

Utah State University

DigitalCommons@USU

All Graduate Theses and Dissertations

Graduate Studies

5-2015

The Legend, The Madman, and the Prophet a Memoir about Fathers and Sons

Erik K. Thalman

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/etd>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Thalman, Erik K., "The Legend, The Madman, and the Prophet a Memoir about Fathers and Sons" (2015).

All Graduate Theses and Dissertations. 4254.

<https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/etd/4254>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Studies at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Graduate Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@usu.edu.



ABSTRACT

The Legend, the Madman, and the Prophet

A Memoir about Fathers and Sons

by

Erik K. Thalman, Master of Arts

Utah State University, 2015

Major Professor: Dr. Jennifer Sinor
Department: English

The Legend, the Madman, and the Prophet is a memoir about fathers and sons, about the experience of being a son of a man of the Rocky Mountains, a legend grown old. The narrative centers around my struggle with the fact that my father had grown old and sick while I was still young, and my consequent search for other fathers, employing two primary examples—a martial-arts instructor from my high-school years who was later exposed as a pedophile, and the eccentric figure of my ex-girlfriend's wealthy and traditional Egyptian-American father. The memoir relates the story of my father's impact on my perception of manhood, my own experience with depression in the wake of his death, and the story of a spiritual search he began in me, which led me from my boyhood Mormonism toward eventual conversion to Islam. This is a story about fathers and sons, about what it means to lose a father, to want a father, and to learn to be a father to myself.

(134 pages)

CHAPTER 1
CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Thesis Topic

When the poet Robert Wrigley gave a reading at USU a few years ago during the May Swenson lecture series, he said something that has stuck in my memory ever since. To paraphrase, it is the duty of poets and artists to breathe new life into old clichés. In her beautiful book, *Reclaim Your Heart*, Yasmin Mogahed employs an old metaphor in a poignant way to illustrate the moment when a person has lost so much and so many that she hits rock bottom and falls to her knees. She describes a seaman alone in a raging storm. His call to the coastguard fails. His efforts to redirect the boat are futile. The lifeboat is gone; the life jacket torn. “Finally,” she says, “after you’ve exhausted every other means, you turn your face upward. And ask God.” She continues, “For this singular moment, everything else is closed. Everything. There is nothing left to call on. Nothing left to depend on. But Him . . . And that’s the point” (67).

The death of my father in April of 2011 signaled the beginning of a year of transformation for me. I was still reeling from his death that summer when my fiancé threw me out of our home. I lost not only her but her three young children whom I had helped raise for three years and come to love as my own. The months that followed these losses would be the greatest struggle of my life, a descent into madness and depression. Unable or unwilling to face the pain, terrified of the grieving process everyone said was so necessary, I would attempt to drown my sorrows in alcohol, smother them in marijuana smoke, exalt and transfigure them with

hallucinogens. I would move and move again, follow myriad religious paths, seek guidance from strangers, and deny myself sustenance.

By December, spent and exhausted and lost, feeling the unraveling of my mind—if only subliminally—I knew I could run no longer. With nowhere else to turn, with the demon of insanity lurking in the shadows of my small, lonely apartment bedroom, I made a desperate but determined choice. I built a bonfire in the apartment driveway out of the many idols I'd spent months collecting, and, watching them burn, watching the thick black smoke carry the last tattered remnants of my sanity away into the cold morning, I made the last conscious decision I had energy to make. I turned to the Creator. For the first time in years, I really prayed, and begged God Almighty to save me from myself.

That day I would suffer a complete mental break, what I would later be told was an extreme manic episode brought on by emotional duress and the use of those hallucinogens I thought would show me the Truth. I would flip my Jeep up Logan Canyon and walk away as if nothing had happened. An ambulance would take me to the same hospital my father had been taken to a few months before, and I would rip the IV out of my arm, and storm out of the hospital. I would chain-smoke cigarettes and wander around town looking for a safe place to shut myself up until this passed, and, in my state so utterly outside of reason, I would wander into the only place my broken heart could call home: the townhome I had shared with my ex-fiancé. I would scare the hell out of her house-sitter and end the day in solitary confinement in the Cache County Jail, where I would spend a week that felt like a year pacing my cell, muttering and ranting, wondering if I would ever regain control over my mind.

