

8-29-15

My Dad, Al Wasserman, was a principled man. He taught me and encouraged others to consider our values. What do we believe in? Where did our values come from? Do they serve us? How do we act on them?

He was an intellectual man. Up at 3am every night, for decades, writing, reading - and noshing. A voracious reader, he consumed books on labor's history, economic globalization, U.S. foreign policy and the occasional Hollywood memoir the way kids pound down milkshakes, with about as much gusto and relish. He led study groups with the Resource Center for Nonviolence in Santa Cruz and he became a regular contributor and columnist to a local newspaper.

He was a man with a strong moral compass. An activist in the civil rights and anti war movements, he marched with Martin Luther King Jr. from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. Dad had seen footage, on the news, of the beatings on Pettus Bridge. He quickly bought a plane ticket to Alabama, happened to meet a news reporter returning home who gave Dad his press badge, thereby allowing him access to the march. He marched with his dear, lifelong friend, Bill Pool (and, as he liked to mention, alongside one of his other heroes, Pete Seeger.) My Mom called Millbrae Furniture every day to tell them my Dad was sick and wouldn't be in to work that day. Bill loved telling how funny it was when Dad came back to work with a great tan after a week of "sick leave"! But it was a compelling and dangerous thing to do, and I am proud of my Dad for having participated in this march, and for demonstrating, sitting in, protesting and even going to jail for so many just causes.

A supporter of the disenfranchised, working people and countries that placed their citizens above profit, Dad studied Cuba, China, Palestine and, more recently, Venezuela. He and my Mom were among the first Westerners to travel to The People's Republic of China in the early 70's (before Nixon). Dad was actually invited there, as a guest. They got to watch surgeries performed without anesthesia other than acupuncture (after which patients awakened and stepped off the operating table themselves) and met "barefoot doctors," farmers who were provided enough basic medical training to work in rural villages where urban-trained doctors would not settle.

He was a man who struggled and changed with the times. Having married and raised feminists, his consciousness began to become enlightened in that regard, too. No, Dad, you can't expect to get everything you need from just one person. And yes, Dad, the George Foreman Grill did help unlock your creativity in the kitchen.

Dad had over 60 paid jobs throughout his life (setting bowling pins as a kid, working in his parents' produce store, buying and selling print shop lead, selling furniture and carpet to celebrities in Palm Springs - where Frank Sinatra preferred to be waited on by Dad's father, my Papa Joe, even though Papa Joe ruthlessly mangled the star's name: as in, "Hello, Mr. Snotra!"), and later as a therapist. He owned dozens of cars, restored at least a dozen classic, wooden boats and left his creative mark on more than a few homes. By his touch, he improved upon and made more beautiful each of these structures and transports. To him, each of them had a history, a story. And they shaped his.

A confident man who grew more humble over time, I knew Dad to be a person of integrity and honor. Over the last several months, his caregivers routinely noted his dignity. He was a person of character. A nice person. A mensch. He had a big heart and a generosity of spirit. He liked to invest in people. Not so much in organizations, but in people. An acquaintance fell on hard times and Dad responded by paying his rent for a couple months. A friend's manicurist raised money for children back home in Vietnam and Dad became her biggest supporter. His dear friends enriched their community in the Philippines by teaching the children everything from computer skills to English to boat building - and Dad helped write the checks.

You give because it feels good and because you want to. Not because you have to. You spend time with those you love because you choose to, not because it is expected. Form opinions and speak your mind. Dream. Take risks. Do the unexpected. Laugh out loud and often. Stand for what you believe in. Affect change. Enjoy the moment and don't let planning for the future compromise your experience of today. Remember and learn from our history. And when you can't remember the past and the future is tenuous at best, relax and hold hands with a loved one on your deck, feel the sunshine on your face, listen to the birds and drink it all in.

I will probably never be as bold and decisive as my Dad was. I know I will never tell jokes and stories as well as he could. But John and I both emulate him in other ways. We teach our son to follow his heart. To know true adventure. To travel and not to shy away from new experiences. To open his mind to foreign ways, interesting and unusual people, street food and a change in plans. To live within his means without selling his soul to the company store, or to Apple or... whatever. (As his Dad, my Papa Joe, said before him, "If you don't have the cash, don't buy it.") To be kind and fair and to work for social justice. As a young (or younger) parent, when I occasionally grew exasperated or responded in anger, my Dad emphasized, "Just be sure to stay connected. After an argument go back and take care to reconnect," he would say. Maintain a commitment to those you love. Apologize, communicate, demonstrate humility.

Most important, Dad taught me, by way of example, all about unconditional love. He loved his children that way. He loved his grandchildren that way. Just three weeks ago, he told me, "You always try to do the best thing for me. I couldn't have asked for a better daughter." (I can convey that because I know he showered my siblings with similar praise.) Just two months ago, he inscribed my copy of his latest book: "I will always be proud of who you are and what you do. You have always pleased me. Love, Dad." Those words are more powerful to me than I can relate. In my heart, he will always cheer me on. He will coach and console me. He will always love me unconditionally, and I will continue to love him right back, the same way.

Always.

Cindy Wasserman

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