

The Messiness of Being Human: A Father-Daughter Performative Dialogue

Mark Silverberg and Aidyn Silverberg-Ceresne

Abstract

The following conversation was enacted by email and text message (with the occasional inner monologue by Mark). Mark had been invited to reflect on this issue's theme and thought a dialogue with his daughter Aidyn, an aspiring writer, would be apropos. Given separation, given all the complications of the parent-child dynamic (guilt, resentment, longing, umbrage, etc.) what better way to dive into "the messiness of being human"? Aidyn was travelling in Central America; Mark was at home in Sydney, Nova Scotia, anxiously trying to prompt her comments, while also trying to wrap up his time at Cape Breton University, with plans to move at the end of the term.

A Father-Daughter Performative Dialogue

[Email thread]

Mark: The invitation to write a commentary on "the messiness of being human" came to me, came at me, at the exact moment I felt least capable of answering it. The messy voices of depression and anxiety saying no, you can't. A messy-child, id voice saying *I won't*. The unallied anxieties saying, *if you can't answer the phone, cook an egg, change out of your sleep-shirt, how do you think you can write this?*

So, I'm looking for an adult voice, for some perspective here—and of course it's totally unfair of me as a father to look to my daughter for it—but here I am, wanting and wishing uncertainly. There may be cause for this; maybe I can find something adult, something fatherly, just in this invitation, just by reaching out. This is for my daughter—or for any of you as daughters, sons, children. Something is needed in this messiness they call being human... can we take a step forward?

Aidyn: It's interesting because there's a popular song right now by Lola Young called "Messy" (check out the song [here](#)) [Young, 2024] and it sounds like it is written about a relationship, to a partner. But I heard apparently it's about her relationship with her parents. Which is funny to me. And it makes sense. Probably one of the messiest parts of being human is our relationships and our relationships with our parents. Which I guess therapy and everything would say is our most important, most foundational relationship. And as I start to navigate my adult relationships more, I think about how those relationships have been impacted by my relationship with you. And with Mom, I guess.

Mark: Yes, these parental relationships are the messiest. Young's song seems to be about her angst at what they (her parents, let's say) expect from her. Her belief and rage is the heart of the song: she thinks that they think she's too messy, too clean, too smoky, too perfect... "A thousand people I could be for you and you hate the f[***]ing lot" (Young).

Is that part of the messiness for you with me and Mom? Our expectations... or your story of our expectations (maybe or maybe not the same thing)? What are they? What is that story? What do you “get that we’re sayin’”?

Expectations never felt like the issue for me with my parents. I didn’t know what they wanted from me. I just knew what I didn’t want from them—which was to be like them. In other words, and I guess it’s happened regardless of my aversion, I didn’t want to take on their suffering, their woundedness.

For me the dread is becoming like them in their messiness, their not being able to get it together. Am I saying I didn’t want them to be human? Maybe. I wanted them to put me before themselves. I can see now what a tall order that was, and yet it doesn’t soften the need nor the disappointment that it didn’t happen.

(While Mark is mulling over his hurts and wondering how much of it to share with Aidyn and with readers, there follows a messy little texting interlude between Mark and Aidyn outside of the main script. Here readers are invited to read between the lines for what’s said and not said, what’s implied, interpreted, paused over...)

[Text message, March 15, 12:37 p.m.]

Mark: Hey, can you send a response to my last entry? Do you think this is going to work? Do you feel up to keeping it going? I need to confirm with them that we’re going to complete it.

[Text message, March 16, 6:54 p.m.]

Mark: Do you think we can try to do one or more response per day?

[Text message, March 18, 3:51 p.m.]

Mark: I really want to keep going on the piece. Can we please try for one response per day?... I’m having a lot of anxiety about it...

[Mark, inner monologue] The messiness of writing together... the waiting, the multiple badgering texts... the knowing that Aidyn has lots of stuff to do and this might not be a priority for her.

[Text message, March 20, 8:12 p.m.]

Aidyn: Ok yeah i’ll do it sometime today when I have time, but i’m very busy and trying to figure out how to take like 3 chicken busses to the next place i need to go

[Mark, inner monologue] But there’s the commitment: perfect parental word, impeccable recipe for nagging. Yes, I know I’m doing it. But what choice is there? To let the project go? To try reigning in my anxiety, the messy way that time addresses me daily and nightly with its reminders, its message that this is not the way it’s supposed to be. To stop the story under the story: if she cared about me... (back to Young’s song: “It’s taking you ages / You still don’t get the hint I’m not asking for pages”).

Not getting a response right away raises all the stuff about parenting an adult daughter: the profound desire for connection and uncertainty about what that connection should be... how to perform the role of father... how to speak wisely... not too much... how to be intimate and not over-demanding... how to know what’s wanted.

[Email thread continued]

Aidyn: Turning back to “Messy,” I can see that the whole little game I’m playing in my head is a model for child/parent relationships that the song performs: parent dissatisfied with child (in)action (Young: “I’ve been out working my ass off all day”); child fed up with the story (Young: “Can you shut up for like once in your life?”). Mess on mess.

Yes. And no. I know that you expect me to be great, use my brain and my heart for some kind of excellence. I know there isn’t too much of an expectation beyond that. Which is fair. I think that’s what everyone wants for their kids. And I also think it’s sometimes too much.