Charged with burglary—though I have never stolen so much as a candy bar in all my life—I would wind up in a program called Mental Health Court, a “compassionate” court

focused on education and rehabilitation for people diagnosed with a mental illness who have committed criminal acts. I was ordered by the court to enter into regular counseling and psychotherapy, and to attend a rigorous schedule of diverse group therapy sessions and classes on mental illness, substance abuse, and the oddest of all—MRT, or Moral Reconciliation Therapy. I grew up in the Mormon faith and I've often heard people talk about blessings in disguise. Mental Health Court has truly been that kind of experience for me. I have been able to learn a great deal about mental health and illness, about the workings of the brain from a psychological and medical perspective, which has enhanced my ability to approach my emotional self from a more rational perspective. I have also found opportunities to connect and empathize with people who have truly known suffering in life, to learn that real strength is shown best in those who suffer.

More importantly still, I was forced, at long last, to confront my pain and loss head on. To stare devastation in the face, and to grieve the compound losses of my father, my lover, my children, as well as my home, my liberty and ultimately the sense of identity I had built for myself. Exhausted from the mental and spiritual/emotional extravagance I had put myself through, and finally face to face with the heartache I had been suppressing and running from, I fell quickly from the frantic ecstasy of mania into the depths of depression. It would take months to climb out of that pit. What I would learn in those months was how, in a deeper and more real sense, my break in December was less about that relationship with Shah'ada, my ex-fiancé, and more about my own father, and my relationship with him.

This thesis is a memoir exploring this period in my life. It responds to questions of the nature of fathers and fatherhood, the emotional needs that underlie the spiritual search, and what it means to discover how to father oneself. For me, this journey began with a spiritual search for

a way out of grief. I was seeking the Father to replace the father I'd lost, and thought I had never had. What I ultimately found was the necessary search for myself, the need to tackle my emotional darkness directly and, with prayer and faith, to learn to be my own father. It is my hope that this honest narrative of my experience will speak to others who have suffered grief and loneliness, and who have tried to unravel their own complicated relationships with their fathers.

In many ways, my father was the consummate Western man. A bartender during the 70s in Park City, he lived in a tepee in Echo Canyon, was an amateur leather-worker, and an expert river-runner, so expert in fact that his friends dubbed him "the Raven of the Rapids." Six-foot-four and broad-shouldered, with a beard down to his waist and a romantic love of wild places and an affinity for wild animals, my father was a towering figure while I was growing up. One of the most memorable events of my childhood was the "70s Reunion," a gathering of more than four-hundred people on my family's five-acre lot in Peoa—a tiny farm town in the high Uintahs—all of whom remembered and revered my father. I cannot count the faces of the people who took me aside in that summer when I was about ten years old to grip my shoulder and, booze and cigarettes on their breath, make sure I understood that my father was a legend. At school, when other kids asked what my father did, I would proudly smile and say "He's a mountain-man."

The problem in this assertion, though it certainly impressed my preteen peers, was that, in fact, my father was out of a job most of the time and not for lack of available work. He had been a maintenance repair man for the mansions of wealthy people in the hills of Park City and Deer Valley when my parents first married in 1983, the year I was born, but he fell from a roof and broke his back. He had tried his hand at real estate in the cutthroat Park City market and had quit almost as soon as he'd gotten his license. "I won't lie and cheat to make money," he said. Much

of my late childhood and early teenage years were defined and punctuated by home shows and sales expos, where my parents would try any number of pyramid-scheme commission sales, everything from super blue-green algae, to Living Scriptures videos, to Health Rider exercise equipment, to bulk beef. None of these proved to be any success for them, and the financial strain filled our home with raging shouting matches, punctuated by shattered kitchenware my mother would throw at my father in frustration. Finally, when I was thirteen and my little brother nine, and we had lost that five-acre lot and old farm house that I loved so much to foreclosure and lived in a beat-up old camper behind my grandmother's house in Woods Cross, my mother had had enough. She divorced my father and took us boys up to live in Logan.

