

D6-- MY FATHER'S DEATH

It is, perhaps, no coincidence that Hillary Clinton's major articulation of a "politics of meaning" occurred shortly after she had lived through her father's death. We will, of course, not know for sure the connection between her presence at her father's bedside during the weeks before his death and her call for a transcendent politics until she explains it. But an experience I had some years back may shed some light on the matter. While it was undoubtedly different from hers in important ways, I would be surprised if our experiences did not share deep similarities. Some things are universal.

August, 1986. An exciting time. I was the research director at a think tank chaired by the leading contender for President of the United States, Gary Hart, and deeply involved in drafting what was to be main plank of his brief Presidential run, the Strategic Investment Initiative (SII). A forerunner of Clintonomics, SII called for making investments in education, training and technical innovation the key to national economic policy. It was the centerpiece of a strategy to see Hart run as a "new Democrat", asking people to choose between jobs and military spending ("SII" vs "SDI"), rather than what was to be the Dukakis focus on social vs. military spending.

We were taken seriously, phone calls were returned, invitations to lunch were proffered, conferences to explore these ideas were well-attended and well-covered by the media. We had the exhilarating sense of being in the center of national policy-making, shaping the national debate, perhaps even having a shot at "making history." We had no questions about a "politics of meaning", there were no doubts, no angst. We experienced the inner certainty that our work had deep meaning and enormous importance.

Suddenly, a phone call. A rush to the airport. A plane flight to Fort Lauderdale. A taxi ride. Entering a large, red building. Rushing through corridors, to a non-descript room. A hospital room. A bed. In it a shrunken, skeletal old man. Dying.

My father.

My father, Ivan Branfman. In his time a handsome, moustached, charming character, one of the very top yarn salesmen in one of the toughest jungles of the world, the New York garment center where he couldn't go ten feet without running into a friend, colleague, customer, rival - whom he would charm, bedazzle, get laughing in less time than it took me to have a thought. The jokes. He knew thousands of them. He would hold roomfuls of people in stitches an entire evening with the stories, the dialects, the imitations. If Willy Loman was well-liked, my father was loved - by his dozens of friends, the southern textile mill owners who made him their New York representative, the customers who made him well-off enough to move to Great Neck and buy a house with beds of flowers, and achieve many of his other material dreams.

My father. Dying now from lung disease, emphysema, heart disease. The proximate cause the 1.2 million cigarettes I'd calculated he'd smoked in his lifetime. The real cause whatever it was that had made him smoke, and gamble, and keep it all inside. Trapped in a difficult relationship with his wife, whom he loved but with whom he could never find peace. Never really comfortable with his sons. His children knew he loved them. But he had never said it. And when he answered "you kids" when asked about the meaning of his life, it was like he was embarrassed to talk about it.

You didn't go around saying "I love you" to your kids when you'd been born a Ukrainian Jew in 1911, seen your father almost killed in a pogrom, moved to a tough neighborhood in Brooklyn where some of your closest friends grew up to be gangsters, and were daily reviled in one of the toughest businesses on earth. What you did was spend most of your time at home behind a newspaper, watching television, handicapping the horses, being polite but removed from your four sons, reserving the charm and energy for those outside your immediate family. The face your sons saw was that of a kind and well-intentioned, but reserved, turned-off stranger, particularly your oldest, somewhat intellectual son, who had made no secret as a teenager of his disdain for the "materialism" he felt you represented.

What happened when I entered that room was thus one of the most extraordinary experiences of my life. For my father, that stranger, suddenly sat up in his bed and smiled at me with a look of the most pure and intense love that I have ever seen, before or since. It lasted no more than ten seconds, but it - and my other brothers reported similar experiences - transformed my life. The room was filled with light and suddenly, for the first time, I understood that word I had heard so much and seen so little.

It was Friday night, about 7 p.m. My father lay on his back, unable to sit up unassisted, his face covered by an oxygen mask, his body wasted, his legs steel rods. Although his large head with its deep brow and thick white hair and moustache remained intact, the rest of him resembled a concentration camp inmate. Within minutes I was chatting with my mother, brother Alan, and his wife-to-be Gloria about my father, as if he was not there. Suddenly, he motioned to me, pulled the oxygen mask aside. Shocked, I bent down. "This is it!, It's really happening!" he whispered.

