

# Portrait of the philosopher as father

*by Katharine Tait*

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IF YOU HAVE listened to all the talks in this series, you have heard fatherhood discussed from the viewpoint of almost every academic discipline. Now at the end you hear from a non-expert, a “consumer”, if you will, like all the rest of you. And yet not just like all the rest of you, for my father, Bertrand Russell, was not really like anyone else’s father. I want to try and tell you what he was like, not as a great philosopher or a political activist, but as a father; and what it was like to be his child.

Before I begin, a word about my method. This is a portrait, not a photograph: it does not claim to be an accurate reproduction, but a picture distilled through the artist’s vision. It includes a good deal of background and a good deal of the artist (myself); this last not from vanity, but because what I am and what I think are part of the story of Russell as a father.

The treatment we receive as children largely determines how we behave as parents, whether we copy or reject it. We find ourselves doing what was done to us and expecting what was expected of us; sometimes with horror we hear our parents’ voices coming out of our own mouths. But what if we have no parents? How do orphans know how to behave as parents? This must have been a problem for many of you in Germany, as it was for my father. His mother and sister died of diphtheria when he was two, his father when he was four, and his grandfather when he was six. His only brother,

seven years older, was sent away to school, leaving Russell alone in a large house with his grandmother, his Aunt Agatha, and an assortment of governesses, tutors and servants. The nearest approach to a father in his life was his Uncle Rollo, who also lived at Pembroke Lodge until he got married. Rollo Russell was a kind and intelligent man and a good storyteller; but he carried the Russell shyness to almost pathological extremes and barely spoke except to children. (Nevertheless, he managed to marry twice.)

My father lived in a hushed household of women devoted to the past. He spent much time alone in the garden imagining the splendour of Pembroke Lodge in his grandfather's time and the lost happiness of his dead parents' home. He seems to have decided very early that he would have children of his own and bring them up more happily and sensibly than he had been raised himself. One can say, of course, that he was trying to make it up to the poor little boy he had been and to show his grandmother how things should really be done, but this is only part of the truth. He could have spent his whole life grieving resentfully over his unhappy childhood, instead of going out to make things better for others. One of the truly great things about my father was that personal grief prompted him to help others rather than to seek sympathy for himself.

He had another motive for having children, equally generous and equally typical of him. He believed profoundly in the power of education to shape character and the power of characters to shape history. He wanted to raise up openminded and courageous human beings who would go out into the world to help others and to fight against the evils he was beginning to perceive in society. His view of the evils of society changed somewhat during his long life and his trust in the efficacy of education diminished, but he never completely lost his hope of reforming the world by changing people's minds.

Though these two ambitions took shape early in my father's life and though he was married at the very young age of twenty-two, it was many years before he had any children through whom to realize them. His first marriage proved childless and his first explorations of the world outside marriage discovered no women eager to have children. Then as now ambitious women did not want to be tied down and women willing to be so tied he did not

find interesting. He was getting on for fifty years old when he came to know my mother, a woman he could love who also wanted children. The two of them were equally eager to embark on parenthood, to have children they could both cherish as individuals and train as reformers. They differed, though, in their underlying and not quite conscious motives: his to do better by his children than had been done by him; hers to carry on into another generation the happiness she remembered from her own childhood.

Their first child, John, was born in November 1921 and I just two years later, in December 1923. (Interesting, perhaps, that we were called after our grandparents, John Russell and Kate Stanley. What was my father trying to reproduce?) We lived at first in a flat in London, which I dimly remember: dark woodwork and a bright fire; a big bed with many cushions, on which we were encouraged to jump and play; a child's swing in Battersea Park with my father pushing it. I remember love and laughter and jokes, against a background of order and regularity which was there for our convenience, not for our discipline. All I remember of my father from here is a pervading sense of love and security.

Soon we acquired the house in Cornwall where my mother still lives and which I still think of as heaven on earth. Of this I remember much more. A plain house, but sunny and full of bright colours, with a lovely garden and a magnificent view. (My father could not live without a view. It must have made prison very hard for him.) Here also we lived a regular life: work for the adults and lessons for us in the mornings, walks or beaches in the afternoons, tea and bath and reading aloud, followed by bed for us and dinner for the adults. John and I were not, I regret to say, in every respect model children and sometimes we would scurry about the house while the adults were at dinner, until our giggles attracted their attention (as they were meant to do) and we were sternly pointed back to bed by my father.

