

Yizkor – 5778
“Dadilies”
September 30, 2017

“Jamie, if you cannot fricassee, fry, fry a hen.”

My Dad said this often to me when I was only a kid. I had not a clue what it meant then and I am equally mystified 6 decades later. My Dad had a lot of sayings like this that made no sense to anybody but him.

“Chili today, hot tamale.”

Really, Dad? What in the world does *that* mean?

“This family is run as a democracy. Each of you 5 kids get one vote. I get 12.”

Right, Dad, right.

Thirty years ago, a woman named Michelle Slung published a book called “Momilies.” It was filled with the time-honored wisdom of mothers. It was replete with sayings like:

*Never run with a lollipop in your mouth!
Don't pick at that scab! It will never heal!
Always wear clean underwear. You never know when you
might be in an accident!
Clean your plate! Don't you know there are starving
children in...name your favorite impoverished
place - China, India, Africa...*

My Mom has her expressions, but the ones that really stick with me are my Dad's, especially now that he's gone. I call them “Dadilies.” Not all of them were nonsensical or silly. But they all make me smile because they bring him back to life.

He told me:

*“If you want to be happy and successful in life, find
something you love to do and then find people enough crazy to pay you to
do it!”*

That one has guided me for almost 40 years.

My brother Stuart remembers him saying,

"If it makes you happy to be happy, be happy. If it makes you happy to be unhappy, be unhappy."

I admit it, I've used that one on my own kids.

He told us often:

"You never learn by succeeding. Only by failing do you figure out what went wrong and make it better!"

And the hits, the "Dadilies," keep coming, these from the memories of my brother, Rick, and sister, Jessica:

"Do as I say, not as I do."

"Don't make me pull this car over."

"Every dollar is an ironman."

"Don't get arrested."

"Nobody ever said life was fair."

"Money isn't good or bad. It just gives you the ability to make choices."

"If you don't like what you're doing, find something else. And if you don't like that, find something else."

His sayings weren't only for family. His most famous maxim, the one that made him famous in business more than 50 years ago was:

"If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there."

My father's name was Lawrence David Gibson. He was a son of the Depression, the eldest of three siblings. He was the first of his family to go to college, the first to succeed, earning high honors. He was the first to make it in business, fighting anti-Semitism battling in companies in New York and Minnesota.

He was married to Lois Kestenbaum Gibson for the better part of 68 years. He was Dad to five children, birthed in one miraculous 7-year stretch. He was wonderful and he was flawed, deeply flawed. But he got healed of his demons in his early 50s' and spent much of the rest of his 38 years on earth making amends to family and friends alike.

Dad's approval was harder to get than Mom's, but worth waiting for when you finally received it. Later in life he became a softer touch, just glad to be around for the party, happy to be loved by his family despite the terrible mistakes of his younger years. In those sweeter years, he became the grandfather of seven and finally, the great-grandfather of one, my little Noa.

He had a keen, analytic mind and didn't always show patience with those who could not keep up with him. That was evident not only in business, but in his life-long advocacy work for Jewish social justice.

This Yizkor talk is for him, but I hope that some of what I share strikes a note of familiarity for all of us who mourn our beloveds today. The awkward tenderness I feel, the brokenness and the joy thoroughly blended, is something all of us knew we would experience when we entered this room today.

This letter to him, only written now, a year after his death, is a tribute of love. I thank you from the bottom of my heart for letting me share it with you at Yizkor today.

Dear Dad,

It is hard to believe that you were here, on this pulpit, little more than a year ago. You were here to celebrate the naming of Noa Pearl Gibson, your great-granddaughter, the first of your fourth generation.

You beamed and were uncharacteristically quiet during that visit. The travel had taken a lot out of both of you. But you sat holding Noa with quiet wonder, knowing that something in you had been made whole by her birth.

I believed that you were always the smartest man in the room, at least when it came to ideas. I wish you had been as smart, especially when you were younger, when it came to relationships.

In your 89th year, you had the sense that as healthy as you felt, precious days were fleeting, and yes, numbered.

You said to our sister, Jessica, "I know that things are going great now, more than I have a right to expect. I just want you to know that if, God forbid, anything were to happen to me, it's all right. I've lived a good life. And it's all right. It really is."

It didn't feel all right at the moment I was told you had been hit by that car on the 1st day of Sukkot last year. It felt as if the whole world, my whole world, was crumbling. We rushed out to see you in Minnesota. We held your hand and stroked your brow even as the brain bleed took you slowly from us, minute by minute.

I have come to understand what so many in my congregation have described to me in the face of death, especially sudden death of a family member. Shock overwhelms emotion. It took two days for tears to come.

Shock, I've come to learn, is the way we insulate ourselves from having to accept the full brunt of the terrible at once, whether it is physical or emotional. Shock is why I was able to cradle your head and caress your hair instead of simply dissolving on the spot. Shock is what allowed me to laugh and make jokes in your presence, even though you were dying in front of my eyes. Shock protected me from the worst of that moment.

But shock only delays delivery on emotion, it certainly doesn't dissipate it. And that has come in waves over the last 11½ months.

Knowing you, you would be worried about the effect your sudden death would have on me and all of us in the family. Let me say that for my part, I have been cradled in love by my congregation, my family, the 1800 strong compassionate souls of this place. I am eternally grateful to them for allowing me to mourn, cry, breathe and eventually regain my equilibrium. I am just as grateful to you for being the father who engendered integrity, emotion, passion and love.

Knowing you, you'd smile and quote Ogden Nash, your favorite humorous poet, and say, "Like talcum, you're walcum."

Dad, thanks for everything. Thanks for it all. The love, the craziness you put us through, the laughter, the anger and the healing, the commitment, the passion, the love. Yes, I know I already said "the love." But it was such a part of you, such a gift you gave to me, that it bears repeating.

God, I miss you. I will miss you until the end of my life. But I believe with every fiber of my being that you continue to live in my heart and in those of every one of your four generations and the countless people you touched in business, the arts, in the Jewish world and in the 12-Step community.

You touched so many for the good. And I am so proud, so very proud to be your son. I ask God this day, may I be gifted with a tenth of your spirit and I will consider myself blessed beyond measure. For you were such a blessing to me.

***Your loving son,
Jamie***

Such letters you could write as well! Such letters filled with Momilies and Dadilies, Sisterlies and Brotherlies, Auntilies and Unclelies, Partnerlies and Friendilies. Some of us could write notes of wrenching emotion reflecting what our children taught us before they died, leaving before their time.

I would offer this at Yizkor today, this moment. The time spent writing a letter to someone you mourn for today is a moment you have brought them back to your heart-space, to full awareness, not mere memory. Try it over the next few days. The words might help you carry the burden of loss and memory with a grace you might not have realized that was always inside you.

Thank you for indulging me this day. I wish comfort and ease for each of us caught in the full throes of remembrance, each of us who experience without filter or shame the deep loving connection of those who made us who we are today.

We come to Yizkor both for ourselves and our community. I hope and pray with all of my heart that we experience some balm within as we remember the best of the best souls in our lives. I hope and pray with all of my heart that everyone of us feels accompanied by someone else here.

You are not alone at this moment. You do not have to be alone tomorrow. You are of infinite worth. You deserve to be treasured, even as you treasure the life and remembrance of those who we honor today.

It is said, "We are not judged by what we didn't accomplish. We are judged by what we didn't even try." Let us honor those we loved so much in life by trying, in their name, to live up to their ideals, their hopes, their love for us. Then that love will live on in us, through us and beyond us. Forever. Forever.