

Of Memoirs, Memories, and Missing Pieces

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David Brown Howell, *Tethered to an Appalachian Curse: A Surprise Calling* (Eugene, Oregon: Resource Publications, 2021) 181 pp.

It happened, I think, when I was five years old. Maybe six. It was a middle Tennessee summer, maybe June or July, hot enough to be in shorts and tee shirts. My family was at some now-forgotten camp and conference center composed of open-air wood-frame cabins connected by dirt paths beneath oaks and pines. I don't remember how it started, only that I was being chased by an older, bigger boy, heavier and stronger and faster than I, bent on avenging some offense I can't remember. Maybe I was just the new kid. I ran into the cabin where we were staying, desperate to escape the beatdown I was sure was coming. The only refuge I could find was a closet—or perhaps it was a wardrobe—where I hid in hopes of saving myself. I curled into a fetal ball, face close to the laces of my dusty Keds sneakers. But my tormenter found me, despite my efforts at silence and stillness. He ripped open the door of my ersatz sanctum and glared at me. I can still remember his Butch-waxed crew-cut, the tangy smell of his sweat. I remember his left hand grabbing my arm and pulling me out and his right fist punching me—hard—in the stomach. Then he turned and ran out of the cabin.

Or did any of this happen at all? Years later, as an adult, I told this story to my father. It's a dream, he said; it never took place. He corrected elements of my so-called memory that conflicted with realities he recalled. And he told me what I had never known: that during the weeks and months prior to my putative beating, my mother had been severely depressed and had threatened to kill herself, my sister, and me. He had taken us along to this camp meeting to ensure that she did nothing of the sort. It was the trauma *du jour* of our familial life, he said, and my "dream" was the way I coped with it. Maybe, maybe not. I don't know, and everyone I could ask about this is dead. What I do know is, memory or dream, I have all my life feared the punch in the gut—spiritually, intellectually, financially, as well as physically.

David Brown Howell's memoir, *Tethered to an Appalachian Curse: A Surprise Calling*, begins with a spiritual punch in the gut. He tells the story of his parents, Jack and Lena, seated on the rough pews of the Born Again Church in the tiny Appalachian hamlet of Boonford, NC, and listening to the fiery oratory of Pastor Leroy. As Pastor Leroy's sermon rises to its emotional climax in the appeal to come forward and be saved, Lena rises and heads toward the altar. Jack, a hard man accustomed to hard thoughts and harder ways, grabs her and drags her back down the aisle and out of the church. Watching Jack steal his convert, leather-lunged Pastor Leroy delivers himself of a curse: "All the Howells are going to Hell!" There are more Howells

consigned to perdition in that moment than might be obvious: Lena is pregnant with the son she and Jack will name David Brown Howell.

Howell's memoir is the chronicle of his lifelong effort to live under, live with, and ultimately live down Pastor Leroy's howled invective as his parent fled that Pentecostal altar. Three quarters of the story involve reminiscences—all narrated in first person, present-tense breathlessness—of the pranks and perils that punctuate Howell's upbringing in Boonford, his academic successes in grade school, and his wandering and ultimate self-discovery in college. These stories carry a sort of whimsical air about them, entertaining, sometime thrilling, occasionally embarrassing. More often than not they end with a near-moral, delivered as though by an Appalachian Aesop, reminding the reader that, once again, Howell has escaped a quick and dirty consignment to the netherworld.

At the book's three-quarter mark, after the author's graduation from college and entry into the working world in Southside Virginia, the tone and diction of the narrative change. Gone is the whimsy, the sense that the author has escaped the inferno by the skin of his teeth. In its place is an adult awareness of the realities of life in the rural South of the 1970s: grinding poverty, economic disparity, ecological collapse, and a racism so deep in the bone no spiritual cleansing will ever wash it away. Howell begins to sense a call through his ministry in a small Southern Baptist congregation, and at the same time to sense that the ministry to which he is called is not a fit for that Baptist congregation. He finds his way to Presbyterianism and the PC(USA). The emerging young adult we meet in these pages begins slowly but steadily to foreshadow the David Brown Howell known to most of liberal Protestantism from the 1990s onward: founding editor of *Lectionary Homiletics*, convener for more than three decades of the largest homiletics gathering in the world, the Festival of Homiletics, wise psychotherapist and pastoral counselor, seminary faculty member, confidant to some of the most widely read and widely heard preachers of our times. Gone is the mountain boy living under an "Appalachian curse"; in his place is a wise, urbane, thoughtful leader in the field of homiletics and practical theology. As the accolades that cover the opening leaves of the book attest, the brightest and best of those fields find Howell's stories "engaging," "fine," "inspiring," and "a rollicking ride."

