a small piece of paper, hands it to GENE)

Careful . . . When I set up a home for my brother and sister, one day we were all out, and he came around and ripped up all my sister's clothes and shoes. Drunk, of course. A few days later, he came around to apologize *and* ask for some money, and I threw him out. . . . The next day he left that note. . . .

[Tom again builds a case for bastardizing his father, and openly proclaims him as his mortal enemy. In response, Gene searches for something positive that might mitigate Tom's intensely negative stance.]

(Rumpled piece of paper . . . scrawled on it: "You are welcome to your burden.")

Tom (V.O.): You are welcome to your burden.

Gene: And you kept it?

Tom: Yes, I never saw him again until many years later he was dying, in Bellevue, and someone got word to me and I went down, and asked him if he wanted anything. He said he'd like some fruit. So I sent him in a few oranges. He died the next day.

Gene: There must have been something there to love, to understand.
[Tom blocks Gene's attempt, and shifts to the positive things about his relationship with Gene. It is as if each of them has made a pledge not to let their relationship with one another be a repeat of the previous generation.]

Tom: In my father?
(he shakes his head no . . . then he shows GENE another card)
Do you remember this? "To the best dad in the world on Father's Day." (*turns it over and reads the notation*)
1946. . . . Yes.

(emotional)
I appreciate that, Gene. That's a lovely tribute. I think I have all your Father's Day cards here. . . . You know, I didn't want children, coming from the background I did . . . and we didn't have Alice for a long time. But your mother finally persuaded me. She said they would be a comfort in our old age. And you are, Gene.

Gene: (touched, but embarrassed and uncomfortable)
Well . . .

Tom: (fishes in the drawer and brings out a program)
A program of yours from college . . . some glee club concert . . . I've got everything but the kitchen stove in here. . . . Do you still sing?

Gene: (smiling)

Not in years.
Tom: That's too bad. You had a good voice. But we can't do everything.

.. I remember your mother would sit at the piano, hour after hour, and I'd be up here at my desk, and I'd hear you singing.

[The theme of singing for father is clearest here. We see the process in the central triangle: Tom, alone in his room upstairs working, Gene downstairs singing to the accompaniment of his mother. Here father and son almost touch in a real way, when the process of how it really was surfaces, and father is again thrown back into the past.]

Gene: You always asked me to sing "When I Grow Too Old To Dream."

Tom: Did I? . . . I don't remember your ever singing that. . . . You always seemed to be just finishing when I came into the room.

(looks at GENE)

Did you used to sing that for me?

Gene: (not a joke any more)

No. . . . But you always asked me to sing it for you.

Tom: Oh.

(puts program away)

Well, I enjoyed sitting up here and listening.

(he pokes around in the drawer, and takes something out . . . in tissue paper. He unwraps a picture carefully)

And that's my mother.

Gene: (gently)

Yes, I've seen that, Dad. It's lovely.

Tom: She was twenty-five when that was taken. She died the next year . . . I carried it in my wallet for years . . . And then I felt it was wearing it out. So I put it away. . . . Just a little bit of a thing . . .

[As Tom again begins his idealized version of his mother, his vulnerability surfaces for the first time. It is hard to tell whether he is mourning his wife or his mother, or a combination of the two. The stage is set—two men, father and son, both longing for a mutual closeness. Both have experienced the loss of their mothers and their wives.]

(He starts to cry, and the deep, deep sobs finally come and his emaciated body is wracked by them. It is a terrible, almost soundless sobbing. GENE comes to his FATHER and puts his arms around him and holds him. Then, after some moments . . .)

Tom: I didn't think it would be this way . . . I always thought I'd go first. *(He sobs again, gasping for air. GENE continues to hold him, inevitably moved and touched by this genuine suffering. Finally, TOM gets a stern grip on himself)*

Tom: I'm sorry . . .

(tries to shake it off)

It just comes over me. It'll pass . . . I'll get a hold of myself.

Gene: Don't try, Dad. . . . Believe me, it's best.

Tom: (angry with himself)

No . . . It's just that . . . I'll be all right.

