

A Eulogy for Steven Asher

One of first things that comes to mind when I think of my father is the warm community that embraced him and my mother; the presence of all of you is a clear reminder of the many friends, family, and colleagues he valued so deeply.

I thought I'd share a few of the other images that come to mind when I remember him. When I think of my father, I envision him, as many of you probably do, sitting at the head of our Friday night Shabbat table -- regaling family and guests with his anecdotes about World War II espionage feats or little known facts about college sports mascots. The best stories, of course, were those about Ivy league athletes who *became* German spies. In addition to keeping the table in stitches with his stories, Dad asked lots of questions. He was always eager to learn about how others at the table were doing, especially the children. Our friends would express surprise at how genuinely interested Mom and Dad seemed in getting to know them.

A second picture that comes to mind is my father leading family hikes. When we were young, often on Sunday mornings, after making pancakes, my father would lead us all out on a Pennsylvania state park hike. He taught us how to find our way on the map, and the proper way of passing under low branches. While we hiked, he would either sing Israeli military marches, or play "trivial pursuits" with us. "Trivial pursuits" meant that my father would ask each of us questions -- common ones included the name of the third president of the United States and the capital of California. I have fond memories of fording a stream on an autumn day, trying to remember the year of the Glorious Revolution. We would beg my father to play the game with us.

The most recent image that comes to mind is my father as Grandpop to our three year old daughter, Maia. Maia had a special attachment to Grandpop -- she LOVED him, and was more excited to see him than anyone else in the world. I remember pulling up in my parents' driveway after our drive from Washington a few months ago. We let Maia out of the car, and when she spied Grandpop standing in the doorway, she raced up the front walk faster than I have ever seen her run, jumping into his arms, and staying there for a good thirty minutes.

But most of you were already aware of my father's ties to his family, his athleticism, his intellectual curiosity, his love of Judaism, and his encyclopedic knowledge of the history of every American university. I'd also like to share a couple of memories that reflect a sensitivity that was not always obvious under his litigator demeanor.

I remember when we toured Colonial Williamsburg, as children, the tour guide asked for several volunteers to play the role of judges in an 18th century colonial courtroom. Of course my father jumped to participate. A black father on the tour with his children also volunteered, but the tour guide demurred, noting that his participation might not be historically accurate. My father then politely withdrew from the role play as well.

I also recall, when brainstorming décor for a party with him, tossing out the idea of bringing in a goldfish aquarium. Dad then explained that we should respect every living creature, as opposed to showcasing animals for their entertainment value.

Finally, I remember my father coming home from work and telling us about a man who had come into his office that day. It was a developer, seeking a lawyer to protest development restrictions in the New Jersey Pine Barrens. I can still see how worked up my father was, exclaiming, “I don’t have many scruples; I’d represent almost anybody. But the one thing I would never do is help anybody knock down a single tree in the State of New Jersey.”

My parents often ask us why all of their children explored careers related to the environment and urban planning. Clearly they passed along their deep-seated passion for the natural world to us. A friend commented yesterday that, when she was speaking to my father this past Saturday, he seemed so grateful for the beautiful day outside. My father’s appreciation for the world around him was one of his hallmarks.

He was also always grateful for the life he led. There is something satisfying about eulogizing a person who so appreciated every moment. We need not have regrets. Right up till the end, rather than complaining about his cancer treatment, every time we spoke he raved about how brilliant his doctors were, and what good friends they had become. I hope that my father’s sense of respect and gratitude for the beautiful things around him, and for his own blessings, can serve as inspiration to all of us.