

Two of My Fathers

Jamaica Plain, February 27, 2005, Victoria Weinstein

Anniversaries of important events in our lives are like telescopes in time. It doesn't matter how far we are chronologically from the event; when the anniversary comes around, the distance between ourselves and the big event collapses and we stand fresh and raw and vulnerable in the present and the past, feeling it all over again.

I had such a moment two years ago, when I first gave this sermon at my own church on April 6, 2003. It had been twenty years that week since my father died, and the emotional telescope experience of those days made me aware that twenty years is a relative term, and while I was glued to the news of the war and sick at heart at its unfolding tragedies, I had the haunting, lingering sensation that I was seventeen years old and a cataclysmic loss had just occurred in my personal life.

In 1983, April 5th fell on a Tuesday. I had the lead role in our high school's production of "Bells Are Ringing," and came home from a dress rehearsal that Tuesday night full of my own high school stardom. I was still wearing my make-up and false eyelashes, and with typical teenaged humility, I just assumed that all the cars in the driveway were family members converging on our house to gather for my big debut. Why I thought anyone would arrive on a Tuesday for a show that opened on Friday night just gives you a sense of the scope of ego we're talking about.

When I walked into the house, my mother met me downstairs by my bedroom. She put her hands on my shoulders and in her inimitable, courageous and direct way, she simply said, "Honey, Daddy died."

I remember a terrible stillness in the air, a stillness that I felt was suffocating me. I remember that I screamed mostly as a way to break that stillness, and I scared both myself and my little brother, who was waiting at the top of the stairs and who was startled

by my outburst into tears of his own. My father had been the youngest of four boys, and all of my uncles were there that night. I was passed from one set of arms to the next, looking into one stricken face after the next: Uncle Mark, Uncle Dick, Uncle Marvin, and then my fourteen year old brother. All of those men. Those giants of my childhood, my father and his three older brothers. Even today, they are titans to me.

Let me tell you one story that perhaps better than any other might illustrate the size of personalities involved in these memories. All our lives, my Dad pounded it into our heads that we were WEINSTEINS and should be proud to bear that name. He was above all a family man. We're Weinsteins, we're loyal to the name, and we don't tolerate mispronunciation of it! This was a constant project. For example, maitre d's in restaurants: "Mr. WeinSTEEN, your table's ready." "It's WeinSTEIN." (Dad had a wonderful, distinguished low voice that he liked to make really low when he wanted to make a point) As with the father, so with the children. For instance, at school during attendance taking: "Vicki WeinstEEN?" "It's WeinSTEIN. Here." By third grade or so all my classmates had learned to chime in with me. "STEIN!"

This always startled substitute teachers.

My dad was the son of a proud and accomplished Romanian Jewish immigrant family, and he had just the littlest chip on his shoulder about anti-Semitism - real or perceived. He always said he moved us to affluent New Canaan, Connecticut because it had such fine schools, but my mother explained later that really, he had dreamed of living in New Canaan ever since he had worked as a caddy at the New Canaan Country Club as a young man. I wonder how he felt when he found out that even as a New Canaan resident, Carl Weinstein would still not be allowed to join the club. No Jews allowed. No one cared that we attended the Unitarian Church - he wasn't going to be welcome at the NCCC as anything other than a caddy. He did the next best thing, though. He became the volunteer Police Commissioner of the town and sometimes chased down speeders in his chocolate brown Mercedes-Benz, pulling them over and yanking his badge out of his back pocket as he approached their window to give them a good dose of hell.

His ashes are buried, appropriately enough, underneath a beautiful pear tree in front of the New Canaan Police Station. I'm sorry I didn't think to grab a handful and get them over to the country club to scatter over the golf course.

So on the morning of his memorial service at the Unitarian Church in Westport, Connecticut, the minister rose to address the hundreds who had gathered to celebrate my father's life, and began his remarks by saying, "Carl WeinSTEEN was a man who...." And out of the crowd there was an immediate, unison rumble of correction: "...STEIN."

Much to his credit, the minister stopped midsentence to regard the standing-room-only crowd with an astonished and amused expression. The explosion of laughter that followed lasted a good minute or so, and the minister recovered most gracefully by saying, "Well, that alone tells you a good deal about Carl Davis Weinstein."

And it does, indeed. He was loyal to his name and many were loyal to him. He thrived on irreverent humor. He thrived on righteous anger, and on fierce pride.

