



How do I stay relevant in your life? - Interview with my Father

By Perin, 40 years old, 15 years in prison in Texas, 2020

During this summer of 2018 and 2019, Ines Aubert visited me at the prison in Texas where I'm incarcerated. She also met my father and stepmother on the ranch they live and work on. As a personal friend now, Ines wanted to know how my father feels about having two sons in prison, so she asked me to interview him.

Shanon is my younger brother. I explained to Ines how, when he was a baby, our parents separated. I stayed with Dad; Shanon went with our mother. Thereafter, he came to consider Greg – our mother's second husband – as his father. Greg abandoned Shanon after he separated from our mother in 1994-95. Those broken relationships served as the foundation for Shanon's troubling behavior – the black-outs, violence, vandalism, and theft. In many ways his upbringing mirrored my own, and now we are both in prison.

An interview with my father became feasible when I was transferred from Texas to a county jail in Florida on a bench warrant to resolve an old case. While there I had access to phones, messaging systems through kiosks, and video visitation. I tried to call my father at least twice a week, usually on the weekend because he was more available then, and it was often necessary to wait until at least 9:30am Florida time to ensure that he was properly awake. Overall it was crazy; waiting to call seemed to take forever, but then once I started talking to my dad, all too soon the automated voice would let us know, "You have one minute remaining." We got so lost in sharing, talking and laughing that the warning was an abrupt reminder of how divided our lives were. The chance to hear my father's voice was vitally important to me, and I did not take the access to phones for granted, especially considering how I would no longer have them when I returned to Texas. The time passed quickly, but I was enriched by the experience.

On November 22, 2019, I began the interview by asking my father, "How did you feel when you heard Shanon and I were arrested?"

"With Shanon," he said, "I was not surprised because he had been in detention before. I was subpoenaed to go to the hearing." My father went on to share how he travelled to Corpus Christi, Texas, in 2000, where, during the hearing with the Judge, an agreement was reached to take my sixteen-year-old brother to north Texas, with my father, to then enroll Shanon in a treatment center. "But then he killed the guy," Dad further explained, which took place when my brother got in a high-speed car chase, after stealing a vehicle from the treatment facility.

"How did you feel at that point?" I asked.

"I began scrambling to get Shanon an attorney," he replied. He also suggested that the State had intended to really go after my brother. Once representation was secured, the attorney was able to get my brother tried as a juvenile (the State wanted to certify him as an adult), and managed to work a plea for twenty years, down from the life in prison

Shanon was facing. “Of course, Shanon was mad at the attorney,” Dad concluded, “but that’s your brother.”

We then spent some time, sharing thoughts on failed opportunities. How I wished we had communicated better as a family, because I didn’t know that Shanon was required to participate in classes and programs as a condition of his release. “When I went to visit him,” I told my dad, “I could have been a source of encouragement.”

My father agreed that many mistakes were made. “Your brother refused to participate,” Dad said, “so he was certified as an adult at eighteen and sent to prison. At the hearing the lady judge went into her chambers to make her decision. When she came out, tears were in her eyes as she explained, “There is nothing I can do.””

The same judge handled the original proceedings involving my brother and she did not want to send him to prison. “The state attorney, though, wanted his head. She really did not care,” my father said. The whole experience was trying, filling him with frustration, anger and sadness. The troublesome relationship with his fourth wife did not help.

“Then, with you, it felt like my whole world ended for a time,” my father said about when he learned in 2005 that I had been arrested in Wisconsin and was awaiting extradition back to Texas. He wanted to reach out, but he didn’t know how to do so. “I remember going to this Mexican restaurant I liked,” he told me, “and I ordered an alcoholic drink, finished it, but when I requested another, they would not serve it to me. That pissed me off; the manager ended up apologizing, but that did not matter; I ended up going somewhere else to have a few more drinks.”

I commented on the fact that we had not been in contact since 1998. That I tried to call him in 2000, while I was stationed in Hawaii with the army. But he reminded me that I did call him – likely in 2001 when I was in a military prison – after I learned that Shanon was in jail.

“You called me and told me something like I needed to take care of Shanon,” my father shared, which evidently amused him. It’s amazing to me what the mind can forget!