My father would spend the bulk of his remaining years in that camper behind his mother's house, taking care of her as she slid slowly into Alzheimer's, and taking care of my mother's father when he was dying of Lou Gehrig's disease. He would never work again, and, in 2011, after virtually surrendering to heart disease and diabetes, and I now suspect depression, he would end his slow, passive suicide in the palliative care unit at the University Hospital in Salt Lake City. The clashing images of my father as rugged mountain-man and divorcee defeated by the expectations of contemporary family life formed part of what my mind could not resolve in the wake of his death. At once consummately masculine in every sense of the John Wayne western-movie ideal, and also passive, and a self-titled religious mystic, couching everything he did (or didn't do) in his later life in terms of God's calling for him, my father was in more ways than one a walking contradiction. "God doesn't want me to work," he'd say. "He has better things in store for me." And my emotional relationship with him was equally dualistic—I revered and loved him (too often the same emotion for me), and hated him for what I could only see as giving up.

Building on this love/hate perspective, I rejected my father on an emotional level, and went searching for other “fathers” to fill the hole my rejection of him left gaping. *The Legend, the Madman, and the Prophet* centers around my search for other fathers, employing two primary examples—a martial-arts instructor from my high-school years who was later exposed as a pedophile, and the eccentric figure of my ex-girlfriend’s wealthy and oddly traditional father—as well as the deeper search for myself. The memoir relates the story of my father’s impact on my perception of manhood, my own experience with depression in the wake of his death and my inability to resolve my conflicting emotions toward him, and my search for the Father and for the father in myself. This is a story about fathers and sons, about what it means to lose a father, to want a father, and to learn to be a father to myself.

Structure

The questions raised by the thesis are explored over six chapters. Chapter 2: Lost, opens up the issues the thesis is tackling in dramatic fashion, relating the account of the mental breakdown I suffered at the end of 2011, and the wild acts of self-destruction I committed that landed me in the County Jail for a week. It describes what the experience of mania is like and explores the explosive nature of pent-up emotional pain. Chapter 3: Rivers, reaches back into my past and paints a romantic portrait of my father as I knew him when I was a boy, and the man I heard he was from others, eavesdropping on adult conversations. This chapter also explores some transcendent experiences of my childhood, and how when I was young I saw my father as a spiritual guide. Chapter 4: Honor, serves a dual function. It investigates the deeper reasons, physical and emotional, as to why I rejected my father more and more as I grew older. His financial ruin and declining health had their impact, but essentially what drove a wedge between us was the fact that he was getting old. So, in Chapter 4 I tell the story of how when I was a

teenager, some friends and I had discovered a swordfighting instructor, a big, young, eccentric man with the rhythmic cadence of poetry on his tongue. I relate how I followed him and his Swordsman's Code zealously for two years, and how I endured my first manic break while traveling in Central America when the man was exposed as a pedophile and sentenced to five to fifteen years in the State Penitentiary.

Chapter 5: Riches and Recitations, jumps forward in time to relate the story of my life-altering encounter with my ex-girlfriend's father, a proud, eccentric, traditional Egyptian man. In it I raise questions of the interwoven relationship between my growing concept of spirituality and my yearning for a strong father figure. Chapter 6: Legends Die, relates the account of my father's drawn-out death, the dissolution of my relationship with my ex-girlfriend, the loss of my financial freedom and my home and place in the world. Alone and penniless, my mind unweaves and I seek my own destruction, pointing back to Chapter 2. And finally, Chapter 7: Reality Check, delivers my account of the last two years of my life. It covers my experiences in Mental Health Court, as well as my efforts at building ties with the local Muslim community. It offers answers to the questions posed earlier in the narrative, answers like "It's not my fault," and "I did the best I could," and "I have the ability to father myself and decide my own course.

Literature Review

My thesis draws on and contributes to the literary conversation in three different areas: memoirs about fathers and father/son relationships, spiritual memoirs, and writings about Islam in America and the unique Muslim American experience.

For inspiration in form as well as how to answer questions about western manhood, I will draw heavily on Brandon Schrand's memoir *The Enders Hotel*. It is a beautiful and artfully rendered account of the author's childhood growing up in his family's hotel and café in small-

