

EAST CLIFTON AVENUE

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EXCERPT

Introduction

After my mother passed away in 2009, we had the arduous task of cleaning out her condo, which included her storage unit in the basement of her complex. There I found some remnants of my parents' possessions stored in boxes and plastic containers with no apparent organization. There were old dishes, kitchenware, all kind of old papers and documents, Christmas decorations, and pictures. There was also my mother's "hope chest"—a one-time popular marital tradition that has since all but vanished. Upon a bride's engagement, she was given a wooden chest that was filled with linens, bed sheets and blankets, lingerie, and so on. It is also referred to as a brides' "trousseau." Almost sixty years later, my mother's hope chest contained old pictures, old Valentines, and "Our First Christmas" cards from my father, as well as some of their engagement and wedding memorabilia. Looking through the contents just reaffirmed my belief that we didn't own anything; everything we have is borrowed. The personal memories attached to our belongings disappear in a dumpster when we die, or years later when there is little or no significance attached to them. A perfect example is my parents' love-letters.

My parents lived a few towns apart from each other before they were married, and phone charges were expensive so letters were a very economical way of communicating—a far cry from today's e-mail and texting. There were also old pictures and letters to and from my father and his family who were living in Warren, Pennsylvania when he was in the U.S. Air Force during World War II and stationed in Japan. I was a little reluctant to read the love letters, because it seemed I was delving into something very private that no one else was intended to read. However, curiosity got the best of me and I put the letters in chronological order according to the postmarks and started to read through them. It not only gave me a whole different perspective on my parents, but it also awakened long-lost remembrances regarding their personalities and the contrast of how their personalities changed over the years.

My father died in 1983, and for the prior seven years of his life he was sick on and off with heart problems. As happens when people are struggling with their health, his personality changed. He went from being very energetic, and someone who loved to laugh, to being very cautious, worrisome, and sometimes melancholy. My mother's personality also changed when my father was ill, and even more so after he died. Their personalities didn't change in a bad way, but during my father's illness and after his death, there was an underlying fear and anxiety that comes with illness and the aftermath of death for those left behind. Reading their letters brought me back to who they really were when I was growing up. It was a bittersweet reminder: bitter because it was a reminder of how they had changed, and sweet because I was reminded of who they once were and the hopes and dreams they had for themselves and their family.

Also in the hope chest were some news articles marking my grandparent's (my mother's parents) golden wedding anniversary, my grandparent's embarkation papers, and an assorted array of other documents. There were so many old pictures, like of my parent's honeymoon, which were very small and hadn't been looked at for decades. Among the many other pictures were some of people I remember, but many of people who I do not. Unfortunately, there isn't anyone alive to help identify these people, so to me they are just anonymous relatives or friends of my parents and grandparents. When I'm gone, all of these people, and even the ones I remember, will be anonymous, and the pictures and papers will eventually be thrown away and the memories of these people will simply disappear. Most memories of my parents will eventually disappear as well. But more than just pictures and papers will disappear. Everything my parents taught me will also be gone: All the stories and people my grandparents and relatives used to talk about will be forgotten forever. Even though I tell my children some of these stories, and pass on the wisdom of my parents' teachings, the stories don't have the same meaning.

This realization brought on some profound thoughts, feelings, and questions. For example, what constitutes a family? How do families transition from one generation to the next? What bonds a family together through the good times and the bad? Shouldn't each generation learn lessons from the last generation, so that we don't repeat the same mistakes that eventually destroy families? Are we bound by our genetics to act out the same bad characteristics from one generation to the next or can we change behaviors? Must a "bad" family history always repeat itself, as bad human history repeats itself?

How can some members of one family love unconditionally, while others are absorbed with their own wants, needs, jealousies, resentment, and ignorance and have little affection for other family members?

But what if we could look back to past generations and observe how the behavior of each family member can impact the others, and also see how wrong conclusions and lack of communication build mountains of useless hurt, resentment, jealousy, and hate. Like everyone else, I have observed many examples of family behaviors both good and bad. For example, shortly after my mother's father died, my grandmother moved into our home and into my little bedroom. There was only room for two twin beds, a chest of drawers, and a chair. I never thought much of it because I was about twelve at the time and I thought this is what families do. I also really loved my grandmother, so to me it was going to be fun. However, after a while it put a strain particularly on my mother, because she was raising three young boys and taking care of a house and a husband who was, thank God, very understanding and compassionate. Being twelve years old and seeing the strain on my mother, I didn't understand why my mother's family didn't help as much as they should have—my grandmother was their mother too! After all, my mother was the seventh out of eight children, and you would think the older ones who could afford to spend the time to help or even take her in to live with them did very little, but at same time the ones who couldn't afford the time or the room did as much as they could. And then there were the older grandchildren as well. Where were they?

