

Making Democracy Personal

Tony E. Adams

Goodall, Jr., H. L. (2006). *A need to know: The clandestine history of a CIA family*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press. 399 pp. ISBN 1-5987-4041-5. \$24.95 (cloth).

A life of secrecy begins with the first secret. (p. 233)

My last name should be “Eickhoff” not “Adams.” After having two children in the early 1950s, my biological grandparents—the Eickhoffs—divorced. My grandmother soon remarried and, adhering to patriarchal custom, changed her name to Adams. The new husband adopted her children, and Eickhoff quickly fell out of Adams family discourse. In 1979 I emerged into the Adams system I would come to know as biological and absent divorce. And I never questioned the constructed family story until a decade after my birth.

In 1989 I found my father’s birth certificate in my grandmother’s attic. It listed his name as Eickhoff. I asked Grandma about the error.

“I married an Eickhoff before marrying an Adams,” she screamed and demanded that I give her the document. “Eickhoff divorced me after your father and your father’s sister were born. You cannot tell anyone about this ‘situation’ and you will never speak of it again.”

The divorce and the Eickhoff name remain Adams family secrets. And while biology doesn’t constitute a family, biology becomes important when people are discussed *as if* they’re blood relatives (e.g., “Heart disease runs in our family”) or *as if* we’re a family free of divorce.

In 2004 I secretly contacted Grandfather Eickhoff. He’s reframed many of my thoughts about the Adamses, in that I now view my constructed-biological relatives as corrupt and mischievous. But since I haven’t told them of my contact with Grandfather Eickhoff, I guess I could be viewed as corrupt and mischievous, too. Adams family secrets continue and relationships suffer. It is such secretive situations that Harold Lloyd Goodall, Jr., in *A Need to Know*, knows of all too well.

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In *Pathways to Madness* (1965), Jules Henry documents his experiences with “the Rosenbergs,” a family plagued by deception, mental illness, and (inter)personally harmful communicative practices. Henry suggests that “our innermost circle of relationships” is never “free of deception” (p. 99), believes that relational illusions allow for the maintenance of sanity, and demonstrates how vulnerability can encourage us to “conceal our feelings and erect a façade” (p. 101). Like Henry, Goodall writes of the deception, mental illness, and (inter)personally harmful communicative practices that plagued his family. He shows how interactions with his mother and father were riddled with ambiguity, discerns ways in which relational illusions allowed for a temporary maintenance of sanity, and describes the fragile façades his parents had to erect when interacting with others, façades of repressed feelings made possible by strict adherence to alcohol, denial, and patriotism.

Goodall begins by qualifying his ethnographic memoir as *a* truth rather than *the* truth. With his father dying in 1976 and his mother in 1983, he does not have access to “primary sources” of familial information. This dilemma is coupled with Goodall’s limited “narrative inheritance”—the lack of family stories that would allow him to understand his past (p. 77). He did have his father’s personal diary, Bible, and marked-up copy of *The Great Gatsby*, but these items were mysteriously stolen from his mother’s house after her death.

Goodall thus resorts to analyzing texts like family photographs, high school yearbooks, and letters from the government that, while appearing “official,” contain many mistakes and obvious lies. He also examines (auto)biographies of former government aides, individuals he knew of as a child but who have since died. Goodall corresponds with previously unknown biological family members such as the daughter of a deceased half-sister, and interviews his father’s high school comrades, a painter, and actress Abbe Lane, a person who Goodall speculates once served as a governmentally-staged family friend.

Throughout much of the book, Goodall describes the troubled relationships between himself and his parents, relationships characterized by unconditional love and rampant misunderstanding. For instance, he only recently learned that his father worked as a spy for the United States government. This knowledge helps Goodall make sense of his uncomfortable childhood experiences. He wondered why he felt that his family lived under constant surveillance and why intimate conversations could only occur in the bathroom with the water running and with individuals speaking in whispers. Knowing of his father’s once-prestigious occupation helps Goodall better understand his mother’s stomach cancer, an illness made possible by a career of amphetamines and the need to present oneself as skinny. Learning of his father’s secret life also reframes Goodall’s understanding of his parents’ retreat into alcoholism, need for telling secrets, and robust refusal of an un-American label.

In so doing, Goodall demonstrates how general “codes of secrecy” become lived by particular individuals and shows how such codes “establish the basic pattern of communication that defines how we turn out in the end. In this way,” he writes, “there is an intricate relationship between how we choose to live and how our nation turns out” (p. 371). Resembling Buber’s (1965) observation—“Political methods at

their height mean the effective abolition of the human factor” (p. 83)—Goodall illustrates how codes of secrecy concealed under the guise of “national security” can abolish a family.

Goodall also uncovers instances of government conspiracy in his father’s public files, records that function as “dummy records” in that they contain many careless and contradictory errors. Goodall approaches these errors with suspicion and concern. For example, he questions why his family abruptly moved from Rome to London to Wyoming to Philadelphia without any discussion. He also wonders why official records would simultaneously list his father as attending Ohio State University as a full-time student *and* managing a real estate company in Huntington, West Virginia. These locations require a commute of more than two hours. Goodall’s father could not drive.

By piecing together a secretive familial past, Goodall illustrates what it feels like to live through situations of communicative hyper-awareness. He discerns benefits in remaking uncertain histories into meaningful futures, and, by exposing covert government errors, demonstrates how political structures materialize in our (inter)personal affairs. Goodall uses his reframed past and these government errors to make sense of insidious, post 9-11 activities of the Bush administration such as its handling of the “war on terror” and its cultivation of unjustified fear. Goodall reminds us of what life in a “democracy” should entail, believes that the official concealing of information is unconstitutional and inhumane, and suggests that we need to interrogate a “president who doesn’t admit mistakes and, if possible, doesn’t ever change his mind” (p. 366).

A Need to Know would appeal to anyone interested in cultural studies, (auto)ethnography, family communication, and political history. It would be an appropriate book for courses on life writing and narrative, conspiracy, and persuasion. Goodall believes a life of secrecy begins with the first secret, but argues that we can avoid such a deceptive condition by becoming concerned and critical citizens. He motivates me to speak of my closeted Eickhoff past, but also shows me that silence can be unfortunately comforting.

References

- Buber, M. (1965). *The knowledge of man*. New York: Harper and Row.
 Henry, J. (1965). *Pathways to madness*. New York: Random House.