

How Well Do You Know Others?

Tony Grift

I have lived a life of privilege. I've never been in a war, I've never experienced famine, I've never dealt with a serious health problem (knock on wood), and I received an excellent education in my home country of the Netherlands and later in the U.S. My accomplishments are rooted in this foundation. I'm fortunate to work for the University of Illinois, which is a great institution and a generous employer. Some would call me an elitist because I must have had a loving and supportive family, attended exclusive schools, and received assistance from other elitists to get where I am today.

Well, not quite.

I did not grow up in a harmonious family. My father was an alcoholic and a chain smoker. I once timed him; he lit a new unfiltered Camel every eight minutes. I figured out that, because he started smoking at a young age, he smoked at least a million cigarettes over his lifetime. Not surprisingly, lung cancer ended his life at 61, one year after his official retirement.

The Dutch are not known for hands-on affection. My father and I shook hands only once, after I graduated with my BS degree. My father was also emotionally distant. His generation (he was born in 1933) believed that talking about feelings was improper. They dealt with their problems as real men did, by drinking themselves into a stupor. My father spent a lot of time in what we now call rehab. When I was very small, he had been briefly committed to a mental institution.

When I was ten, an event happened that broke him completely. My mother, who had always been healthy, died suddenly from a pulmonary embolism. I woke up that morning and was told to go to the neighbors' house because my mother was ill. I remember seeing her on the couch, with a damp towel on her forehead. I had no idea what was going on.

The neighbors, who had a phone, called the doctor three times before he finally showed up. By then, it was too late. Today, my mother would have been in the ER in 30 minutes, and her life would have been saved. Not so in 1974 in the Netherlands, where my family did not have a phone, and no access to an ER.

At that point, my father might have stepped up to take care of his three motherless children. Instead, he sought consolation in liquor. Neither his relatives nor my mother's family did anything for us either. They were all proudly pious, and they were all religious hypocrites. They left the three of us to our own devices and, in my father's absence, the social services had to take care of us. My relatives' lack of compassion shaped my views on families and on religion; I avoid both.

The years after my mother's death were horrific. We three children hid whenever we saw our father's car pull into the driveway. My older sister, who was 13 at the time, became a surrogate mother to my brother and me. Social services provided a caregiver for a while, but they eventually determined that our domestic situation was not sustainable, and we were sent off to foster care.

My brother and I lived with several different foster families. The arrangement never lasted very long. Once their good intentions wore off, our foster parents saw us for what we were: two emotionally damaged, badly behaved, hormone-ridden teenage boys. Our fosterers quickly had enough of us, and I don't blame them. I can only imagine what a menace I was at that age.

My last fosterers were nice people, but I never connected with them. I didn't need replacement parents, and I told them so. They had wanted me to be an example for their 10-year-old son, who was starting to cause trouble. That plan didn't work out. Instead, the father in my last foster family began to resent me because I could outwit him in arguments. He called me disrespectful and decided that he'd had enough of a rebellious teenager with a big mouth.

With nowhere else to go, my brother, who had also burned his bridges, and I were sent to a group home, called the Noordhoorn, in Apeldoorn, about an hour from the town where I went to school. I was 15 and my brother was 16. The Noordhoorn was a bad place, so bad that my brother and I were the best behaved residents!

Much later, a therapist told me that when children have a decent upbringing before the age of 10, they have a good chance of becoming normal, well-adjusted adults. At the Noordhoorn, I saw people who did not have a decent upbringing.

ing. The residents included young drug addicts, former teenage prostitutes, and people with serious mental illnesses.

At the Noordhoorn, my brother and I lived in the teenage house, called Linqenda, and there was also a house for children up to ten years old. The teenagers were a bad influence on the younger kids. We threw Molotov cocktails for fun, and the little kids enjoyed it so much that they bought a can of gasoline and burned their elementary school to the ground! Even we were shocked by that. It's easy to condemn them for that behavior, but those little kids had never been loved or cared for. They had no concept of responsibility or accountability. They were mini-sociopaths.

Violence was common at Linqenda, and I took part in it because I had to. I once got into a fistfight, over a girl, with my own brother. We regularly indulged in vandalism. One night, we decided to break all the windows in the house. In response, the practical Dutch management replaced all the windows with bulletproof glass, which was impossible to break. I know because I tried.

After 18 months, my time was up, but I didn't want to leave. My fellow gangsters meant more to me than my own family. Two years after I left, a documentary film was produced about the Noordhoorn, called "Nestwarmte" ("nest warmth"), which showed what life was like for children who had been rejected by their parents and by society.

Meanwhile, my father somehow got his act together, thanks to psychotherapy, acupuncture, and the passage of time. He still smoked heavily, but he went back to work and seemed content. Despite his long absence, he never lost his job. Instead, his employer, the Netherlands railroad system, put him on medical leave, with pay, for six years! There are advantages to living in a socialist society. I can only imagine what would have happened in the U.S.

At age 16, I was on the road to prison and probably an early death. But one thing kept me alive: learning. In fact, the only place I felt safe was in the classroom. The Noordhoorn psychologist once told me that I was a very smart kid, even though my grades were appalling. And my home life had been awful. Unlike other kids, I didn't do my homework at the kitchen table. Instead, I rode the bus for an hour to finish my homework, and I tried to stay alive when I got home.



The Noordhoorn in Apeldoorn, in use as a group home. The housing for teens, called Linqenda, was located in the courtyard behind this building.

With no other alternative, I moved in with my father. My older sister was in nursing school, and my brother had joined the Air Force. To keep my mind from wandering, I did nothing but study, and I experienced a huge intellectual growth. Everything that once was hard steadily became easier. I discovered a knack for mechanics, and then electronics and mathematics. So I kept on studying, interrupted only by a stint in the Royal Dutch Air Force where, as a second lieutenant, I commanded two desks and taught classes on physical and electronic instrumentation, which I still do!

From that point on, my career took off, resulting in my current position as a professor, of stoic reserve, at a world-class university. I've never smoked, I don't drink, and the only scars I carry from my childhood are an inferiority complex (which is common to children of alcoholics), imposter syndrome (who doesn't have that?), and the decision to never relive my childhood through offspring.

So why did I tell you this sad story? I have a good life now, and I don't need sympathy. Instead, I want you to remember that life is tough—tougher than you can imagine—for many of the people around you, especially young people. Practice understanding and compassion, and refrain from judgment and assumptions. Let's be there for each other, because we're all in this together. If I had a religion, that's what it would be.

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