You may wonder how my father died. He was only fifty years old, which seemed young to me at the time and which seems ridiculously young to me now. He had a heart attack, that is how. He had had his first heart trouble in his early thirties and was a veteran of open-heart surgery by his forties. Bum arteries, yes, but also a type A personality that might be more accurately described as "Type A+."

It isn't so much how he died that stays with me. It's why he did. It's why so many men get caught, as did my father, in an endless rat race of competition and stress and the feeling that they need to prove themselves to their wives, brothers, neighbors, ancestors, kids and the guys at the country club by the size of the house they have and the kind of car they drive and the kind of company they work for. I well remember the little celebrations Mom would plan at home for each of my dad's promotions as he rose the corporate ladder in the advertising industry, and later as a pioneer in the cable industry. What I also

remember is sensing even as a child, that he was trapped in workaholism, far too easily given to fits of rage over small things at home, and how I wished he could do what the doctor recommended: slow down, calm down, learn to relax a little bit.

One time we were together, the two of us, driving home from a dinner with my Uncle Marvin and Aunt Mae. We were having one of our typically intense father-daughter philosophical conversations, as we really loved to discuss all kinds of important topics out of a special *simpatico* and delight in each other's minds. We drove for about 45 minutes and about ten minutes away from home my dad pulled into the parking lot at a little convenience store where he sometimes picked up the Sunday paper. The store was obviously closed as it was late at night, so I turned to question him why we had stopped. I saw that my father was sitting holding helplessly onto the steering wheel and crying.

I panicked. I asked "Dad, what's wrong!?" I had only seen him cry twice before that I could remember: once when my siblings and I had had an especially bad day as little kids and he had been overly harsh with us, and once when Jimmy Carter won the presidential election in 1976 (Dad had worked long and hard for the Carter campaign). Through his tears, my father explained to me that he was so proud of me, he knew I was going to grow up to be such a terrific woman and he was so sorry that he wasn't going to be around to see it.

With a sinking heart I tried to reassure him. "Of course you will! You're just feeling fragile because you just had a heart attack, but you're going to be fine! You're going to live to be an old man, Dad!" But my heart was hammering, because I knew he was right. And he did leave us less than a year later. He was addressing a conference of cable executives when he began to have those familiar chest pains. He excused himself for a moment and told his secretary, Mona Kaye, to call an ambulance. Later in the hospital room, when his oldest brother arrived, Carl quipped, "Hi Marvin, I see you got a new suit for the occasion." And his last words, also to his brothers, were "Take care of my babies."

Now, as the woman he didn't live to see, I'd like to play that scene over again. Because I have a few things to say to him. Like: "Carl, you just have to do whatever it takes to change your life! Don't cry: change!" He knew the need for this intellectually, but spiritually and emotionally he didn't have the resources to make that change. This I grieve most especially: that any of us would feel so caught in our competitive, striving ways that we truly don't know how to stop, even when we know it might cost us our lives, and cost our children their parents. I love my father and that love hasn't gone away over the years - our relationship hasn't ended just because he's not physically here -- but I feel anger occasionally about all that he has missed; all that we missed together. I feel cheated of the chance to see him mellow a bit with age. (He would have had to have mellowed some by now!) I grieve that my sister and brother and I have been deprived of his presence for so many of our important milestones. I'm incredibly sad that Uncle Carl isn't around to love a whole new generation of Weinstein grandnieces and nephews, and that he won't ever know the two adorable sons of his own adorable son. They will never get to meet Grandpa Carl.

I have a photograph on my desk over at church; a pile of photographs, actually. A few are ones I took at the end of the summer at our district's Cedar Hill retreat --kids playing, stuff like that. There is one particularly sweet photograph of a 40-something daddy Clayton Handelman standing with his tiny son Jonah in a snuggly holder on his back. Both of them look comfortable and happy. I cannot imagine, in a million years, my dad with a snuggly on his back. It just wasn't done. Photos of my father holding his small children are endearingly awkward, taken in an era when it was still considered appropriate for fathers to make cute helpless expressions and hand over crying or stinky diapered babies to their wives, and everyone would laugh (nowadays most wives or partners would be just as likely to hand the baby right back!).

