My Level Awakening of God After "Dad" Wounds
The morning of March 4, 2009, three police officers knocked on my door and asked to come in. Considering my last run-in with the law was a speeding ticket more than a decade ago, and one of the officers was my friend's dad, I let them in. I was certain they were investigating my neighbor, whose driveway was like a revolving door. My three young children, all under the age of five were bathed and ready to go the gym that morning. I was scheduled to teach a yoga class at 10 a.m., have lunch, and then take my oldest to afternoon preschool. The police wanted to know if I knew a Floyd Hannah, and I immediately wondered what Dad had done and what legal counsel I would need to obtain for him. They kept asking questions, and they kept asking me to sit down. I coyly answered with more questions, staying busy with my morning dishes and tending to kids. I didn’t want to incriminate Dad. Realizing they weren’t going to leave, I reluctantly conceded that Floyd Hannah was my dad. I finally sat down to answer their questions. The officer knelt in front of me and told me their investigation was about an accident and death. Who did Dad kill? The victim was Floyd Hannah, whose real name they discovered was Fouad. Just then I noticed that the officer with a sweater had “Chaplain” on his badge. They had found my name and address inside Dad’s briefcase and were uncertain how I knew him. They were piecing together why a man from Chicago was in north-central Indiana and hoping to find his next of kin. Dad was in north-central Indiana to see me and my family. He died on impact approximately forty minutes after leaving my home. I was the last person he talked with before he died. Mystery solved.
My world changed after Dad died. In fact, it just stopped. I went through the motions to notify my siblings and plan a funeral. At the funeral we played Neil Diamond's "Coming to America," a song that captured Dad's spirit. A Coptic priest concluded with a ceremony of smoky incense and Arabic chants. The funeral was full of friends and family, but only the Egyptians removed their shoes and participated in the Coptic ceremony. When we cleaned out Dad's apartment and workspace at the hospital, I caught a deeper glimpse of the family and community Dad had built outside of his ex-wife and children. He had many friends.

In the weeks and months after losing my dad, I realized that I believed I had faith in God, but what I really had faith in was my dad and a patriarchal system. God had always been portrayed to me as "Father," but my father was no longer around to keep me within those bounds. It was very confusing to me, and I spend nearly a year reading Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, and Job. Job was especially meaningful to me. It awakened me to see how shallow my assumptions of God had been. Dad was central to my faith and ideas about God. With him gone, the scales fell from eyes, and I saw how small my God was when I reduced God to "Father." It was a struggle to reconcile Dad's fatal accident with a God who is supposed to be protecting us.
Dad’s dying opened my eyes to a greater image of God. It wasn’t an easy journey, however. A couple months after Dad died my youngest son started to have seizures and became ill. He was hospitalized five times over the course of six months. His development was regressing. I was afraid and woke with rage. Finding myself angry with God I felt out of control. I identified with Job, who suffered the loss of his family, estate, and personal health through what I felt was God’s gambling with Satan. Now God was gambling on me. Was it not enough to take my dad? On top of this, three months prior to losing Dad, I had buried an unborn child. I hated God. God took my unborn baby and took my dad, and somehow that was not enough. Why my son? It felt as if it were war. I decided since God was gambling, maybe I should too.

Since I had been baptized, I lived my life according to the rules. I followed a strict and safe God. My Jesus had a manicured beard, big shepherd stick, and wore deodorant. My Jesus with fluffy sheep created a safe space in a chaotic world when I was obedient. With the sudden traumas in my life, I felt that Jesus broke my faith contract. I spent nearly a year in the book of Job because I believed my answers were there. I decided I had made an error in believing God was safe. Job’s God was good and deserving of reverence, however Job’s God was not safe. In fact, the more I thought about it, Job’s God was a big bully and a bit of a monster. The thought was terrifying to me.
As Job declared his innocence in the Bible story, I, too, claimed mine. As Job was careful to revere God despite his circumstances, I did the same and still do; God is worthy of honor and respect. Like Job, I did nothing to deserve my traumas, so I let God know this each day during my prayers. It’s long been a ritual of mine to take an evening walk to contemplate and pray. I do this on summer evenings and in the rain or snow. I even do it on vacation. In my year of reading Job, I’m certain my neighbors wondered why I was yelling and shaking my fist at the sky during my evening stroll. God never replied to me as God did Job, telling my weak and grieved self to brace myself. God’s only response to me was open sky and not striking me with lightning!