How well I remember meals in that bright dining room, sitting as the youngest and quietest member at table while my father carved the roast while talking, always talking. I can still see the juices running from the meat under his knife and remember the eagerness with which I awaited my plate. There was only quiet at the table when we had fish. Then my father would take out his

glasses, put them on and study his plate with solemnity, making me think there was something wrong with it. But it was only that he couldn't see the bones without his glasses. Fish with bones usually prompted the story of the doctor who got a fishbone stuck in his throat and with his last dying purple breath managed to gasp out "Glove stretchers!" His wife ran for her glove stretchers, removed the bone just in time, and they lived happily ever after. What are glove stretchers? Your guess is as good as mine. Perhaps they belonged to my father's well brought up Victorian youth.

Of course it rained in Cornwall. It rains a lot there and often there is fog or drizzle or grey sky. But I don't remember that. Only the sunshine and the happiness, and the wind, clear and fresh and exciting. I remember lying under the fragrant hay stooks drying in the fields, watching the little clouds reel through the sky and listening to the larks and the bees. I remember the crunch of sand underfoot, the prickle of barnacled rocks, the chill of the water and the roughness of the waves, which would roll you over and over in their horrible sandy wetness if you were not steady on your feet. The wild blue-green of the sea, the golden gorse, the purple heather, the dry and shining cliff grass—all this seemed as much a part of my father as his white hair, his red face and peeling nose under his panama hat, the long white shirt that protected him from sunburn and the dark pipe moving his hand as he gestured. It was always moving, for he was always talking, joking, taking it on himself to entertain us all, laughing his loud and sudden laugh as though someone else had made the joke.

Every beach had a little stream, where he taught us to build dams, reinforcing the sand with stones and then waiting for the breathless moment when the trickle over the top became a deluge and the whole structure was destroyed. He taught us to swim and to climb, to float in pools and to breast the waves and to understand the tide and its currents. When the way home from the beach seemed hot and long, he would cheer it with fantastic tales which he made up as he went along; I particularly recall a long serial about a flying post office with wings made of postage stamps. At home in the garden he would throw balls over the roof while John and I rushed round the house to see them come down among the vegetables. My Cornish father was absolute perfection to me, a combination of Father Christmas and the brightest summer sun. I

loved him with an intensity I have never known since; he was so wise, so kind, so good, and always the centre of everybody's attention.

Sad that the idyll could not last forever. But there was always the other ambition: to do good to the world by giving us a perfect education, encouraging all that was good in us while discouraging all impulses to laziness, unkindness or deceit. Our parents believed in conditioning. Babies were ethically neutral, they thought, and teaching them right habits from birth would ensure correct behaviour in adult life. "The right moment to begin the requisite moral training", wrote my father, "is the moment of birth, because then it can be done without disappointing expectations" (*Education and the Good Life*, New York: Liveright, 1970, p. 90).

I cannot describe my life with my father without getting into educational theory, because so much of what he did with us was determined by his ideas of what ought to be done. The jolly man on the beach was always *thinking*, always pondering what methods to use to bring about the desired results. When I grew up and read his book on education, I understood better what he had been doing in those early years, but I liked it less. He was the kindest man in the world, couldn't bear us to be unhappy, cherished his children every minute, filled our lives with sunshine, and yet ...

So kind until theory blinded him. In the book on education there is a sad account of John's fear of the dark. According to then current theory this fear was neither innate nor rational; it was usually picked up from some foolish nurse and could therefore be conditioned out of existence. When John showed symptoms of this infection, he was reasoned with gently, persuaded to agree that his fears were foolish, told to lie quiet because nobody would come if he cried again—then left alone in the dark. Do you suppose he stopped being afraid? Our childish fears do not go away because we are told they are foolish; rather we tremble in secret shame until at last we outgrow them. Modern "scientific" theory combined in my father's mind with memories of his own Spartan upbringing and blinded him to what he was really doing. Certainly John learned that it was useless to cry in the night. But perhaps he also learned that protectors don't come when you need them—a conclusion by no means intended.

