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Half-Life of a Zealot

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A man wrapped up in himself makes a very small bundle.
— Benjamin Franklin

CHAPTER 7

Tender Mercies

Hope

The tragedies I encountered throughout my posting were interwoven with Lillian’s illness. She was not only depressed or manic but frequently psychotic: One morning I found her stranded, unable to figure out how to step across the hot lava that she saw flowing around her bed. My fears soared when I read that one out of every three cases like hers ends in suicide. So, late in my Vienna tenure, when our doctors had tried every treatment they knew and she wasn’t getting better, I flew home to meet with the leading researcher on bipolar illness at the National Institute of Mental Health. Dr. Robert Post met with me in his home for two hours late one night.

I described Lillian’s struggle just to get through a day. “Your daughter’s system is being poisoned,” he told me, his voice clipped with annoyance. “You shouldn’t have accepted the debilitating side effects of her medications.” He recommended that we start over with an experimental mood stabilizer that had helped 60 percent of his patients who were nonresponders to other drugs.

With a surge of optimism, I asked, “How many have you given it to?”
“Twelve.”
I searched his eyes. “How many children?”
“None.”
Dr. Post waited as I processed his words. “Do you think it’s safe?” I asked nonsensically.

“Safe? You’ve tried everything else, and your daughter has a potentially fatal illness. It’s time to throw the book out the window,” he pushed.

No single remedy works magic for every patient. Medication right for one person’s brain chemistry may be useless for another. But for Lillian, Neurontin was literally a lifesaver. We were overjoyed when the drug led to an enormous improvement. Although her illness had no cure and she would still have times of high risk, she could now engage with the world around her and not swing out of control so often. It was like watching Lazarus stagger out of the tomb as her wit, sparkle, and keen perceptions were unbound.

Since then we’ve had plenty of difficult, even excruciating, times. But we both have a blessed sense of being beyond the worst. Maybe that’s why I can write about my daughter’s past—because I have so much confidence in her future.

Ultimately Lillian united our family in ways none of us could have predicted, eliciting the care and compassion that often stay buried in pain-free circumstances. Charles’s resentment changed dramatically once he understood the flood of emotions that Lillian had to manage without a willing brain chemistry. Henry’s concern for her was a factor in his earning a master’s degree in counseling psychology and then working with troubled adolescents. And Teddy, who adores his sister (he calls her the wisest person he’s ever met), developed a profound regard for people with psychiatric problems. Charles, Henry, and Teddy would be the first to understand why, as I look back on my life, I describe Lillian as not only a close friend but also a sage teacher.

One lesson she’s taught me is that I must reach high without overreaching. Like all mothers, I’ve tried to find the balance between trying to safeguard my child and letting her find her own path. But Lillian has reminded me many times that I can’t do or be everything for her. I can only offer to be a guide as she takes her own steps. Yes, I could stay at her side when times were roughest. I could get her the best medical care in the world. But I couldn’t somehow, by sheer force of will, “make it all well.”

Second, my daughter has also taught me that tragedy can be both
terror and teacher. Mental illness has followed me all my life. Since my early years I’ve wanted to alleviate the suffering I saw in the eyes of Hassie and others whose psychiatric diagnoses were emblazoned across their identities. In my breakaway time in Heidelberg, I learned empathy as I experienced the depression that I’d witnessed in my mother. Directing Karis, I was constantly enriched by nursing a cup of coffee with a woman who was trying to hear me over internal voices screaming epithets. And I grew stronger: standing with my arm around the waist of a brilliant pianist so terrified that his future was cut off before it began, I’ve realized the limitations of talent.

Lillian’s third lesson has been the power of others to influence an illness. Her problem wasn’t only “chemical imbalance,” “dysfunctional behavior,” or “genetic predisposition.” The reactions of people around her, including me, were in the mix as well. A phone call from a friend, a judgmental scowl, an invitation for tea and conversation. . . . Every act of openness or prejudice shaped her reality. Despite their influence, the people interacting with her have generally had little idea of their impact.

