

Preparing for the Inevitable

I was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, as were Mom and Dad and almost all their extended families. My parents' names are Irv and Joy, but I grew up in an era when kids only called their parents "Mom and Dad." They were only teenagers when they got married. It didn't take long and then came four kids: my older sister Carole, me, my brother David and finally my sister Cherie. In order to make ends meet, we moved from one city to another as Dad got a promotion or took another job for an increase in salary. The jobs were mostly managing shoe stores or Discount Houses (early versions of Target). He put in monstrously long hours fueled with endless cups of coffee and cigarettes. When I was in 3rd grade, we moved to Indianapolis, Indiana for yet another job in retail.

Dad may have worked his *tush* off but he wasn't much of a complainer. He was practical about it: to take care of the family you have to work hard, make sacrifices, take advantage of opportunities and prepare for whatever may come. His work ethic did not come with a woe-is-me attitude. Rather, he always had such energy and enthusiasm. When we'd pop in to visit him at work, I'd marvel as he bounced from one customer to another with a quick smile and a ready response for whatever they needed.

He had a fun and easy rapport with his co-workers. Eventually, one of those who had worked for my Dad years earlier found a great job with Allstate Insurance Company and urged my Dad to check it out. He did, took a chance, took the job selling insurance and built a successful career that lasted more than thirty years, all in Indianapolis.

Susan and the boys and I would try to get to Indy at least a couple of times a year. Since the boys went to URJ Goldman Union Camp Institute (GUCI) right outside of Indy, we organized family reunions around camp drop off and pick-up.

Several years ago, when I flew in to visit them, Dad had a special mission for me. He wanted me to go with him to the Jewish funeral home and help him make pre-burial arrangements and then choose plots in the cemetery that is owned by the Indianapolis Hebrew Congregation, our family's Temple for over 50 years. Not exactly what I had in mind for my brief visit home. It didn't matter. Whatever Dad wanted, I always wanted to live up to his expectations.

Dad made sure to tell my Mom and me that these arrangements were only to reduce the stress on the family. "We have to prepare for the inevitable," he said, "so we might as well be practical about it." He also made it clear that he was totally against wasting money on a fancy coffin or any other

elaborate arrangements. “When you’re gone, you’re gone,” he said. “It doesn’t make any sense throwing hard earned money down a hole.” I have had a lifetime of such instructions: practical, logical and unsentimental, all delivered with a serious, no nonsense expression. He was a street-smart man who valued being tough and for whom the worst offense was being someone’s chump.

And so we went to the funeral home. Within no time we were in the show room of the coffins. Dad shot a glance at Mom and me as if to reinforce his determination to just get the simplest and the least expensive. And then he said as much to the funeral director, and so she did. She pointed out a plain pine box that didn’t even have handles for the pall-bearers. “Oh,” said Dad, “that really is pretty basic. How will they carry it?” With patience the director said that it was certainly possible to carry it by holding it from the bottom, but it wouldn’t be convenient or easy.

Right next to the plainest one was one not much fancier, but at least it had handles and a simple wooden Jewish star on top. “Well, that’s a bit better. At least it’ll be easier on everyone else. Right?”

His eyes looked ahead at the next few samples. “Look, this one has lining. And it’s not that much more expensive. Right?” And then further down the row we went. Each one with a bit nicer wood, a little thicker lining, a fancier

design and, of course, a nice jump in the price. And with each one, the determination to get the simplest and the cheapest faded. Nearing the end of the show room, he patted one of the best models: traditional, fine, heavy, dark solid wood, with ample lining and all the features, or so we thought.

“This is the one,” he said. And then just as suddenly, “Oh, look at that one. It has a pillow!” And looking at us he said, “I like a pillow.”

That was my Dad in a nutshell. He was always, simply, maddeningly, aggravatingly, complex, unpredictable, charming, demanding, intensely loving and loyal, both selfish and giving, creative and stubborn, with a quick temper but funny and thoughtful. He was a man’s man who was very much a little boy at heart, who was absolutely thrilled when he found at a garage sale or an auction an old toy from his youth.

