

The Chemistry of Identity

I was in my mid-twenties, pursuing my PhD in psychology, when I received an unexpected phone call. It was Steve, my father's longtime friend and a fellow chemistry professor.

He sounded urgent. "Annie, you need to come to Massachusetts right away. Something's wrong with your father."

Steve had never contacted me before, so I was taken aback. "What's wrong?" I asked, concerned.

"He's acting really strange. You know how frugal your father is? Well, he suddenly wants to hold a champagne brunch for at least 100 people."

My father was known for his penny-pinching ways and rarely spent money freely.

I reluctantly admitted, "Yeah, that doesn't sound like him."

"Exactly. Please come immediately. He's at our home."

"Okay, I'll leave right now."

At that time, I lived in Connecticut, my stepmother was staying a few more days in Italy, and my sister lived in Illinois. I was the closest, so it was up to me to go. My father was in Massachusetts, about two and a half hours away.

As I drove north, my mind drifted back to the last time I saw him, just a couple of weeks ago. He seemed different, but I attributed it to jet lag from his trip to Italy. On Father's Day, when my partner and I visited him, he hurriedly came out of the house.

"Get back in the car! We're going to Boston!" he exclaimed, a wide smile on his face.

"Dad, we just arrived. We've been driving for hours. I really need to use the bathroom," I responded.

"Sure, but we have to go to Boston!" he insisted.

As much as I didn't want to drive to Boston, my father so rarely asked for anything, so we obliged. We drove for an hour to Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he had lived with my biological mother during his graduate studies at Harvard.

Two things were notable about my father. He was extremely thrifty, always mindful of his spending, and he didn't share a lot about his past with me. However, that day was different. He took us on a tour of the places he lived in with my mother, speaking about these places with fondness. We ended up having tea at an upscale hotel, enjoying cucumber sandwiches and delicate pastries. Dad engaged in lengthy conversations with everyone we encountered, even the newspaper vendor on the corner. Although he would have a few words with everyone, this was unlike him. My father seemed like an amplified version of himself, and I wasn't quite sure how to interpret his behavior that day.

As a result of my psychology training, I believed that personalities are shaped by a combination of one's biology and environment. My father personified these factors with a constellation of traits that set him apart. Known for his deep family orientation and razor-sharp intellect, he was goal-driven to a remarkable degree, able to write entire books in a matter of months. He approached his health with the same tenacity. He ran ten miles daily alongside his academic colleagues, and he ate mostly homemade meals made from fresh ingredients. When under the weather, he would take a nap, rarely becoming seriously ill.

My father was also exceptionally rational, likely a byproduct of his academic training. It could be seen in the most mundane conversations. If you sought his advice, he would often begin with the phrase, "Well, the rational thing to do would be..." He had little patience for irrational behavior and was perplexed by people who made decisions based on emotions.

However, Steve's depiction of my father portrayed him as someone entirely unrecognizable, displaying irrational behavior. How of my father's personality remained? How much of this new behavior was the result of some biology gone awry? Would medication or surgery restore the person I knew? Had something occurred in Italy that changed him irretrievably? I also questioned if I would be able to handle this crisis on my own.

Upon arriving at Steve's home, my dad rushed out to see me. "I just knew you would come. I knew you would be here soon."

"Dad, what's going on? Steve says you're not yourself."

"I'm not. I'm better than ever! I'm on the verge of a great discovery. And I don't need to sleep much. I only sleep an hour or two a night. Plus, I've learned to speak Italian!"

"I see. Well, I think we need to go to the doctor and see what's going on."

"Oh, absolutely! Let's do that."

My father seemed happier than ever. That day we met with a physician who asked my father several questions. The doctor suggested that my dad be admitted to a psychiatric hospital for evaluation. My father clearly needed help, but I was unsure if he would willingly become a patient.

"Dad, I think you need help, and I agree you should go to the hospital."

"Yes, that's probably a good idea. But I need a room of my own. I'm quite famous, you know, and I can't have all these fans bothering me."

"Right. I'll see what I can do," I assured him.

Within a couple of hours, we found ourselves at a local hospital with a psychiatric unit. The blue-green colored walls and the recreational room seemed prison-like. The blank stares of the patients made me question if this was the right place for my dad. However, I felt there was no other choice because he wasn't himself and his grasp of reality wasn't strong. I worried he might make a terrible decision and get hurt. I wanted him to voluntarily agree to treatment, even in this depressing environment. As we filled out the intake forms, everything went well until my father learned he would have a roommate. He then refused to become a patient.