Although with time my daughter has become much more stable, the fear of Lillian’s death has never left me. While painful, that fear creates an appreciation for each day that I share this earth with her. That’s the fourth lesson. I encounter Teddy, Henry, Charles, my friends, and every other person I touch with a sense of being gifted by their presence. I take no hug, sunrise, kind word, or autumn leaf for granted.

Fifth, as my daughter and I have negotiated a fragile compromise between hope and despair, I’ve recognized more clearly the essential aid of friends, family, and professionals. Together we laid a foundation of trust and communication by day, only to have night demons rip apart every bridge to sanity we’d built. We all began again the next day, holding onto the promise that failure is an event, not a person.

Similarly, I’ve realized a sixth lesson—that everyone needs an advocate. No matter how clever, how strong, how experienced, people find themselves trapped. With the same effort I put into finding medical advice for Lillian, I’ve pressured bureaucracies to help impoverished families. It’s not only people on the bottom rungs of the social ladder who need help. My students need to be told when they’re brilliant, and women I work with today, who are trying to stop wars, need to be ushered into the offices of policy makers.
Seventh, life with Lillian has taught me not to be afraid of difference. Reality isn’t always beautiful, but even when distorted it can dazzle. In my early thirties, Karis and Hunt Alternatives challenged me to appreciate diversity. But those lessons crystallized in my forties when Lillian showed me that life is kaleidoscopic, a turbulent and random recombination of shapes and colors. I came to see the importance of not only a saved soul or healthy psyche, but also a robustly integrated society in which individuals coexist in easy sameness as well as splendid difference. Lofty words aside, I still flinch when an unkempt person approaches me on the street. His mumbling is disturbing. Scary, really. But he could be my child. He is, after all, someone else’s.

And a final lesson: Lillian has dramatically altered my perception of success and the value of internal versus external strength. I know plenty of people with exquisitely balanced brains, extensive education, and advanced careers who are miserably unsatisfied with who they are. As I’ve wondered what I could hope for my daughter, I’ve constantly returned to the afternoon when Lil, while reviewing her progress with her gentle Viennese psychiatrist, began to ruminate. “It’s hard to think about all those years before my illness was diagnosed. Then the months in hospitals, and trying to find the right medications. I imagine: if only I could have had this new drug then. . . . But I guess I really wouldn’t want to go back and change anything. After all, every experience is part of me. And I like who I am.”

Mental illness isn’t a tragedy. It’s not an aberration. It’s a reality coloring my family’s world, adding new shapes and forms. Lillian and I have often discussed how she should pass on this understanding. Should she or I write about it, or protect our family privacy? We thought long and hard, then she decided to craft an article with me requested by Good Housekeeping, laying out her experience as a sort of road map for others facing a frightening journey. Bipolar disorder was rarely being diagnosed in children. Lillian said that the article would be her way of turning something terrible into something good for others. As the authors, we could control the tone and content.

When the issue hit the stands, I cringed. It had our text, but the editors’ title: “I Couldn’t Reach My Daughter.” Her courage had been missed by the headline writer. The article was about Lillian, not me.
I’m not sorry we did it, and neither is Lillian. We’ve helped a lot of people and become more open in the process. But it was a tradeoff.

**Tradeoffs**

Tradeoff is a subplot in this half-told tale of my life. In my fifties, I’ve settled the score with Donna Reed, TV’s perfect mother in a perfect family, who molded my young psyche every week. Still, trying to balance professional and personal loads, I’ve made plenty of mistakes. Dragging along three kids as I’ve gone crusading has been full of challenges, but it’s had its beautiful moments too.

The most difficult but also the most striking confluence of work and family life was when my intense involvement in the Balkan War came at a time of almost overwhelming pain for my own family. As innocents fled indescribable horrors, I was trying to ward off legions of devils streaming out of my daughter’s mind. But it was our shared vulnerability that allowed the refugees and me to stretch across language, class, and culture—and find each other.

