

A Round of Golf
with My Father

A Round of Golf *with My Father*

*The New Psychology of Exploring Your Past
to Make Peace with Your Present*

William Damon



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To Jesse, Maria, Caroline, Sarah, and Isak

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PROLOGUE

A Call of Consequence

“DAD, I DON’T know if I should be telling you about this.”

The call came from my daughter Maria one afternoon while I was sitting in my office in California. There was uncharacteristic hesitation in her voice.

A spirited, world-traveling young economist, Maria was in Cape Town, South Africa, on a teaching assignment. Jet lag had kept her up late that night. She’d used her sleepless time to dig into some “family stuff” online—stuff that might interest me or might upset me, she didn’t know which. But her findings were so fascinating she really wanted to share them with me. Finally, she decided that I probably could handle it.

In that consequential call, my daughter introduced me to my father.

During her sleepless night in Cape Town, Maria had become curious about a grandfather she never knew. That man was also the father I never knew. Oddly, I had never shared Maria’s curiosity, a lack of interest that I’d never questioned before but which now seemed mysterious to me. As it turned out, Maria’s call uncovered many mysteries that had long been buried in the conspiracy of family silence that had surrounded me as a child. I listened intently as she opened the doors to the long-locked vault of my family history.

She was right: I did handle it without getting upset. In fact, Maria’s online discoveries intrigued and thrilled me in a way that took both of

us by surprise. What she revealed set me off on my own ten-year discovery quest. It led me to a new understanding of myself and the course my life had taken. It triggered a process of reflection that helped me gain perspective on the choices I've made and helped me think more clearly about the choices in front of me.

The introduction to my father did not take place in person, nor could it. By the time Maria “found” him, he had been dead for twenty years. I didn't know this, or much of anything else about him at that time. But as a result of Maria's call, I was introduced to my father as a person—a person with physical features I could gaze at in old black-and-white photos, a life story I could investigate, living friends and relatives whom I could meet, and character traits I could uncover, analyze, and compare with my own.

I had lived for more than six decades without seeing a picture of him. As a fatherless boy, I had found father figures to guide me through the uncertain and aspirational phases of growing up. Yet the man himself had been entirely missing from my life. Now, after all these years, I was offered a glimpse of the actual man. What was he like? What happened to him? What did he do with his life?

Until college, all I knew about my father was that he was “missing in World War II.” I assumed he had died in action on some nameless European battlefield. Then, in the midst of my college years, I heard otherwise, in cryptic information that my mother revealed to me in a brief remark. But at that time I had no interest in following up on anything I may have heard about my missing father. I was absorbed in my studies, and then in my career, and then in my own growing family. I was not at all eager to get distracted by emotionally loaded information concerning a man who apparently had abandoned my mother and me as soon as I was born.

As a result, I knew virtually nothing about what became of my father after he had left the one mark on the world that *was* obvious to me: the act of inseminating my mother. The context of that act, all-important as

it was for me and my children, remained as cloaked in mystery as the rest of my father's story.

When I answered Maria's call, little did I know that it was to take me on a journey that would make a trip from California to Cape Town feel like walking down the block. It turned out to be a journey that brought me back to my childhood years, and then back even deeper into the twentieth century and some of its great dramas. My father's disappearance, in addition to its profound effect on my life, was bound up in historic stories of World War II, the Cold War, the 1960s civil rights movement, and the postwar American diplomatic mission of promoting democracy throughout the world. Like all lives, my own has been shaped by the historic periods I've lived through. Now I had a further insight to consider: the way my father's life reflected the era he lived through and to which, in small but significant ways, he contributed.

All this shook my sense of my own life's trajectory to its foundations. I felt drawn into a reconsideration of where I came from, how I got to where I am now, and why I made the choices that have made me the person I am. I had an intimation that such reconsideration might guide me in directions yet to come. By gaining an understanding of my roots, I gained a clearer hold on my future. By filling in long-standing elements of my identity that had been concealed from me, I was offered a new chance to develop in ways that would advance purposes I have long held dear.