Those events deeply affected my father, causing him to second guess himself to the point where he sought to chase the pain away with alcohol. No doubt there were aspects of shame mixed with helplessness. Then the questions creeped in: “What went wrong? What if things would have been different?” Thinking about the past and living in hindsight caused my Dad to struggle with reorienting his life. It took him time to heal. Unfortunately, our call ended before we could cover more ground.

On Saturday November 30, 2019, when I called to continue the interview, Dad was driving to Starbucks. I found that hilarious, and told him, “I am so jealous right now!” He laughed because we had covered the topic of coffee before. “I wonder why they don’t allow coffee there,” he mused aloud.

“I imagine they don’t provide it to keep the aggravation down. Kind of like how it stays cold in here. And they don’t issue shoes, only shower slides.”

When Dad arrived at Starbucks, he put me on hold. I listened to him make his order then pull up to the drive-through window.

I couldn't help but laugh when he said, "And there is the pupaccino."

"Does your dog enjoy that?"

"Ohh yes," he replied. "She knows when we are getting near to Starbucks. She loves these things. They usually put it in a larger paper cup and don't fill it all the way up, but this time they put it in a smaller plastic cup filled to the brim. Now there is whipped cream all over! But I am not worried about it. She will clean it up pretty good."

We then discussed random family topics, what he had been doing for the past few days, including Thanksgiving, and what his plans were going forward, including the rest of the weekend. When I finally got around to the next question on Ines' list, I had to redial because the first fifteen-minute call ended.

Dad was back at his house when the second call connected. I reminded him of the question: "So what did you envision for Shanon and me? What did you imagine we would be, or what we might do?"

"Thinking about it is hard, it hurts," he said, matter-of-factly.

"And yet it does us no good to run from the pain, does it?"

"It's not that I am running from it, I just don't like to think about the past because of the emotions that come up."

"But Dad," I replied, "hearing you talk about it is meaningful to me, to know that you had deeper thoughts and interests regarding Shanon and me."

He again expressed how thinking about the past caused him emotional pain, but he answered: "I just wanted both of you to be happy. To do whatever you wanted to do, to find your way."

I explained that, back then, happiness was hard to find when I did not know what I wanted to do. My father said he would have been happy to support us no matter what we did, whether in the military or civilian life; he would have liked us to have a family, to have grandchildren that he could spoil.

"Did you ever think, Dad, that you could have done more while we were growing up to help us find our way, to then support those efforts?"

If that question hurt, he faced it well enough. "The truth is that I lost faith, because being separated from your lives made it hard to be supportive."

"And yet I tried often when I was younger to get you to communicate."

"You know how bad I am at communicating," he said, in a subdued tone.

Of course, and I don't fault him for that part of his nature, but I couldn't help sharing how I felt like an outsider and alone while growing up. "I always felt that you had your ready-made family, with three step-children to replace Shanon and me."

"But that wasn't true at all, son, no one could replace you. And that living arrangement was difficult. It always was."

"Then why did you stay in it so long?"

"That is a good question," he admitted. "It wasn't all bad but making the relationship work was very hard on me. And Judy's kids were not easy to get along with. I only stayed

the last five years because of Lance's children, but even then, I got to the point where they did not even matter. I mean, even when we went fishing, which is something I really enjoyed, it was hard to find pleasure in it with her. I was married four times in my life to people who wanted to get married, but not because I wanted to."

"And how did those relationships end up turning out?"

"Not very well," he admitted. "Now, though, I finally got married to the person I wanted in my life."

"Which, I imagine, makes a huge difference..."

"It absolutely does. We are completely different people, but all of our differences are not a hindrance but rather complements. If there is such a thing as a soul mate, she is definitely mine."

My father married Angie in 2006 and I have witnessed how much she enriches his life. I am really happy that he has found a person who will share in the love I know he desires to provide.

Angie was just waking up, mumbling in the background. I told her good morning, and she eventually clued into our discussion. She was aware of how Dad had been distant while I was growing up. The separation prevented us from developing the father-son relationship I wanted.

"Your dad is the kind of person that when he is pushed away enough, he just withdraws. He still loved you and cared..."

