

White Carnations

Fathers Day In a Bathroom Mirror

I watch my father shave each morning.
The whiteness of the shaving foam matches the whiteness of his hair
I glance and, in my mirrored vision, his eyes twinkle in response.

We have the same eyes,
although his were brown and mine are blue.
Have we had the same thoughts, too?
I wonder.
Did he feel the way I sometimes do?

Or have I been able to program myself
 design my life
 control impulse
 deal with strife
free from parental oversight?

Before I began shaving, as a teenager, I was cocky enough to think so.
Now, all I have is the bathroom mirror.

When we were together!
Both pictures cropped
from a single picture that
had both of us in it.



John Gates Ramsay and John Martin Ramsay, 1980

I also have other photos, memories, and stories.

The question remains, “Have I been able to program myself, design my life, control impulse, deal with strife free from parental oversight?” Who am I?

I ask myself these questions—trying to understand myself— or is it just because I’m curious. Sometimes, I go further and ask, Why am I? That is a knottier question. But, both questions conjure up thoughts about my parents, my childhood, and things that may have shaped me.

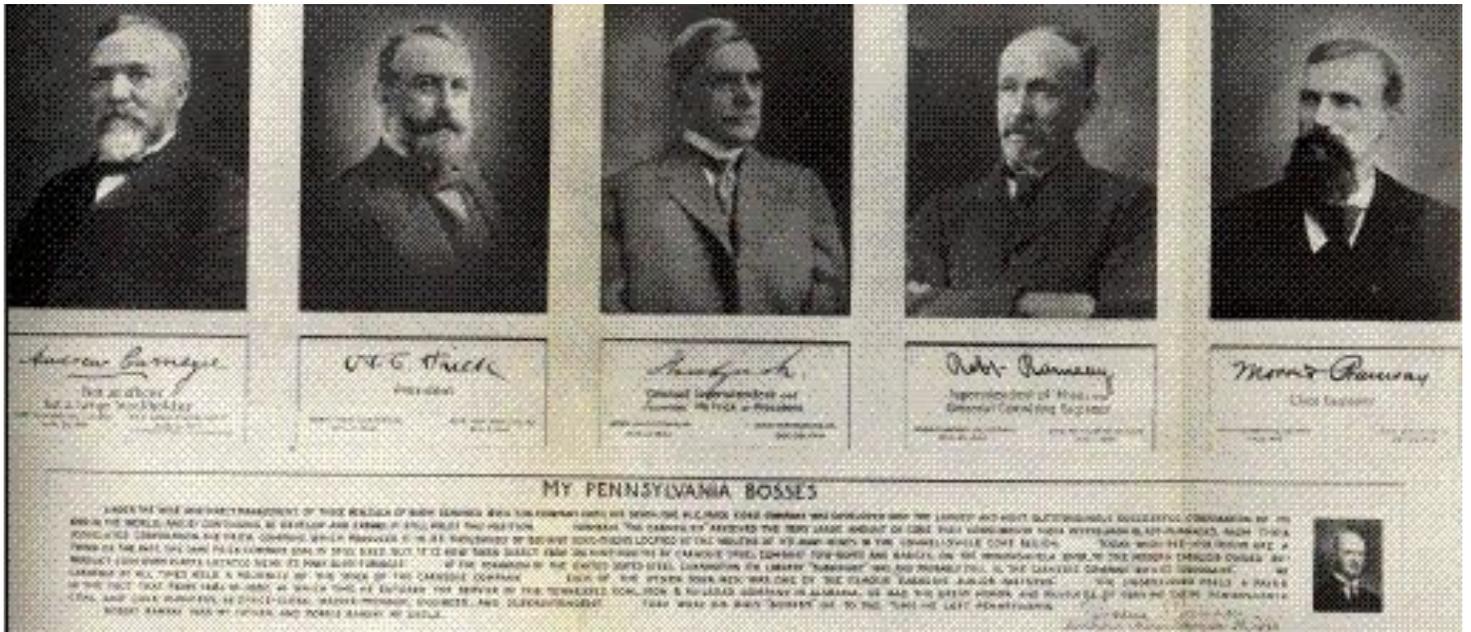
The photos, memories, and stories lurk in my memory—stuck there, exerting their influence.

My father was born on Indian Territory in what we now call Oklahoma. His mother told him to be grateful to native Americans because it was an Indian woman who had nursed him when she couldn’t. Perhaps that was the start of my appreciation for people everywhere.



John Gates Ramsay with his mother, Jessie Thompson Ramsay in 1902

My father's Ramsay ancestors were Scottish coal miners. They knew hard work and hard times. Dad's grandfather, Morris, emigrated to the United States in 1863 at age 15 with his parents and seven siblings. Morris proved his mettle and became an important mining engineer in the coal fields of western Pennsylvania. He is at the far right next to his brother, Robert.



