

LEL Memorial

This is the one single event that all sons can prepare for in their lifetimes. They may or may not get married, they may or may not have children, but if there is any order in the universe, they will bury their father.

But how does one find the words, set the right tone in summarizing a relationship of 52 years in a matter of a few pages?

I have been struggling with this impossible task for quite some time. How do I explain my appreciation for my father in a manner that captures both his flaws and his strengths? How do I meaningfully explain the ways he has informed my personality?

The relationship between father and son is about balance of power. Inevitably, as they both grow older, that balance begins to shift. Imperceptibility at first, but as time erodes the skills of the father, it builds the skills of the son. Until, one day the son finds himself the majority shareholder in both of their lives.

I am extremely fortunate that toward the end father did not fight the inevitability of this process. I am honored that father felt that he did a sufficient enough job, that he could trust my judgment in overseeing his affairs. In early February, as we closed on the sale of the gas station that was located next to Max Levy, he turned to me and said that he could not have done it without me. I had earned my master's license and my hand was now fully on the tiller.

After that sale, father began the business of dying. Our conversations about his assets increased. Files were organized, important documents discussed.

Father had made it clear to me that he was ready to die. He felt that with the sale of the gas station that he had discharged his final family responsibility.

But what is my obligation, as a son, to tend to his dying father.

I have vivid memories of Louis and Lionel being in Maine one summer, and Lionel repeatedly pleading to Louis, “we need to talk”, and each of those heartfelt requests go seemingly unanswered.

I was determined to serve my father better than he served his. I can report that I accomplished that task. During the last few weeks of his life, he wanted to see more of me, and he just wanted me to lie in bed next to him and hold his hand. It was here we actually spoke of death. I really wanted father not to be afraid during this process. And he was able to express that he was ready for death, unconcerned about its finality.

Stacy, Erica and I all knew his desires about how he wanted to die, no active measures, and sufficient medication so that he was feeling no pain. I was pleased that we were able to give him the death that he wanted. It was a good death, an easy death; unlike Mother, father did not linger. And typical of all Levy send offs, it was accompanied by lots of laughing and scratching.

But for father, it was life that was not always so easy.

I learned a lot from my father as he struggled through life.

Sadly many of those lessons were learned by observing how not to behave. Most of father’s less than stellar choices in life were based upon his insecurity and lack of ability for self examination.

I do not want to overly dwell on these deficiencies, indeed, we are all flawed. But what is most remarkable to me, is that despite these flaws, or because of them, father had areas of admirable strength of character. Perhaps, like Captain Kirk, he needed his pain.

I firmly believe that the root cause for father's insecurity lay at his mother's, Margret Wasserman Levy's feet. I believed that he grew up feeling unloved and unappreciated by his mother.

He often repeated the story, that as a young child, his mother would leave him in the care of others as she went on all kinds of adventures, both foreign and domestic. She would return in a whirlwind bearing fabulous gifts for him. Since then, father has never been able to accept a gift graciously; indeed he hates gifts. All he ever really wants is for you to pay attention to him; to just spend time with him. My lesson here was not to be overly dependent on others for your happiness. While father often spoke about the need to "have a song in your heart", there were times when he could not carry a tune.

Father had difficulty amusing himself; he needed people. He had no real solitary interests that sustained him outside of the Law.

Father was fiercely loyal to those people he cared about. He was truly concerned with their well-being. He touched everyone in this family with either legal assistance or financial help, and often both. He gave both freely and without solicitation. The Bank of Levy was always open. And most amazingly, he never asked, nor expected anything in return. This ability to be generous without conditions is one of my father's finest qualities.

Yet this instinct would end up giving him the most grief when he directed this largess to women outside of the family. Coupled with his emotional neediness he found himself in a position where he DID expect something in return. I am sure that this dissonance caused him mental pain, but self awareness was never one of his strengths.

He would surround himself by women whose lives he subsidized (with the exception of Jane); who he hoped in turn would feel sufficiently grateful so that they would spend time with him. But to the complete surprise of no one but Louis, this was a wasted effort.

Critical lessons, love and loyalty can be freely given, but never purchased.

And equally importantly, be self aware; keeping challenging your internal motivations so that you will never find yourself in an emotion wasteland wondering “how did I get here”.

All of the children were taught self reliance at an early age. This lesson came in many forms.

Early on father realized that it was easier if he worked for himself. His first job was with Abrahams and Lowenstein. Apparently they had a formal dress code; when it was very hot they could take off their coats and loosen then ties. If that was not bad enough, one day he took Liz Frasier to lunch, and upon his return was told that “we don’t take female clients to lunch”.

This just won’t do.

I have been self-employed since 1984 for many of the same reasons of my father. Fitting in with the surface dwellers is a problem for both of us.

He had no concerns about social norms. He never lived his life being worried about what others thought; for example he was one of the first attorneys in the city not to wear a tie, and then he started coming to work in sneakers. This is a lesson that I have taken to heart, much to the annoyance of my wife.

This is why my sisters and I tend to be the proverbial bull in the societal norms china shop. Sure it can land you in what some might consider social fopaux, but we Levys’ just drop it down a gear and drive on through.

His sense of personal honesty and fairness was remarkable. He would volunteer deleterious information in any and all of his financial dealings. If you ever purchased anything from Louis not only were you fully informed about what you were getting, and what might possibly go wrong with it, but you also got it below market price

Another extremely important lesson was how my father handled his anger. He would get mad and then it would pass, forgotten. He never held a grudge or had an unkind word. He firmly believed that the freedom to make mistakes and fail was one of the most important tenants of the American experiment.

I learned the value of critical thinking. As a lawyer's son I was taught to examine multiple sides of an argument.

He also taught me to be a patriot.

From an early age he taught me the responsibilities of citizenship; to vote, to serve on juries, of the necessity to serve one's community. This started my volunteer career at the age of 17, which still continues to this day.

His recognized and spoke about the importance of America being a land of laws, not men, and how incredibly blessed we are to have been born in a free country.

As my political views matured; from liberal democrat, to Tea Party. As my Quaker education evolved to me to being an active supporter of the NRA. Father's reaction was one of mystification rather than appreciation.

And this was too bad.

In this he failed to fully appreciate his role in my development. He could not understand how the tools he provided me could lead to anything different from himself. He just did not realized that he was looking at the next rev level; Louis 2.0.

I would like to close with one final thought. While father felt that death was the end of the road, I am less certain. About 2 months ago I had a dream that I was walking somewhere very familiar when my cell phone rang with my father's ringtone. The first words out of my mouth pose a question, "what is the date where you are". Why he asked. I reminded him that he died on March 10th 2011. Oh really he said, I feel fine.

I was glad he had made the journey safely.