I felt shock waves through my body. My father had never, not even once, not even when he was incontinent and needed an oxygen mask to breathe and slept sitting up on his living room couch, acknowledged that he was going to die. He was always full of plans: the next visit or party with his friends, the next trip he was going to take as soon as "this thing" got better. So stunned was I by this comment, which I alone had heard, that I did not repeat it to my family. My father was breaking through the denial for the first time. So was I.

And my father's comment meant something else besides: he was fully conscious, his mind fully alert. The diminution of his body was not accompanied by a reduction in what remained. On the contrary. His body had almost disappeared - but his intellect, his wit, his soul, were larger than ever.

After that, we included my father in our conversations. Although most of the talk was by us, and he communicated only through a few

intermittent sentences, he was the chief protagonist in the events that were to ensue - more alive in dying than he had ever been in life.

My family let me know, and my father confirmed, what was to be the dominant fact of the days to come: my father, though in incredible pain, though filling up with fluids and only able to remain alive by being drained of them every few hours as if he were a stagnant swamp or leaky rowboat, had decided that he would at least remain alive until my brother Yakov, a Hassidic Jew, arrived from Jerusalem. And this meant that he would stay alive from that Friday night until at least Sunday morning, which was the earliest Yakov could come.

I was later to read Joseph Campbell's description of an epiphany as an event so powerful that it transcended good or evil or any other categories, and to realize I had experienced it in the days that followed my arrival at the hospital, a time of exaltation and horror, beauty and ugliness, such as I have never known before or since. I feel the events that occurred more than eight and a half years ago as if they happened yesterday:

o The nurse would come in every few hours with a thin tube several feet in length. It would be inserted down through my father's nose into his vitals, causing him excruciating pain. The liquid would be drained out of him, culminating in a spasmodic convulsion. Talking to my father afterwards, it was clear that he was enduring the unendurable. I had known my father was strong before this. But now I knew it in a different way. He had decided to do whatever was necessary to see Yakov before he died. He would do it, despite having to bear physical pain that I could not even imagine.

o That Friday night my father endured two such "drainings." On Saturday morning, about 11 a.m., he motioned towards me. I leaned over, pulled aside his oxygen mask, stuck my ear near his mouth. "When Yakov comes, put me out," I heard. In shock, I asked him to repeat it. "When Yakov comes, put me out," I heard again. So stricken was the look on my face that my family immediately asked what he had said. I motioned for them to go out into the hallway. Once there, I repeated what he had said. Suddenly, the 6 of us - my mother, my

brothers Alan and David, Gloria and my girlfriend Nancy - put our arms around each other and spontaneously began wailing at the top of our lungs. The Word had been heard, the veil pierced, for the first time. My father was calling the shots, and he has now spoken clearly and unambiguously for the first time. This was no joke, no nightmare, no rehearsal. It was the real thing. He had decided to to die. He was going to die. For real.

o Shortly afterwards my father's Indian doctor showed up, wearing golf pants. He clearly had two goals, the first to make an appearance. The second to leave as soon as possible. A perfunctory examination, a quick move toward the door, corralled by the family in the corridor, he impatiently answered our questions. No, there was nothing to be done. No, my father was not going to make it. And, most emphatically, no, he could not be "put out." It was against the law. He would be kept alive as long as possible.

o I have faced many unpleasant tasks in my life, from initiating a divorce to interviewing refugees from bombing. Never have I had so excruciating an experience, however, as having to inform my father that his request would be denied. He was clearly angry, and was to repeat his request several times in the days to come. I felt helpless, frustrated, angry - angry that he was being put in this situation, angry that his doctor was so indifferent to his fate, angry that I could do nothing. What a horror! To want to serve my father more than I had ever wanted to serve another human being - and at that very moment to fail him in his most just and dignified request.

