

## On Natalia Ginzburg's "Human Relations"

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" . . . the friend we've dropped is hurt on our account . . . We know this but we have no regrets, indeed we feel a kind of covert pleasure, for if someone suffers on our account, it shows we have the power to cause pain, we who for so long felt utterly weak and insignificant."

So writes Natalia Ginzburg in "Human Relations" in which she considers the way people come together and grow apart; and come together and grow apart; not a breakup essay exactly, and yet it will serve, I think, I hope, since Ginzburg breaks (or anticipates breaking) with parents and friends and relations from beginning to end. She hangs her reflection-on-the-human-condition (that's what this is)—in which we humans are eventually forced to come to terms with how *human* we are (as in helpless in the face of the universe, as in doomed from the start)—on a story of coming of age, beginning in childhood when we are understandably baffled by adults and their "dark and mysterious" ways. Next, sparked by adolescence, comes the long middle of the piece: Enamored of our peers, Ginzburg admits "we punish the adults . . . by our profound contempt"; by the end of the essay, she herself has grown up, of course. "We are so adult now," she tells us, "that our adolescent children are already starting to look at us with eyes of stone." In other words, what goes around comes around, right? As for what happens in between: Relationships—hers (ours?)—keep ending and ending and ending of natural causes, which (if we don't count death) only means we eponymous humans—*naturally* (hopelessly) fickle and self-serving—are to be held responsible more often than not.

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Some weeks back, I was sitting at my desk with Natalia—that is, with her selected essays (in *A Place to Live*, translator Lynne Sharon Schwartz), mulling

“Human Relations,” when my son—my grown son who lives elsewhere and was only visiting for the day—galloped down the stairs to say hello.

“What’s that?” he asked, pointing to a miniature document framed in silver on my desk.

“It’s a copy of the letter from Grandpa,” I told him. I’d received the original, typed on an IBM Selectric on a piece of tissue-thin paper, when I was thirteen (this is family lore), sometime in the middle of my last summer at Waukeela Camp for Girls.

“Can I read it?” asked Jake.

Of course he could. I handed it over.

Almost fifteen years ago—nearly four decades after the letter first arrived in Eaton Center, New Hampshire—I’d had it reduced and copied to fit the frame, five-by-seven, and specially engraved. At the time, I was planning my dad’s seventy-fifth birthday celebration, and among the things I’d decided to give him were the words he’d once given to me. A strange sort of present, I guess, but it felt very right. I’d saved it for almost four decades by then, and I wanted him to know; it showed him to be such a good dad. And such a good writer.

Three years have passed since he died, and, on a recent visit back east, I found the frame on his dresser. “You can have that,” said my mother. Gladly I took it. What I do not have is the letter I wrote to him first. But it’s clear I’d complained: I was bored. I’d had it with camp—with canoeing, and archery, and Capture the Flag. I wanted to lie on my bunk and think deep thoughts or no thoughts at all. I wanted to be left alone.

And Dad wrote back to say he wasn’t surprised. “When you stop to think of it, what has happened is that a ‘generation gap’ has been established between you and camp,” he said. And then, new paragraph: “This basically is the same type of gap that may someday develop between us . . .”

My son, silently reading, looked up: “*Basically*,” he said aloud, and then: “This *basically* is the same type of gap . . .” at which point, just for a moment, he couldn’t go on. Something about his grandfather’s tone, wise and confident—as if to say, “just between us” and “you already know this, of course”: That was Grandpa, Jake told me later, when I asked what got to him. It was typical, he said—Grandpa’s willingness to take his mother seriously (at age thirteen, all angsty and pubescent) conveyed with a single word: *Basically*—it stood in for the way he gave people credit, Jake said: He presumed our intelligence, emotional and otherwise, and carried on from there.

