

Marvin
Olasky

Lament
for a
Father

The Journey to Understanding
and Forgiveness

After spending more than forty years with Marvin Olasky the journalist, I needed this great little book to discover several other facets to his colorful persona. There are no “bare facts” in this man’s life. Everything is part of a sovereign design.

—**Joel Belz**, Founder, *World* magazine

What is Marvin Olasky’s *Lament for a Father*? Is it a tracing of the plummet of twentieth-century intellectual life into eugenics and anti-Semitism? Is it the chronicle of Jewish suffering in World War II? Is it a critique of the secularization of American society and education? Is it an attempt to understand the psychology of how brutality passes from generation to generation? Is it a son’s attempt to understand the dysfunction of his parents’ deeply unhappy marriage, his father’s failure, and his mother’s scorn? Is it the story of a broken actor on a broken stage? It is all of these, but ultimately it is one man’s agonizingly circuitous journey to faith in Christ, to gratitude, and finally to honoring a tragically flawed and tormented father.

—**Douglas Bond**, Author, *Stand Fast in the Way of Truth*
(Fathers & Sons)

Marvin Olasky walks readers through the process of understanding his father’s world and in the process teaches all to do the same with our own fathers. With a posture of compassion, grace, and mercy, *Lament for a Father* puts on display what happens when the gospel shapes the way we remember our fathers and gives us permission to experience the joy and pain of imperfection. Olasky shows us how researching our parents’ past can lead to a place of healing and reconciliation. It’s an extraordinary testimony to the all too common brokenness of the families of World War II combat veterans that shaped the generation after them. It’s a riveting tale.

—**Anthony B. Bradley**, Professor of Religious Studies, The King’s College; Director, The Center for the Study of Human Flourishing

For decades, few voices have been more important in the American church than that of Marvin Olasky, as he has shaped a generation of Christians to apply the good news of the gospel toward the flourishing of healthy communities. But in this book, Marvin pulls back the layers of his own storied life, one that itself is a dramatic tale of God's saving grace. Olasky allows us to see the story behind the sage, sharing for the first time his difficult relationship with his father, sharing in emotional and poignant words the aching longing in his heart for the father who could have been and the satisfaction he has found in the Father he knows. Every human being, no matter how accomplished, wants to know and be known by their dads. Pick up this book, read it, and buy an extra copy for a friend who needs to read it. You will not be disappointed.

—**Daniel Darling**, Senior Vice President, NRB; Best-Selling Author, *A Way with Words*, *The Dignity Revolution*, and *The Characters of Christmas*

Marvin Olasky is an extraordinarily gifted man: a journalist, editor, professor, theologian, and writer with a talent for doing relentless research. In this book, he turns his microscope on a man he didn't like, who disappointed him and failed him, a man he wanted to admire but couldn't: Eli Olasky, his father. Eli graduated from Harvard, a brilliant man with scholarly ambitions, but after returning from military service at the end of World War II, he drifted from job to job and became a stoic who never laughed or played baseball with his son. Why? What happened? It's a gripping story about family, faith, suffering, and forgiveness. A true lament.

—**John R. Erickson**, Author, Hank the Cowdog series

Marvin Olasky explains how he finally came to understand, appreciate, and forgive his brilliant but emotionally distant and underachieving father who died in 1984. Through painstaking but fascinating historical research, Olasky comes to understand

his father's difficult life as he grew up as a young boy in a Jewish immigrant community in early twentieth-century Boston and then experienced debilitating stress as a US Army soldier assigned to help to clean out the horrible remains of Nazi atrocities in Jewish death camps at the end of World War II. Olasky has written this book not only to honor his father's memory but also to explain how he himself changed from an atheistic, zealous communist to a born-again evangelical Christian who has edited *World* magazine for the past three decades. Anyone who has experienced a difficult parent-child relationship will appreciate the wisdom in this book.

—**Wayne Grudem**, Distinguished Research Professor of
Theology and Biblical Studies, Phoenix Seminary

Marvin Olasky has been an intellectual, theological, and economic treasure for decades. In *Lament for a Father*, he serves up a poignant, intimate, and engaging memoir crammed full of lessons about what makes for manhood with honest meditations on themes ranging from anti-Semitism to redemption. Beware: this book is addictive.

