



Philip Graham

## The “So What” Factor: The Shadow Knows

Twenty-eight years ago, I was a newish assistant professor and preparing with hope and dread—as assistant professors are wont to do—for a tenure decision looming a few semesters in the future. I was also a newish father—my son Nathaniel was around three years old, his precocious self already pretty well established. At the time, my wife and I thought easing Nathaniel into more responsibility around the house was a good idea. So after dinner, we would ask him to help us bring the plates back to the kitchen. For whatever reason, this new ritual became a point of resistance on his part. We kept insisting, he kept hemming and hawing, and one day I lost my temper and shouted at him to *help with the damn dishes!*

I’d shouted too loudly, immediately felt regret, and I followed him into the kitchen, where the little guy was seething. I paused before apologizing because he clearly wanted to have his say, his face contorted with anger. “You . . . you . . .” he fought to get out, searching for the worst name he could call me, “you . . . you . . . you . . . *colleague!*”

Of course I laughed, which didn’t much help the moment. But it was a rueful laugh, because I realized how much I’d been bringing the workplace home.

I can remember this incident quite clearly, though it occurred nearly three decades ago. I can see the dining room, the short, narrow hallway of the pantry that my son ran through on his way to the kitchen, and I can see the corner of the kitchen, right by the stove, where he crouched as he chose the worst insult he could imagine. At first I told this story as a joke, as a kind of cautionary tale about academia. But this “joke” hides a much more serious story. You might say that the three-dimensional “itness” of the physical details of the story hides its deeper significance. Certainly my telling and retelling

of the humorous “colleague” anecdote, turning the story into a kind of rote conversation piece, did its job of obscuring that significance as well.

Many of the stories of our lives lodge within us for reasons that are clear, or reasons that are not so clear and so might remain unexamined. Yet if you focus more attention on a story’s details, from close up, or as if from a distance, or from the perspective of someone seeing them for the first time, you can add dimension to those details and they will gain more substance—so much substance that, from the light of your gaze, they will cast a shadow.

I believe that most of the stories of our lives cast shadows.

Some shadows are obvious, while others wait for us to notice them. Either way, a shadow is what gives a memory, whether of a person, place, or event, its true life, just as chiaroscuro, the traditional artist’s technique of blending light and dark, gives depth to a two-dimensional surface. Looking more closely at the dinnertime anecdote, I realized that for my young son, the mysterious word “colleague” conjured up terrible, threatening creatures. With all my complaining I had brought what could be considered demons into my house, and they had frightened my child.

But even my most problematic colleagues weren’t demons, of course. They were human beings, though in some cases deeply flawed human beings. I’m the one who turned them into demons. I’m the one who unknowingly unleashed them on my son, and in so doing I had become a kind of demon myself. In so doing, I had become a *colleague* too. I started looking at those colleagues differently. As non-demons, they lost a lot of their power over me. They still behaved badly, but I began to see that behavior as a sign of weakness within them, not power, though power on their part was often asserted, the usual smoke and mirrors of the emotionally impaired. They began to lose their hold over my inner life, though perhaps this was a longer process than I’d like to admit.

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Ten years ago I wrote an essay<sup>1</sup>, initially as part of an exercise, about an argument my parents once had when I was eight years old. I wrote about it because, of all the thousands of arguments they had let loose in my presence, this was the only one in which I could remember, even after nearly fifty years had passed, the actual hurtful words they flung at each other. Why did I remember only those words?

I had been sitting at the kitchen table, a bowl of cereal before me. They stood by the sink, the morning sun shining through the window behind them while they argued. Finally my father said, with some heat, “Y’know, Edie, I never loved you.” And with great coolness, cigarette in hand, she responded, quietly, “Well, I never loved you either, Bill.”

This was not the response my father had expected, and he turned and left the room, but within seconds he was back, shouting, “Don’t you ever, ever say that again!” And my mother, staring straight at him, responded with derisive laughter.

Through the process of writing about this long-ago incident, the more I thought about the sound of their voices, and their body language, the more I understood how that argument had affected my life far beyond the less than twenty second exchange I’d witnessed, how the memory wasn’t only about my parents, it was also about me. Sitting there unnoticed at the kitchen table, I must have realized that my father loved my mother more, and she loved him much less.

