

In the Name of My Father. Happy Father's Day, Dad!

By [Edward Curtin](#)

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Theme: [History](#)

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For thirty years I have taken my father's name in the vain hope that some of his exquisite writing and character would be recognized through his son's hand. When he died in 1993, I was devastated. I was the middle child squeezed between seven sisters.

As the only son, my father and I had a very special bond, heralded by my being named after him and sealed by an intimacy exclusive to the two males in the family. When he died, I became the oldest man in a vast extended family bearing the name Curtin. I felt older and more responsible.

Shortly after he died, I very consciously dropped the Jr. from my name to carry on his. This seemed like a way to keep him with me, as if we were one, and just as he once seeded me into life with my mother, I could give him continued life in me, for naming is numinous and in the beginning and end are the words.

From the start, he was my great supporter in all I wrote (and did). With him behind me, I have always felt filled with supreme confidence, as the word attests to its meaning as a shared faith. His in me and mine in him and both of us in something far larger than us: God, the Spirit that inspires us. I would send him my published writings and he would respond with wit and praise, sometimes disagreeing with some of the content of my work but always instilling in me the inner confidence that I was born to write. And as his letters were works of art themselves, I always felt he was blessing me, as if we were poetic souls together exchanging communion, as we often did when I was young and we would attend early morning Mass together, often stopping afterwards for his favorite corn muffins, a simple second act of breaking bread together.

As Irish-American Catholics educated by Jesuit priests, we both had the sensibilities of James Joyce when he said in a letter, “[A writer] is a priest of the eternal imagination, transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life.” Since we lived more than a hundred miles from each other, a life of letters between us ensued.

We both knew that daily life often left something to be desired and our task was how to find ways to fulfill that never-ending desire. In our ways we differed, at least on the surface, for those differences concealed a shared affinity for wit, literature, sports, and things spiritual, to name but four – his spirituality being of the conventional sort and mine more heterodox. When he read the English writer Edmund Gosse’s classic account of his Victorian childhood and his conflicted religious relationship with his father in *Father and Son* – subtitled “a study of two temperaments” – he wrote to me to say it sounded like us; there was a sadness in his words tinged with a wise understanding that this was inevitable, for separate generations are affected differently by changes in society, and yet and yet, the fundamental things abide. Our deep love, most fundamentally.

My father was a lawyer who in his youth had been an excellent athlete. Since I adored him, at first I too became an athlete in his image, then I considered becoming a lawyer on his trail, and even briefly contemplated the priesthood in search of my father’s shadow. By a simple twist of romantic fate, however, I became a teacher, a wandering scholar, and antinomian of sorts, whose true calling was always writing. I spent many years fleeing my vocation down my nights and days, half committing but never fully. But the Call was insistent, and with my father’s implicit support, I finally said yes. Yes I said yes I will Yes. I think it was also his calling. But different social and personal situations led us down different paths, and he had little choice.

Being a child of the 1960s, I had more opportunities to spread my wings, much of it because of his support. I have been writing and publishing since my twenties, but once my father died and I assumed his name, my writing increased until it became a torrent of words that were unstoppable. I felt I was channeling him, not in some literal and weird sense, but that his death had opened a floodgate that I had kept closed for some reason. Some fear. Something. Yet I always felt I was writing for him.

Because he married young during the Great Depression and had four daughters by the age of twenty-eight and then five more children (one died at birth), he had little time for serious writing, so he channeled his writing into his letters, what he called epistles, which he tossed off on the go with the aplomb of a master. He left me with a large trove of these magical epistles that read like mini short stories. Erudite and deep, funny and self-deprecating, he left a legacy hard to match, not just with his words but with his life. Here are a few excerpts:

- I have a new case, Ed, in which I represent the fair wife Sally in a custody case involving three children. It seems the children phoned the father and told him that the mother said that reptiles, movie stars, and President Reagan were on the roof. I don’t think this helps my case unless I can show that Reagan was on the roof. What do you think? And what movie stars? I guess I should move for a bill of particulars as to which stars and what kind of reptiles.
- This week I managed to keep pretty busy which is good, though somewhat depressing. Yesterday one of my clients was a blond Japanese guy with a seeing eye dog whose wife, also legally blind, snatched his cane and tried to push him

in front of a car. The reason, however, that he is blind is that he killed his first wife a few years ago and shot himself in the head, causing the blindness. He has also threatened to kill this wife.

- [Back from a doctor's visit, he wrote:] The doctor said I have only two problems – from the waist down and from the waist up. But from the neck up I think I am okay. *Cogito ergo sum*.
- Another of my clients was a 14 year-old Puerto Rican girl who with four others mugged an old cleaning woman on the subway at 4:45 A.M. My charmer is accused of threatening the victim with a gun. Talking to her in detention, I asked her why the gun bit and she said, 'She was giving us a hard time.' I asked her what she meant by that and she replied, 'She wouldn't give up her bag.'
- Next case! *¿Quién sabe?* [who knows?]
- It's a great big wonderful world but more than half the people in it are nuts.

I'm afraid he's right, but he said it, not me.

He once wrote to me that when I was born the doctor told him "You hit the jackpot." He assumed it meant multiple more girls to go with the four he already had. It turned out to be me. He asked me a good question, "Where had you been?"

After all these years, I still wonder. *¿Quién sabe?*

But here I am now and my name is Edward J. Curtin, Jr., a very lucky son of a wonderful father with a saber wit and heart of gold.

Happy Father's Day, Dad!

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