—**Robert A. Sirico**, Founder, Acton Institute

I first discovered Marvin Olasky through his book *The Tragedy of American Compassion*, which told the history of faith-based charities designed to lift people out of poverty by transforming their lives, not sustaining them in poverty. Newt Gingrich, the future speaker of the House, was so impressed that he bought copies to distribute to his fellow members of Congress. In his latest book, *Lament for a Father*, Marvin takes us through the early part of his life in ways that sound depressing until you get to the end. As a brilliant writer and thinker, Marvin consoles those who have had difficult parents and shows through his own experience they do not have to determine the course of the lives of their children.

—**Cal Thomas**, Syndicated Columnist

A sense of longing and loss pervades Marvin Olasky's tribute to his father—a reckoning with his Jewish heritage that remains sensitive to time and culture, faith and freedom. A beautiful lament suffused with gratitude and honor.

—**Trevin Wax**, Author, *Rethink Your Self, This Is Our Time*, and *Gospel-Centered Teaching*

Marvin Olasky's memoir of his quest to understand his inscrutable father whisked me from working class New England to the brutal execution of his Russian great-grandparents to the concentration camps of the Third Reich. With the diligence of a journalist and the penitent longing of an errant son, Olasky digs up his father's past to learn what changed him from a passionate scholar to a remote stoic whose wife called him "lazy and lacking ambition." The result is a vividly drawn journey during which Olasky exchanges scorn for honor and bitterness for grace. *Lament for a Father* is a poignant reminder that even our most deeply rooted family resentments can be gloriously and unexpectedly redeemed.

—**Lynn Vincent**, *New York Times* Best-Selling Author;
Investigative Journalist; Navy Veteran

In this accessible true-life tale, Marvin Olasky truly fathoms his father for the first time, uncovering a loss of faith in God that led to a collapse of faith in self and eventually an evaporation of all confidence in the promise of life. It's a searing, unblinkingly honest, yet ultimately consoling story of family life, ethnicity, and growing up, capped by an engrossing appendix in which the author describes his own recovery of faith.

—**Karl Zinsmeister**, Author; Journalist; Consultant

Lament *for a* Father

The Journey to Understanding
and Forgiveness

Marvin Olasky



P U B L I S H I N G

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Here's a dictionary definition: "A book dedication is a way for an author to honor a person (or group of people)."

So in one sense I'm dedicating this book to my father, who's the main character in it. But I'm also taking the unusual step of dedicating it to you, the reader. You may be looking at this page right now because you have unresolved conflicts with a parent, living or dead. You deserve more than to go through the rest of your life feeling either guilty or angry.

I wrote this to blaze a trail through my own forest,
and to encourage you to do likewise.

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Introduction

I've watched many times *Field of Dreams*, the 1989 movie starring Kevin Costner. Flawed though the film is, it always chokes me up. Although called "a baseball flick," the underlying motif is father-son relationships. At the end, Costner's character asks his dad, "You wanna have a catch?"

My lifetime catches with my father: zero. He has no interest in baseball. I never play until I'm eleven, when I'm a fat kid with a lazy left eye. My batting average during one year of Little League is .182, if I generously count as hits what are probably errors.

Still, I want to be at least a decent fielder. I nag my father to come out on the street and throw me some ground balls. I say "street" because we live on the second floor of an apartment in urban Massachusetts with no backyard or nearby green space. That means a missed ball goes rolling and rolling. That geography contributes to a missed opportunity.

One day, finally, my father agrees. We stand in front of the house. I walk twenty yards away. He throws me a ball that bounces twice before it should have hit my glove. I miss it. Embarrassed, and blaming my father rather than myself, I run after it and yell over my shoulder, "Why didn't you throw it straight?"

When I pick up the ball and turn around, he is walking up the steps to our front door. He goes inside. That's it. We never again even start a catch. Nor do we talk much. Once I become a teenager, we speak hardly at all.

Cut to October 1984. I'm thirty-four. He's sixty-seven—and dying of bladder cancer. I live two thousand miles away and fly to Boston with the public goal of providing some comfort and help. My private motive is selfish: to learn why he moved from ambitious youth just before World War II to decades of postwar failure, at least in the eyes of my mother, my brother, and me.