At the risk of seeming unappreciative of Howell's theological journey (I am not), I am left with a question: where is the connective tissue that gets us from the raw-throated threats of eternal damnation and a mountain boy trying to outwit them to a long and faithful ministry under the aegis of a theology founded on grace? How exactly does one accomplish such a transformation? Does Howell internalize and transform the curse, or combat against and overthrow it? How, and when? That, I think, is what is missing in this book.

Good memoir writing requires a lot of things, but among them is the sense that there is a central struggle that the author must come to terms with over the arc of the narrative. A memoir is more than a catalogue of episodes, a "this-happened-then-that-happened" collection of events. A good memoir is the biography of its author's soul.

David Brown Howell is an engaging raconteur. He knows how to tell a story. All the more fascinating to me, then, that he doesn't deliver on this key task of memoir-writing. His stories about his life in Boonford are tales of close scrapes and narrow escapes, arranged in chronological but episodic fashion, and capped off with a sort of "see there—beat you again, Leroy" conclusion. Missing is what those scrapes and escapes teach him about the curse and his life both within and beyond it. When he becomes an adult, we see him coming to terms with the vicissitudes of parish leadership, but hardly a word about how Pastor Leroy's Damoclean curse still hangs over him—if in fact it does—or what it costs him to evade it. Throughout the chapters describing Howell's stellar career in both psychotherapy and homiletics, the curse makes no appearance and apparently has no bearing whatsoever. Only at the beginning of the last chapter are we told, in an almost off-hand way, that "After a theology class in seminary, I no longer take Pastor 'Grim Condemner' Leroy seriously." A single, matter of fact sentence disposes of this curse which has dominated his identity and to which he has all his life been "tethered." We are not even permitted to know what words and ideas in that course were so powerfully liberating. In the end, we know *that* Howell defeats the curse. We don't know *how* he does it, or what it cost him to do so. We—or at least I—don't know his soul.

Which brings me back to that five (six?) year-old boy hiding in the closet. In some respects, he is the image that would hang over any memoir of mine, the way Pastor Leroy's curse hangs over Howell's. All the occasions and encounters I have run from in fear of confrontations that would undo me, all the gut punches I have received from bullies both figurative and literal that left me with belly- and heartaches, all the closets of mental self-protection I have sought refuge in only to be roused and routed, even all the times I have dried my tears and steadied my heart and gone back out in the sunlight where both bullies and buddies were waiting—all this would have been part of that story, in much the same way as Howell's escapes and escapades are part of his. But in addition, what I hope I would do is ruminate on what the weal and woe of my experience has cost me, as well as what it has taught me about fear and self-confidence. If I were writing that memoir, I would want to leave a trail that others could follow, one that limns the soul's path from hiding to hope. That's what I wish Howell's memoir had done.

David Brown Howell's *Tethered to An Appalachian Curse* has a powerful and evocative core image. It has a long series of entertaining and well-told episodes from a life few who don't hail from the hollers of Appalachia can imagine. It begins in curse and ends in grace. It is missing, however, the ruminations that illumine the meaning of both curse and grace. It is missing what he learned from the experience of living with that curse and accepting that grace. Those learnings would light the way, not only for Howell but also for others of us who live under the curses of racial, sexual, gender, economic, and societal prejudice. The path out of the curse and toward the grace needs signs to mark the way, like blazes on the trunks of trees beside a trail through an Appalachian forest. I would like to have followed those blazes. I would like to have read that book.