Morris' oldest son was my grandfather, William Ramsay. Morris trained his son as a mining engineer and William at age nineteen, filled in for his father when Morris became ill and died. Here is a picture of the entire family during Morris' final year. William is the tall nineteen year old in the back.



Morris and Sadie Ramsay with their children in 1890.

Is this where I became aware of the importance of family and the responsibilities of the oldest son? At least I know that it was coal that brought the Ramsay's to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania where my grandfather, William, became Superintendent of the coke works for Bethlehem Steel.

As a young man, my father, John, worked in the steel mills of Bethlehem. He left school in the seventh grade to help support his parents, eight sisters, and one brother—and especially so his sister, Jessie (next to his with bows in her hair), could go to college; Jessie. The idea was that would then get a job so John could finish his education. How I wish, now, that I could ask Dad how old he was when he started working, what his jobs were, and why he never got back to finish school?



William and Jessie Ramsay's children. Standing: Olive, Billie, Jessie, John, Kathryn, Henry, seated: Helen, Mary, Sarah circa 1915

The Great Depression was hard on Americans. I remember those times. Dad helped organize fellow workers to give them a voice in how they were being treated. He was elected first President of the local union—and was fired by Bethlehem Steel after working for them for sixteen years. The United Steelworkers stepped in and hired John. I know that is why I understand the necessity for unions in our industrialized economy.

Dad spent his life interpreting the objectives and vitality of workers in many industries both at home and abroad. He believed in the goodness of people in all walks of life and was a spokesman for bringing blacks, whites, immigrants, workers, managers, clergy, and parishioners together in finding solutions which would elevate everyone. He helped make Social Security (1935), The National Labor Relations Act (1935), collective bargaining, the Fair Labor Standards Act (1938), and subsequent legislation to recognize the importance of laborers, a reality. He went on to be Layman of the Year in Washington D. C., and, with his wife, was given the Mother Jones Award. He was called “God’s good man” by Lucy Randolph Mason who wrote To Win These Rights. He himself wrote “My Formula for Victorious Living” for Guideposts, Sept. 1945, and served on the Board of Goodwill Industries International. He also served on the Religion and Labor Foundation, instituted the publication “Economic Justice”, and was active in the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen. He and Mother spent a month in South Korea representing the National Council of Churches as South Korea strove to industrialize following the war.

Is there any question as to why I am a liberal Democrat?

Well, yes, my Mother had a hand in that—she was much more partisan than Dad; but that will be another story. I am writing these stories down because they have something to do with why I am who I am. Now that I can’t ask my parents to fill in the blanks, I can at least tell the stories for you so that you have some of the answers when you ask the questions.

I was born in Bethlehem. I remember the strikes, the mounted police, the soup lines, and that Dad invited Orson Welles to bring his show “The Cradle Will Rock” to the Steel Worker’s picnic at Dorney Park in Allentown. The picnic could not be held in Bethlehem: the Bethlehem Globe Times gave it no publicity, but the Allentown Morning Call did. (Read Wikipedia

[link](#) for a description of the musical.) The picnic was noisy, there was drinking, and Welles was late arriving. It was not dangerous but was boisterous. Experiences do not necessarily affect individuals in the same way. Who we are is always an individual personality interacting with the developing stories in which it grows. It was the Bethlehem experiences which caused me to break from the Ramsay line of coal and industry and to turn to agriculture and milking cows.

To be fair, I must also point out that Dad's father and grandfather were employed as management and Dad broke with them to join the side of the laborer. Was his Indian still nursing him?

When Dad was asked to move to Atlanta Georgia to become part of the C. I. O.'s Southern Drive organizing southern workers in mill towns all across the South, Mother stepped in. She and Dad were a real team. They knew and agreed on right and wrong and often, especially Dad, asked themselves, "What would Jesus do?", inspired by Charles M. Sheldon's book, [In His Steps](#). Raising three teenage boys in a city presented some problems which concerned Mother while John was on the road organizing. She, Gertrude, was the daughter of Moravian missionaries and was born on the east coast of Nicaragua. There was no industry in her experience. When her parents retired to Bethlehem, founded by Moravians, they bought thirteen acres which they called Hidden Paradise. Mother opted for 100 acres twenty miles west of Atlanta in which to put her boys to milking cows and plowing fields in her paradise. She called it Skyland Farm and named its dirt road, Skyview Drive—it has retained that name for seventy years.



Patty, John, Dick, and Bill Ramsay flanked by neighbors Gene and A.B. Martin, 1948

I lived at Skyland Farm for only one year before going off to Berea College, My brother, Dick, was there much longer.