I could do none of this without some method of self-examination. I was embarking on a serious quest, and I knew that I would not get very far if I approached it casually or haphazardly. Part of the quest—the reconstruction of my father's life—was historical, which required digging through old archives and interviewing his still-living friends and relatives. I am not a historian by training, so my efforts on this were dedicated but amateurish. The other part of the quest, which I saw as essential, was psychological: using what I found to construct a transformed view of my own life, one that could provide me with renewed purpose

and direction. In this endeavor, I was able to draw on my professional knowledge as a life-span developmental psychologist who has explored purpose and identity in his research and writings.

But my own previous work in psychology was not in itself sufficient for the quest I was now embarking on. For the self-examination I was undertaking, I found a promising approach that has been emerging in clinical and autobiographical studies over the past two decades, called “the life review.” A life review is a deliberate procedure for reconstructing our pasts in a manner that can provide three personal benefits that many of us desire as we grow older:

1. acceptance of the events and choices that have shaped our lives, reflecting gratitude for the life we’ve been given rather than self-doubt and regret
2. a more authentic (and thus more robust) understanding of who we are and how we got to be that way, reflecting the well-grounded, reassuring sense of self that the great psychologist Erik Erikson called “ego integrity”
3. a clarity in the directions we wish to take our lives going forward, reflecting what we have learned from the experiences and purposes that have given our lives meaning in the past

I adapted the general life review approach to my own particular circumstances and needs: I do not claim to have implemented or replicated the method in a rigorous and systematic way with a scientifically drawn sample of subjects. In fact, in my exploration there was only one subject: me. The life review approach gave me a way to investigate and construct the renovated life story that I wanted to work out for myself. As I went about this, I increasingly came to believe that the approach could be helpful for others seeking renewed understandings of themselves and the way their lives and life purposes have evolved.

In discovering the truth about the man who sired me, I understood what I had missed in a childhood without a father. I came to terms with long-unacknowledged—or buried—resentments that I may have had as an only child growing up with a single mother. I acquired a sense of what I gained by learning to compensate for my father's absence. As strange as it may sound, I even learned what I owed him.

In the process, I've come to a new understanding of my struggles, my accomplishments, my mistakes, and most importantly the trail of purposes that have defined my highest aspirations and most gratifying contributions to the world. My life story, although not yet complete, is more filled in and more authentic. As such, I believe it offers me a truer guide going forward, one that is sturdier in its capacity to direct and sustain my future choices.

This book is about three journeys of discovery that have captured my imagination since my daughter's consequential call. The first is central to my professional work: a scientific quest to learn more about how people find purposeful identities that fulfill their lives. While my earlier research focused on younger people, in recent years I've turned to later periods of life, seeking to understand what purpose means for people who have much to look back on. The second journey is more personal, though it is widely shared: a desire to understand my past, present, and future in ways that provide reasons for satisfaction rather than regret or despair. By sharing reflections from my life review, I hope to inform readers about how life reviews offer opportunities to find renewed purpose and clarity of direction. The third journey is unique to me, and it sprang upon me unexpectedly: a historical quest to learn the truth about my missing father, through archival searches, interviews with his still-living friends and family, and travel to sites where he grew up, worked, and played. My goal here was to construct a portrait of my father's life that would not only satisfy my newly aroused curiosity but also inform my other two quests. I share the fruits of this unique historical quest to convey the intriguing facts that I discovered about my own life story and

my father's, and also to share the special window they provide on key events in world history. Some of what I learned had moving personal meaning for me; and some of it qualifies as more general psychological and historical discovery.