o Shortly after we began our vigil, me at the foot of the bed, I began to hold my father's legs, and was rarely to stop touching, stroking, holding on to him thereafter. I touched him far more during the next two days than I had in the 44 previous years. Before, I had never said "I love you" to him. Now I intoned it over and over again. Before I had always felt a kind of ambiguous love around him, genuine feelings weakened by the wall between us. Now I felt the most intense, pure and deepest love of my life, a magic carpet taking me into domains of light and dark, peaceful white clouds and rocking storms, that I had never even known existed. What stood out most was

the pure *depth* of feeling, as wave after wave of emotion lifted me up to the most exalted heights and crashed me down onto the rocks, minute by minute, over and over and over again.

o There were many, many beautiful moments during this experience, but none more beautiful than this: at some point in the early morning hours of Sunday, about a day and a half after he had arrived at the hospital, my father beckoned to David, the youngest brother, the lawyer. He asked him to take out his legal pad. For the next several hours, he would signal David every few minutes and whisper something to him. David would then write it down in longhand. To our amazement, our father had decided to dictate his last will and testament, a testament from the heart, from an inside we had never seen, a testament that speaks to us now from beyond the grave in a way that does nothing else. All told, some 25 sheets of paper, some with several, some with only one sentence, but more words of a personal nature than the sum total of all his life's writings. Words we had never before heard, but would never again forget. I have not been able to read those words since, nor can I read them now, without weeping - in joy, in sadness. The Muslims have the Koran, Christians and Jews the Bible. We have this. When he wrote, "tell your mother I have always loved her," the words were simple. The feelings were not.

o Sunday dawned. A sudden bustle. Yakov had arrived! A bearded, grave, black-clothed figure entered the room, living in a state which only a deeply religious person who hadn't slept for more than 24 hours, flying and praying through the dark night on his way to his dying father's bedside, can imagine. Magically, my father again lifted himself up, gazing at Yakov with the same look of adoration and love that he had conferred upon the rest of us. We all left the room, to allow them their last time together. When Yakov came out ten or fifteen minutes later to invite us back in he gazed at us in wonderment. "He's a Tzaddik!," he whispered, referring to the 12 hidden righteous people believed to be alive at any one time, and upon whom the existence of the world rests. At that moment, it was easy to believe.

o Shortly after we re-entered the room, my father beckoned to me. I leaned over. "Now put me out!," came the whisper. The room

stood still. I went into shock. "I can't, Dad," I heard myself saying. "The doctor says it would be murder." I held my arms out, helplessly. I told my family what he had said, they repeated what the doctor had said. We all circled the bed, crying, weeping, saying over and over again, "we love you," "we love you," "we love you." My father beckoned to me again. I bent over. I heard, "if you love me, put me out!" I gestured helplessly again.

I did not realize those would be the last words he would ever utter.

o We remained around the bed, weeping. After another fifteen minutes, the nurse came back in. Although she did have the tube this time, she removed the oxygen mask to clean my father's face. She then moved to return the mask. As she did so, however, my father knocked her hand aside. Angry, he had decided to do what the state required. He had decided to choose the moment of his death.

o The next hour was the most extraordinary of my life. I found myself moving closer, till I was less than a foot away from my father's face, utterly absorbed in the great, moustached head, as slowly, ever so slowly, my father's face passed from life to death. At first he breathed normally. Slowly, he began breathing more and more laboredly. Ten, 15, 30, minutes - it seemed like a lifetime. Suddenly. A tongue protruded. A face turned purple. Eyes went blank.

Another 75-year old man dead, in another hospital room in southern Florida.

My father.

My father.

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I had just spent over an hour as my father died, staring directly into his eyes as they passed from life to death, feeling his skin as he passed from life to death, experiencing the greatest love and pain I

had ever known, love so great and pain so great that the experience resembled neither, an experience in which the material world, the "real" world, the world of politics, simply faded away, to be completely overtaken by a very different Reality.

Face-to-face with mortality.

Face-to-face with life.

Face-to-face with death.

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I had, from time to time, tried to think of politics, my work, the Strategic Investment Initiative, the race for President, during that time at my father's bedside and the following surreal 10 days that took us from sitting with "the body" in the hospital room, to the Florida mortuary where Yaakov and my other brothers argued about whether to embalm the body (Jewish law forbids it, my mother wanted it), to the funeral in New York City, to sitting shiva.

