

FOR MY FATHER

By John Neblett

Hello, my name is John Owen Neblett. I was born in New York City in 1963. Since 1985, I have served so far, 28 years on a term of 15 years to life for the crime of murder in the 2nd degree. I am here today to tell a little about my relationship with my father. He passed away last November and this presentation is my memorial for him.

The evening I got the news of my father's passing, I was fortunate in that I was participating in a large gathering of men in San Quentin's Catholic Chapel for the G.R.I.P. Program. One of the elements of the program is emotional intelligence. As a long time member of the G.R.I.P. program, as well as a trained G.R.I.P. facilitator, I knew I had to share my feelings with my brothers to model what we do in our class meetings. My own words weren't up to the task at that time to sufficiently show what my father had given me, so I shared Dylan Thomas' poem:

ALL ACTORS SAY: "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Goodnight."

It made me want honor my father with something similar. In the G.R.I.P. program's curriculum, we call this part "Unfinished Business." The men are given a writing assignment to complete that is a dialogue to whomever they have "Unfinished Business" with. I had unfinished business with my father and my God. After my first grief, I asked myself, "Who was my father, Robert Cecil Neblett?"

Bob - "I was born in Georgetown, Guyana, and was raised there and in London, England. I joined the Merchant Marine during WWII and have been to every country with a port in the world. My father, Eric Neblett, was half-Indian, from his mother. She gave birth to thirteen children, all of whom were born at sea, eight survived. I don't know if he suffered any discrimination in his life, but the chance exists he heard the "N" word in reference to himself. I don't recall using it or teaching my children to feel racially superior. His family settled Georgetown, Guyana where he would marry my mother,

Lucille Hurley. They would raise my sisters, Enid and Sheila and I as Christians."

Because he was raised with these values, my father forgave me my crime and supported me materially, emotionally and spiritually until his passing. He also made provisions for my eventual release. Because of his example, I share this faith as well. Through it I was inspired to write this.

As a child, I mostly saw his gentleness and kindness. However, he was a violent disciplinarian, and my older brother took the brunt of his punishments. I hid myself in an effort not to be struck in my tum. The worst incident of domestic violence took place when I was three years old."

Scene 1

Actors enter - Mother (Christine), Father (Bob), Mother's Sister (Jeanette), are in the kitchen, largest room in the apartment. There is a door separating this scene from the children's bedroom. The child is awakened by the voices and has no choice but to listen.

Christine - "Bob, she doesn't have anywhere else to go and she's my sister."

Bob - "She's not staying here with my children."

Christine - "But she's my sister!"

Bob - "I don't care. That slut is not staying here!"

Christine - "She doesn't have any where else to go!"

Bob - "Then the slut shouldn't have gotten knocked-up."

Christine - "She's staying!"

Sound of fist striking

Christine - "No Bob, don't!"

Jeanette - "Call 911! Someone please call 911, He's hurting her! Don't you hurt my sister, She's the mother of your children!"

More loud screams. A chorus-like cacophony of agony. The child is rolled into a ball with his hands covering his head. For him, this is too painful to hear.

Jeanette- "He's choking her! Somebody call the police!"

More screams. "No Bob – don't!"

Officer – "Is anyone going to press charges?"

End scene. Actors exit stage right.

I can't recall who spoke after that but I remember hearing my father was sentenced to thirty days in jail for this incident. I recall missing him terribly. My happiest memory as a child is recalling my brother, sister, and I running down the street together to welcome him home after he returned from work daily afterward. Because of how I believed this event influenced my psyche, I use the story of Oedipus as a metaphor. The play by Sophocles, Oedipus Rex, opens with Laius, the father of Oedipus, receiving the prophecy from the oracle at Delphi that his son is destined to be his killer. After he is born, Laius, in an effort to avoid his fate, cripples the infant Oedipus horribly by pinning his feet together and abandoning him to a shepherd. The shepherd then gives up Oedipus to be raised as the son of the King of Corinth. Oedipus, on reaching manhood, visits the oracle at Delphi, finds he is prophesized to be the killer of his father. Fleeing Delphi, and wanting to avoid the crime of patricide, he comes to a narrow place in the road to Thebes and argues the right of way with Laius, refusing to give way; he kills the stranger in a rage, fulfilling the prophecy unknowingly.

In the scene just performed, I see myself crippled by the terror I experienced and the feeling of abandonment. On my road to manhood, I joined the Navy in the hope of leaving my childhood behind. Instead, my victim's first name was the same as my father's and his wife's was the same as my mother's. Thus, my reality ironically and tragically fulfills the myth's prophecy.

For My Father

He never taught me hate he gave me grace.

The hate Lord came from hurt a victim
spurns when he believes this lie can make
him safe:

that anger gave him strength; for that he
mourns. Like Oedipus, I thought the road to
Thebes Would save me from the guilt of
patricide; instead, a darker type of homicide
awaited.

After I took up with thieves,
a brown man with my father's name would
die and his wife shared the name of my
mother, their child just born she'd raise
without a father; and all because I didn't want
to flee. My remorse Lord, was mirrored by my
father, he'd show me how repentance could
go further.

He showed me how repentance could go
further, making his home a cell just like his
son's. He prayed I'd ask forgiveness for the
murder 'cause Jesus blood had washed away
my sins. Your Spirit called on mine because his
prayer one father to another touched Your
Heart. The people sent by you would make it
clear the day will come we'll never be apart.
I made the choice to listen to Your Word,
and thought one day Your Truth would set me free.

But when my prayers for mercy went unheard
I repented ever making my plea.

When I spoke this truth, I knew I made him
sad; I thought I was a man who loved his dad.

I thought I was a man who loved his dad,
except when I refused to ease his pain;
a letter, call, or card would make him
glad, inside my cell of shame I couldn't
strain the truth from paranoia,
paralyzed, by laws that said the truth
wasn't enough; I lost my faith in him
when he advised, "A man's humility is
what God loves."

The Friday night I got the news he died,
I spoke about my loss with many others;
and Jesus cross behind - I let go my pride,
and learned humility now gave me many brothers. My dad's with Jesus, finished
with his race; He never taught me hate,
he gave me grace.