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Backtracking now—not long ago, we flew east to visit our Jake. It had been a while. We felt as far away as we are—three thousand miles—and vaguely out of touch. The first night we saw him and his girlfriend for dinner; the second, after a meal, we gathered at his place where we drank tea and listened to music. There were other outings, of course—so many people to meet and places to see—our boy (our young man) was living a rich and interesting life. Full of music, books, art, friends, good work and good play. And we were delighted to follow him around for a couple of days. Home again, though, we felt slightly off-balance. Proud and thrilled—and unaccountably sad. No choice, after all, but to return to our house, our work, our world, and leave Jake to his.

Speaking of which—family life, I mean—here’s one of the things that happens in “Human Relations”: Ginzburg actually meets “the right person.” They move in together. They have some number of children. And that’s when life—thus far defined by an endless if illuminating series of infatuations and humiliations, alliances and betrayals starring *us* (she’s in first-person-plural every inch of the way)—reveals itself as random and terrifying and largely indifferent. Therefore, she writes, about being a parent, “we” are afraid of “a puff of wind” (it’s true, isn’t it, we are); “we love . . . in a painful, frightened way,” she admits; “We . . . knock on wood and turn the light on and off three times. It suddenly seems that this alone can save us from disaster. We fend off sorrow . . . But sorrow does find us.”

At this point, the word itself—*sorrow*—takes the reader off guard. Not that *we* haven’t had our share, but, up till then, we were enjoying rueful commiseration—we too have broken with parents and friends—and/but, now this: “We’re no longer afraid of death,” Ginzburg writes, “we gaze at death every hour, every minute, recalling its great silence on the face we loved the most.” Wait, thinks the reader: *We*? And this is when she, I, the every-reader gets it: This isn’t a tongue-in-cheek entertainment—it’s a face-off with mortality, that’s what it is. Under the circumstances, since we must die, how best to behave like human beings before we do?

That is, if Ginzburg has amusingly and accurately observed the way we humans dump and are dumped, she isn’t condoning it in the end. And now we recall the translator’s intro: “The agonies Ginzburg lights on so briefly but wrenchingly are literal, not metaphorical,” writes Schwartz, explaining that the author’s husband, “was arrested and killed by the fascists.” Worth noting, this, not only for curious readers but for writers, too, since, in part, the blurriness here is what distinguishes this work as essay as opposed to pure memoir: The writing and remembering—though movingly intimate and specific—is in service of a topic other than herself. Human nature is Ginzburg’s subject, at least as

much as her own personal history. “Now,” she says, “we are truly adult.” Now, “we’d like to rip away all our past cruelties of word and deed, from the time when we still feared death but had no idea, couldn’t yet fathom, how irreparable and irremediable, death was.”

Very crafty, right? Not just skilled, but clever, having everything to do with point of view. That third person plural, that “we,” turns out to be the most generous of perspectives. Neither institutional nor political, but rather an inclusive and even humble way to embed earned wisdom and sound advice in the story of a series of encounters—of comings and goings, and beginnings and endings—that add up to a life. It’s as if we’d figured it out for ourselves: If it’s human to be callous and cavalier, it’s necessary to our humanity to eventually realize that it’s better, *more* human (more *human*), to be kind. What a feat, her pulling this off—first, her managing to avoid pretension and condescension (the “royal” we); and second—pronouns notwithstanding—her having been true to her purpose, which, in the best tradition of the personal essay, involves a *try* on the part of one voice and mind to thoughtfully, if subjectively, investigate an idea. “At the center of our life is the question of human relations,” she began, to get us off on the right foot. (As in, *basically* . . . )

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What if I were to try this at home? Can I? Should I? Well—here goes:

It’s heartening, isn’t it, to get a glimpse of our kids with both feet in their own lives. Gratifying and dear, but it forces a reckoning, right? There’s the shock of realizing, though they are welcoming and seemingly happy to introduce us around, that it isn’t a life that includes us anymore, nor should it, really.

