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Inside, Outside, and Between

Sometimes, our most valuable insights come from childhood experiences, especially the painful ones. You would think that memories from decades ago would fade over time. While the details get fuzzy, the emotions remain vivid. Growing older, I'm able to do more than feel the pain. I'm able to see the significance of these childhood memories. The border for the 1000 piece puzzle of my life snaps into place with each re-examined memory. This is about one of the puzzle pieces from the border.

I remember being in the living room as a child, watching television. I was supposed to get my pajamas on to get ready for bed. But I didn't want to. My father had a volatile temper; that night, either my Dad radar was not working or I simply gave in to being a child. My father became angry and told me to go outside and to come back in when I was ready to put on my pajamas. I remember walking to the back door, through our small kitchen, with a sense of commotion around me, my mother in tears. I stepped outside, into the cold and dark of the night. The door shut behind me with the firmness of a well-placed bet at a poker table. I sat down on the back step and began to cry.

I was no more than 10 years old and this was the loneliest I had ever been, even though I had spent many moments by myself, high up in our backyard apple tree. This kind of aloneness was different. My father was telling me in no uncertain terms that if I couldn't live up to the simplest of expectations, I could no longer be part of the family. I remember the blackness all around me and the feeling of being shut out from the world, my world, my family. They were inside, in a warm house and I was on the outside, with little more than my pride to keep me company. This was what it was like to be on the outside and I knew that I didn't want it anymore. I knocked on the door to be let in.

I'm noticing that even now, over 30 years later, I don't want to write about this memory. I try distracting myself, so as not to re-live the pain. I get up for a snack of crackers and cheese before sitting down to write. I move my laptop so that it's not in the sun on the patio table. I tease my son as he reads a Popular Science magazine. I am delaying the hard emotional work that is required to put the pieces of the border together.

Many times since that night, I have been on the outside looking in. But I have always been able to find my way in, into the heart of a group. Or I have simply walked away, knowing that the pain of sitting on the doorstep, waiting to be let in was too much to bear. In my adult life, I've had plenty of rejection—in dating, in applying for jobs, in social and professional clubs, on work teams. Nothing, absolutely nothing, has been comparable to the experience of being rejected by my father in that moment. He was such a powerful force that his dismissal of me meant exclusion from the family as well.

I recounted this story to my brother when I was in my thirties. We were hiking and talking about how our childhood experiences had shaped us as adults. I remember playing down the importance of this event in my life. My brother astutely replied, "If it wasn't that important, why have you remembered it after all these years?" We hugged and I knew that it had touched me deeply, both the memory and the acknowledgment of what had happened to that young girl many years ago.

My father died almost 30 years ago, when I was a teenager. I have since forgiven him. As the saying goes, he knew not what he was doing. Oddly enough, I have become the glue that keeps my siblings and parents and in-laws together. When I am absent at a family gathering, my sister-in-law remarks how it wasn't the same without me, that there was something missing that was more than my physical presence. I pause to give thanks for the wonderful relationships that I have with my family and extended family. Glue is neither on the inside or the outside. It is between. I smile, knowing that I have found my place in the family.

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