Let Dick continue the story:

“One of Dad’s experiences in organizing CIO unions in southern states was arriving at a meeting of workers and finding a rope separating two groups—Negro and white—in the auditorium (the custom in this era). He remarked that a Union is a Brotherhood. The people removed the rope and integrated the seating. Dad helped organize the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen which included negro and white ministers. These church leaders had programs and retreats so that families would have normal interracial activities—especially so the children could have integrated experiences instead of segregated schools and other segregated social contacts. Meetings would often be held at our farm in Douglas County, twenty miles west of Atlanta.

“There was a threat, at Skyland Farm, of a cross-burning from the KKK for this interracial activity, but it was repressed by our neighbors (members of the KKK) who vouched that we were good people.

“The activities with the Religion and Labor Foundation and his organizing for the Union, gave Dad close contact with Morehouse University in Atlanta, where Martin Luther King was a student, and with the Ebenezer Baptist Church. Later, I ran programs in the civil rights movement when I was director of the American Friends Service Committee College Program in six southeastern states (1960-1966). I continued working with many of Dad’s contacts. On a committee with Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, I got to know Martin Luther King, Jr. who recalled knowing my father and staying with my parents in their house in Washington in the 1950’s.”

Brother Bill has gone through our parent’s collection and found some significant memorabilia relating to the Kings. Here is what he says:

“1. - An article in the NY Times dated April 25, 1957 reporting on the ‘Social Justice Awards’ given the day before by the Religion and labor Foundation. The awards were given to Rev. John LaFarge, Senator Herbert Lehman and Martin Luther King, Jr. Dad was co-chairman of the National Religion

and Labor Council. I have a check signed by Dad and endorsed by MLK for his expenses at the awards occasion.

2. - Another check to MLK was issued in January 9, 1964 was signed by Mother and endorsed by MLK. It was related to a conference of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

3. - A copy of MLK's book Stride Toward Freedom published in 1958, with a handwritten inscription and message to Dad from MLK.

4 -Handwritten notes from a presentation Dad made to the Presbyterian Church at a memorial service after MLK's assassination.

5 - Several communications from Coretta Scott King after MLK's death including two Christmas cards showing pictures of the children. The first has Yolanda at seven years, MLK III at five and Dexter at 3 months. Also a letter from Coretta thanking Dad and Mom for their expressions of condolence, friendship and support.”

I have concluding words:

OK! Bill has a gold mine! I am so pleased to learn that Mother wrote a check to Martin Luther King, Jr. It demonstrates how much she was a part of their endeavors. And the documents show how much John, Gertrude and Dick were a part of King's life from college days on.

Add to this Martin Luther King, Sr.'s commencement address and recognition the year my son Martin graduated (at the top of his class) from Berea College. Martin and I were, of course introduced to "Daddy" King and shook his hand. I have passed that legacy on when substitute teaching on Martin Luther King Day by shaking that hand of mine with the students. One kid said, 'I'm never going to wash my hand.' It's worth keeping the dream alive!

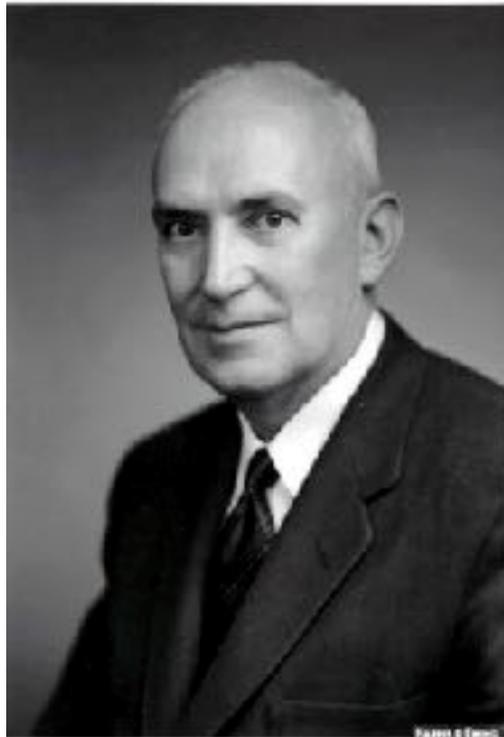
I can't conclude without mentioning our sister, Patty. She was the firstborn and the only girl. As the oldest, she could also give greater insights into who we are. Those insights will have to be articulated by others now that

she is no longer able to verbalize in a way we can understand. Her daughter Susan wrote today, "I'm wishing we'd done this 10 years ago when Mom could have participated! "



Martin Lotz Ramsay, 1958

Dear friends and family, keep looking in that bathroom mirror. You may find your father!



John Gates Ramsay, circa 1960