One evening we sit on a Danish modern couch in their apartment. He tells me some stories about his life in the 1930s and 1940s. Then I throw him a question about his dropping out of graduate school. The question is harder and curvier than a polite inquiry should have been. He gets up and walks away, saying over his shoulder, "Why don't you mind your own business?"

I put away the conversational ball and go to sleep. The next day I ask no more questions. My parents drive me to Boston's Logan Airport. He wears a baseball cap because chemotherapy has left him bald. I pull my suitcase out of the trunk, shake his hand, lean over, and whisper in his ear, "I love you," because that seems the right thing to say to a dying parent.

I never see him again. I wish I had persisted in my questioning about turning points in his past, both for true love and to gain true family history. In *Field of Dreams*, the son and the dad finally have a catch. That catches my tears, every time.

It catches other tears as well. After I write a *World* column about *Field of Dreams* and my own experience, letters from readers flow in. A typical comment: "My dad never,

and I mean never, played anything with my brother or me. I deeply regret what I lost not having memories of my dad taking time to play with me.” Another writes, “I know the great black hole that remains when a father is present and willfully absent at the same time. We finally walk away and begin the search for a Heavenly Father.”

Jeffrey Munroe in *Reading Buechner*, a biography of the Christian author, focuses on the day in 1936 when Buechner’s father deliberately “breathed in the carbon monoxide that killed him.” Munroe says, “Buechner’s life and career have been a quest to understand the meaning of that event and to understand where God was when the unthinkable happened.”

The result is not so dramatic when a father is simultaneously present and absent, but many people—judging by those letters—have unresolved conflicts with dads, living or dead. So do I. My father, born in 1917, graduates from Harvard in 1940 with great opportunities, only to give up his hopes sometime in the 1940s or 1950s. He suffers a spiritual and psychological death until his physical demise in 1984. Why?

Now that I’m seventy, why bother to look backward? Buechner says he deals “with the sad parts of [his] life by forgetting them.” He writes, “I didn’t know I was forgetting them . . . but the mechanism of forgetting had been so strongly switched on in my childhood that it became a sort of automatic response.” He then discusses Jesus’s parable of the talents, where two men who receive a lot of money use it to gain more, but the third, who receives a little, hides it in the ground.

Jesus chastises that third man, as does Buechner, who says such burial is “not really being alive. Not really making use of what happens to you. If you bury your life—if you don’t face, among other things, your pain—your life shrinks.”

I sometimes speak directly to the readers of *World*: After editing the magazine for almost thirty years, I feel like I know them. I don't know who will read this book, but I'd like the liberty now to speak directly to them—I mean you. Since I want to be forgiven for my trespasses, I need to forgive the trespasses of others. So do you, if you still have regrets regarding your interaction with your father. Or so does someone you love.

My first piece of advice is to do what I did not do: Persist in questioning while your father is still alive. Don't take no for a final answer. Learn about your father's life. If he won't tell all or anything, at least ask about his parents and grandparents. And here's my second piece, based on what I've learned in writing this book: even if it seems too late, it's not.

Here's some of my research path: Interview ten cousins for information about our grandparents and their impressions of my father. Buy a membership in Ancestry.com and find the naturalization papers of one grandfather and the marriage records of the other. Roam the internet to learn details of life in the 1930s and 1940s: Metropolitan Opera broadcast schedules, neighborhood activities, Harvard graduate courses, trolley and subway maps, hit songs and radio broadcast times in the 1940s.

I've written many history books, of course using the past tense to write about the past. But this book is different. The research has made my father come alive to me, so the past seems like the present, and I've taken the unusual tack of writing almost entirely in the present tense.

I understand more about my father, now that I know about his experiences. I understand my mother more. You can make your parents and grandparents come more alive to you—you just have to dig in. This book shows what I now know, but it also points the way to what you can learn.

1

Memories

In 1956 we live in a four-room apartment on the third floor of a triple-decker in Malden, Massachusetts, just north of Boston. Ward Seven is mostly Jewish and working class, with rows of wooden houses containing one apartment per floor. Our living room has comfortable but mismatched dark furniture: dark green couch, brown wingback chair, a plain wooden rocking chair. The floor and windows have lighter colors: an orange oval-shaped throw rug in the middle, beige window shades that I like to pull up and down by a string with a looped end. We have radiators for warmth and open windows for cooling.