"I know he did, Angie," I replied, "but he had to deal with my mother and Judy in tandem to make the relationship with us work." Ultimately, it did not work out very well. My life was divided across the breadth of Texas, complicated by the different home dynamics I had to endure when I travelled back and forth. Going to visit my father was extremely frustrating because I would get into fights with Judy's sons, and then it always felt like she couldn't help but to interfere in how I tried to get close to my father.

When Dad got back on the phone, he repeated how he would have loved for Shanon and me to follow our passions, to find our way in life. We discussed life quality, briefly, and how, as he works and lives on the ranch, he could be paid more.

But Dad loves what he does. "I always say that if a person can find a job they love, it isn't really working at all."

That turned the conversation to ruminating over the possibilities concerning my brother – he is set to be released from prison in 2021. We both hope that Shanon will be at peace and find his way. At least my father will have the opportunity to be a part of that process, to teach and guide my brother going forward. For me...well, there are many years left to do in prison. Admittedly, I may never get out. Neither my brother nor I has lived up to the visions our father had for us, but I firmly believe we will all be better for the experiences we have endured.

I asked Dad: "Are you resolved to what I will have to face for the next 16 years?"

"Do I have a choice?"

“Not really,” I admitted, “but there will continue to be opportunities to develop our relationship and stay close as I work to gain parole when the time comes.”

Then I asked: “What would it be like for you to have Shanon or me, or both of us in your life each day?”

“I don’t think I can put that into words, son.”

“Well, you have to, because you definitely won’t write it out!”

He laughed and then tried to explain how it would be amazing for him to have us there, near him.

“What do you think you would do with us there?”

“I would try to spend as much time as I could with you guys and give you all the love and support possible for the time I have remaining,” Dad said. He commented on how anything could happen, but he would love the chance to be more active in our lives, to even help us more directly.

“Even in our present situation, Dad, those things can be worked on. I mean, I understand the separation, and how busy you can get, but surely you would like to be a part of that process now? Isn’t there more you could do to strengthen the relationships at this point?”

“Sure, there are,” he admitted. “And yes, I would. There is just always something going on. This job is all consuming. It wasn’t supposed to be that way, but I do love the work.”

“I can understand that, but surely you have gotten to a place where better plans can be made?” I suggested. “I mean, in the beginning you had to get used to the work out there, and the infrastructure was limited. But now that’s established. Can’t you find ways to alternate times when you and Angie could visit Shanon or me? Or find a person to fill in during the times when you would be away?”

“It all depends on what happens, Son. The animals are a big part of what we have to monitor each day, feeding them, letting them out, then putting them back up. We have hawks that hunt the chickens. And if a cow has a calf... the point is that just as soon as I try to make plans, something always comes up. Angie and I would love to come and visit you and Shanon more often, though. It does bother me that we can’t.”

From there, we discussed my eventual return to Texas. Dad would love for me to be on a unit close to him, and he explained that if I ended up far away, he would try to get me transferred due to his health. I will be invested in the process of seeking parole in 2035 from the moment I return, so I shared some of the different things I’d be working on in the future. Living around him and other family is a dream worth striving for.

On Saturday, December 7, 2019, I woke my dad up, but he didn’t mind. Our conversation was informal, so it wasn’t until Sunday, December 8, 2019, that I posed new questions. First, though, he sent a message to Ines, letting her know to call.

For the past couple of weeks my father helped me connect with Ines in Switzerland. It was wonderful to share ideas and thoughts with her, as well. Last week she got to listen when I talked to my father. “I never thought I would get to experience that,” she suggested. She found that very interesting, very moving.

“Would you like to answer the other questions I have that Ines sent me?” I asked.

He chuckled and replied, “I’m not really awake enough, the brain is tired.” He stayed up late. I teased him about being old and asked him how he kept my brother and me relevant in his life.

Before he could answer though, Angie got on the phone. “Hello, Nasty,” she said, “Good morning.”

I laughed. “Nasty? Coming from the person who has yet to shower! I am already so fresh and clean, but good morning to you too.”

