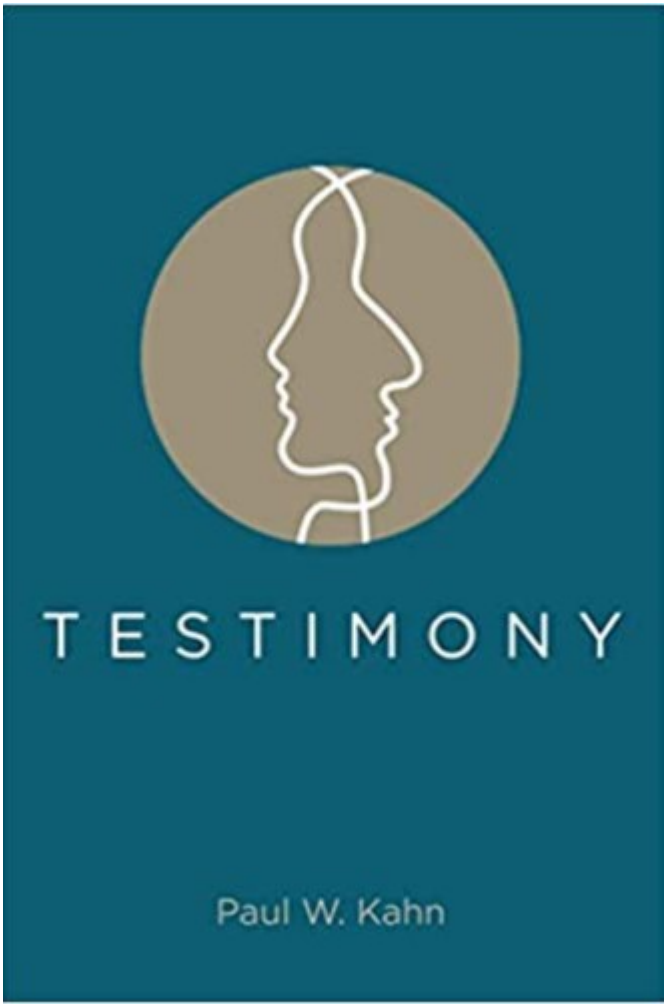
What if forgiveness were unthinkable?

Paul Kahn’s memoir of his family is a cautionary mirror for our cultural moment.

by James K. A. Smith in the September 8, 2021 issue

In Review



Testimony

Cascade Books

By Paul W. Kahn
Buy from Bookshop.org ›

Is there anything more maddening, perplexing, and utterly inscrutable than a family, even the one closest to us?

Paul Kahn's unique and brave book probes the intimate, perplexing, and painful mystery of his own family. Above all, the book is an unparalleled exercise in paying attention. If, as Simone Weil said, attention is love, then Kahn loves his parents deeply. Kahn, a political philosopher at Yale, undertakes an almost phenomenological dissection of his mother and father's lifelong marriage—although "marriage" here seems like a generous description for what is more of a tortured entanglement than a relationship.

Testimony begins with an Angela Lansbury-grade mystery: "On my mother's seventy-fifth birthday, she began to confess. By her eightieth birthday, she was dead." The confession? An adulterous affair, years ago.

Kahn wonders what compelled his mother to confess what had been successfully hidden for a lifetime. He suspects a mix of need and hope. As much as confession asks for forgiveness, it also demands recognition, and his mother may have finally found the courage to demand to be seen. On the other hand, she may have been hoping for a happy ending: "My mother, at seventy-five, wanted her life story to end as romantic comedy. She had no idea that tragedy was sitting out there as an alternative plot line, for she never read tragedy."

The book recounts the horror story that follows this confession—what Kahn doesn't shrink from calling the abuse and even torture his mother suffered at the hands of his father. We can't imagine why or how they could possibly remain living together, and yet proximity seemed to be their only way of being in the world. Even during his mother's final prolonged illness, his father berates, belittles, and hounds her. "There is no vacation from hell," Kahn avers.

"How can we so hate those we love?" This organizing question itself raises the question of whether Kahn, despite his close attention, is an unreliable narrator—perhaps someone who needs to believe that love somehow lurks beneath this terror. The attribution of love to his parents' relationship seems seriously unfounded by the end of the story. A bond, yes. A covenant, even. But love? Not all being with is communion, and not all passion is love. To suggest otherwise is to give

the abuser credit undeserved.

Kahn is best at trying to plumb the depths of his father's psychology. (He exhibits more sympathy for the torturer than the tortured, it seems to me.) At one point he asks his father: "Are you evil or sick?" Kahn's sympathy sees a sickness: PTSD. While part of a neuro-ethics program at Yale that put him in conversation with doctors at a local VA hospital, Kahn learned that PTSD is a sort of inverse amnesia. Unable to forget, "memory overwhelms." The past trauma is ever present, and so the sufferer, constantly facing the threat, is back in the trench.

Kahn sees two primal traumas in his father's life: the loss of his own father at a young age, followed by the crucible of World War II. "It took my father more than half a life to escape Patton's army," Kahn surmises. "With my mother's confession, he was in the grip of a new obsession. Again, he lost control of his memory. He could think of nothing else." Thus he ends his years by playing the role of victimizer: "My father may have served as a medic in the War, but in his old age, he practiced the skills of the torturer."

Kahn's father—an atheist who, despite being a secular Jew, loathed religion—could be seen as a cautionary mirror for our cultural moment. He shows us what the world would look like if forgiveness were unthinkable: "an entirely secular person, he believed in justice, not forgiveness."

Kahn himself does not want to live in such a world. He wants a world where love enables us to forgive, which is to say he wishes his father could have forgiven his mother. His father's cosmos is bleak—without God, without grace, only the bare law of what one is owed as the measure of justice. Kahn accepts his father's atheism, but you can sense his discomfort with what that seems to entail. He knows he wants love and forgiveness. Can we have that without faith? He looks almost longingly at the Christian hope of resurrection but then concludes: "Who can believe this today?"

After his mother's death, as he tries to know how to mourn her in the face of his father's monstrosity, grief becomes a parable of secularization. He first senses the paucity of secularism in contemplating hospice, which operates in a world stripped of the rituals. Modern hospice "relies on love alone," he observes, "and I am not at all sure that love is enough." This experience causes stress fractures in his previously confident secular outlook: "We need the faith that comes only with a practice of love; we need traditional ritual." Kahn settles for demythologized faith: "I

call my faith love," he confesses. "There is no longer a caring God, but our lives are still filled with the sacred."

Gently, I might suggest that Kahn is still too much his father's son. At one point he admits: we moderns "live as Christians, wanting bodily immortality, but without belief." He is resolute in refusing his father's refusal of forgiveness. Why not consider refusing his atheism? Why should the limits of our imagination—what we find believable—be confused with the bounds of what could be true? Imagine a love stronger than death; imagine a God who is love; imagine your mother was right: we are living in a divine comedy in which the last word is love.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "A family's painful mystery."