As meaningful as they were for me, those connections weren’t necessarily possible for my kids, and I must acknowledge the price they paid in having me as their mother. The cost to them is captured in a memory of a time when I thought that I was the one making a sacrifice. Returning one evening from four gut-wrenching days in Bosnia, I walked into the house, straight to Lillian and Teddy at the dinner table. Charles was away, and as the butler brought and took the soup, then the veal, then the strudel, the children didn’t say one word about my trip. I finally asked, “Why couldn’t you have expressed a bit of interest, after all the phone calls you’ve overheard, the stories I’ve told, the political figures you’ve met?”

“We can’t take any more” was the essence of their reply. This was more than compassion fatigue. It was a defense of identity. I’d been so focused on “saving the world” that I’d forgotten a basic principle: my kids shouldn’t have to compete with refugees.

I was appalled that I could be so insensitive. It stirred up the self-doubts that plagued me about mothering and career. The mothering pull is powerful, so unrelenting that I think it must be biological—part of the survival of the species mechanism. But rather than observing
with some scientific distance, we mothers experience the tension at a visceral level with a sense of overwhelming (and thus secret) guilt.

I figure we have a three-way choice: We can have no children so we can be perfect professionals—and always regret missing out on one of the great joys of womanhood. We can stay home full time trying to be perfect mothers—and wonder if we’re using our brains to their fullest. Or we can live with a diminished score on both, career and family.

I haven’t trivialized the conflict by ignoring it. Often I’ve felt I was betraying my children when I left them with someone else so I could go to a meeting. In reality, giving a child space to cope with adversity, to be independent, is solid mothering. Letting a child transfer attention and affection from one person to another teaches an important skill. In my head, I could say my responsibility as a mother was to be sure that every moment each of my children was safe and loved, and that didn’t require my constant physical presence. But in my heart, the ache and misgiving were always there. Throughout my childrearing years, the sad contest seethed inside me, at a place no one could see.

Rather than keep the tension in the dark, where it would be most powerful, I’ve found it’s worth taking the time to explicitly stage the internal conversation. Here it is.

One voice lays out the crux: Children need their mothers like they need no one else. They’re ours for only a few years, and it’s selfish of me to devote myself to my career when I could be with them.

Then another voice speaks up: I love my children with all my heart. And like most working mothers, I often longed to be with them when they were in the care of someone other than me. But I couldn’t have become who I was to the world if I’d spent fourteen hours a day with my children. I didn’t want to use my time that way. Even so, we had breakfast and dinner together almost every day. I drove my kids to school and curled up in their beds at night to read stories or do math games. I often planned weekend excursions for us or canceled meetings to come home if they were sick.

The third voice isn’t internal. It comes from my children, who have let me know, in no uncertain terms, that I wasn’t the “unconditionally always there” mother they longed for. I’ve apologized, with many, many tears, for disappointing them. But when I look back, I’m not sure I could have done it differently. Absolutely, there are specific moments I’d change. But I went to heroic efforts to leave my work be-
hind and enter their worlds, “a thousand times a thousand.” That’s my mother’s expression. My mother, whom I’ve castigated for leaving me in the care of Franny or just to fend for myself. But now I get it. Now with my own kids, I see my mother differently. She had her life to live, as do I. Maybe children need to have children of their own to understand what I’m talking about.

Rather than seeing my profession and family in competition, as the children did and as I often experienced in a given day, I believe I integrated mothering my little ones and nurturing the world. The desires and demands of those roles blended into a stronger compound.

Certainly, being with my children infused me with love that I turned outward to the world. An hour with my arms stretched out to them opened up my heart to the pain of others. But did being decision maker, visionary, and public personality enrich the lives of my children?

Beyond spending time together, I brought to my children the fullness of who I am as a woman in the world. Now the truth is that they didn’t give a hoot about the fullness. They wanted only the mommy part. If I tried to explain the importance of a meeting, they cast it as bragging. If they saw me on stage, they didn’t hear the speech because they were focused on the distance between them and their mother behind the podium.