The explorations in this book take place in a zone where psychological science, personal experience, and philosophical reflection meet. This is not the first time I've ventured into such territory. When I began the research that led to *The Path to Purpose*, the best-known treatments of purpose were found in philosophical and theological contemplations (such as Rick Warren's *The Purpose-Driven Life*) or self-help books (such as Richard Leider's *Power of Purpose*). By now, it's fair to say, purpose has become a well-established subject of study and practice in fields such as education, business, medicine, and psychology. I believe that the feelings that prompted me to write the present book are ones people everywhere will recognize: a quest to better understand my past and present self, my sense of loss for a key family member who went missing from my life, my confusion over long-ago childhood mysteries, my need to heal past wounds and regrets, and my wish to reaffirm the life I've been given.

Everyone searches for life meaning in a unique and personal way. But the search itself is universal. For those who choose to join me on the journeys contained in these pages, I hope that my research, my reflections, and my discoveries provide useful insights about this most personal, and most universal, human quest.

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1

Life Stories

WE TELL STORIES about ourselves all the time. Sometimes we tell stories about ourselves to other people. Sometimes we tell stories about ourselves to ourselves. In either case, our stories say something about who we are, who we would like to be, and how we would like to be seen. Our life stories are ways of building, presenting, and confirming the identities that have given us meaning and direction in life.

Life stories can range from the dramatic to the ordinary. We might tell a high-stakes story about a time we took a gallant risk for a noble cause, such as rescuing a drowning child from an ocean tide or pulling someone out of a burning building. Or we might tell a more everyday tale about a hard day at the office or a shopping coup while bargain hunting. We might recount a lengthy saga of suffering, struggle, and triumph. Or we might share a brief account of an enjoyable trip we took on vacation. In each case, though, the story will tell us, and others, something about ourselves.

When we tell our life stories, we usually are not aware of their identity-presenting agenda. Other goals that coexist with self-presentation seem more obvious to us. The stories we tell others may be intended to entertain, to amuse, to influence, or even possibly to deceive. The stories

we tell ourselves may be intended to remind us about incidents we've treasured and now enjoy reliving, or to help us rethink events we have found disturbing in the past and now wish to resolve in our present thoughts. But along with these other goals, whether intended or not, any story we tell about ourselves conveys information about who we are and who we want to be.

Depending on how committed we are to honesty—and how good our memories are—our stories vary widely in their accuracy. Rarely are we able to tell a story that's "the whole truth and nothing but the truth." We are selective in the events and details that we choose to convey, and we don't always get those events and details exactly right. The inaccuracies in our life stories occur not necessarily because we are trying to deceive ourselves or others (although sometimes people do that), but more commonly because our information is incomplete. We may not know all the facts about an incident we are trying to recall, we may have memory lapses, or we may have false memories that include imaginary embellishments. Life stories are not complete accounts of what happened on any given occasion. Our life stories are incomplete in other ways as well. If it's an ongoing story (as are most life stories, other than deathbed confessions), we can't know how it will end.

Whatever we perceive to be the reasons for our stories, and whatever degree of accuracy we may achieve, our storytelling continues as long as we remain alive. Each day offers us new opportunities to revisit our understanding of who we are and to forge stronger, more authentic, and more life-affirming identities. The life stories that we tell ourselves permit us to do this—especially if we go about telling them in an intentional way.

Life stories enable us to make sense of events that seem meaningless or dispiriting if just left alone to fester. They help us salvage benefits from our regrets. One saving grace of the human condition is our capacity to find meaning in life's most painful occurrences. Stories that place regrettable incidents in the context of what we have learned from them can help us do this.

A thoughtful story can help us find meaning in events that otherwise may seem random or disconnected. It can weave our life events into a coherent narrative about who we've been and who we hope to become. It can help us connect the past with the present and prepare us for the future we'd like to have. In this way, stories about who we've been and who we are can help us deal with the inevitable challenges life throws at us. They give us agency in determining who we shall become. Storytelling is a fundamental human capacity, and life stories are a prime way that humans bring coherence and positivity to their life experiences. Any life story, whether lengthy or brief, offers us a chance to review some portion of our lives and, with that, a chance to reflect on who we are.