Powerful memories of course reveal something significant about other people, but a powerful memory really only belongs to the person who remembers it, the one who chose that a particular piece of his or her life would enter the internal archive. Young as I was, I hadn’t known at the time that I’d internalized my parents’ conflicts, or that years later I would seek, anxiously, cautiously, to find someone who might share with me a middle ground within the chasm between loving too much and loving too little.

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<sup>1</sup>“The Ant in the Water Droplet,” originally published in *Field Guide to Writing Flash Nonfiction*, edited by Dinty W. Moore (Rose Metal Press, 2012)

I have often asked myself, why had my parents stayed together, why hadn't their misery torn them apart? Maybe I should look, not at the particulars of that argument, but its context. Couldn't the context of a memory cast its own shadow? And what was that context? The argument I remember so well took place in the late 1950s, at the height of the single wage earner family. My father held all the economic power, which made him strong and kept my proud mother weak, but now I could see that his unrequited love for her kept him weak, and the lack of love she held over him made her strong.

Now another shadow loomed behind my parents' unhappy words: the emotional guerilla warfare of their marriage, which I long believed had been ruled by chaos, had instead been carefully calibrated, creating a kind of toxic balance. And within that shadow I realized how one distant argument has ruled yet another aspect of my life. My own long marriage of over forty years has attempted a different balance, of transparency and equality, in family life and also professional life, obsessively, almost comically so, even to the point where the two books my wife Alma and I have co-authored are almost exactly evenly divided between her contributions and mine.

Memory—imperfect, fluid, sometimes hazy—waits for us to return and re-return, to examine and re-examine what at first we cannot see. This, I think, is one of the great interpretive tasks of the nonfiction writer, and of the memoirist especially: we are collectors not of memories so much as those memories' shadows, so that we might recover, through their nurturing darkness, the hidden meaning of our lives.

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Later, while revising this essay, to my great surprise I came upon a further shadow, another stepping-stone of recovered meaning. I'd decided to add a few extra details of my memory of my parents' argument that was still so clear after nearly sixty years—where they stood in the kitchen, how the morning sun shone through the window behind them—and in doing so I was reminded of an argument between my wife and me when we were in our early thirties. We too stood facing each other in a kitchen—actually, the breakfast

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nook of our home—and the window was open to catch some of the fresh air of a newly arrived spring. As I recalled these details, they cast a shadow.

I'm unsure of what exactly we argued about. We were nearing the end of our first year teaching at the same university, both of us assistant professors. What should have been a time of relief at our good fortune had instead become a time of great stress, due in large part to the very people who, four years later, our as yet unborn—and as yet un-conceived—son would later dub *colleagues*. I know I felt trapped, unable to go on, and at one point I said to my wife, despairingly, “I don't think I love you any more.”

I remember glancing out the open window, afraid our neighbors might have overheard me speak such terrible words, when Alma, her own voice laced with despair, replied, “That's not true, you do love me, *you do*.”

I turned to see the absolute certainty on her face, and with great relief I understood that of course she was right. How could I have said something so stupid, so hurtful? As I write this, I still shake my head, amazed that until now I had never connected this quarrel to my mother and father's long-ago argument that had so shaped me, the unconscious lessons of which had in fact led me to my wife. Though of course my parents' exchange of words had marked the beginning of the end of any happiness in their lives together, while the shock of ours led to further commitment.

Why do I see this only now? Do memories hoard their shadows until one is ready to receive them, or are those shadows always available and merely need the light cast from an attentive gaze?

Three arguments long familiar to me, between my then three-year-old son and me, between my parents when I was a child, and between my wife and me before that son was born—each of them, strangely enough, taking place in a kitchen—share shadows of hidden correspondence, creating a narrative circle spanning three generations that I'd never before suspected. In writing this essay, I have suggested a number of ways to regard a memory in order to reveal its hidden shadow of significance: up close, or from a distance, or as if for the first time. What I did not initially realize is that shadows can call to each

other. Perhaps one particularly intense memory creates a cascading path of other memories, each with its own waiting shadow. Perhaps seemingly disparate memories will resonate when placed together, their shadows now in strange harmony. The task of a nonfiction writer or a memoirist is, it seems, not only to reveal a shadow in isolation but to find the hidden, larger structure, and to slowly, carefully chart the memories of one's life in a developing canvas of light and dark.