I am so grateful that fathering has changed and is evolving to something that I think is far more emotionally rich for dads and their kids. I am so glad that we have a good number of men in our own church teaching Sunday School; something that was so rare when I was growing up as to be downright odd. Fathers are important religious educators of their

own children. I think, for instance, of Jewish boys and their fathers studying the Torah together. I remember my father asking us what we thought of the sermon or Sunday School some weekends after church, as Mom served us a big brunch of what we called Jewish soul food (she also sat down eventually and participated in the discussions). Spirituality and religious development have never been, and should never become, something we consider "women's work."

I have a few other photos in an album at church of a men's group gathering of the summer of 2002, something the former minister organized. What it looks like is a bunch of healthy, warm and friendly guys just hanging out together. What it is in reality is more than that : it is ministry to men, ministry between men. I don't know if your congregation has a women's group -- many congregations do - but do you have a men's group? A retired men's breakfast gathering? Anything like that?

Ministry among men doesn't have to consist of Iron John-ish male-bonding or involve shamanic vision quests or other of the "men's movement" activities that came into fashion in the New Age era. However nor does a men's group have to be all about smoking cigars, telling the most haw-haw kinds of jokes and intentionally avoiding anything that might be vaguely described as emotional or spiritual. I've seen that kind of men's group, too. I think there's probably a more happy medium to be found! Men's ministry, like ministry to women, honors the ways that men experience the world from the perspective of their gendered reality (no matter what their sexual orientation), provides space and time for them to process through the big and small events of their lives together, and encourages each man to seriously attend to the life of the spirit that is uniquely his.

I remember when my father's own father A.J. Weinstein died my dad acted as though he was fine, but there was a terrible strained sadness in the house until my father's best friend John Rizos showed up with a bottle of something and took my dad home with him for a good, long visit. My father wasn't a drinking man, but he had a few with John and I suppose he cried and got some of his grief out in a way that he didn't know how to do with his wife and kids around. I'm not suggesting that ministry to men should involve

drinking, but I do think it would be a blessing for everyone concerned if men formed relationships of mutual care that allowed them to better navigate the difficult terrain of masculinity that is imposed on all men by our culture. Part of that ministry would be to make room for the diverse ways that men are men: to free them from the limitations and tyrannies of masculinity as it is defined by the larger society.

Let me speak briefly about a man I greatly admire for having lived out a public leadership role that was characterized by gentleness, patience and nurturance - qualities that our culture has traditionally denied to men. While some dismissed him as a wimp, many more others felt deeply touched and cared for by his kindness. I speak, of course, of the Reverend Fred McFeely Rogers.

The only temper tantrum I ever remember having as a toddler, in fact, was when mom wouldn't let me watch "Mr. Rogers" one night. I had been sick with the flu and she wanted me in bed before the strains of that well-loved theme song would come tinkling out of the television. I don't remember who won that particular battle but I always meant to write Mr. Rogers a love letter and tell him how much he meant to me. When he died at the age of 74, I felt terribly sad, as did millions of people; both those who had watched him as children and those who grew to admire him as adults. He died very close to the 20th anniversary of my father's death and I realized that they had been very close to the same age. I never got to see my father age, but I got to see Mr. Rogers' hair get snowy white.

He was such a good man, and so easy to love. I relied on him. Some people didn't get the appeal. But I did. Mr. Rogers, an ordained Presbyterian minister, had what I would later learn to call pastoral presence. Even from the television I felt he was really looking at me. Mr. Rogers was a father figure who never asked what grades we got and whether our team won the game. He practiced unconditional regard: he just wanted to know how you felt inside, and wanted to know that you felt valuable whomever and however you were. He never raised his voice (he was the only grown-up I knew who never did!). He changed into his play clothes when he got home (his mother knitted those sweaters, which now

reside at the Smithsonian) and he spoke gently about real things, even things that sometimes scared me, like divorce or death. . . or being sucked down the drain while taking a bath. He did us a world of good. His show was 900 episodes of blessing.

So they are both gone into the Eternal now, both my beloved alpha male daddy and the gentle television father figure who provided me with my first alternative version of masculinity. Both have lessons to teach. Mr. Rogers said it all with his warm and kindly eyes: I see you, and you matter to me. And Mr. Weinstein says it all by his absence: Live, and live well, because I didn't quite know how to, and the cost was very high.

We let them go, because we have to, taking what wisdom we can from them about the nature of manhood, and of fatherhood and the question of how to have life more abundant. In their honor and in their memory, let us choose life ourselves, being fearless and honest about what that takes, and let us stand by our brothers, our uncles, our fathers, our sons as they do the same. Let us love our men. Let us support them in choosing life.

Amen. Shalom. They live in us.