Basically, something has shifted between us and our grown-up child; we, who sang to him, who wiped his nose, who read him his favorite story (“Ferdinand”), who scrambled his eggs in the morning (not too runny) and gave him our old guitar outright (it was his first). We are no longer at the center of anything for him. It’s as if the road we were on had suddenly narrowed and veered; nothing sudden about it, of course, but that’s how it feels—other people have not-so-suddenly become more important, more influential than *we*.

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Sometimes you’re not sure what you’re writing about. You take on an assignment—for instance, to consider the breakup essay anew—but you can’t seem to

stay on track. Case in point, it seems my subject today is not breaking up, but *growing* up—maybe even growing *old*.

See, the first time I read my dad's letter—and every time since, year after year, decade after decade—I understood it from the point of view of the child. I *was* the child—the letter had been written to me. It wasn't until I went back to “Human Relations” . . . And then, if that hadn't been enough, Jake happened to be home, and he happened to pick up Dad's letter and to read it out loud—and *that's* when I got it, that's when I realized that something had shifted: Both the essay and the letter contained startling intelligence—a new angle to consider—or, if not new, well then newly meaningful to me.

“The circumstances can be different,” wrote my father nearly fifty years ago, “and the subject of our ‘gap’ may be different, but nevertheless it is a gap created by different stages of maturity, experience and interests. If it ever happens, please remember your own experience at camp.”

In “Human Relations,” Ginzburg writes: “We are adult because we carry with us the mute presence of the dead, from whom we ask counsel in our present actions . . .” Mute, ha. In that moment, it was as if Dad were with Jake and me in the room, addressing both of us. Talk about a triangle. Talk about the lessons of love over time.

Not that we needed to be schooled, Jake and I. He didn't, anyway. We have suffered no terrible rifts or silences, nor much of the kind of miscommunication that occasionally—or often—comes between parents and children of a certain age. The problem—the wonder, the triumph, the reward—is only that he has genuinely moved on, that's all. He's found new loves—he's well into his life. I wouldn't have it any other way, of course not. But how not to miss him? How not to miss the person I was at the center of his life? And how to assure him that I really and truly don't need him to need me there?

“Human relations must be rediscovered and reinvented every day,” writes Ginzburg.

And there it is, that's it, that's today's lesson. For if the essay considers the inevitability of leave-takings and loss—of breaking up—it's also about how to carry on with the knowledge that we haven't much power over our own lives, much less anybody else's: Ginzburg has written, on the page before, “that this is what being adult means, nothing at all like what we thought it meant as children, certainly not self-confidence, certainly not a serene mastery over all worldly things.” And at last, in a moment of “complete equilibrium,” she observes that it's absurd to have wanted that power in the first place.

“We must always remember,” she continues, “that every single encounter . . . is a human action, and therefore always good or evil, truth or lie, generos-

ity or transgression.” That “we” again—so perfect, right? “I” would have put the writer at a distance; “You” would have put the reader on the spot. “We,” though she’s speaking of herself, makes us all feel a little less lonely. A little less weak and insignificant, too. A little more seen and known, that’s how she hooks us, and that’s how she let’s us all off the hook. That’s the gift of “Human Relations.” Not that Natalia Ginzburg necessarily knows our hearts (although some of us will feel that she does). But that she allows us to know hers as if it were our own.

And so she admits of her grown-up relations with humans, “Timidly, we seek out the right words. And we rejoice to find them, timidly but almost effortlessly; we rejoice to possess all those words . . .” Then, never complacent, never one to tie things in a bow, she adds that “after a time they start to become too easy, too natural and spontaneous, so spontaneous and effortless that all the richness and discovery and choice are gone . . .” Well, yes, okay, I agree. For the moment, though, for *this* moment, anyway, here they are: good and resonating words in the book on my right, under glass on my left. How lucky to have them at hand, the words—for the hurt, the hope, the longing, the love—the right and ringing words, and a way to frame them.