As it turned out, I ended up spending a lot of time helping my grandmother because my mother was always busy taking care of the house, my father worked full time, and my two brothers were much younger and needed care. For a while it was great because my grandmother would tell me stories about my grandfather and how it was when they first came to this country from Sicily. I was always fascinated by all the stories and I remember most of them as if she told me them yesterday.

Unfortunately, after a couple years my grandmother's health began to decline. I had to wash her feet, comb her hair, and help her to the bathroom in the middle of the night. I don't think my efforts with my grandmother were heroic in any sense of the word. This is just what I did. I guess it was what was expected of me, like many others in similar situations. I guess I didn't realize it at the time, but my parents were agapic (selfless) in their style of loving and they did the best they could in raising us with unconditional love. Parenting is done by example, and both of my parents were great examples.

After years of studying and teaching intrapersonal and interpersonal communication, and interpersonal relationships, I believe you have to be born with the abilities of unconditional agapic

love. I don't know if it is something that can be learned, that we can change and mature into. Perhaps it is what is in our DNA, just as we can't change our height or the color of our eyes. But at the same time, there are degrees where we can modify our behavior. I call it the "Ebenezer Scrooge Syndrome"! But it comes with hard-learned lessons.

When my grandmother began to fall to the point of having to be brought to the hospital for stitches, a decision had to be made. She needed round-the-clock care that we could not provide. My parents made the hard decision, especially my mother, to place my grandmother in a nursing home. She lived there for about a year and then passed away in her sleep. Of course the dynamics of my mother's family drastically changed. People were getting older, getting sick, and dying off. As they died, so did their experiences and memories forever. I really didn't know if anyone was as interested in our family history as I was. It isn't an extraordinary history, but I believe it is important to hand down any family history to one's family. Look at the popularity of all the DNA ancestry companies.

I always knew that as I get older my grandmother and her stories would all disappear with me. To me they are important, and I want to share these stories with my children who are part of our heritage. The problem is the stories are all disjointed and they would be just stand-alone little family remembrances taken out of a larger context with little interest. What I decided to do is create a fictional storyline and intersperse the true stories, which take place in the town and on the street where my grandparents lived and where I spent a lot of time as a child. I combined the characteristics of relatives and others within fictional characters and blended family members and situations that can evoke thought and emotions. I also wanted to interweave little life lessons that can be learned by not only the good things that I have witnessed but also the not-so-good things that perhaps can be avoided if one can see the negative consequences.

While telling the story of the Buonoforte family there are many underlining questions: What do we have to offer future generations? Why do bad family behaviors repeat themselves? How do we not make the same mistakes past generations have made in the name of "blood"? At one time, countries were bound by bloodlines, with the idea that a mixing of blood through children would result in peace and prosperity. But as time went on, those bloodlines were broken and even more chaos erupted. As then, much is taken for granted in the name of blood, and with that there is also much pain. True family bonds are cultivated with the love-of-life experiences with those who are generous and make

personal sacrifices and share. Most importantly, it is the type of love that binds the family and builds relationships. It is the expression of “unconditional love.”

Having the capacity to love unconditionally can be both a blessing and a curse. It is a blessing because having that love reciprocated is what makes life a wonderful experience and brings families together. It is also a curse, because if that love is not reciprocated it can be heartbreaking. Unconditional love does not mean that we don't take responsibility for our actions and our behaviors; on the contrary, loving unconditionally takes work, open communication, and selflessness.

As I wrote and revised the story of the Buonofortes and the characters around them, it brought me both happiness and sadness. I was able to reach back and remember so many wonderful people who because of my youth I couldn't appreciate at the time. My mother was the seventh of eight children, so by the time I grew out of being a hyper and rambunctious kid, everyone was beginning to become sick and pass away. But I do have my memories, and this book will be a testament to that part of my life for me, my children, and to others who can relate.

Within the story of the Buonoforte family, the sacrifices, potential rewards, and heartbreak of unconditional love are the main message: Rethink behaviors as to not repeat the same mistakes that eventually destroy families. A message that I hope millions of other families may be able to relate to, understand, and be moved by. You will see within the Buonoforte family that there are those who are emotional and affectionate, and those who may be emotional and not affectionate. Although brothers and sisters may share the same genetics, it is a puzzle why if brought up by the same parents they can be so different. It creates much confusion and potential hurt. Perhaps if that is understood, we can let go of old vendettas and hurt feelings, reconnect, and grow.

An important note: As you read the dialogue, remember the characters for the most part may be speaking in Italian, interspersing English. For clarity and understanding, I have written the dialogue in an easy English conversational tone, sometimes interspersing some Italian for interest as I remember some of the conversations of my parents and relatives.

As you begin to read through this first book of the trilogy, I hope you believe as I do that this is a story for all families and a story for all time....

With that, “Godere”...Enjoy!