I was angry, I was afraid, and I was not letting God off the hook with all the open sky silence. I needed an answer. I found the freedom and space to express how I really felt by holding my ground with God. As Job did, I discovered who I really was and saw my life and the people in it differently although I would have already given my daughter an equal inheritance (Job 42:15)! With my new freedom, I realized my grievances were not just about my current traumas, but the old ones too. It was time to clear myself of my "dad" wounds.
Abuse victims understand the feelings of powerlessness. We will often go to great lengths—even the abuse of others—to avoid ever feeling the shame and shudder of being completely weak again. By overcoming my fear to confront God, I was able to reframe my story about why I was abused. By maintaining my innocence with God, I maintained my innocence with my mom and dad and realized I deserved better. I deserved a safe and loving home. I deserved the right to say what I believed without punishment or trial. The religious barriers that kept me safe by following the rules also caged me in. By holding my innocence, I was able to roll the stone away and see out from my hiding place.

In a journey of faith, doubt is essential. How can we believe if we don’t doubt? My spiritual posture to question God made everyone around me uncomfortable. I was even accused of blasphemy! Out of the thick I can say that hating God and not believing in God are separate things. It’s also my personal conviction that there should be room for each kind of doubt. The Bible tells us, “Carry out your own salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12 CEB).”

It seems to me that to carry out this command, we must doubt. Whether we doubt God’s existence, intentions, or supposed preferential treatment of men, we are to face our fears. Carrying out our salvation also means questioning who God is. I began to think of God differently, not just as a Father.
Reframing Dad (and God) was some of my most difficult spiritual work. It not only was at the cost of my trauma, fear, and trembling, but it required a new set of religious lenses on the 'Father' topic. There were good things about my dad, and I had to dig deep to put them at the forefront of my mind. Despite Dad's violence and violation of boundaries, he was devoted to his family and did not let me go. And trust me, I tried to escape. Dad wrote me a letter every week for over twenty years. As my children grew, Dad also sent them letters, each with stickers inside (since they weren't old enough to understand money). He visited every other weekend, bringing balloons and fresh fruit; he insisted on taking us out to eat to give me a break from cooking. Dad worked a part-time job, in addition to his full-time job, so he could take all of us on vacation. My family, my sister, and my little brother made some great memories on those trips, or any other excursion we decided to embark on. Dad was always about the fun.

Ever since I was an infant, Dad called me 'Sunshine.' He rarely called me by my name in his letters or while visiting. Being 'Sunshine' still makes me feel special; it feels real and as a special blessing specifically for me. Dad also taught me to 'never give up.' He demonstrated perseverance unlike anyone I have ever known (and he never let me forget that he came to America at nineteen years old with a hundred dollars and couldn't speak English!). If Dad had given up, we might not have reconciled.
Reconciling with Dad gave me a greater sense of family and security. I know not everyone can (or should) do this after surviving an abusive relationship. Though Dad and I did have a decent relationship at the time of his death, much of my personal reconciling with him occurred after he died.

Our Dad issues are knotted into God issues; untying the knot not only required me to stand in fear as I questioned God but also awakened me to God outside of ‘Father.’ I realized God was more than a Father who demanded worship. God wasn’t going to hurt me and wasn’t interested in buffing power over me. God didn’t ordain patriarchy as a prescription for human social structure. In fact, God wasn’t a sexist. I realized God is a little like me, too, and wants me to feel the power in knowing that!

“For I know the plans I have for you,” says the Eternal, “plans for peace, not evil, to give you a future and hope—never forget that.” (Jeremiah 29:11, The Voice)