town Idaho. Schrand's sparse attempts at interpretation are few and far between, as the narrative is grounded in scene after beautiful scene, often positioning himself as a confused and enamored young observer. He relates the stories of many people who passed through his grandfather's hotel, most of them men whom life had broken in some way or another. These characters are presented through the eyes of a boy who was raised by his mother and a harsh stepfather. In every man that stops at the end of an arduous journey to stay a while at the Enders, often working off their rent by lending their hands to the never-ending process of remodeling and repairing the old building, Schrand imagines glimpses into his own father, whom he never knew. Against the haunting backdrop of all the hardships of life in the Intermountain West, he presents the portrait of his grandfather, stalwartly kind, stoicly and silently willing to help the down and out, the beaten men who show up on his doorstep with nowhere else to go. In the wake of his grandfather's death, Schrand reveals his emotional struggle without ever naming it, simply showing in lyrical scenes his teenage restlessness and acting out. In my memoir, I have striven for this kind of scene-grounded exploration of deep emotional issues and stark realities, and hope I have imitated Schrand's lyricism, completely void of polemic. I have also drawn on him for inspiration in writing about my father, and the many ways in which I identify with him and his brand of manhood even as I have tried to distance myself from the same.

In this vein, I have also taken inspiration from Mark Spragg's *Where Rivers Change Direction*. In form, Spragg constructs chapters that are both parts of a complete story but also in some ways self-contained. The exploration of western manhood is a theme that carries through and connects the chapters, but each stands on its own as a beautiful piece of writing. In my own thesis, I have constructed six chapters that stand out as readable on their own, distinct parts that come together in style and voice to make a whole but that can be read and enjoyed on their own

as well. In addition, Spragg writes in a voice full of careful, poetic prose that evokes the sense of the land and its hold on and influence over its men and boys. My own father was in many ways a product of his environment, his image in the minds of those who admired him—in my mind—a manifestation of the Rockies and the deserts of Southern Utah. This intimacy with the land is certainly a part of my own experience and identity, and I will attempt to write with an evocative and sensory-rich voice like Spragg's to illustrate this connection to the land in my own narrative.

In the field of spiritual memoir, Kathleen Norris's memoir, *Acedia and Me* has provided me with useful perspective in exploring the confluence and conversation between spirituality and mental illness. She presents her own experience with the concept of acedia, a Christian monastic term describing a kind of spiritual lethargy and complete disinterest that threatens the monk's rigorous asceticism. She suggests that acedia can serve a broader use in helping anyone who fails in a determined life pursuit to understand their own lack of faith or belief in themselves and to explore their own emotional landscapes. Norris strives, through her own experience as well as an ample use of meditation and explanation, to explore the convergence and relationship between the spiritual and emotional/mental struggles in life. While her attempt is admirable, she stops short of truly joining the two, always asserting that acedia is distinct from depression. I will attempt to push this kind of exploration farther, as my experience of mental struggle and emotional duress have been intimately linked with spiritual striving and a yearning and search for the Divine. Where Norris, I feel, spends too much page space on explanation and interpretation, I have through lyrical scene-grounded writing explored the intimate relationship between mental illness and yearning for connection with God.

Patricia Hampl's *Virgin Time: In Search of the Contemplative Life* is a poignant memoir that explores her personal search for a way out of the emotional scars of a traditional Catholic

upbringing. Like my own experience, her search involves journeying. She travels to the heart of old-world Catholicism in Spain and France to confront the issues of religious guilt endemic to her own religious experience. Poignantly, she describes her journey home, and the more personal continuation of her journey in her time spent in a California monastery, where she is able to explore the silence of prayer and discover a more personal spirituality. My own spiritual path has been a journey from and out of a guilt-ridden childhood in Mormonism, through cynical Atheism, Eastern meditation and the ecstasy of Hinduism, to finally find my spiritual home in the discipline of Islam and the quiet conversation with God in Muslim prayer. In both the journey that comprises the search and the quietude that defines the end as well as a new beginning of finding a spiritual home, Hampl offers much inspiration for my own writing.

Anne Lamott offers inspiration in this journey-like quest for a spiritual home as well, in her book *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*. “My coming to faith did not start with a leap, but rather a series of staggers,” she says, invoking the kind of human reality of experience, detached from the often overpowering mythology of religion. Lamott’s often irreverent voice and down-to-earth prose can offer some tools in humanizing the more ecstatic and sublime aspects of my experience.

For me, building a grounded and consistent relationship with the Creator as part of my conversion to Islam has been the only real salvation from madness and depression. Unlike Christianity, which has a long tradition of separating religious and secular life, Islam represents a complete way of life, a joining of the spiritual and the practical, the ecstatic divine and the day-to-day, and Islam’s holistic concept of life I believe has much to offer Americans in learning to bridge that gap and integrate the spiritual and temporal aspects of our lives.