He was hard on us as kids and, of course, spoiled the grandkids: taking special delight in letting them do things that they knew their parents would disapprove of.

And though each of those descriptions is accurate, none is adequate because Dad, like every one of us, filled with contradictions that could be frustrating as well as endearing. He loved to tell of the old army days, when he was with the US occupational forces in Germany: “All you really need,”

he would say, again and again, “is three hots and cot. Three meals a day and dry place to sleep.” Then again, he really did like his pillows.

This past March 17, after a long and slow decline that brought the kind of indignity and humility that went far beyond his patience, and he let everybody know it, my Dad died. The day of the funeral was a chilly, drizzly, Indianapolis day. My siblings labored like Clydesdales: schlepping the heaviest of the solid wood coffins and slogging through the mushy cemetery grass. We could all picture Dad’s smiling face cheering us on. Proud of the effort and understanding it as gift of love and respect.

Preparing for the inevitable means much more than making pre-need or preplanning funeral arrangements. I think just about every day since he has died, my Mom, siblings and I are continuing to appreciate the ways Dad prepared us to carry on. First, he took the time to meticulously set in order the financial affairs to help Mom. It is not an easy task to organize all the various accounts, policies, and assets. His actions reduced the stress and burden on Mom, and that has made these awful months of mourning more bearable.

And for my Mom, as well as my siblings and me, Dad’s ultimate act of preparing for the inevitable was in demonstrating the strength and intensity of love: love for family, love for friends, love of faith, love of your heritage,

and love of life. He taught us that you can love life even though it is not always fair and that often it isn't even very nice. Still, it's not like there's another game in town, so learn to make the best of it during the hard times and soon enough the sun will shine again and a soft breeze will hit you just right or you'll catch a shy smile from someone dear and realize that things are going to be okay.

He prepared us for the inevitable by teaching us life skills; my sisters have his love of gardening, my brother has his eye for finding hidden treasures and fine design, and I have his love of Israel and Judaism. He taught us to lean our hearts in favor of those who suffer, the hungry, the weak and the vulnerable. He taught us never to spend more than you have; don't promise what you can't deliver, don't be quick to brag, don't take a compliment easily and don't be a four flusher. He taught us that business is all in buying low and selling high; that something is worth only that which someone is willing to pay, that a man's word is invaluable, but get every agreement in writing.

And so fortified with the practical wisdom and life lessons, we should be fine, right? Ah, if that were only the case. The mourning process is a slow slog through grief. We wear the strain of loss on our face and in our eyes, but most of all, in our hearts.

Each of us, touched by the lives of those now gone, still feel the imprint of their soul and the support of their love. We recall with admiration their strength; we recall with joy their humor; we recall with smiles their quirks; we recall with longing their encouragement; we recall with forgiveness their weaknesses; and we recall with pride that we pledged to honor their memory and we are continuing to do so.

And on this Yom Kippur, this Day of Atonement and time of Yizkor, as we remember our loved ones who have died, we also remember the people who came to us offering comfort during our times of loss.

Whether we are still in the year of mourning or our grief is from a loss years ago, we most certainly will recall the goodness of the caring people who surrounded us and who tried to lift just a bit of sorrow from our broken hearts. You, who have fulfilled the mitzvah of *Nichum Aveilim*, trying to comfort mourners, please know that each visit, each card, and each act of tenderness lessened the ache. We will forever feel a sense of humbling gratitude.

As we honor the memory of those who have died, let us prepare ourselves and our loved ones for the inevitable. Those who loved us, taught us, nudged us, nurtured us, scolded us, extolled us, challenged us, and strengthened us did so in order to prepare us for our life journey, not to fold

in a heap of sadness and grief. Rather, to live life well, with goodness, values, faith, and love.

For the ties of love that death cannot sever; for the companionship we shared along life's path; for those gifts of heart and mind which have now become a precious heritage, for all this and more, we are grateful. Now help us, O compassionate God, not to dwell on sorrow and pain. Help us instead to find within our hearts the courage to return to the tasks of life and its joys. *Amen*