

A Celebration of Alvin Wasserman

August 29, 2015

I'm not saying I had the best father in the world. But I would lay anyone odds that I had one of the most unique. All of you know what a privilege it was to know him; all of you have your own stories to treasure.

- He coached my powder puff softball team when no other dad would, and helped me design a lemonade stand, providing an early lesson in capitalism. We loved the Dodgers, and then the Giants, and then especially when the Dodgers played the Giants.
- You should have seen his face when he tried to teach my poor, old grandmother how to drive, and she rather predictably plowed right through the neighbor's fence!
- We went horseback riding, and when his horse unexpectedly took off, Dad hung on for dear life, cigars flying out of his shirt pocket in all directions, as he yelled, "Whoa, you sonofabitch!"
- In 1965, shortly after spray-painting mom's Corvair, by hand of course, he bought a rusty old 1942 Studebaker, so ugly! At 15, totally horrified, I routinely had him drop me off at high school a full block away. He always referred to that year as the time he "almost" drove me to school...we laughed about it together, as recently as a few weeks ago, in fact.
- We got lost sailing on Lake Tahoe, looking for Emerald Bay, and we will forever deny that the half a gallon of cheap white wine we had onboard had anything to do with our navigation.
- He loved ribs, Chinese food, cheesecake, and just about anything his kids cooked for him. He was also a gracious host, delighting in breaking bread with friends in his own home.

My father was an imperfect man, but honest about the ways he fell short. In his last year, he was sometimes honest to a fault, accepting all kinds of responsibility for what he would call his "emotional absence," especially when my brother and I were little. He felt very badly that he had not fully appreciated his wife, our mother, during their marriage. I so wish he had been able to give himself more credit for all the times, the amazing number of times, he got it right.

"I did the best I could at the time, with what I had," one of his two favorite mantras. And when his best didn't work out as he would have liked it to, he came up with his other favorite: "Sometimes the magic doesn't work."

During the past year, I tried to convince him that I thought he and Mom had provided me with tools for a damn good life, and that...all told... he had been a truly exceptional father. He always wanted to hear more about why I thought so, and was also quick to balance what I said with a litany of his flaws. As these last few months passed, I realized that he was spending some time holding himself accountable, evaluating his life, taking stock.

My father was many things to many people. I'm sure most of you knew him as kind, generous, very funny, a wonderful storyteller...and also a serious, thoughtful man...not to be confused, however, with "easy," although he tried very hard to be. Dad was fully capable of being stubborn, difficult, combative. In other words, he was complicated, like most of us. No, he wasn't always easy, but he tried to listen, support, and to see things from another's perspective, even if he didn't like what he saw. He was very good at respecting someone else's views that were contrary to his own, as long as there was intellectual honesty to the debate...

That is, unless the discussion was about the "Working Man," the "average Joe" who worked way too hard for way too little, while corporate America's obscene profits soared into the stratosphere! Right? Come on, who here doesn't recognize this argument? Dad was a champion of the underdog, the disadvantaged, the victims of racism, classism, sexism, and he expressed his convictions and values in serious action:

- When I was in high school in the 60's, Dad was arrested during a sit-in, protesting racial discrimination in hiring practices on famed Auto Row, Van Ness Ave., in San Francisco.
- Many of you probably know that Dad and his best friend, Bill Poole, terrified but committed, joined Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in his March from Selma to Montgomery, AL.
- Dad and I walked with Cesar Chavez on a long, hot, 4 day protest through Central CA, during the grape boycott, staying with braceros who offered us rice and beans, a place on their floor to sleep, and an outhouse.
- He was a radical, anti-war activist who expressed his beliefs in action, and was again arrested at the Oakland Induction Center as he tried to prevent young men from registering to go to war. He said, "It has to start somewhere, sometime, by people like us." And it happened: people like us stopped that war.

- For many years, Dad wrote an opinion column in the local newspaper, ran study groups, always generating wide-ranging commentary. He was an instigator, a thoughtful firebrand, who enjoyed polite discussion, but who lived for political action, revolution preferably, in the streets.

No one was more passionate or enthusiastic at a demonstration: Wearing his beret, shaking his fist: "Viva La Huelga! " "Hey, Hey, LBJ, how many kids did you kill today?" And he would always say, "Remember: There's no damn difference between the Democrats and Republicans...none of them work for us!"

The man who put his money where his mouth was, and who provided his kids with a role model who represented the importance of defining goals, values, and ideas, challenging authority, and who actively tried to make the world better, also showed us how to have fun: He jumped out of a plane with a parachute... and broke his leg; he bought a pool table; he loved to dance, read and write, and watch movies at all hours of the day and night. He drove a string of fabulous sports cars, and loved all of his boats. He traveled around the world with Mom, and they were hosted by the People's Republic of China even before President Nixon was.

His letter to the Chinese government requesting permission to travel to China ended with, "Power to the People!" A big, bald guy, heavily bearded with long hair, respectful, excited, smiling. I'm sure the Chinese had no idea what to make of him, but no doubt ended up finding him irresistible, quite the character. I thought Dad made a much better first American ambassador than President Nixon. Later, in another life, he lived on his sailboat, the "Don Quixote," (of course), with his second wife, with whom he sailed the Mediterranean.

Dad told good and bad jokes, often cracking himself up, and he wrote and read his stories with "gusto," one of the first adult words he taught me. He took great pride in his writings and delighted in sharing the gift of his stories with others.

Dad tried to treat people how he wanted to be treated, with humanity and respect. He accepted his imperfections, took responsibility...tried hard to be a mensch, in Yiddish: a good man.

My father was Alvin Wasserman, a very • good • man, and I am extremely proud to be his daughter. I will love and miss him forever.