(he turns and blows his nose)

Gene: It's rough, Dad. . . . It's bound to be rough.

Tom: (shakes his head to snap out of it)

It'll pass. . . . It'll pass.

(starts to wrap up the picture of his mother)

Gene: Can I help you put these things away, Dad?

[Gene faces his wished-for opening. His father is vulnerable, bleeding openly. How does he respond? Does he talk about his own emotional reaction to the death of his

wife or his mother? No. Instead he responds on an object level, offering to help father put his things away. All is still not lost. His over competent father allows him to do it, and the opening still exists. Gene, with magnificent timing, opens the issue of moving to California and marrying Peggy. The opening is slammed shut. The automatic reactive pattern reestablishes itself. Gene and his Father now proceed, against both of their wishes, to repeat a piece of painful process from the generation before.]

Tom: No . . . no . . . I can . . .

(he seems to be looking for something he can't find)

Well, if you would.

(GENE starts to help.)

Tom: I don't know what we'd do without you, Gene.

(And together they put the things back in the box. . . . As they do so, GENE is deeply moved with feelings of tenderness for his father. After a few moments, he starts, with great consideration.)

Gene: Dad?

Tom: Yes?

Gene: *(putting it carefully and slowly)*

How did you like Peggy?

Tom: Who? . . . Oh . . . Oh, yes. Very nice. Very attractive.

Gene: I'm thinking very seriously, Dad . . . of marrying Peggy . . . and going out to California . . . to live.

(Tom straightens a little.)

Gene: Now, I know this is your home, where you're used to . . . but I'd like you to come out there with me, Dad. It's lovely out there, and we could find an apartment for you near us.

(this is the most loving gesture GENE has made to his father in his life)

Tom: *(thinks for a moment, then looks at GENE with a smile)*

You know, I'd like to make a suggestion. . . . Why don't you all come live here?

Gene: *(explaining calmly)*

Peggy has a practice out there.

Tom: A what?

Gene: She's a doctor. I told you. And children with schools and friends.

Tom: We have a big house here. You always liked this house. It's wonderful for children. You used to play baseball out back, and there's that basketball thing.

Gene: Dad, I'd like to get away from this part of the country for a while. It's been rough here, ever since Carol died. It would be good for you too, getting away.

Tom: Your mother would be very happy to have the house full of children again. I won't be around long, and then it will be all yours.

Gene: That's very kind of you, Dad. But I don't think it would work. Besides her work and the children, all Peggy's family is out there.

Tom: Your family is here.

Gene: Yes, I know.

Tom: You know, Gene, I'm only saying this for your own good, but you went out there very soon after Carol's death, and you were exhausted from her long illness, and well, naturally, very susceptible. . . . I'm wondering if you've really waited long enough to know your own mind.

[As this insidious process surfaces, Tom tries to coax Gene into compliance. Gene holds onto his California anchor in desperation. Father pulls out the stops and pushes all the guilt buttons.]

Gene: I know my own mind.

