

July 17, 2012

I'm probably not the first person to stand here and say this is a new experience. Death of a parent, a grandparent, a brother, a husband. A confidante. A friend. But then, maybe the merging of fresh and familiar is the appropriate mixture when talking about Leon, my father. We keep coming back to bits from movies, from books, from stories other people tell, to try and comprehend the events of the past few days. But that's my Dad, whose life reads like pages of a storybook.

Together with his sister Jeannette, he was born half a world away, in Kobe, Japan, in the 1930s. Coming from the same Eastern European stock common to so many of us in this room, his parents veered left – to a late-colonial life in the Far East – when others went right – to North America. I think that set the precedent for his life.

He was a beautiful baby boy, with an impish, expressive face retained right through his life. So beautiful, in fact, that his mother submitted a picture of him to a contest held by a local dairy... and wouldn't you know it, baby Leon won.

As an eight-year-old in Shanghai – where his family relocated on the eve of war – he witnessed the Japanese march into the city the day after Pearl Harbor. He'd tell us of a boyhood spent with a Swastika draped across the street; about listening to secret Allied broadcasts on his parents' radio set; about the whistle of bombs falling from American air

raids; about P-51s swooping out of the clouds over the city. When the Americans liberated them, he said, it was like they were twelve feet tall, with their tanks and their trucks and their planes parked wingtip to wingtip. He held a reverence and admiration for our neighbor south of the border that refracted through the generations, all the way to two of his four children – me and my sister Miri – who’ve made our homes on the U.S. West Coast.

But the place that touched him most, he’d always say, was where his family lived for two years after the war, and that was Italy.

They only managed to get there, all the way from China, thanks to some secret help my grandfather gave the Italians during the war; my father once proudly showed me a letter his father had kept, from some Italian dignitary in Shanghai, granting them highest consideration upon arrival. Traveling by steamer around Asia and through the Suez Canal, my fifteen-year-old father rode camels around the Great Pyramid of Giza, drank at Raffles Hotel in Singapore, and walked the streets of Bombay. When my grandparents settled in Rome, my father went to school in Florence, and his love of the city reverberated through his soul. With his gift for languages, he picked up Italian and remained fluent his whole life.

Thanks to my great-uncle marrying a Canadian during the war – my great-aunt Lou, who’s here today from Vancouver – my father and his family settled in Montreal in 1949. Leon attended McGill University and

became a lawyer. He was a member of the Quebec Bar for over fifty years. During that time he transitioned from young, independent-minded attorney – a dapper single man who, we used to joke, dated half the city – to family man, husband, father of four children, and, eventually, six grandchildren.

But such facts and events, amazing as they are, are only facets of the full picture of who my father was. He thirsted to know more about people and things, a yearning that went beyond education. He drew, he painted, he loved music – everything from Verdi to Brahms to the Beatles. All his life he lived in cities, but his love of nature was unparalleled – he'd tell my sisters the only way to shoot an animal was with a camera.

People overuse the word “family man,” but that old shoe fit my father well. “La familia,” he'd call it, raising a glass at reunions like the one we were set to have later this week. He was enormously proud of us, his children, but the light of his life was his grandchildren. He held weekly brunches with the little ones; went to all their school plays, piano recitals, and hockey games; trudged up flights of stairs with his cane to see model cities and ships built by my nephews using lots of scotch tape and the cardboard from his folded shirts. He took them to events ranging from classical concerts to the movie *The Avengers* to the Italian community's Centro Leonardo Da Vinci – which one of my nephews dubbed the Centro Leonardo Di Caprio. He engaged his grandchildren, truly engaged them, on a level they understood, but never like they were anything less than his equals. At the same time, he remained a kid at

heart himself; he could always be counted on to make a baby laugh with a funny face or an impossible-to-duplicate sound or expression.

Lust for life is another cliché my father embodied. Food, wine, dancing, skiing, swimming, soccer. He did them all, even when age and orthopedics made it difficult or impractical. Having come of age during the Second World War, he became a *de facto* expert on the subject; my mother quickly learned to nod off to the literal sound and fury of *The Longest Day* or *Bridge on the River Kwai*. But beyond militarism, his fixation on the events he experienced firsthand as a child led to an interest in history as a discipline, and to personal histories as well. It was rare for somebody to meet my father and not, within the first ten minutes, have shared where they came from, what languages they spoke, the origin of their surnames.

