

My Family's Legacy

A quest to understand my depression led me on a journey through past generations... and to a rediscovery of the man who was my father BY JOHN SEDGWICK

PHOTOGRAPH BY GUIDO VITTI

It comes from an oversize envelope, tucked into the back of a box stored in the locked closet of the Historical Room at the Stockbridge Library—an envelope that contains some love letters from my father to his first wife. It comes from the original 1783 deed to the land on which my great-great-great-grandfather Theodore built a proud, handsome house, and the frail, wispy X with which the Native American woman who owned the property signed it away. It comes from the dark corners of the attic of that house, which yielded an unexpected cache of letters that had been gathering dust for 200 years, the letters tied up in ribbon like a gift, one of them bearing a lock of hair, with the note “To Pappa.” And it comes from the desk of my late mother, where she’d hidden away the private diaries she’d kept since her girlhood.

Some people have a passion for wines, others for philately. For some time now, I have become obsessed with history—or, more precisely, family history. Not just the names and dates gathered up by most genealogists, but the full stories of the people who had come before. How they had lived, what they did, who they were. Their stories now fill my filing cabinets, overrun my desk, jam my bookcases. A few of these ancestors were illustrious: an early Speaker of the House, novelists, prominent lawyers, and my cousin Edie, the '60s icon and Andy Warhol contemporary who is now the subject of the movie *Factory Girl*. But many more were obscure, and I wanted to track my lineage back through them all. By learning about them, I thought I might learn about me.

My quest began in the year 2000, when I was 46 and fell into a nasty period of gloom that was officially diagnosed as a clinical depression. My half-brother Harry had another term for it: “the family disease.” Varieties of

manic depression, essentially. Some tilted to the upside, and some more to the down. Harry ticked off a few of the more recent sufferers, including Edie, who had famously died of a heroin overdose, but also her brothers Bobby and Minty, both suicides. “And you remember how Dad was toward the end of his life,” Harry

a family genealogy. Preoccupied with my own life after his passing, I'd put it all in the basement. But I consumed it now, keen to learn what lay back there. I talked to cousins, consulted some psychiatrists who were willing to diagnose the long dead, and checked historical accounts, letters, scholarly works,

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added. I recalled how irritable he'd become, how gray he seemed, and tired. Even my grandfather, a charming old gent we called Babbo, was not immune. “He nearly killed himself over a love affair. Didn't I tell you?”

I had heard snatches of these stories, and I had my own impressions. But I had never put them together into any sort of pattern, and certainly never thought that such a pattern would have anything to do with me. But the experience of my three-month-long bout with illness, and the prospect of its return, remained with me, and as I brooded about it, I imagined that if I could find and understand the previous sufferers in my ancestry, I might gain a reassuring perspective on my ordeal and what it might portend.

And so I started in. For a while there, I became a medical detective, following the genetic trail back through the generations to find previous bearers of the disease. My father was an unexpected help. He died back in the '70s, but he had collected a trove of family autobiographies, memoirs, and collections of letters. He'd even commissioned

and medical texts. I traced the line back two generations, then five, to my great-great-grandfather, a fiery lawyer who went bankrupt and ended up an early inmate at McLean Asylum, as the mental hospital was then called. I found a terrifying screed that he'd written there. “Who then is to judge of the soundness of the human mind—the multiply-sided mind—and emanation of the Great Central Fire,” it began, and then it went on and on, the words running every which way over the page, the lines blotched with spilled ink and angry cross-outs, the whole thing a frightening image of his disordered mind. And then to a sixth generation, through his frail, distraught mother. And finally to an eighth, when in 1752, her grandfather, the 61-year-old Ephraim Williams Sr., father of the man for whom Williams College is named, wandered through Stockbridge on what the psychiatrists agreed was probably a manic spree, offering ridiculously large sums for the houses of the English settlers along the way. Fortunately, no one took him up on his offer. Still, the family was anguished. “He is...by no means...in one

quarter of his notions," his daughter wrote to her brother.

Poignant as I found these stories, I knew I needed to go deeper. To understand what these people had gone through, I had to understand them—their families, their times, their circumstances, their pressures, their rivalries. And this is when the history came more fully alive for me. I drove about the state,

there. I soaked up details about the "hog reeve" who was charged with rounding up the stray pigs that often ran loose everywhere, and the penetrating winter cold that, despite a roaring fireplace, could leave a bedside glass of water frozen in the morning. Such details created the backdrop of their lives.