I figured Dad passed her the phone to escape the question, but that was okay. I simply asked her instead. “Dad didn’t want to answer, but what about you, hmm? How do Shanon and I stay relevant in your lives? How do you work on keeping us close?”

“I think about that all of the time because I have so much going on. When I am spending time with my daughters, who can be needy, or my dad who is 83 years old and alone and I don’t know how much longer he will be with us, I feel sad because I can’t spend the same amount of time with you and Shanon. You are family, and I want us to be close. It is important to us to have you in our lives. We talk about you a lot.”

Dad was quiet on the subject, choosing to let Angie share her thoughts. She is very passionate about family. In the past she has made time to visit me herself when my dad was otherwise engaged. That was how I met “the old man”, her father. Those visits significantly contributed to how our relationship has developed since 2013. She went from shy, not talking much, even reluctant to look me in the eyes, to confident and direct, fully capable of sharing her thoughts and feelings which I have come to appreciate.

I told her that I understand the busy nature of their lives, and how time management has become more of an issue. She agreed, but she also stressed that she really wants to get better at including Shanon and me more.

“Before you left,” she said, “it was easy to take how close you were to us for granted. We did want to come see you more, and we should have. The same is true for Shanon, and I really want us to work on doing more in the future.”

Ines called and interrupted the conversation, but that was okay. Angie said goodbye and went about getting cleaned up and ready to go to Church.

Dad kept Ines and me connected while she caught me up on what she’d been doing and her upcoming plans. Then her phone died, not sure why, but my call also ended, and I had to wait in line to use the phone again. When I finally got in touch with Dad, he was making his way out to feed the animals.

We discussed how he was doing Angie’s job. “She gets paid to do the animals, but there are times, like now, when she is doing something else that I go and take care of the animals...and she still gets paid.” He laughed.

“I guess that’s the benefit of being married to the boss,” I said.

“Yeah, I am married to the boss.”

Our laughter faded to nothing when bad reception caused his phone to die. And with the kiosks down, there was no other way to contact him, so I decided to take a nap. When I woke up a message from Dad was on the kiosk, explaining that he did not know why the phone kept hanging up and to call back if I could. Unfortunately, it was too late in the day to do so. Soon thereafter the kiosks went down again.

On Monday morning, December 9, 2019, there was another message from Dad, sent the night before. Ines wanted to talk to me on Monday, which prompted me to call my Dad, but when I got him on the phone, he told me: “Ines texted again and suggested that she would talk to you later in the week.” It was difficult to link up with her because of the six-hour time difference with Switzerland.

On December 3, 2019, the case was resolved so I was waiting to be transferred back to Texas. That could happen any day.

If nothing else, I was given a chance to continue the conversation with my dad.

“Yesterday Angie talked about how Shanon and I stay relevant in your lives, but would you like to add anything?”

“I think she explained it pretty well,” he replied. “It is just like she said: you and Shanon are very important to us. I think about you both all the time.”

“Do you ever talk about us?”

“Oh yes, I definitely talk about you with the guys here,” Dad said. “One of the guys used to be in prison, and he understands what it is about. We are always teasing him, but he has been good to talk to. Other than that, it is a personal thing, not something that I try to really advertise. But there are some close friends that do know, that are aware, because you and Shanon are very much a part of our lives.”

I finally asked, “So, Dad, how do you manage the burden of having two sons in prison, the father-son relationship dynamic, where you are having to help support us?”

“You are not a burden, Son,” he stressed. “I am just really happy that I can support you and Shanon. That I can help.” He understands that we are dependent upon him for certain things.

“I am very grateful for what you do, Dad. It is hard to say how Shanon feels, because I think he struggles with understanding how to build a relationship with you, but that will change when he gets out.”

Dad agreed.

Having my father answer these questions was a wonderful experience. I got to learn more about him – a continuation of the process since he fully re-entered my life in 2013 – and how he deals with the struggle of being separated from his sons. It is unknown how long my father will be able to contribute as he does now. He really wants to be more active in our lives. That weighs on his mind. But as I told him years ago, during our first visit: “The relationship I want with you, Dad, is not a race. We are not trying to make up for lost time, but living each day trying to do the best we can. Just do the best you can.”

It is obvious that he has taken that to heart.