Take, for example, our sense of how we've acted in important relationships. For most of us, relations with parents play a large role in our life stories. We would like to think of ourselves as good children who have been loved by our parents, who have made our parents proud, who have expressed gratitude for whatever our parents have given us, and who have always been there for our parents until the very end. This ideal, however, is rarely achieved.

It is common, for example, to feel we should have devoted more time to a sick or dying parent, no matter how much we manage to do. People with dying parents tend to be in midlife, with many competing responsibilities, such as jobs, families, and community engagements. It is hard to be in more than one place at once, so we may feel forced to balance obligations. Although we have tried to do our best for our parents, looking back often uncovers a residue of guilt: Could I have stayed at my mother's bedside longer? Should I have said things to her, or done things for her, that I never quite got around to? As unjustified or irrational as such feelings may be, they can leave a legacy of distress and doubt. A new narrative account of the whole relationship over time can trigger a process of reflective review that resolves such feelings by recasting them in a more forgiving light.

Similarly, many of us may feel that we've had troubling conflicts—with work colleagues, old romantic partners, former friends, or relatives—that

were never adequately resolved. We may still feel nagging insecurities about these relationships and regret over not making things right. If there is still the opportunity, with careful reflection we might now find a chance to do so. If not, we at least could figure out what went wrong, learn from it, and recognize the mistakes we have made. Ultimately, such recognition bears on our identity, our sense of how we've conducted our important relationships.

This is where a deliberate and intentional approach to storytelling can come in. Troubling imperfections in our past behaviors are central to some stories, but these are not the only stories available to us. Just as there are things to regret in virtually every relationship, there also are things to value and treasure. Revising a troubling story to achieve a fairer balance between what we wish we might have changed and what we have cherished can go a long way toward placing life's inevitable regrets in a broader perspective that conveys an overall sense of positivity and gratitude. A deliberate and intentional approach to life stories, such as a life review of the sort that I describe in this book, offers a way to *affirm* our life experiences rather than rue or despair over them.

In the field of psychology, the groundbreaking promotor of an affirmative approach was Victor Frankl, a major influence on the views I present in this book. Frankl wrote his landmark *Man's Search for Meaning* while imprisoned in a concentration camp during World War II. His book ushered in a new perspective on how to promote psychological well-being that emphasized purpose, meaning, and other elevated human capacities. Frankl's insights became the foundation of now-prevalent trends in psychology that focus on the value of positive mental states.

It's worth noting that Frankl gave his book a different title from the one eventually crafted by its English-language translator. Frankl's original title was *Nevertheless Say Yes to Life*—capturing, in a short phrase, what *affirming* our past experiences means. Affirmation of past choices and events that have shaped our lives means saying *yes* rather than *no* to them. It means looking for lessons in mistakes. It means finding

opportunity in hardships and redemption in regrets. Frankl showed how this could be done under the bleakest of circumstances.

The benefits of affirmation have been recognized in popular culture as well. A lyric by Johnny Mercer goes: “You’ve got to accentuate the positive / eliminate the negative / and latch on to the affirmative.” Another famous song reminds us to stay “on the sunny side of the street,” and there has been well-known guidance about “making lemonade out of lemons.” But when life inflicts really hard blows, such advice is easier given than followed. The difficult question is, How can we do this through all the numerous ups and downs of a lifetime?

The field of psychology has offered answers to this question, based on Frankl’s work and on the recent “positive psychology” approach that followed his lead. My thinking has been influenced by these insightful approaches, and my deliberations in this book reflect that, but these approaches are not the primary focus of this book. Rather, this book focuses on my use of a *life-review* approach that has emerged from the fields of psychiatry, personality psychology, and narrative research. Nevertheless, it should be clear that my use of the life-review approach is directed squarely at the affirmation objective championed by Frankl and pursued in research and practice by the positive psychology movement.