His passions, too, were the stuff of legend, and romance was always his thing. After all the dates and dalliances, he linked up with a 22-year-old Israeli gal on a blind date in London in 1968. True to form, my father showed up late in the lobby of the Park Lane Hotel with a spot of shaving cream behind one ear. Still, the date lasted eighteen hours, and after it and a season of letter-writing, the couple married in Jerusalem that Christmas Eve. Oh, don't kid yourself, not everybody was on board: two astonished sets of parents and siblings were joined by my mother's quirky aunt Jenny, who at their wedding wore a black dress and told everybody "these long-distance marriages never last."

Well, 44 years later...

Here again, though, emerged the iconoclastic within the stereotypical: theirs may have been a storybook meeting and romance, but they defied the gender roles of the age: my father, a male from the 1950s, was brazenly unafraid to show emotion – he cried at every opera he saw. He gravitated toward strong, smart women he could admire and respect. And there was nobody he found those qualities in more than my mother and, as they grew to adulthood, my three sisters. (Mantra to them: “don’t take shit from anyone!”)

Not like he made it entirely easy for their prospective suitors: our wall of historic military armaments, rifles and swords acquired by my grandparents in their time in Italy, struck a tremor into boyfriends real and would-be. So too did the “Friday night initiation,” those weekly Shabbat dinners my parents held that left many wondering if those ornamental guns were intended for actual use (they weren’t).

He transcended boundaries on other levels, too, blending a personal and professional life in the Italian and Jewish communities. Our house was filled as equally with Italian rolls as it was with challah bread – and, courtesy of my father, lots of breadcrumbs. Later, in my twenties, when I told my parents I was gay, he wasn’t quite sure what to think: what would I do without the love of a good woman? he asked the night I told him. But he trusted my judgment, and grew to embrace my life and orientation. Attending a Pride parade with me in New York a dozen

years back, he thrilled to the opening motorcycle contingent – Dykes on Bikes – while hoping for a day when such marches would become altogether unnecessary. Soon after, he and my mother became good friends with a gay couple; two years ago, when Ron and Don decided to tie the knot, he officiated at their wedding.

You'd expect from a Montreal Jewish attorney a sense of seriousness, but my father was anything but: his ribald sense of humor was legendary, mixing hackneyed expressions with groan-worthy puns, Italian profanity with dirty jokes.

Meanwhile, he managed to imbue our moral universes with balance: use judgment, he'd insist, but don't be judgmental; think critically, he said, but don't be cynical. His philanthropic urge went way, way back: his late mother, my grandmother, told us how, for one of his birthdays back in Shanghai, he received a magnificent train set. But instead of keeping it for himself, he insisted it be donated to less fortunate children in the city. In adulthood he volunteered with Magen David Adom (Israel's Red Cross); with the Special Olympics; with a Meals on Wheels organization. He also spoke to schoolchildren of all stripes about the Holocaust and the War, and once sponsored a child in Africa.

My father would always sum up this mixture, his mixture, of groundedness and free-spiritedness in three words: "Roots and wings," and that's what he tried to instill in all of us. Although he chose to practice Judaism in his own, unconventional way, he remained an

ardent Zionist his whole life; he once told me that, while living in Italy and hearing about the Israeli War of Independence, he itched to join the fight even though he was too young. Dancing at the Western Wall on Simchat Torah with one of our relatives from California he emoted, “this is what it’s all *about!*”

But with all that, he was never the sort of father who held us to fixed standards and expectations; his pride in our careers, our lives, and above all our – and his – descendants was what really kept him going.

Shortly after he entered his latest – and last – bout of hospitalization, my sister Naomi sent us an e-mail about a dream she’d had: In it, we were all at our father’s bedside. He looked as he did when we were kids, and he turned to her, called her “Naomi Lara,” as he would back in those days, and said, “I see you’ve been reminiscing.”

That was, I think, his greatest gift on his final days on Earth: a chance for us to recollect, to remember, to gather our thoughts, to say goodbye. To reiterate, for me, how my life’s travels echoed his footsteps – from the gardens of Shanghai where he played as a boy, to the courtyards of Florence where he studied, to the forest graveyard in Riga where his kin lay fallen but never forgotten, to the ski fields of the Matterhorn where he beheld the great mountain alone.

After his death this past Friday, we drove home from the hospital. My sister Tamara pointed her car to the west, toward home, and beheld the

most spectacular sunset she'd ever seen: the sun a gargantuan, fiery orange sphere sinking fast toward the horizon. My father, in that most exquisite melding of the timeworn and the original, always loved sunsets. Like God painting the sky, he called it. There was no doubt in our minds what nature's most incredible light show that July evening could be.

It was Leon. Our friend. Our relation. Our baba. Our love. Our Daddy.