On the other hand, they gained an image of me as a competent person. My favorite reminder of that is when Teddy said, as I tucked him into bed, “Mommy, you should run for president of the United States. I’m serious. Don’t smile. There’s nothing about the job you couldn’t learn. Please, Mommy, do it. Do it.”

Until they all left home, my ambivalence would persist, and the residue feelings would live even longer. For when guilt is deposited in layers, over hours, months, and years, self-forgiveness happens slowly, also in layers. Ultimately, it’s been a spiritual exercise of confession and acceptance. Forgive me, I can say, for not being perfect. I am how God made me. And that must be enough.

Granted, I should have been more sensitive to my children’s difficulties being in my wake, given my own difficulty in trying to find a space in a Hunt family brimming over with zealots promoting their causes. That Dallas endeavor was frustrating and painful, but ultimately I found, or created, room for myself. I hope that my kids will too.
Zealots can be blind. We can be narrow. But we needn’t be. We can be open to unexpected pressures that rudely reshape our most carefully constructed worldview. I hope I can pass this on to my children and grandchildren. I hope they’ll be willing to shake themselves loose from worshipping strength and beauty and give up banishing ugliness, inadequacy, and “inappropriate” behavior to the shadowy margins. I want their kaleidoscopes to have endless hues and patterns, and not all those pretty. And I expect them to be confused and unsettled by some whom they meet; that may include the face each sees in the mirror.

My job is to encourage an openness that will let them realize the connection between themselves and disoriented people at the bus stop, dedicated public servants in the bureaucracy, teenaged Serb warriors, and elegant Middle Eastern royalty.

Ours is a remarkable family, and looking back, I’m grateful for how my sense of mission was spawned as I grew up with people who took great risks for the sake of an ideal. From Lillian I learned the necessity but from the Hunts I learned the art of throwing expectations aside, stretching beyond my knowledge or expertise to engage with whatever reality intruded impolitely on my life.

Dad would be at least bemused to see his role in shaping my worldview. I think he’d take satisfaction in the number of ways I’ve followed in his footsteps, including by penning this memoir. I’ve even emulated his syndicated column—writing, albeit as the “liberal voice” for Scripps Howard News Service. Like him I keep churning out books, speaking here, there, and everywhere. However different we are in assessing what the world needs, it was Dad’s disregard for boundaries that gave me the gumption to tackle those needs.

Hassie died about a year before this book was published. At his gravesite I read passages from chapter 1. June sang with her guitar. Bunker, Lamar and Norma, and Helen and Harville were there too. I was grateful that they could give their implicit nod to paragraphs Hassie wasn’t able to approve. Of all of Mom’s four kids, I’d been Hassie’s most frequent visitor in his last, bedridden years, often bringing others with me. So Charles, Lillian, and Teddy, Helen’s children, and Mark’s parents had seen him of late and came to the cemetery. Lillian spoke beautifully, expressing a connection that no one else could fathom.
And then there’s Mom, that remarkable woman who let the Thanksgiving turkey get cold while she prayed “for all those in every corner of the world who don’t have family to be with.” I hope she would recognize a bit of herself in me—if not her creed, at least her passion. A thousand times I heard Mom declare, “I love getting old.” In fact she proclaimed 1999, the year of her death, to be the best year of her life—even though she was suffering from cancer. The whole family gathered in her bedroom for her last hours, singing songs from Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *Oklahoma!* We were all so into the moment that we didn’t notice exactly when she breathed her last, but she entered the pearly gates either to “The Surrey with the Fringe on Top” or “Oh, What a Beautiful Morning.”

Dad taught me to launch forth. Hassie, how to give without getting something back. Mom inculcated in me how to care about others. But for fifteen years it was Mark Meeks who convinced me that I should apply that caring to the world, with an insistence on social justice. Putting aside the disappointments of any failed marriage, I’m grateful to him.

