



Audio essayist: Jay Varner

Title: Three generations of men with fire

Duration: 7 minutes, 12 seconds

About this transcript

Each Bookpod transcript is an edited version of a longer conversation recorded in person or over the phone. It is not a formal essay. To gain a better appreciation of the text, below, please listen to the podcast episode.

Introduction

Family histories make us wonder about fate and how to escape it.

In this episode of Bookpod, Jay Varner talks about *Nothing Left to Burn*, a memoir about his arsonist grandfather, his fire chief father and his own stint as a newspaper reporter on the fire and police desk.

Presentation

I grew up in a very tiny town in the middle of Pennsylvania that had about five hundred people. Everybody knew everybody else. And everybody in town knew my dad, who was the fire chief.



As a kid I really looked up to my dad, and always wanted to see him more because, when you're the fire chief, you're often running out the door to go fight fires, car accidents, anything that comes up.

His father, my grandfather, was a serial arsonist who had lit a series of fires in the 'sixties and 'seventies when my dad was just a child. And it was during that time that my dad started to examine himself and become involved in the fire department.

For me it was really a matter of looking at these two men to see how they factored into my life and examine those family relationships and secrets that I think probably lie in the heart of all of our families.

#

My grandfather, I started to get to know him when I was very young. He would show up at our house with garbage every Saturday morning, and he would light this garbage on fire in this kind of magnificent blaze.



And he did this quite often, not only with the garbage on Saturdays, but sometimes he would show up with mattresses. He had tires. You kind of never knew what he was going to have.

I wanted my dad to stop my grandfather because I knew my dad went out to extinguish fires, and my grandfather showed up to light them. Something wasn't right here. There was some kind of disconnect.

But my dad really wouldn't do anything. He wouldn't say anything. He didn't want to disrespect his father.

And I was terrified of my grandfather. I mean, he started these fires. He never really had a kind word to say to me or my dad. He was pretty cruel. And he could just change at the flick of a switch for seemingly no reason.

How my dad overcame that, I mean, I think he really as a teenager looked at himself and had to figure out who he wanted to be as a man. And did he want to continue to live in his father's footsteps? In that area, you know, it's such a small area. It's very rural. I think a lot of boys are defined by who their fathers were, or even their



grandfathers. And I think my dad decided, you know, I'm not going to be somebody who's destructive like my own dad. I'm going to be the exact opposite of that. So it was kind of a form of rebellion, but I think it was a way to kind of restore some honor to the family name as well.

#

Unfortunately, the community was not very supportive of us after my dad died.

My mom had made the decision that rather than have the pomp and circumstance of a big fireman's funeral, which the fire company and a lot of members of the community wanted, my mom didn't want that to happen. She felt she had lost enough of my dad to the fire company while he was alive. So she did hold a funeral the way she wanted to, which was, of course, I think it was entirely her right to do. It was her husband. The rest of the town didn't own him.

And they resented that fact. And for years afterwards, even still to this day, I mean, there are still people who will turn and look the other way when they see her because they disagreed with it so strongly.



So all of those friends that my dad had with the fire company, they didn't come around. They didn't come by to help us out. They didn't come by to see me. And even my dad's brothers, you know, they never really called. Never sent Christmas cards. Nothing.

So in terms of having a male role model, it was really my mom's dad, my other grandfather, who had to step into that role. And he was in his late sixties at that time.

One thing I really wanted to show in the book was my mom's level of determination and tenacity to be a good mother to me. I mean, she was a single mother at such a young age. She was only thirty-two, thirty-three, when my dad died. But she taught me such independence and courage. And I felt that other people there never really gave her credit for all that she had done.

#

I was a creative writing major in college, which was great, but perhaps not the most practical thing to do with a major. I had no idea what I was going to do with my life.



I was home and living with my mom again and I happened to see an ad for the local newspaper, and I applied. I thought, well, I can probably be a reporter. I didn't know that they were going to assign me to the police and fire beat. That was the last beat that I had ever wanted to have.

But suddenly, I'm sitting at this desk with the police scanner on it. The alarm codes go off and I'm expected to jump up with my notebook and press pass and, you know, speed off to the fire.

The first time I did that, I was just terrified, because, you know, I didn't really know what I was doing on the job, but I also knew that I was going to see the flip side of where my dad went all of those days and nights when he ran out of the house. And I had never really seen that up close before.

So that caused me really to kind of confront those things that I had felt. I had a resentment for him for not being there. But when you see the other side of it, you see somebody's house that's on fire, and they're standing there



kind of huddled and just watching these firefighters try to save their possessions. It really puts things into perspective of what he did.

And it also gives you an addiction in a way. At least it did for me. You know, you hear those codes come over there's a big fire, you know, I'm going to be on the front page today – if I can get there as fast as I can.

And that's when I thought, you know, maybe I'm becoming a little too much like my dad and the excitement that I felt of actually going and rushing toward this.

#

I think when you lose a parent at such a young age, it's almost the case of kind of arrested development in a way because you're always thinking about that time. You're always looking back on it. And, you know, I only had nine years with my dad before he died. So I look back on those nine years and all that I saw it through were the eyes of a child. You just observe and witness.



Valedictory

For more information about Jay Varner, visit

www.jayvarner.com.

Bookpod producer is Barbara Finkelstein. Music is by Kevin MacLeod.

See you next time at Bookpod, home to writers of lasting value.