No one speaks much. We don't yet have a television. I'm six. My brother Sidney is nine. He teaches me to play chess. We play in the evening while lying on the rug, propped up by our elbows. I've learned how to read by ingesting Classics Illustrated comic books that cost fifteen cents and include *Moby Dick* (no. 16), *Robin Hood* (no. 3), and *Don Quixote* (no. 11). My father, Eli Olasky, sits in the wingback chair reading science fiction or mystery stories, little paperbacks with the covers torn off so they could be sold for a nickel. Sometimes he takes out heavy books with letters not in English and reads from right to left.

Three introverted males reading or playing chess, in silence befitting a Trappist monastery. Into the room lopez my thin and dark-haired mother, who wants to see the world but is now stuck in an apartment half a mile from where she grew up. At age six I miss subtle signs of marital discord, but it's hard to mistake misery when she periodically screams, *Harvard man! Lazy! No ambition! Why don't we have a house! Why don't we go anywhere?* My father walks into their bedroom and closes the door. Sometimes my mother goes after him.

On Saturday mornings Sidney walks to the synagogue with our father. They then walk to our grandfather's house for a Sabbath dinner. Our mother does not go to the synagogue or to dinner. I, a fat child with little legs, stay with her in the kitchen. It features a sink mounted to the wall, a curved-top refrigerator that requires periodic defrosting, a free-standing cupboard with separate meat and milk dishes, and a gas range.

After lunch, which typically emerges from cans of tuna fish, peas, and carrots, I sit at a rectangular table with room for four and a plastic laminate surface. My mother turns on the Texaco Metropolitan Opera broadcasts and listens while she dusts, washes dishes, mops the linoleum floor, and strides back and forth, sometimes peering out the small window.

My job is to listen to my mother between acts. She tells me I am lucky to have a bed of my own in a room I share with Sidney: she had to sleep with either an older sister or an aunt. I am lucky to have a teddy bear: she never had a doll or a stuffed animal. I am lucky because someday I will go to college: she was smart and worked hard in school but never had the opportunity. I am not lucky to live in an apartment with peeling linoleum and scratched wooden floors. My aunts and uncles walk barefoot on "wall-to-wall carpet."

Then the next act begins. Sometimes I ask my mother what the story is about. She tells me in a sentence. It's always bad news for the principal woman. In *Lucia di Lammermoor*, Lucia knifes her bridegroom and dies in front of wedding guests. In *Aida* and *Madame Butterfly*, the title characters commit suicide. José kills Carmen in the opera with her name on it. Gilda in *Rigoletto* dies at the hands of a hit man her father hired. Leonara in *Il Trovatore* swallows poison to avoid rape. Mimi in *La Bohème* and Violetta in *La Traviata* die of tuberculosis.

I can see my mother is sad, so I try to amuse her by looking at a book or a magazine and finding a big word I don't know. I try to pronounce it. When she cries, I ask her for three-digit numbers, add them in my head, and yell the answer like a stand-up comic desperately trying to wring smiles from a cranky audience. My wages are a plate of Fig Newtons and a glass of Nestle's Quik, heavy on the chocolate powder.

Every other Sunday evening my parents play bridge with my mother's five brothers and sisters, each with a spouse. They rotate from house to house: when it's our turn, the twelve adults sit in groups of four around three card tables. They all smoke cigarettes or cigars. My aunts notice what clothes others are wearing. If something is new, my mother asks, "What's something like that cost?" or "Where did you buy it?" Her tone, often accusatory, forces the offending sister to say, "I spent too much." That means she can afford to spend too much, which my mother can't.

As the card playing begins, aunts and uncles try to engage my father in small talk: "Seen any movies you like?" He stares at the chatterer and says, "Let's pay attention to our cards." He reads books about bridge strategy and knows

that 999 of 1,000 times a bridge hand has a card higher than a nine. He points out the mistakes in bidding others make. The uncles tell jokes and roar with laughter. As both my brother and I remember, our father never laughs.