And now, as a weathered woman starting to pick my way through the second half of my life, my hat’s off to Charles, at once my mentor, partner, naysayer, and cheerleader. Continuing a lifetime of giving, he’s created the Boston Landmarks Orchestra, providing free concerts to families. He also spends a chunk of his time on airplanes and in hotels, conducting orchestras around the world, most frequently in Moscow, across Central Asia, and yes, still in Sarajevo. The joy I felt twenty years ago when I first saw him conduct has continued, just as strongly. During more than a few hours of working on this book, I was in the back of a hall as he rehearsed, looking up from my page to gaze at the maestro. Those private moments were like scenes from a movie, complete with soundtrack.

And our kids. As I’m finishing the last commas of this manuscript, for a sweet and rare moment all three of my children like me. And, I should add, I like them. Henry is a first-rate husband and dad. He has bloomed as a documentary film producer, leading viewers into the world of a high school basketball team on the Wind River Indian Reservation, then into the Brazilian land equity movement and the accomplishments of a new woman president of war-torn Liberia. Lillian is a
talented poet and staunch friend to many. She lives across from her
dad’s church and at the Columbine Ranch, and she calls me almost
daily to discuss some aspect of theology, read to me a passage from
a favorite book, or debate a strategy for the Hunt Alternatives Fund.
Teddy, bless him, is more than ready to be out from under his parents.
He’s a deeply spiritual soul and as kind as can be. Now that he’s gradu-
ated from high school, he’s doing his own trailblazing. How much,
after all, can I object?

But this is my half-life, not anyone else’s. At middle age, I’m more
radioactive than ever, hoping to spark some public policy explosions
before I decompose altogether. Charles and I are ensconced in Cam-
bridge, Massachusetts, where I wake up every morning relishing the
thought of another five decades of organizing, writing, funding, and
teaching.

Needless to say, I’m excruciatingly aware of many mistakes that bal-
ance my successes, but frankly I feel energized by both. I imperfectly
understand and inadequately implement my crystal-clear values, and
in true zealot style I can become impatient with people who don’t see
life as I do. But for all my passion, I’m learning to tolerate, even em-
brace, a wide range of difference in others. Now, at the half-point of
my life, I believe, even if I don’t always remember, that only by accept-
ing the complexity and contradictions of other people will I be able to
accept the dramatic marbling in myself.

Still at It

When we left Vienna for Cambridge, so did my colleagues Susan, Val,
and Sarah. The Hunt Alternatives Fund moved from Denver and was
transformed, first under Val’s leadership, and now under Sarah’s. The
fund is going strong, with three initiatives: one global, one national,
and one local.

The first, the Initiative for Inclusive Security, works with women
waging peace in more than forty conflicts, connecting them to thou-
sands of officials at the World Bank, the United Nations, the State De-
partment, and other halls of power. The women bring a wealth of ex-
pertise in law and governance, civil society, academic research, and
development. They’re involved in hundreds of activities, such as cre-
ating a business initiative to stop the civil war in Sri Lanka, organizing mass street demonstrations against the nuclear buildup in Pakistan and India, writing exposés of massacres in Colombia, campaigning for peace referenda in Northern Ireland, reintegrating demobilized soldiers in Rwanda, gathering testimony against war criminals in Kosovo, and training thousands of women to run for office in Cambodia. Ambassador Hattie Babbitt heads our nine-person policy and advocacy office in Washington. I spend considerable time on the road, consulting with women leaders in every corner of the globe, helping them find their voices, as I’ve found mine.

The fund’s national project is called Prime Movers. We support leaders of social movements as they strategize ways to engage millions of citizens to create a more just America. They learn as much from each other as they do from us.

One prime mover is Eboo Patel in Chicago, whose Interfaith Youth Core helps young people share their different faiths while building new houses and feeding the hungry. Another is Sara Horowitz, forming institutions in New York that will ultimately be a model for a “new New Deal,” an updated social safety net for the increasing number of workers living without a wide range of basic benefits and protections.

In Massachusetts, the fund has put together a coalition of thirty arts groups through an initiative called ArtWorks for Kids. We link the organizations with our wealthy friends, who become their influential allies, helping to push for political support.

