

## ZICHRONOT

Written and presented by Barbara Davidson

When Rabbi Lauren asked me to speak about memory, I immediately thought of my father.

My father, Charles David Ross, Charlie as he was known, died thirty years ago this coming Saturday, Shabbat-Yom Kippur, Oct 3, 1987. At his funeral, Rabbi Alan Miller, of blessed memory, said "To die on Shabbat is a great honor, and to die on Yom Kippur Shabbat is the greatest honor." Why did God bestow this honor on my father, a man who never prayed in the traditional way, never kept kosher or went to shul except for a year on a daily basis, at twenty-four, to say Kaddish for his father, and when he attended family celebrations like weddings and bar-mitzvot? His cynical comment on the high holidays was "Folks like to get all dressed up to be clothes to God...c-l-o-t-h-e-s!"

Every Yom Kippur he stayed home from his office where he worked hard on his feet as a dentist. That day he ate a big breakfast while my mother and aunt were fasting. He was happy to have time on that day for his many hobbies and creative endeavors.

We knew for a month he was dying of lung cancer. He was placed on a respirator because he could not breathe. We all prayed at different milestones during that extended period: Dear God, please don't let him die on Labor Day when everyone will be away. Please don't let him die on my birthday. Don't let him die on Rosh Hashanah. That is when our son Michael, his only grandchild, was born. We welcomed this cherished child on Yom Tov, the Jewish New Year. We watched

the machine breathe for him for a month and talked to him with words of comfort, appreciation and love. We held his hand. And then it was just before

we left to pray Kol Nidre when his blood pressure dropped so precariously low we wondered how he could survive another night?

He loved his work. Every Friday when other dentists in Queens spent their day off playing golf, Dad drove to Greenpoint Hospital in Brooklyn to provide free dental care in their clinic for the poor and underserved. For decades, he never missed a single day. In his own practice, if patients could not pay, they would often end up in our house at some future time hanging a fixture or repairing our boiler. Our car had a St Christopher medal, the patron saint of travelers, pinned above the dashboard to keep us safe. It was placed there by one of Dad's patients, the priest from St Joseph's Catholic Church. He used to drive him back to the rectory on his way home after the last appointment of the day.

He served for years as President of the Bryant Parents Association where my brother and I attended high school and he arranged for his Kiwanis Club to donate scholarships to deserving graduates. He was the steady rock in every emergency and the life of the party who played piano by ear. It was by example that his children chose helping professions, his son a caring physician and me a social worker.

Yom Kippur morning, around 10:30, I called home from the coat closet (where in those days there was a phone) after our son Michael, then 16, finished reciting the *v'ahavtah* prayer on the *bimah* and I could let out a sigh of relief. I reached

my brother Albert who confirmed what I already knew in my heart, Dad had died that morning around 1 AM. He had withheld the news from us so Mike could get through his honor without distress.

Once I returned to my seat, quietly tearful, word spread quickly throughout the shul. While George was marooned in the choir stall, people kept coming to where I sat to console me. By the time *Yizkor* service commenced, I fantasized it was a funeral service for my father. What better place could I have been that day than at the SAJ, cocooned from the world and embraced by my community of family, friends and extended family?

So for me, when one thinks about Memory, what endures is not how fervently you pray but how fervently you live. When a person has died, it is our tradition to say “May his memory be a blessing.” I do believe God blessed my father for the memories he created in so many lives by his generosity of spirit, his authenticity and his creating meaning by using his gifts to serve others. I think there was a reason God waited to end his life on such an auspicious day, perhaps not so much as an honor but as a lesson.

Barbara J. Davidson

9/20/17