

Dad's eulogy
Jan 24, 2008
by Jon Groner

I have lost two heroes in the past week. Obviously, my dad was one of the heroes. The other was Judah Folkman, who was the most renowned pediatric surgeon in the United States, if not the entire world. Dr. Folkman and my father actually had much in common: both were not only Jewish, but had a strong interest in Judaism. Both were brilliant, gentlemanly, and excellent teachers. Dr. Folkman's brilliance was in the field of cancer research. My father's brilliance was in the field of everyday life.

I first thought about what I might say on this day over a decade ago in this sanctuary. The occasion was the last time my family and I attended services here with my father and mother. Though still living at home, my father's disease had become so advanced that he was unable to recall how to put on his tallit. As I helped him with this task, I remembered that it was my father who had taught me to same ritual over 25 years ago. On that day, I began to make a list of all of the things my father taught (or tried to teach) me in his lifetime. At one point the list was written down, but in my haste to get here, I left it behind. That is probably good, since the list was quite long. However, I would like to share a few things:

- **Bicycling:** It was my father who taught me to ride a bike. He had mixed results at first, but was ultimately successful. There were approximately two trips to the emergency room in my early years of cycling. It seems that my father neglected to tell me to let go of the handlebars should the bike tip over. This resulted in a badly bruised but not broken nose. Eventually, I became quite good at cycling, met my wife only because of my bicycling, and continue to ride.
- **Sports:** this was an abject failure. My father taught me the rudiments of several sports, but took it no further, obviously realizing that I had no talent. I was blessed with a father who knew not to fight battles he and I could not win. I grew up with animosity towards kids who excelled in sports and towards their fathers who yelled at them to do better.
- **Photography:** this was a great success. I learned virtually every aspect of medium format black and white photography from my dad. My father's technique was "Suzuki," starting me on a small camera when I was young, and advancing me to bigger and better cameras as I became older. Eventually, he allowed me to shoot with his prized Rolleiflex. I am quite certain that I was helping my dad in the darkroom before I could read. My sister and I would sit on tall stools as he would make contact prints and pass them to us to rock in the developer and fixer trays. Eventually, I learned nearly everything: not only how to compose and shoot photos (his advice, supposedly straight from Robert Capa, was "if you don't like your photos, you are not close enough") but everything else. My father and I had photo outings, wandering around in beaches, forest preserves, and even rail yards. He taught me how to read a light meter, how to watch the sun, and how to set the shutter and aperture on the camera. In the darkroom, he taught me how to mix chemicals, how to develop negatives, how to print, how to retouch. In my prime, I could blend the hot and cold water out of the tap to within 2 degrees of 68, (the optimal temperature for the chemical reactions required to develop negatives), using not a thermometer, but the back of my hand. My father taught me this. The only secret he never shared was

how to load film in a daylight tank, which must be done in absolute total darkness. The developing aspect of photography is now a lost art. But photography – now digital and color and 35 mm equivalent with a Nikon instead of medium format black and white with a Rolleiflex – is still a big part of my life. And just as my father’s photography could slow the pace of any vacation with my mother, I have also been the recipient of exasperated looks from my wife in places from Newfoundland to Rosh Hanikra.

- Driving: my father insisted on teaching Judy and me how to drive before we took driver’s ed, lest we be destroyed by learning the “wrong” way to drive. My father’s advice for driving in Chicago: right foot on the gas, left foot on the brake, right hand on the horn, left arm out the window (presumably gesturing).
- Dogs: my father had a deep affection for dogs, and treated them as part of the family. While they were allowed to eat ice cream (or at least lick the carton), they were expected to behave. We had a pair of setters, mother and son, and the mother, in particular, was a decent show dog. I spent more than one Sunday in the back of a country squire station wagon with an anxious (but well groomed) Irish Setter waiting for my Dad’s turn in the ring. I also have a deep love of dogs, and our guido, rescued from canine death row, is part of our family, just like Dad’s setters were.
- Every conceivable household repair chore: my father could do everything: he could install a dishwasher, he could bend thin-wall conduit, he could unclog a toilet or sink, he could lay bricks, pour cement, wire electrical fixtures, even finish an entire basement, which he did when I was young. He probably managed to teach me only half of what he knew, yet I know twice as much as most of my neighbors. With the electrical knowledge from my father as a foundation, I was able to install light fixtures in high school and wire houses for Habitat for humanity as an adult.
- Music: my father loved music, but had not talent. I am the same. My father and mother listened to classical music, attended concerts at Ravinia, and did occasionally listen to contemporary music. (tell story of going to Harry Belafonte concert at the Blackstone Theatre in 1968)
- Family and Judaism: To end where I started, family life and Jewish life were very important to my Dad, and I think he did pass this on to me. His relationship with my mother was a very close one and very complementary. She was the reader and writer, he was the one who worked with his hands. Extended family was also important. He was very devoted to his sister’s family and especially her children, and they called him “Uncle Buddy.” Not only were the major Jewish holidays important to him, but Friday night dinners and his weekly attendance on Saturday mornings were a ritual for him. I often accompanied him as well during my high school years. I will always cherish that time with him in synagogue.