Bring Back the Music, one of our grantees, puts violins, flutes, clarinets, and trumpets into the hands of kids from low-income families. They stepped in when music education was slashed from Boston Public Schools. Urban Improv, another ArtWorks grantee, gets kids talking about peer pressure, violence, racism, homophobia, and substance abuse—all through improvisational acting. Some of our arts programs teach kids entrepreneurship: Artists for Humanity expects its teens to work at least six hours a week and pays them to produce paintings, theatrical sets, photographs, and graphic design for individual and corporate buyers. The young artists’ lives are changed as they take control of their microenterprises.

In all these efforts I’m surrounded by talented staff, who endure my constant critique in service to our larger vision. And I don’t ever forget
that we wouldn’t be doing these projects if it weren’t for the brilliant stewardship of our family business by my brother Ray, and the support of Helen and June in demanding a funding stream so we sisters could develop our own separate work.

Apart from our foundation, just down the road (ten minutes by bike), is Harvard’s Women and Public Policy Program, which I direct. We sponsor research, convene policy makers and practitioners, and shape the experience of thousands of graduate students who pass through the Kennedy School of Government en route to changing the world. Some of those spectacular men and women take my courses in “Inclusive Security,” thinking through how they’ll bring women into formal and informal peace processes when they are themselves the policy makers in charge.

Over in “the Yard,” younger students have signed up for the “Choreography of Social Movements.” We examine American movements through a framework of values, vision, leadership, resources, and the ripe moment in time. More important, my zealots-in-the-making meet in small groups to plan movements that they’d be willing to lead. I haven’t come across many of the communists that Dad warned were running Harvard, but I’ve hung on my walls the speech I delivered with him at the East Texas Oil Field, to give them fair warning.

All these activities, whether with our foundation, Harvard, writing, or consulting, feed into a larger aspiration. My vision is a world in which every person is valued. No lives are discarded as statistics. No one is marginalized.

Since I started working on this book eight (eight!) years ago, the landscape of our world has changed dramatically. “Security” is now the leading story. But real security requires more than bombs and bullets. In an increasingly dangerous world, we won’t be safe until we cultivate an understanding that every person’s tears are the same color (to borrow a Bosnian phrase), and every dream carries the same weight. My life, my passion, my zeal are in service to that vision.

Thinking about overarching vision, I pulled off a shelf the cloth-covered blue journal that I held in my lap as I sat alone on a Himalayan mountain, during my Outward Bound trip in November 1989. Each trekker was told to find a place where no one could see her. There we spent the day alone with our thoughts. Looking down on eagles as they swooped over the folds of velvety valleys, a lake of white clouds,
and brilliant fields of snow, I composed this poem. It strikes me as a remarkably fitting summary—and forecast—of my life.

Singla Pass—15,000 feet

Here I am this woman
born into my own intimate moment
of a universe vast and incomprehensible.
In the first half of my living
after heady climbs and disappointing descents
I have learned three lessons:
That although joy awaits discovery
love doesn’t come delivered prepackaged or perfect,
no matter what predictions or promises;
That life defies diagnosis, so that
I may bleed without suffering
And other times suffer without bleeding;
And that sometimes, beyond my willing,
my accomplishments far exceed expected limits,
interspersed with times of forgiven mediocrity.

Now, looking out onto the next half of my living,
I am rooting myself in those three lessons
so that, in untamed and verdant response
I will freely give to those closest to me
my brightest and kindest moments, hoping that
from those nearest will extend an ethic to embrace the world.
I will treat myself with kindly care,
earning every wrinkle with worries well-placed
and every leathered crinkle with authentic smiles.
And I will be shoeless nine of ten workday hours,
convince children that rain was part of our picnic plan,
and perform many other hitherto unsupposed feats.

Then someday infinitely soon
I’ll wear my grey crown proudly
assumed with graceful dignity and an irreverent chuckle
And I’ll willingly, freely, pass on
with the secret delight of passionate memories
and most tender mercies, worthy of my full womanhood.