Tom: I mean, taking on another man's children. (
looks at GENE a long moment, sees it's hopeless)
 Did you mention this business of California to your mother?
Gene: (*gets the accusation, but keeps calm*)
 Yes. She told me to go ahead, with her blessings.
 [Mother's ghost appears, and the central triangle is again spelled out.]
Tom: She would say that, of course. But I warned you.
Gene: (*turns away*)
 For God's sake.
Tom: (*gives up, angry*)
 All right, go ahead. I can manage.
 (*sarcastic*)
 Send me a Christmas card . . . if you remember.
Gene: (*enraged*)
 Dad!
Tom: What?
Gene: I've asked you to come with me. *Tom:* And I've told you I'm not
 going. *Gene:* I understand that, but not this "Send me a Christmas card, if you remem-
 ber."⁹⁵
Tom: I'm very sorry if I've offended you. Your mother always said I mustn't
 raise my voice to you.
 (*suddenly hard and vicious*)
 Did you want me to make it easy for you the way your mother did? Well, I won't.
 If you want to go, go!
 [Mother's ghost, plus her position in between them.]
Gene: God damn it.
Tom: (*running on*)
 I've always known it would come to this when your mother was gone. I was
 tolerated around this house because I paid the bills and—
 [Tom's feeling of being left out and tolerated.]
Gene: Shut up!
 [The dam bursts.]
Tom: (*coming at him*)
 Don't you—
Gene: (*shouting*)
 Shut up! I asked you to come with me. What do you want? What the hell do you
 want? If I lived here the rest of my life it wouldn't be enough for you. I've tried,
 God damn it, I've tried to be the dutiful son . . . commanded into your presence
 on every conceivable occasion, Easter, Christmas, birthdays, Thanksgiving. . . .
 Even that Thanksgiving when Carol was dying and I was staying with her at the
 hospital. "We miss you so. Our day is nothing without you. Couldn't you come up
 for an hour or two after you leave Carol?" You had no regard for what was really
 going on. . . . My wife was dying!
Tom: Is it so terrible to want to see your own son?
Gene: It is terrible to want to possess him . . . entirely and completely!
Tom: (*after a moment . . . coldly*)
 There will be some papers to sign, for your mother's estate. Be sure you leave an
 address with my lawyer.
 [Tom attempts to dismiss his son, and bring their discussion back to object level.]

Gene: (cutting in)
Dad!

Tom: (cutting, with no self-pity)
From tonight on, you can consider me dead.
(turns on him in a rage of resentment)

I gave you everything. Since I was a snot-nosed kid, I've worked my fingers to the bone. You've had everything and I had nothing. I put a roof over your head, clothes on your back—

[Tom's answer is the same as with his own father and his daughter Alice: a complete emotional cutoff.]

Gene: —Food on the table.

Tom: —Things I never had.

Gene: I know.

Tom: You ungrateful bastard.

Gene: (as though he would hit him)

What do you want for gratitude? Nothing, nothing would be enough. You have resented everything you ever gave me. The orphan boy in you has resented everything. . . . I'm sorry as hell about your miserable childhood. When I was a kid, and you told me those stories, I used to go up to my room at night and cry. But there is nothing I can do about it . . . and it does not excuse everything . . . I *am* grateful to you. I also admire and respect you, and stand in awe of what you have done with your life. I will never be able to touch it.

(Tom looks at him with contempt.)

Gene: But it does not make me love you, and I wanted to love you. . . . You hated your father. I saw what it did to you. I did not want to hate you.

Tom: I don't care what you feel about me.

Gene: I do!

CONCLUSION

Enlightened by the successful use of *I Never Sang for My Father*, I have looked for other films which might be equally useful. *Double Solitaire*, another of Robert Anderson's works, deals with a marriage that is twenty-five years old, and is about to rupture. This marriage is seen against the backdrop of the marriage of the husband's parents, who are celebrating their fiftieth wedding anniversary. The similarities between the two marriages are very clear. The fifty-year-old relationship survives by closing things over, pretending everything is all right, and living at a fixed distance, a distance filled with games of solitaire. The younger marriage is a series of repeating patterns in the marital fusion. This is elucidated very clearly in a sequence in which the husband and wife spend a weekend together in a remote beach house, and the husband tries vainly to reach his wife and change her mind about leaving him.

Another film that is an excellent study of marital fusion, especially reciprocity, is Ingmar Bergman's *Scenes from a Marriage*. This film shows

how the relationship between Marianna and Johann shifts over the course of his affair, their separation, and the subsequent process of their divorce and reconnecting after they have both married other people.

John Cassavetes' film *Woman Under the Influence* lends itself very nicely to a study of the invalidation process in families as it ties into acute psychotic reactions.

The study of human relationships and the way they determine how much of the potential of any individual is realized never ceases to fascinate. It has been estimated that most people use something like one-fifth of their actual abilities in a lifetime. How much more of their inherent talents and intelligence might people use if they were masters of their own relationship space. It has always been easier to see what's gone wrong with the family across the street, or how other wives and husbands might improve their lot. And life would be easier if your spouse would change, so that you wouldn't have to. Displacement material offers the student of humanity an exercise in planning how to change others, while offering a chance to learn enough also to change himself.*

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