

My Father and Eleanor Rooseveltⁱ
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L'Shanah Tovah

My father, of blessed memory, who many of you knew as Pops, was a great story teller. Among the stories he told my brothers and me was of the time he spent in Quoddy, Maine at a National Youth Administration Camp, the youth version of the CCC, the Civilian Conservation Corp. He spoke with some pride about how he learned to wash his clothes in a single bucket of water and how he learned the skills and military discipline that later held him in good stead during World War II.

It's funny how often we listen to the stories our parents or grandparents tell and retell with only half an ear. All too often, by the time we realize how much we don't know, how much we wish we did know, how much we wish we had asked, it is too late. Our loved ones have already made the transition from this world to the next and clear communication between the two worlds, the kind of communication that could clarify a fact or fill in a picture, is no longer available to us.

Often it is not until they are gone that we realize we want to understand how they became the people we knew. The people who sometimes exasperated us, particularly when we were young, but who we dearly love and so sorely miss.

Last summer, just a few months after my father's passing, I took a pilgrimage of memory. I revisited the places I had experienced with him, consoling myself for his physical absence by surrounding myself with the physical evidence of the times we had spent together, walking where we had walked, doing the things we had done together.

Sometimes in our grief, we need some physical proof that our loved ones are not really lost to us. We may clutch a scarf with our mother's perfume to remember how she would wipe away our tears or wrap our father's favorite jacket around our shoulders to relive his hug. Eventually, we find we can give most of these things away to others who need them more than we do as the rawness of loss eases and our experience of our loved ones evolves to accommodate their transition from physical presence to the feeling of them we carry within us.

Now a little over a year and a half after my father's passing, the journey of grief is different than it was. Don't get me wrong, I still miss my father. I always will. But I no longer feel the jarring recognition of his loss that repeats throughout the first year of mourning with each new holiday, situation or experience faced without him.

Instead, I am comforted by realizing, when I miss being able to ask his advice, that I know what he probably would say. We all carry enough of our parents' lessons within us to know what they would say. As I look forward to my son's upcoming *ufruf* and wedding without my father and my mother, I don't feel the sadness I might have a year ago. I know my parents will be with us in the mezzanine section that we reserve for our guests from the next world. Only

the body dies. Souls live on as they continue their journey in the next world. I really do believe, as our ancient Rabbis did, that our loved ones watch over us from above; their love the bridge between this world and the next.

There is a very powerful psalm that we will sing in a few minutes at the end of our Yizkor Memorial Service, Psalm 23, “The Lord is my Shepherd.” My favorite line is *gam ki eileich bgei tzal mavet*, “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,” *lo ira*, “I shall not fear...”

My friend, Rabbi Harold Kushner notes that the psalmist refers to walking *through* the valley of the shadow of death. Mourning is a journey. Like a valley, it can close in on us. It can overshadow with darkness everything we see and feel. But a valley has a beginning and an end, where it opens up to let in more light. We walk *through* the journey of mourning, with its highs and lows, sometimes slower, sometimes faster. But at some point, for each of us, the walk, the journey, becomes easier.

Psalm 23 also reminds us that, while the darkness of sadness lifts little by little over time, once we lose someone we love, we are always on a journey through the valley of the shadow of death. But not alone. Never alone. God, our unseen and often underappreciated shepherd, guides us along that journey. God accompanies us on that journey until we can find some stillness, some balance, some peace with the new reality of our lives that now will be lived without the earthly presence of our loved ones.

Realizing that their wisdom continues to guide us, believing that their presence and love continue to watch over us, is just part of the journey of walking through the shadow of the valley of death and finding peace.

That is why this summer, a year and a half-ish after my father’s passing, I was ready to try to understand my father. That is also part of how we walk through the valley of the shadow of death and come out from under its darkness. How had my father become the man he was? The Greatest Generation World War II vet and Navy man, the fireman who risked his life to save others, even after he retired. The father who was always there when my brothers or I needed him, who always seemed to know how to save the day – possibly because he carried almost an entire garage of tools in his car trunk and possibly because of the skills he learned at Quoddy.