I enjoy most about those evenings the opportunity to show off. My mother talks about how smart her children are: I can say the alphabet backward. An aunt or uncle calls to me, "Mahvin, show us what you can do." I stand proudly in my plaid knee-length shorts, my belly pushing against the fabric of my button-up shirt. Dark socks and dark leather shoes finish the look as I rapid-fire announce, "Z-Y-X-W-V-U-T-S . . ." and go all the way to "C-B-A," in a rush. The grown-ups applaud and hand me Brach's sugared fruit slices, M&M's King Size peanuts, and Tootsie Rolls.

In 1957 we drive down US Route 1 to Hollywood, Florida, where my father will be the principal of a Hebrew school that students attend after public school lets out. One night we eat at a Howard Johnson's. The table looks a lot like the one we have at home, with the same laminate surface. My father orders a hamburger and a wedge of iceberg lettuce. No ketchup or mustard on the burger. No dressing on the non-salad salad. My mother orders beef burgundy.

I request a small wedge of lettuce and a child's hamburger. Since we eat only kosher meat at home, I ask the waitress if it's kosher. She laughs and walks away. My father says it isn't. I ask, "Why are we eating it?" He says, "It's not important." My mother takes one forkful of beef burgundy and waves her hand to summon the waitress. She tells her, "It's undercooked." That's true. All the meat we eat at home is in the oven so long that hamburgers look like the eight balls I once saw. By the time the waitress brings back the beef burgundy, the rest of us have finished eating. My

mother complains to the waitress again. The manager comes back and gives my brother and me free desserts, vanilla ice cream with lots of chocolate sauce.

In Florida I glory in my father being a principal, which means he's the most important person, not just someone screamed at. He knows so much. He knows the frequency distribution of English letters: E most often, but people who think the other vowels follow immediately are wrong. (T, A, O, and N came next.) But he does not love talking to parents or to his school board. My mother's tirades become more specific: "You just want to read. Why don't you schmooze with them?"

The Atlantic Ocean is only two miles away, so we go to the beach, once. We spread a blanket on the sand. After a few minutes my mother jumps up and runs away with a cloud of gnats behind her. She says Revere Beach north of Boston is better, even though when we go there once my brother and I have to wear our Keds in the ocean because we "might step on a broken bottle."

Our house in Florida has 980 square feet and lacks air conditioning, but it has jalousie windows, glass slats that I crank up and down. One time I'm hot in the middle of the night. I rise to open our living room windows, closed to protect against robbers. My mother is also up, throwing shoes at palmetto bugs (a.k.a., giant cockroaches) scampering across the wooden floor.

In 1959 we suddenly drive back north to Massachusetts. I now know some American history and desperately want to stop in Washington, DC, to see the Capitol and the White House. My father says, "It's not important." We bypass them. We stay temporarily at the home of my grandfather, Louis Olasky. I watch him pray in the morning. He fastens to his

arms and forehead a deeply worn set of black straps and little black boxes. I ask my father why he doesn't put on those things. He says, "I'm not Orthodox like my father." That doesn't satisfy me. "But why?" He says it's not important.

As Christmas approaches, my fourth-grade public school class has the task of putting on the back wall of our schoolroom a paper mosaic of a nativity scene. The teacher assigns me to help to make the baby Jesus. In a spurt of hyper-Orthodoxy, I refuse, telling the principal, "If I don't believe this, why should I do it?" My father says, "It's not important." He brokers a compromise: I will work only on nonreligious parts of the mosaic. For the next week, I reluctantly spend art period cutting out white bits of paper that form the snow of a wintry scene.

By that time, we have a black-and-white television. I start watching Westerns: In the fall of 1959, prime time on television features twenty-six, including eight of the ten most-watched shows according to Nielsen ratings. My favorite is *The Rifleman*, the first television series to have a widowed father raising a son. The star, Chuck Connors, played in the NBA for the Boston Celtics in 1946: he was the first professional basketball player to shatter a glass backboard. On television he expertly handles a Winchester rifle with a modified trigger mechanism that allows for rapid-fire shots! During the opening credits each week Connors says, "A man doesn't run from a fight."

