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In what ways are George and Howard tinkers, and how are their traditions indirectly passed down from generation to generation?

In “Tinkers”, Paul Harding illustrates how being a tinker and fixing things can be applied to all aspects of life. George and Howard use their unique gifts to take control of their lives in their own ways.

To be a tinker means to fix things – however, George and Howard are tinkers both literally and figurative. George describes the feeling of fixing an old clock: “Each piece of the clock was a small city, and he was the mayor of each one. They ticked and whirred and meshed, and every now and then he had to go into each one and tinker a little, oil a gear or a pin, just as the mayor of a city, say might have to make small repairs here and there, patch a pothole or shore up a bridge.” He compares being a tinker to being a mayor, since both control and maintain something that has many parts which make up a whole. This illustrates that he views his work in high regard, as he compares his trade to a very respectable position. Furthermore, George’s mindset also connects to how he is a tinker in other aspects. Not only do tinkers fix physical items such as clocks, but they also fix the human condition. George, for example, uses his hallucinations to keep the memory of his past alive: this includes much of his family now gone such as Howard. As George lays on his bed in the house he built, “The second floor fell on him,

with its unfinished pine framing and dead-end plumbing (the capped pipes never joined to the sink and toilet he had once intended to install) and racks of old coats and boxes of forgotten board games and puzzles and broken toys and bags of family pictures - some so old they were exposed on tin plates – all of it came crashing down into the cellar, he unable to even raise a hand to protect his face” (Harding 2). George describes the second story of his house collapsing and falling onto him – because his house is one of his creations, its destruction represents the deterioration of his own mind as well. Describing the broken-down framing and plumbing, and household items scattered throughout paints a vivid picture of losing an important part of his family’s history. Specifically, the destruction of his house represents the hallucinations he has (making it unclear as to whether his house really collapsed or that he simply imagined it). Ironically, George uses his condition in a positive way, by remembering others. By remembering others, he keeps them alive and is a tinker of sorts, of the human condition – therefore, his hallucinations can be seen as more of a talent than a symptom of a disease.

Likewise, George’s father, Howard, also tinkers with humans. He suffers from epileptic fits, which randomly cause him great pain and give him seizures. Similar to George, he uses his condition as a tool, and prefers to see it as a gift or talent, not a hindrance. He states, “And as the ax bites into the wood, be comforted in the fact that the ache in your heart and the confusion in your souls means that you are still alive, still human, and still open to the beauty of the world, even though you have done nothing to deserve it.” He uses a metaphor to compare his epileptic fits to an axe biting into his body, or a tree. While this shows how much they cause him to suffer, he still finds ways to appreciate it. He illustrates how simply feeling is a gift and should be valued, because he is experiencing life. His epileptic fits remind him to live life to the fullest, despite how much they hurt. These cause him to try to be a good father. However, it is only out

of shame that Howard runs away from his family one day because he does not want his family to see him as a weak and dying old man. Harding writes, “The despair came from the fact that his wife saw him as a fool, as a useless tinker, a copier of bad verses from two-penny religious magazines, an epileptic, and could find no reason to turn her head and see him as something better.” Howard is ashamed of who he is – an epileptic and a failed tinker – and wishes that his son, George, become something better. (Ironically, this leads George down a path of becoming a tinker too). In fact, Howard even once accidentally bit George’s hand when George was sticking a spoon in Howard’s mouth during one of his seizures. This caused George to hate Howard; yet, in the end, George still remained loyal to his family’s trade and became a tinker. This illustrates how traditions are passed down: they are not necessarily taught and enforced. Interestingly, it can often be the opposite of what is intended to be passed down. Even though George did not like his father as a child, he grew to respect him and tries to keep the memory of him alive.

George and Howard are tinkers of the human condition, and use their conditions to enhance their field. George uses his hallucinations to keep the memory of his family alive, while Howard uses his epileptic fits to be reminded to appreciate life. Paul Harding implores the audience, through George and Howard, to take control of one’s life in spite of challenges.