Yet despite some suggestions that there have been upwards of three million converts to Islam in America in the last decade, I am hard pressed to find a literary work of creative nonfiction written by a convert. And this is where my memoir fills a much-needed gap. In weaving together my exploration of masculinity and my experience with mental illness into the narrative of my conversion to Islam and the building of a grounded spiritual life, I will be adding my voice to the conversation in creative nonfiction about spirituality as an American Muslim convert. Therefore, writings about Islam round out the literary influences I draw upon in writing this memoir. Yasmin Mogahed, an Egyptian-born Muslim teacher out of California, has written a beautiful little self-help book/memoir about the psychology of Islam and its central tenet *tawheed*, or Oneness. In *Reclaim Your Heart*, Mogahed offers a uniquely down-to-earth perspective on building a relationship of intimacy with the Creator that is a breath of fresh air in the often heady theological conversation between Muslims and Christians and secular Atheists. She explores the idea that by becoming the slave of Allah, and by casting off our attachments to things and people and filling our hearts with the love of God, we can achieve freedom from slavery to the things of this world and learn to approach the challenges of life from a better perspective. In my memoir I explore the reality of these assertions as reflected in my own experience.

I will look to other influences in writing about Islam and being an American Muslim. Of course, I will draw inspiration from Malcolm X's seminal *Autobiography*. Drawn to the power and strength of Muslim spiritual expression by the frustration and anger of his own experience as a black youth in segregated America, his poignant journey through and out of Elijah Muhammad's hateful cult to the transcendent kindness, equality, and peace in the Qur'an and the example of the Prophet Muhammad certainly offers much to American Muslims today, and it has

offered immense inspiration to me. *Taking Back Islam: American Muslims Reclaim Their Faith* is a collection of powerful essays compiled by Michael Wolfe. Containing essays on the subject of how to talk about and practice Islam in a post-9/11 America by everyone from immigrant Muslims to Yusuf Islam, the former Cat Stevens, this book offers relevant insights into the struggles facing American Muslims today, and I have drawn on it in approaching the explanation and description of my own journey.

Unlike the older religions of the world, Islam's mythology is intimately connected with its history, which is more well-documented than any other religious history. Indeed, the *Sunna*, which is the written account of the Prophet Muhammad's words and deeds, and comprises the second source of doctrine in Islam, is entirely composed of first, second, or third-hand accounts of the people who walked and talked with him, and was compiled by a scientific historical process. In his concise history *No God but God*, religious scholar and historian Reza Aslan relates the history of Islam from the days of the Prophet to the present with a careful and subtle touch, parsing out the differences between the mythology that has developed and the more factual history of the religion's cultural and historical development. This grounded historical approach will help to inform my writing about my experience of Islam as an American convert. It will help me discuss the differences between Islam and my other religious experiences in an honest way, as I attempt to focus on the humanity of my experience and avoid polemic.

Conclusion

This memoir is a story about fathers and sons, about the experience of being a son of a man of the Rocky Mountains, a legend grown old. It is about growth and loss and pain. It is about a spiritual search, and my conversion to the religion of Islam. It is about a search for fathers to replace my own aging father. It has the potential to enrich the literary conversation

about growing up in the West, about Western manhood and how it is adapting (or not) to the changes in our lifestyle. It also fills a much-needed hole in the sparse literary conversation about the experience of being an American Muslim. I have struggled and wept for this work, and I am proud to present it to you.

Bibliography

- Aslan, Reza. *No God But God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam*. New York: Random House, 2006. Print.
- Haley, Alex and Malcolm X. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. New York: Ballantine, 1964. Print.
- Hampl, Patricia. *Virgin Time: In Search of the Contemplative Life*. New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1992. Print.
- Lamott, Anne. *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith*. New York: Anchor Books, 2000. Print.
- Mogahed, Yasmin. *Reclaim Your Heart: Personal Insights on Breaking Free from Life's shackles*. San Clemente: FB Publishing, 2012. Print.
- Norris, Kathleen. *Acedia and Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2008. Print.
- Schrand, Brandon R. *The Ender's Hotel: A Memoir*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2008. Print.
- Spragg, Mark. *Where Rivers Change Direction*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1999. Print.
- Wolfe, Michael, ed. *Taking Back Islam: American Muslims Reclaim Their Faith*. New York: Rodale Books, 2002. Print.