But I found I could not think seriously about my political life during this period. In fact, my main thoughts about my previous life involved a sense of wonderment: how could I have taken it all so seriously?

The world beyond that hospital room, beyond the enormity of my father's death seemed not only unreal, but inconsequential. The Strategic Investment Initiative, the race for President, was about ... what? Money, media, power. Even if implemented, the SII was about economics: dollars, position papers, government programs, bills. How could such issues be taken seriously in the context of the depth of feeling, the heights of passion, the sense of touching the unconditioned, the experience of life and death?

That experience, in that room, catapulted me out beyond the world of position papers to a real world of pain, joy, sorrow, exaltation, a real world where people really live their lives ... or do not.

I realized that my assumption in working on politics was that I was working to improve people's lives, to make people happier. But the issue of "happiness," of joy and sorrow, it was clear in that room, got played out down here, in the dirt - not up there in the realm of words on pieces of paper. And it was not clear to me then, nor is it now, the precisely connection between the real world "down here" and the work I was doing to have better "public policy" up there.

My father's life, and death, raised all sorts of questions. Almost none of them were answered by any of the bills I was helping to draft, or policies I was helping to articulate. The real issues of my father's life, and death - his ability to experience and convey love, his relationships with his family, his sense of meaning and purpose - would not in any significant way be affected by the passage of SII, the election of even the best of Presidents.

And, on a more personal level, this experience opened me up a like a can opener. The worlds I began to glimpse, the emotions I felt for the first time, the insights as yet inexpressible in words but no less real for their non-verbal nature, were powerful and compelling and profound. The world of politics, by comparison, seemed pale and sterile and imitative, a kind of "pseudo-life."

I had so many questions during this experience, from wanting to understand how I had managed to live so much of my life to that point without knowing about these new depths of experience and feeling, to being intensely curious to know what religion and psychology could tell me about what I was undergoing, to being badly frustrated that I could not even begin to understand, let alone put into words, this experience of exaltation and horror, transcending anything I had ever known. The latest book by Robert Reich or Kevin Phillips, the editorials of The New York Times or Washington Post, the stirring words I had been writing as preamble to the SII, seemed laughable at best, grotesque at worst, by comparison.

This was my new self, starting to emerge in incubus. My old self, a 44-year-old with a political role and identity and living to earn, with

an ego that needed to be satisfied, soon found itself preparing to return to Washington, to resume its job at the Hart think tank.

As I flew back from sitting shiva in New York to resume my work in Washington, however, I did not plan to resume my life as it had been. I made a list of resolutions. I would take my life more seriously. I would exercise every day, lose weight, eat more healthily, be more frugal. I would read more. I would be more honest with my co-workers. I would complement my political activities with spiritual and psychological explorations. I drew up a daily timetable, filled with uplifting activity. Not a moment would be wasted.

It lasted about two days. I soon found myself back working 18-hour days, phoning and typing, caught up in intrigue and egos and the fight for power. The tensions between our think tank and the Hart Senate Office, the thirst for influence and attention, the debates over taxes and spending, became the core of my life. This world of position papers and public policy debates had seemed a dream in that hospital room. Within weeks, the foreground shifted. My life became consumed by politics, and it was as if my father's death had been the dream.

I remember during those weeks and months trying to return to the emotional and psychological space I had experienced during my father's death. And failing. And finding that thinking about my father's death now seemed as unreal and dream-like as had my present life of politics from his hospital room. And feeling strange, weird, confused, that an experience that I know to be so seminal, so powerful, so profound, seemed to have disappeared without a trace, without any of the questions that had seemed so important having been answered.

As it turned out, however, the consequences of the inchoate Awakening I had experienced during my father's death were only delayed. I returned to the think tank and, following Hart's fall in May 1987, formed another think tank called Rebuild America for nearly four more years. By the fall of 1990, however, the process that had begun in that hospital room finally came to the surface. I left politics and began a spiritual exploration that has taken me to Jerusalem,

Hungary, India and Laos, involved a significant commitment to meditation, and continues until the present moment.

As I still try to understand it.

My father's death.