

There was a time when my childhood was my sworn enemy.

Just a few years ago, as I entered the mysterious and overwhelming world of adolescence, I experienced a number of changes in myself and in my life--some for the better, some for the worse. Now that another frightening transition seems to be drawing nearer and nearer—that is, the transition from adolescence to early adulthood—it seems to me that I am once again in a position to make decisions about who I am and who I want to be. And so over the course of the past two or three weeks, I've begun to re-examine many of the choices that I made when I was younger.

I led a relatively reclusive life as a child. Although I recognized that other people could be interesting, intelligent, or entertaining, I was basically interested in how my own mind worked. I never really had any sort of social life outside of school. I read a lot. I wrote a lot.

Back then, my writing was the central focus of my existence. I spent all of my spare time writing stories, writing poems, making up songs, thinking of new ideas, and doing things like that. If I needed an audience, I had my parents and *their* friends. And, of course, I had my grandpa Nat. Nat was a writer, like me. From the very beginning, Nat was my editor, my creative consultant, my playmate, and my friend. My whole family was always enthusiastic and encouraging about my ideas. They made me confident that I could live out my entire life in a world of my own creation, in a constant state of wondering and wandering and exploring.

I was a very passionate little kid. Even some of my earliest poems and stories dealt with the concepts of life and death in an intensely personal way. I was very scared of death, as a child, and I consistently voiced my fears as articulately and honestly as I could.

As I got older, my parents began urging me to spend more time with children in my age group. They were proud of all my talents and accomplishments, but they had also come to be worried that I might never develop a healthy social existence. After all, I didn't really have any friends. I never went out. All I did was sit at home, read and write. And so my parents put increasing pressure on me to call up other kids on the telephone, to spend afternoons with other kids at their houses or at the movies or riding our bicycles

in the park.

When I was twelve years old, I auditioned for a play for the first time. It was *Little Shop of Horrors*, in the basement of the Great Neck Library, directed by thirteen-year-old Jamie Forrest. I was cast in the role of “Seymour”--the lead. It was a very exciting event for my entire family when we performed the play in August 1990. There I was, little Danny Pitt Stoller, on a stage with a bunch of other children, acting in a play that we had prepared all by ourselves. Everyone could see that this was to be an important step in my development. I had finally found a social niche in which I was able to be comfortable and express myself.

And then a lot of things happened. I did another play, and then another, and then another. Before long, I had hardly any time for my family at all. I was still writing--a poem here, a story there--but now writing was like a hobby for me. People that I met doing plays would say things like, “Oh, you also write?” And in January 1991, my grandpa Nat suffered a stroke which resulted in permanent aphasia--his ability to speak was considerably impaired. This was undoubtedly one of the few genuinely tragic events of my life.

I never cried when Nat had his stroke. In fact, I never cried about anything at all, for a long, long time. I'm not sure exactly when I stopped crying, but I'm sure it was around when I was twelve years old, just as I was beginning to explore my creative energies in a superficial social atmosphere, instead of a personal, self-involved environment.

I think that's when I renounced my childhood. A single stroke had transformed my brilliant, vital, magician of a playmate Nat into a tired, disabled old man. And besides, I didn't have any time for childhood anymore. Now I was discovering the world of romance, and new frontiers of adventure and intrigue lay before me. I began to be involved with girls. I went out on dates. I did everything I could to distract myself in order to forget my reclusive, intensely intrapersonal past, taking my cue from the Beatles' song “In My Life”: “...And these memories lose their meaning, when I think of love as *something new...*”

I pretended that nothing had changed. I wrote more poems. I wrote love poems for the women in my life. I did more and more plays. I pretended that I didn't care what

anyone else thought of me. Meanwhile, everything I did was somehow for someone else's approval. I was convinced that everything I was doing was full of all the passion I had had when I was a child. Meanwhile, I was dead inside. I couldn't cry, because I couldn't feel. My entire life was a superficial, self-deluded lie.

Nat died a few weeks ago. He was brought to the hospital because of intracerebral bleeding, and he died less than a week later. I went to see him several times in the hospital. It was the most unbearably tragic event of my life, and still I never shed a tear. I think I'd forgotten how.

I had told him everything I needed to when he died. He knew that I loved him. I think he even knew how important he was to me. And yet I still felt incomplete, as though I was still holding something in. I realize now that I *was* holding something in, but that something wasn't anything that I could have told Nat as he lay on his deathbed. It was just my life. It was just my childhood. My endless quest for self-knowledge, for self-creation, had given way to my need to fit in with other people. And now that this grand old symbol of my childhood was quickly fading away, I wished that I could show him that I was still the grandson he loved. I wished I could show him that I was still me, despite everything.

Well, I can't show him, but I can show me. I cried a few days ago, literally for the first time in years. I cried for the loss of my grandfather, and for the loss of my childhood. And I knew then that I've got to start re-discovering who I am. I'm not sure what that means yet, but I've got my whole life ahead of me to find out. I wish that my grandpa didn't have to die in order for me to realize all this, but that's okay. He would have willingly, gladly given all he had just to help me carry on, strong as ever, embracing my childhood and anything else that makes me love truth.