



Father's Day in the Time of Corona

It has been 13 ½ years since my father passed away. I think of him every day still. A modest man who on the surface was not slated for greatness. And yet he would become one of the leading rabbis of the bay area from 1952 until his death in 2006. My Dad would tell me of his childhood growing up in Squirrel Hill in Pittsburg. Every day he would go to *cheder* after school. One of five children raised by hard working parents, my grandfather Morris was an immigrant from Poland, and my grandmother Lena was second generation American. As my Dad matured he realized that he wanted to be a rabbi but that orthodoxy was not for him. Rabbi Solomon Freehoff was to become his mentor developing a friendship that they maintained throughout their lives. Attending Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion, he almost did not become ordained. My Dad had a disability. He wore glasses since the age of two and had numerous eye surgeries to try and correct his vision. The surgeons could never get it quite right and so for much of his early years of life he would have to tilt his head in order to see. The "powers that be" felt that he would never get a job and therefore should not be ordained. The student body rallied to his support and said if he wasn't going to be ordained, neither would they. I rarely saw my Dad get angry. But one of my earliest memories was when I was a small child and made fun of his eyes. The fact that I remember this is not so much because of his anger, but because I realized I inadvertently hurt his feelings and touched upon a pain that persisted throughout the years. Not wanting to disappoint my father let alone hurt him was common among me and my three siblings.

But those same eyes gave him a unique sense of vision to see the world. Remember that quote by Robert Kennedy? "Some men see the world and ask why. Others dream of a world and ask why not?" Well my Dad was of the latter category. He was a dreamer. And he could see the world through hopeful eyes. Eternally optimistic even in the most divisive of times. He proudly and courageously joined with Martin Luther King Jr in the civil rights movement. He travelled to the deep south to march and risked his life for what he believed. Later during the Vietnam war, he spoke out against the war at a time when it was very unpopular to do so. He had an uncommon ability to seek out justice and pursue it. When I think of my Dad I wonder where he and his colleagues gained their moral courage and allowed their moral outrage to fuel their actions. Congregations were divided, even then. But there was a respect that the rabbi could speak his mind and folks could agree to disagree. We need more of this. More leadership. More moral outrage. More courage. More listening.

After my Dad retired something amazing happened. He went to see his ophthalmologist who told him that after 67 years he no longer needed glasses! So, he took them off! I never did quite get used to seeing him without glasses. But perhaps in retirement God told him he could give those eyes a rest. Or perhaps after fighting the good cause for 50 years he no longer needed assistance to see the world clearly. He knew the weakness of humanity. He knew of its struggles. It did not bother him. It only encouraged him to try harder. Speak more forcefully. He never stopped believing in the innate goodness of all people.

Before he died he said, "I have been blessed in my life and I am forever grateful. But I am doubly blessed because I know it". Wouldn't it be a wonderful world if we all were able to count our blessings? And to live in a world in which we knew we were loved and cherished for who we are?

Happy Father's Day pop, I miss you every day still.

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