What my father *intended* in our education was so often undermined by what he was. He dealt with our rational minds and never realized how much we picked up from tones of voice, gestures, expressions at variance with the spoken words. He meant to encourage us, to expect the best of us, to arrange our lives so that we must acquire good habits, and to fill our minds as full of knowledge as his own. But his secret doubts and inherited negative attitudes were always creeping out round the edges, peeping at us behind his back and assuring us that it was not all such plain sailing. And then besides, he was himself a brilliant man and unaware of the mental limitations of more normal human beings. It was an immense strain understanding all he said, remembering what he told us, struggling with arithmetical and philosophical puzzles. It wasn't meant to be. He was always jolly about it, but you knew he would be disappointed if you couldn't do it, whatever it was. And his mind was like a rapier, sometimes cutting unintentionally. No, it was not an easy life.

We were never supposed to be afraid. Children properly brought up as we were would never be afraid or deceitful or unkind. There would be no need, since no one had taught us to fear and no threatening adult needed to be deceived, or imitated in our dealings with others. We were proud of our father—early on we had a sense that he and we were special—and we did our best to live up to his expectations. But virtuous behaviour never became the automatic response his theories implied. I was always afraid, not always kind and generous and truthful, and I was not cheerful and confident because I always felt I had so many faults to conceal. I felt that, since my father was perfect and his methods of course wise, responsibility for the less than perfect results must lie with me.

How I loved him in those early years! I cannot describe to you the intensity of my devotion, the way my sun rose and set with him, the source of all joy and wisdom. When he told me that Hungary used to be called Yumyum and they changed it to Hungary because they thought it would be more dignified, I believed him. When he looked out of the window on April Fool's Day and said, "Good gracious, there's an elephant coming up the garden path!" I believed him, although I knew I had been fooled the same way the year before. When he told me the Duke of

Wellington had a tail and had a special little hole made in his saddle for it, I believed him. I believed *everything* he said and some things I have never straightened out. Was there a King of Bavaria whose courtiers said he was mad because he bubbled in his soup? Or was that only told to get us to stop doing it?

When he was talking to other adults and I could not understand all he said, I would watch him quietly, devotedly, proud of his wit and brilliance, and yet even then dimly aware of flaws. Perhaps it was his willingness to stretch truth for the sake of a story, for I was passionately honest and accurate—as he had taught me to be. Or was it the uneasy sense that his arguments were not always quite fair, though I could not have said just how? I felt at moments that he was not living up to his own high standards and that troubled me very much. It still does. I still regret the inability of my wonderful father to be what he told me people should be.

When my brother was not quite six years old and I was not quite four, our parents started a school for us. They did not think it would be good for us to grow up without the companionship of other children—my mother because she had enjoyed it herself, my father because he had not—yet they could not find any existing school that met their exacting requirements. No religious indoctrination, of course, no flag-waving patriotism, no corporal punishment, no heavy moral emphasis, absolute freedom of inquiry on all subjects, including sex. There were schools that met these requirements, but most of them did not measure up to the other ones: an orderly, disciplined life, with plenty of outdoor exercise, an academic education that would ask the utmost of both intelligence and memory.

So they started their own school. Twenty-odd young children (the youngest, like me, only about three years old. It seems extraordinary now that this could have been thought good for children of that age, but the emphasis on scientific training led people to believe that experts must be better for children than ignorant parents, however loving.) In any case, there we were, twenty-odd of us in a heavenly rural setting, with the very latest in educational equipment, a group of idealistic young teachers, and two brilliant, dedicated heads.

I have never been able to make up my mind about the school. It did much that they wanted it to do. We spent a great deal of time

out of doors in all weathers, climbing trees, exploring, identifying flora and fauna, collecting bones and fossils, simply playing. I remember with pleasure the endless variations of tag and hide and seek we played among the lawns and hedges of the lovely gardens. We had a great deal more freedom than is common and we certainly learned to be independent and self-reliant and ready to question almost anything. We also learned a great deal of history and literature, science, mathematics, and languages—French, German and Russian—as well as how to find out things for ourselves and how to write up what we had found out. I think it is owing to this good beginning that I have never had trouble learning in any other school.