For me the messiness is the same, I guess. I want you to put me before everything and I don’t think you know how. And the things that I really want to be excellent at... I feel like I haven’t learned them yet. How to have a healthy relationship, how to find joy and fulfilment in my own life.

I guess the messiness is that we have to learn those things on our own. No matter how great or deficient our parents are. And usually we’re carrying that mess that we didn’t create. That you also didn’t really create but didn’t clean up very well either. And then we have to try to put ourselves together, as new whole people, mess and all.

Mark: Honestly, I want you to use your brain and heart to find some peace and comfort, “excellence” has nothing to do with it. I don’t want to put this expectation on you: finding joy your own way is perfect.

It’s interesting that we see the parental messiness the same way: both of us wanting our parents to put us before all else. This is how I always felt about my mother. Even at her death, I was insisting that she put me first, and I can just now (at almost 60) see how harmful that was for both of us. I’m not saying this so you’ll give me a break. It’s part of my own attempted clean-up—taking stock of what happened in the past, letting it all in, sitting with it. “Healing” seems to be the word people use for this, but it feels inadequate to account for all that goes into the process. I wish there was another word for what I’ve been working on the past few years: trying to do some of that clean-up. My dream is that the process might help us both feel a little less messy about us, our relationship.

[Mark, inner monologue] Next, there’s a part that I should probably cut or maybe leave under erasure... readers can decide if this passage is too much... and what it means that the too much is still here...

There’s still this nagging voice, telling me I should be offering some fatherly advice... though I have none better than her observation that we need to carry and learn these things on our own. I think this is why I’ve gravitated towards Buddhism: the idea that the search, that healing or spirituality, must be worked out on our own, not accepted as doctrine or faith. Buddhists have a single word for this: *Ehipassiko*: “See for yourself.”

Buddhism calls the messiness *dukkha*, suffering, or more appropriately “unsatisfactoriness”—the seemingly unending desire for things to be other than the way they are. The haunting “not this” feeling. This feels like a root definition of my anxiety. I’m sorry to come back to this, but it won’t leave me alone these days and I think it’s something we share. But I also know that maybe this voice is just the anxiety, obsessing about itself, not able to let anyone else in, not seeing her through all my talk.

Aidyn: I stepped on a dead bird yesterday. It was in the central square, already dead and partially decomposing. Just a baby, neck twisted sickly to the side, a bit flattened into the sidewalk, maybe already previously stepped on by someone. I walked by it carefully at first, even thought for a split second that maybe I should move it, have a little birdy funeral for it. Then decided against it; birds carry diseases after all. Later, I was in a rush and walked back in that direction over it, smushing its soft body under my sandal. At first I thought it was dog shit I stepped on but then I remembered the bird. I walked away quickly, hoping no one saw me step on it.

Mark: This is a great image and metaphor. I'm so proud of you for being out in the world, travelling the central square of so many places, just being and noticing. That's all you need to do. But at the same time, I know from experience how hard solo travel can be; how hard to just stay with it. While it might sound trite, really all you need to do is be yourself. It's like the paragraph you just wrote—simple and unworked, but it says so much: no matter how hard we try to be perfect, or just do right, there will be mess. We're gonna smush birds and be smushed.

Aidyn: My anxiety isn't all that bad these days. It's mostly simple things: where will I eat dinner, how do I ask for this thing in Spanish, will my laptop be stolen if I leave it in the hostel room instead of in a locker? And people looking at me. I don't care what they're thinking really or I try not to. I just want the freedom to exist without being constantly observed and perceived. I guess that's the mess too. People are always watching, but they also don't care. Or they do care, but not in the way we think. If they weren't watching, I'd be alone, which I don't want either. So I just live with those things, all this mess, whatever happens happens.

Right now the future seems exciting. I guess that's because I have a plan; I know what the next bit will look like. I'm lucky. I like to be spontaneous, but my body likes it when things are planned out. My anxiety wants me to stay still, so I try to keep moving. I guess I just force myself to move and to do something, even if it's messy. Even if I don't know exactly where I'm going.

Mark: I love this image of you, flying wobbly through the world, darting in and out of hostels, letting what happens happen. This says so much more about "the messiness of being human" than all my anxious ruminations. I've managed to cut some of those from this dialogue—trying to tone myself down so I can hear you. I know I'm not great at doing that: really listening to you instead of myself.

Maybe deep listening itself is a little image or microcosm for that impossible thing we're both seeking from our parents: to be heard first.

Deep listening also brings me back to your bird, lets me see it in the sky, long before being smushed. It's flying through that foreign morning deep blue light, filtering through the mess, saying "I'm here... let's talk for a few minutes."

[Text message, April 3, 10:03 a.m.]

Mark: Do you want to try to write one more response? It would be great to end on your voice, not mine



Aidyn has notifications silenced

References

Young, L. (2024, May 30). *Messy* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k-k2_Liofy8



Mark Silverberg is a professor of American literature at Cape Breton University, Nova Scotia. His current work focuses on Buddhist mindfulness, pedagogy, and poetry. He is the father of two daughters.

Aidyn Silverberg-Ceresne is a tree planter and a philosophy and English graduate from McGill University. While writing this dialogue she was travelling in Nicaragua and El Salvador.