"Dad, can I talk to you privately?" I asked. We walked down the hall together. "I really need you to get some help. I think it's okay to have a roommate. Can you please become a patient here for me?"

"Oh, sure. I'll stay here; I'm just negotiating with them," he stated matter-of-factly.

We returned to finish the intake forms.

That night, I felt a sense of relief as I stayed at his home surrounded by his things. He was now in capable hands. The doctors would determine what was wrong, and he would be safe. I called my stepmother in Italy and my sister, informing them of the situation. They agreed to come to Massachusetts as soon as possible.

The next day, I visited my dad.

"Guess what happened, Annie!" He said breathlessly.

"They think so highly of me that they gave me a roommate. I'm helping him with his problems."

"I see."

"But there is one thing that amazes me," he said.

"What's that, Dad?"

"How is it that not one person here has heard of the last name 'Beall'? Isn't that odd? I've calculated the odds of that as one in 17.3 million," he said, sliding a piece of paper toward me with some numbers on it.

I had absolutely no response. But it didn't matter, he began talking about something else.

Eventually the physicians diagnosed my fifty-five-year-old father with manic depression. During his stay at the hospital, he was in a manic phase, exhibiting tremendous joy. He also became unusually sensitive to others' feelings. One day, as we took a walk outside, we stumbled upon a unique shrine to the Virgin Mary. Someone had buried a bathtub in the ground with the rounded end exposed, serving as a pedestal for a large Virgin Mary statue. I found it somewhat amusing and remarked on it.

"Now, Annie, how do you think that person would feel if they heard you?" my father chastised.

"You're right, Dad."

This behavior was uncharacteristic of my father, who typically criticized people and things he encountered. Although it was nice to see this side of him, I found it unsettling because I worried the dad I knew might be gone forever. It was a moment when I realized I'd fully stepped into adulthood.

Over the following weeks in the hospital, the doctors addressed my father's mania by adjusting his medication. With each change, the high-volume version of my father slowly disappeared, and the person I knew emerged. No longer was he consumed with excitement. No longer did he believe he was famous or on the brink of some great achievement. No longer did he consider himself superhuman and capable of helping others.

After three weeks, the hospital discharged him. My stepmother, (whom I call Mom), picked him up and they drove to the Midwest. They wanted to get away. They wanted to forget what happened, and they wanted my father to fully recover. Eventually, they bought a summer home in Wisconsin and focused on renovating the home.

However, when I visited them, my father rarely spoke. We would sit through entire meals without him uttering a word, which was unusual. Engaging in lively conversations, particularly over dinner, was something my father cherished.

"Dad, you don't talk as much as you used to," I finally said to him one day.

"I know. I just don't have anything to say."

"I've never known you to have nothing to say," I sadly remarked.

I looked at him, absorbing this major change. The manic version of my father had given way to a subdued person—now he was a shadow of himself. Would this version be his permanent state? A sense of loss washed over me, like a part of the father I had always known was missing, faded into the background. I was left pondering: what parts of him truly remained?

Mom also saw this change and informed his doctors. Over two years, his physicians adjusted his medications repeatedly. The person I knew mostly returned, but not completely. He no longer consumed alcohol due to his medication, and he saw his health as more fragile than before. He diligently took his medication to ensure he would not have a relapse.

The long journey from his diagnosis of manic depression to his recovery and return to his "normal self" took several years. During this time, I pondered the nature of our identities. Are we merely the sum of chemicals within our bodies? Can a slight imbalance in those chemicals alter us so significantly? Do chemicals make us arrogant or humble, more or less sensitive, happy or

sad, confident or unsure? And who was my father, truly? Was he simply a unique collection of chemicals that had temporarily gone awry?

As I reflected on my father's journey, I witnessed the complex interplay between chemistry and identity. My new understanding of mental health taught me that chemical imbalances could have profound effects on our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. My father's experience with manic depression had demonstrated the power of these chemicals, reshaping his personality and challenging the very essence of his being.

But throughout the ups and downs, my father had shown me that he was still himself in the most fundamental ways. He maintained his connection to family and willingly went to the hospital when I urged him to. Family was his top priority, and his unwavering commitment never faltered. Additionally, he exemplified tenacity and resilience, which were true hallmarks of his character. He wholeheartedly embraced the importance of medication, diligently working towards stability and reclaiming his life. He always prioritized his health. Even when he faced mental illness, he approached his well-being with the same dedication as his training for his many races. Although his personality may have seemed somewhat amplified, his core essence remained intact, serving as a reminder that our identities are not solely defined by chemicals but also by something profound within us.