John and I paid a price for this education, though. As heads of the school and teachers in it, our parents had to treat all the children alike. During term-time we could have no special relationship with them. Of course there had always been nannies and governesses in our lives and we were used to being cared for by other people. But our parents had always spent a lot of time with us, always been very close, both from interest and from love. Now they were gone. My shining, laughing, red-faced father was in his study at the top of the tower, writing to make money, worrying about the school, teaching history. When he came down, which was often, he was for everybody—they all wanted to hold his warm dry hand and get close to him, and I had no special claim. It was very hard. Remember I was only four or five years old. I learned then to adore from a distance, unapproaching and unapproachable, and I was never able to unlearn the lesson.

The story of my life with my father is one of ever-increasing separation. This is the normal progress of such relationships, no doubt, but usually the child grows away from the parent. I always felt, on the contrary, that he was moving away from me before I was ready, before I had begun to think of seeking a life of my own. Indeed, what life could I have found more exciting and delightful than the one I had had with him?

After the wrench of the school came my parents' separation, and not too long after that my departure for boarding school. Now there were only school holidays to spend with my father and even these had to be exactly divided up between the two parents, both of whom were living in new homes. It was difficult to feel that we

belonged anywhere. Our parents disagreed passionately and profoundly about us. They were still as devoted to us as ever, still as convinced that our education was of crucial importance, but they were no longer in harmony about what was to be done. It was not possible for us to remain neutral. Of course I chose my father, but not without grief. He said things about my mother that seemed unduly harsh and I had to recognize consciously at last that he, the apostle of reason and understanding, the embodiment of kindness, was allowing prejudice to make him unfair.

When I grew older and read some of my father's writings and listened with more understanding to what he said, I saw that he was often unfair. As I had dimly suspected, he did not allow facts to spoil a good story or cripple a good argument. When he thought a cause was right, or a person was wrong, he would let fly with merciless eloquence, indignation and ridicule. Though I generally agreed with him, I often shrank away from his extravagance. A last sad example was his Vietnam War Crimes Tribunal, whose outlandish accusations and tone of shrill indignation caused me acute embarrassment. Yet I had to acknowledge later that in this case almost all he had said had been true. Those terrible things had indeed been done and my good taste was surely a less appropriate response than his wild scolding.

I was always a quiet child, a watcher rather than an actor, and I have been a quiet adult, living a private life far from the pavements of Trafalgar Square. Yet I think perhaps I am more like my father in many ways than like the person he wanted me to be. He wanted us to grow up like his public self: courageous, indignant, ever at work redeeming wrongs. What he got was two people like his private self: shy, burdened with guilt, given to depression, and feeling both useless and worthless. Was this typical Russell character in our genes or did we learn it from our father? Would different children subjected to his methods have turned out closer to his ideal? Why was he, with his awful childhood, more the kind of person he wanted than we, with our ideal one? Genes or methods, take your pick. For myself I can only say that I was always determined to be like my father in every way possible, even to dousing my food with pepper as he did. (Though I gave up that ambition after my first taste.) And I have seen my son model himself on his father in the same way, down to the smallest

absurdities of habit. Perhaps love is after all the most effective teacher; but since we do not always understand our children or they us, we cannot be sure what lessons love is teaching them.

I have spoken mostly of my father in the early years of my life because then he was closest and most beautiful. Family complications and the troubles of adolescence cut me off from him as I grew up and my marriage to an American put the Atlantic between us for most of my life. I regret the separation. There was much I could have learned from him, and underneath our shy skins we loved each other immensely. But it is not easy to be the child of a great man. If we are ever to be more than shadows we must get away, far away, and build our own lives. (In this connection I might add that it is not easy to marry the child of a great man either. My former husband is a man of great intelligence and unusual integrity, but "he had a hard act to follow", as they say, and in the end we split on the ghost of my father.)

After my father died in 1970 I came to think that I should write a book about him, to tell about the side of him that I had known. It was only as I wrote that I began to see him as a human being, a man with faults and virtues like other men (though better than most), no longer that larger-than-life, utterly charming and cruelly disappointing idol of my early years. I suppose he spoiled me for any other man, but on the whole I think he was worth it.

*Cambridge, Mass.*