To determine what really happened in such places, though, I turned to the Massachusetts

suicides, worrisome illnesses, and on and on through the decades, each story giving way to the next.

Eventually, the letters of those early generations gave way to books for the later ones—unpublished memoirs, autobiographies, and the like—as the narrative came through to later generations of Sedgwicks. The story of my patriarchal line is, of course, the story of fathers and sons, the endless struggle to separate while staying united. And that is when it hit me what my project had always been about. It had been about my father. I'd resisted the family history that had so totally absorbed him; I thought of it as his. Born in 1899, he was 55 when I was born and he had always seemed like a man out of the past to me. His interest in the familial past led him away from me, but now it brought him back.

My research led to a book project of my own, and when the book was done, I went once more to the family graveyard to which, like so many Sedgwick things, my father had been so devoted. It's called "The Pie" since it follows an unusual circular plan, by which all the generations of the family are gathered in concentric circles around our common ancestors. It symbolizes the Sedgwicks' reverence for their forebears and for each other. My father's grave, topped by the family crest, is in the outermost ring. Ultimately, I will go right behind it. In the stones, I could trace the line of manic depression down through the generations, yes. That is in my lineage. But what mattered more was where it all came out: to Dad and to me. We were close and would be close forever. ■

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visiting many of the towns the Sedgwicks occupied when the familial pattern was set: to the Berkshire hamlet of Sheffield, where the Sedgwicks first settled in a cramped white house across from the Congregational Church; and to Great Barrington, where Theodore was hunted by marauding farmers during Shays's Rebellion; and all over the rolling hills of the Berkshires and the flatlands of the adjoining Pioneer Valley; and to Boston, culminating in my great-uncle Ellery Sedgwick's house, where he lived while editing the *Atlantic Monthly*.

And, of course, time and again, I went to Stockbridge to stay in the old family house, pondering the portraits on the wall, sensing the spirits of the departed in the light that filtered through the windows. At their height in the 1810s, the Sedgwicks owned half the town, and I prowled all over it to track them

Historical Society, a grand, imposing building in Boston's Fenway section. I'd long known that it held a collection of Sedgwick papers, but I hadn't realized the full extent of them until my friend Peter Drummey, the head librarian, took me back one afternoon into the stacks to show me shelf after shelf of blue boxes, each one thick with Sedgwick letters from as far back as the Revolution. That was daunting, but inspiring too. I settled in at the silent, high-ceilinged reading room to go through them, or at least as many as I possibly could. Days turned into weeks, and the weeks mounted. Letter led to letter, and the many plotlines slowly unfolded on the fading sheets that were stiff with age and sometimes had chunks of the original sealing wax still attached.

And what stories there were! There were torrid courtships, crazed business ventures, an abusive husband, a reviled stepmother,

THE LEGEND OF YOU How to ensure your name will live on

You don't need to be worth seven figures—or buried six feet under—to leave a family legacy. After all, the country is filled with burger-flipping high school kids who'd line up to apply for the Your Name Here Scholarship Fund. "Creating a scholarship is a perfect way to create a legacy of giving while enhancing someone else's life," says Melanie Schnoll-Begun, managing director and head

of philanthropic services for Citigroup, in New York City. How much do you have to donate in order to make that happen? It depends on the university, but it can be as little as \$1,000. Start by speaking with the director of alumni relations and development. From there, personalize how you want the scholarship structured, what type of student should receive it (e.g., a male

lacrosse player from Boston who has financial need and scholastic merit), if you and your family will play a role in helping the college select the recipient, and if you'd like to send biographical information along with the scholarship so that the student can learn about you. "Don't be afraid to specify what you'd like the scholarship to achieve," says Schnoll-Begun. "Universities want to give donors as much

satisfaction from their gifts as possible."

If you're skeptical about handing over a lump sum so early on in life, consider a charitable gift annuity. How does it work? In exchange for your donation, the university agrees to pay you an annual fixed percentage of the gift for the remainder of your life. Percentages are based on age, so the older the donor, the higher the rate will be.

Go to acga-web.org to find the current suggested rates established by the American Council on Gift Annuities, the standardized rates most organizations go by. With a charitable gift annuity, the remaining money goes to the university when you pass away. "This is a simple way for people to leave a legacy without fear of outliving the income," says Schnoll-Begun.

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