

## “Father and Daughter”: Loss and Longing in a Short Animation

By Robert C. Abrams

As a psychiatrist and geriatrician, my attention has been drawn to “Father and Daughter,” a 10-minute wordless animation created by the Dutch filmmaker, Michael Dudok de Wit. “Father and Daughter,” now accessible on the internet,<sup>1</sup> was an Oscar winner in its category in 2000 and has been celebrated for its metaphoric richness over the past two decades. Among its several themes, the film directs attention to the salient life events of older people that in busy medical practices are rarely elicited.

“Father and Daughter” opens showing a girl aged 5 or 6 who has an unmistakably loving relationship with her father. However, the father suddenly embraces her, clambers into a small boat, and rows out to sea.

The girl is then left to bicycle through her life alone. She rides uphill, downhill, through sunshine and storm. Mostly she pedals stoically ahead. Along the bicycle path of her life she encounters varied exemplars of humanity—people of different ages, some, like herself, bicycling solo, and others in family groups. But crucially, she rides past these people without making lasting connections. Meanwhile, she matures into adulthood and begins to age visibly.

Eventually she finds that she is an old woman, frail and kyphotic. Nothing seems to work properly anymore, certainly not her aging joints; her gait has become precarious, and a fall appears to be almost inevitable. Even her trusty bicycle is no longer reliable, and she turns away from it with an air of resignation and disgust recognizable to those who have experienced the often-humiliating disabilities of aging.

What then is the message of “Father and Daughter” for physicians? When we first evaluate an older patient, we know little about the preoccupations or key events of his or her life. It is axiomatic that we can understand more about a person’s current behavior if we appreciate the milestones that have propelled him forward through life—or held him back. An inquiry about whether a person can recall an experience that he or she considers decisive may suffice to begin. The first follow-up probe could be: “How do you think that experience might have influenced your later actions or decisions?”

In “Father and Daughter” the abrupt separation from her father is presented as that impactful event in the daughter’s life. Even if her father had provided an explanation at the time, she had probably been too young to assimilate it. The loss was therefore a psychologically injurious abandonment, experienced like a death, save for the uncertain possibility of a future reunion.

As a method of inquiry, Viederman<sup>2</sup> devised an interviewing technique intended to hone in on patients' central life experiences in order to construct a condensed psychodynamic life narrative. Creating a life narrative requires a conversation in which the patient and doctor together search for the events or experiences that have had an enduring influence on the person. In "Father and Daughter" that experience would be, again, the young girl's traumatic and developmentally consequential separation from her father.

The psychodynamic life narrative interview involves no formal structure; it is simply a well-defined line of investigation. Its biographical emphasis is ideal for older patients, for whom there is a longer life trajectory to consider and understand. However, even for older patients, the psychodynamic life narrative interview does not necessarily require a lengthy span of time, as many individuals are well-aware of the psychologically important events of their lives and respond quickly. Well-suited for patients undergoing a crisis of illness or facing imminent death, the interview could also be incorporated into outpatient encounters, bedside liaison psychiatry consultations, or hospice and palliative services.

In the geriatric primary care settings familiar to this writer, the usual order of business is to first address patients' conspicuous age-related conditions. However, if the conversation reaches no deeper, the potential for a meaningful exchange between the patient and physician will remain unrealized, an opportunity lost.

In creating a life narrative, the physician (not necessarily a psychiatrist) might be able to help the person discover the origin of his reaction to the adversity or health crisis he is now confronting. If a person's actions in the past had seemed self-defeating or otherwise regrettable, from the perspective of time there might also have been elements of predictability or inevitability, appreciated as part of a pattern; now the individual's life course no longer seems quite so random. In Viederman's approach, the interviewer concludes by summarizing what has been said to afford the patient an opportunity to reflect upon it. Successful or not, the effort at finding coherence from the past to the present can still convey a gratifying message to the patient, namely, that his or her life story has been valued.

Self-discoveries may reveal both strengths and weaknesses. In "Father and Daughter" the woman's life is marred by her inability to establish relationships with others, presumably a consequence of abandonment. But if she has been traumatized and isolated, she has also been *sustained* by the memory of her original loving relationship with her father; and it is in the hope for a reunion with him that she finds the motivation to carry on bicycling against the wind. For others, the aftermath of childhood loss could contribute in adulthood not only to depression, but also to transcendent gifts of compassion, artistic expression, or a commitment to social justice.

Finally, as an old woman with no time for detours, the daughter reaches the end of the road. There she happens upon her father's boat run aground. Immersed in it, she is now in the "same boat" as her father, literally and symbolically. Her father has died, and she is near death herself. She then rises from the boat and hastens toward a far-distant image of her father, shedding years as she runs. Reaching him, once again a child, she embraces him joyfully. The circle has closed.

Films like “Father and Daughter” also demonstrate and reinforce the value of the humanities for medical education. Engaging with paintings, poetry, music, or film permits students—and practicing physicians as well—a respite from the burdensome volume of data generated by contemporary medical practice. That respite can encourage students and physicians to reconnect with their most basic tasks as healers. For this geriatrician-psychiatrist, “Father and Daughter” provided the inspiration to seek out the untold stories of older patients and help them discern meaning in their lives.

## References

1. Dudok de Wit M. Father and Daughter [film animation]. 2000.  
<https://youtube.com/watch?v=8fR5L-XA6ug>
2. Viederman M. The psychodynamic life narrative: A psychotherapeutic intervention useful in crisis situations. *Psychiatry* 1983; 46 (3):236-46. doi:10.1080/00332747.1983.11024196

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