I didn’t know but I was determined to find out. So I asked my husband to join me on a pilgrimage of a different sort, not of memory as I had done the year before, but of discovery. The first stop would be Quoddy.

Quoddy, really Quoddy Village, is located just outside Eastport, the eastern most city in the United States across from Canada. It seems such a strange, isolated place to locate a work program, especially one for hardscrabble kids like my father, used to the streets of New York, Jersey and the industrial cities of Massachusetts. But, as I found out this summer, there were some very good reasons why there was a NYA camp at Quoddy. Perhaps, not surprisingly, they all had to do with another hero of mine, Eleanor Roosevelt.

Eleanor Roosevelt, always concerned for the well-being and education of young people, convinced her husband, President Roosevelt, to establish the NYA as a youth version of his more famous CCC. The Roosevelts had often taken the train from their home in New York to the terminus of the line in Eastport, Maine to reach their summer retreat on Campobello Island, just a short ferry ride away. They had been involved with Eastport’s Quoddy Village from its inception

as family housing for workers on the local New Deal Dam project. Once that project was complete, Eleanor thought the village – built of neat white clapboard houses, meeting and recreation buildings – would provide a good location for a NYA camp. This camp would take youth from the cities along the train line, including from Eleanor’s home town, New York.

Eleanor’s influence also was seen in the youth chosen for the NYA. Unlike the CCC, the NYA accepted not only poor young men but also young women and black students. NYA was an integrated program at a time when the US Armyⁱⁱ and the CCC were both segregated.ⁱⁱⁱ

Eleanor actually visited Quoddy Village in June 1941, about the time my father would have been there. She wrote in her “My Day” syndicated newspaper column about how she visited the (machine) instrument shop, where my father studied. I don’t know if she actually met my father, but I do know that she helped make him the man he grew up to be.

Going through my father’s papers in preparation for my “pilgrimage,” I found a photograph of what must have been my father’s Quoddy class. A mature man, probably the teacher, stands with 15 teens, four girls and 12 boys. My father is third from the left, squatting in the front row next to the only black youth in the group. Were they friends? Was this where my father learned the importance of relating to everyone as equals, regardless of someone’s religion or the color of someone’s skin (something he taught me and my brothers)? I don’t know, for I did not ask him when I had the chance. But if so, then that is just one of the many ways Eleanor Roosevelt influenced my father’s life and, by extension, my own.

At Quoddy, my father completed the requirements for his high school diploma and studied gyroscopes as part of his instrument class, a skill that enabled him to enter World War II as a petty officer, torpedo man third class, on a PT boat in the Philippines. Perhaps even more importantly, I think he also learned an ethic that would guide him throughout what became for him a life of service, first in the war, then as a fireman saving lives, then as a good citizen always willing to intervene to help others, whether in breaking up a fight or as head of his synagogue’s food pantry program. My father was a hero in all the ways that count most. I understand now that the budding hero within him was groomed at Quoddy.

Quoddy Village is now a residential suburb of Eastport. David and I drove through the streets. We saw an abandoned Quonset hut that looks like the hanger where the students practiced repairing airplane engines. Some of the white clapboard cottages still stand, converted to private homes.

I asked David to pull over so I could walk around. I stood with my back to one of the cottages, perhaps the very one which had been my father’s. It was situated across a narrow road from the shoreline. I could imagine my father walking here, taking in the view of the sun reflecting off the water. Looking around, I tried to absorb every image, scent and sound I could of what my father might have experienced when he was here. These were the scenes he had looked at. These were the trees that shaded him on his walks from his bungalow to his classes, dining room, and recreation hall.

Standing there, standing near where a young version of my father had stood, I now had a better understanding of why he always seemed to have a soft spot for Maine. More importantly, I had a better understanding of why *I* had come here on this journey of discovery. I needed to make my father’s journey my own.