Affirming our past experiences means finding the constructive outcomes they’ve brought. Even the most difficult times can lead to learning, character growth, new opportunities, and other personal benefits. It is true that some events are so catastrophic that we must mourn them: living in this world can be excruciatingly tragic. But as long as our minds are intact, we have the chance to find meaning in our experiences. The first place to look is at ourselves. Whatever happened in the past, we would not be the same people we are now if those things had not happened. For this reason, knowing and accepting our identities means affirming rather than denying the choices and events that took us here. This is why telling life stories in a manner that provides affirmation of

our pasts helps us build fulfilling identities that look to our future directions with hope.

Life stories can help us come to terms with problematic past experiences of many kinds. People often are troubled by opportunities they've missed. A student decides to take a gap year rather than apply to medical school and then loses the chance to go to medical school after suffering a permanently disabling accident while traveling during that year. A manager leaves a secure position at a large corporation in order to start the restaurant of his dreams, and eventually the restaurant fails. An investor is offered a chance to buy Amazon stock at pennies a share when it first comes out but declines because he considers it too risky. Career and money matters abound with these kinds of mishaps. Stories that turn a positive light on such realities can help us accept these kinds of misfortunes, placing them in perspective with the more auspicious moments that our lives as a whole have enjoyed. Stories that extract lessons from mistakes we have made help us avoid similar mistakes going forward.

With deliberation, stories of regret can be turned into affirmative stories reflecting self-forgiveness, appreciation, and feelings of satisfaction. Such stories can capture the entire reality of our experiences, the good along with the bad. They enable us to build robust senses of identity that bestow confidence in our abilities to cope with unexpected further challenges.

There are times when reassessments of identity are especially called for. Graduation from high school or college often triggers a search for purposes that can galvanize our energies and carry us into adult life. In the process, we may find ourselves reexamining our fundamental sense of who we are. A commitment to a long-term relationship such as marriage is another such time. As we contemplate merging our life paths, our homes, and our finances with another person's, this may prompt deeper reflections on how we have come to this juncture and where it will take us. Conversely, the end of a marriage through death or divorce can cause a disruption in our sense of who we are. A story that has been built around the "we" of that relationship now must change to find a

new focus. When children grow up and leave home, parents are compelled to rethink the role that has defined a central component of their identities. Who will we be now, when the shape of our day-to-day lives no longer bends around our children's needs? Retirement from a job poses the same challenge, as does a career change. Our vocational stories are woven into our senses of identity, and it can be difficult to untangle the two. Health events—a cancer diagnosis, an injury, a decline in important physical abilities—also affect us in ways that reach beyond the physical. A personal identity anchored in physical capacities and activities must shift. An athlete who can no longer run, a pianist whose fingers become frozen with arthritis, a woman growing past the age of child-bearing, indeed every one of us who advances across any irreversible threshold of aging must find new life stories that are no longer predicated on the capacities we have lost.

Every transition poses junctures, where a life can branch off in one direction or another. After graduation, a young person might choose to take a job immediately, to go on to further schooling, to see the world, to enter a monastery for spiritual growth, to enlist in military service, or to take any number of other possible paths. Any choice will foreclose, or at least delay, other options, which then become the “roads not taken.” As we look back, it is almost inevitable that we will wonder what our lives would be like if we had taken a different road. We naturally would like to understand how the turning points in our lives shaped who we are now and who we will become. We wish to be at peace with the directions that our lives took as a consequence of the choices we made.

The retelling of life stories can lead the way forward. Part of the appeal of gatherings such as high-school and college reunions is that they invite this kind of storytelling. In a less immediate manner, so do social media outlets such as Facebook. When we “catch up” with old friends, we reexamine and reconstruct our identities. As we tell our stories to one another, or as we display photos illustrating small pieces of our stories, we see how our lives have been going. We question why we've ended up where we have, and we speculate about what comes next.