The other Western I watch is *Have Gun, Will Travel*, which debuts in 1957 and ranks fourth in the Nielsen ratings during its first four years. The star, Richard Boone, is not conventionally handsome. He has a wisp of a mustache like the one my father sometimes sports. He has a pockmarked face, and—most important—a nose that makes me wonder,

Could he be Jewish? (I later find out he is, or his mother was, which is officially good enough.)

Boone's character, Paladin, is ready to kill when necessary but prefers books and chess. He is obviously smart: I later hear screenwriter Sam Rolfe saying the success of the show hinges on Boone's ability to "play a high-IQ gunslinger and get away with it." Paladin quotes Shakespeare. (For the benefit of nine-year-olds, someone says, "That's Shakespeare, ain't it?") He drops so many references to Aristotle that one TV critic exults, "Where else can you see a gun fight and absorb a classical education at the same time?" Paladin is my hero. And he doesn't exist.

Those are my main childhood memories. I also remember names of a few prominent individuals my father mentions admiringly. David Ben-Gurion, the first prime minister of Israel. Henry Wallace, the US vice president in the early 1940s. Theologian Mordecai Kaplan.

When I become a teenager, I no longer admire my father, but I do admire two of his possessions: a mahogany four-drawer filing cabinet and a mahogany four-shelf bookcase. They aren't mismatched pieces like our other furniture: they make up an elegant set, and the drawers on the filing cabinet roll with exceptional smoothness.

One afternoon I try to rummage through the filing cabinet, but it's locked. After my father dies of cancer, my mother throws out its contents. All I remember of the bookcase's contents: several books by Kaplan, along with the classic *Meditations* of Stoic Marcus Aurelius. My father channeled that stoicism into the advice he offered others: "Expect the worst, so you won't be disappointed."

My mother expects the worst, but she is still disappointed. Here's one example: In 1965 my parents, my brother, and

I go to my father's twenty-fifth reunion and sleep for two nights in a Harvard dorm suite. My father surprises me by saying this is the first night he has ever spent in a dorm there. My mother says she wants to sip sherry in a Harvard master's home and sit in a seminar. If she does, she goes alone, because my father goes to sit in Widener Library: "I never got to use it much."

The *New York Times* reports that the reunion features "handshakes, talking, and laughter. But the man who would have made the difference for the class of 1940 was absent." I ask my father about that, and he surprises me by heatedly responding, "Kennedy was a faker. He didn't even write his own senior thesis."

My father refuses to go to the Essex County Country Club for a class picnic, and my mother surprisingly doesn't demand that: "We don't have the right clothes." I roam Harvard Square, and when I return, she walks once more on some well-trod territory: "Your father could have done so much, but he lacked ambition. I tried to help him achieve what he was capable of achieving. Do you know why he developed an escapist personality?" I say I do not know and leave the room.

Massachusetts is having a heat wave on those June days, but for some reason the heat in our suite comes on that night and we cannot stop it. My mother says she can't stand such a roasting. She tries unsuccessfully to find a janitor. She comes back muttering about how she's almost always unlucky.

"But there was one time," she says, and tells a story about November 28, 1942. A wealthy boyfriend drives her to one of downtown Boston's premier nightclubs, the Cocoanut Grove. The Grove has columns that look like palm trees with light fixtures made to look like cocoanuts.

Dark blue satin covers the ceilings, bamboo and rattan the walls. Drapes conceal exits.

That night, though, she and her date cannot get in because the nightclub, with an official capacity of 460, already has one thousand people inside. Later, a fire breaks out and spreads rapidly. Patrons crawl through thick clouds of smoke. Bodies pile up at a jammed revolving door. Some that open inward do not open at all when dozens of people press against them. The death toll is 492, making it the deadliest nightclub fire ever.

My mother says, “The best thing in my life was not being in that fire.”

In 2008, when my mother is dying, I start slowly filling a filing cabinet drawer with facts and stories gained from her and from my brother and cousins—sometimes their own observations, sometimes things my father told them. From their memories I’ve reconstructed scenes and conversations, keeping in mind characterizations like this one from a cousin about my mother: “The angriest woman I ever met.”

Why was my mother so angry? In 2017, getting serious about understanding my parents, I request my father’s Harvard records—and they are a revelation.