That is what we do every time we visit Israel, isn't it? Or when we go on a European heritage tour? We walk in the footsteps of our ancestors. If not our own parents or grandparents, our people's ancestors, *Avraham Avinu* and Sarah *Imeinu*, Father Abraham and Mother Sarah, and the countless generations in between them and us. Somehow their stories become more relevant, more compelling when we stand where they stood and see what they saw. Their journeys become the foundation of our own journeys. Their merit and memory, the lessons of their lives, become our guides along a path that began with them but does not end when they leave us behind in this physical world. That is also why I had come here on this pilgrimage, this journey of discovery, to see how I would continue on my own journey.

That journey does not just continue with me but continues *l'dor v dor*, down through the generations.

As I looked at the photo of my father with his Quoddy class, I noticed my father had a full head of thick dark hair, the very same hair I now see on his grandson, my son, Yoni. It's funny how physical characteristics pass from one generation to another as our children become living tributes to our parents after they are gone.

Yoni is old enough to have his own memories of my father. Not all grandchildren are as lucky. Either way, though, it is up to us to repeat our parents' stories, our grandparents' stories to our children and to our children's children. Only by telling and retelling their stories can the lessons, the experience, the example of our loved ones' lives enrich the journey for each succeeding generation as we seek to understand the meaning of what has come before us for our own lives.

That is really part of the miracle of Jewish survival. Just think of it, each week on Shabbat, each year reciting the Passover Hagadah, sitting under the Sukkah, or eating blintzes on Shavuot, we are a People telling the story of our journeys. When we share the stories of the journeys taken by our parents and their parents, when we try to explain what those stories may mean for us, we are adding our own personal family stories to the larger eternal journey of our People as well as remembering, memorializing, those who we have lost and still love.

Eleanor Roosevelt once wrote, "We all create the person we become by our choices as we go through life."^{iv}

If we are lucky, we have parents who are our heroes and whose stories help us grow to become heroes in our own children's, or other children's, eyes. If we have a much darker tale of what our parents' journey means to us, we still have the chance to apply the lessons of their lives to our own. Their stories can help us write a different journey for ourselves. That is the point of the freewill God has placed within each of us.

We don't have to take an actual physical pilgrimage, as I did, to seek to understand our parents and the legacy they have left us. This is especially true if we listen with a full ear to the stories our family members tell and ask questions with an open heart while we still can. But every experience of life and loss *is* a journey.

The time inevitably comes for all of us to continue our journey through life without those we hold dear. May we be comforted knowing that their love accompanies us and their wisdom guides us through the valley of the shadow of death and beyond as we continue our own journeys that have been built upon theirs. May the lessons of their lives inform our choices on our own journey through life. May we thus grow to the heroes our loved ones can count on, just as our

loved ones hopefully were the heroes we most counted on. *Zichronam l'vracha*, may their memories be a blessing. And let us say, Amen.

Shanah Tovah.

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ⁱⁱ "MILITARY INTEGRATION TIMELINE," condensed and quoted from Morris J. MacGregor, Jr.'s book, *Integration of the Armed Forces, 1940-1965*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Some CCC camps were initially integrated when first founded in 1933 but by 1935 all the integrated camps were disbanded and segregation remained the policy throughout the rest of the history of the CCC, according to "African Americans in the Civilian Conservation Corps" (FDR Presidential Library and Museum Archives). Available at: <http://newdeal.feri.org/aacc/>. (Accessed Sept. 25, 2017.) However, L. Diane Barnes argues that after a setback to integration, successful efforts were made to reintegrate the CCC after Roosevelt's reelection, which resulted in the majority of African Americans assigned to integrated units by the time the CCC was disbanded. L. Diane Barnes, "The Great Depression," in Paul Finkelman, ed., *Encyclopedia of African American History, 1896 to the Present: From the Age of Segregation to the Twenty First Century. Vol. One* (Oxford and NY: Oxford University Press, 2009): 325. In contrast, the NYA was founded from the beginning and largely remained integrated, though it always served more white than black youth. On racial integration in the NYA, see also NATIONAL YOUTH ADMINISTRATION. (Oklahoma History Society) available at <http://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=NA014>. (Accessed Sept. 25, 2017.)

^{iv} Chandler Roosevelt Lindsley, *Quotable Eleanor* (Welshpool, New Brunswick, Canada: Roosevelt Campobello International Park Commission, 2007): 118.