

## Empty at the Top

By Joel Silverstein

**I**t has been two years since my father; Abraham Silverstein died. This past year moved much more quickly than the first year he was gone. Much of that has to do with the simple fact that life goes on. Many of our friends are in similar situations with aging parents, ailing parents, and the understanding that death is inevitable. The final years of a parent's life is a time of change for their children. Despite how successful we may have become, or how old we are, we are always children while our parents are alive. There is always a higher authority in the family. We always have a place of comfort. After my mother Barbra died in 2011, we devoted all of our time to caring for Abe. It was challenging, it was chaos, and it was a privilege. I still had a parent. After his death, I joined the group of those without fathers. However, now, two years later my position has changed. It's not that I no longer have a father or mother, this is bigger than that—I have become an orphan. My mountain is empty at the top.

Being an orphan does not mean I am alone in the world, quite the contrary. I have my family with my wonderful wife Kathy, our fantastic children Jona and Jane, and our oldest Charlie. Plus my brother and sister, and Kathy's family as well. Plus I have friends, more than I ever thought I would have. My life is full of people. Going to high-holiday services this year was melancholy and required reaching deep into the memory bank. Everything regarding my father is now from the past, no opportunity for the future. Important things he did or said now become footnotes to conversations. My mountain is empty at the top.

We still have the house in Brooklyn. We made repairs, with painting, and floor refinishing last year. My brother Jeff is living there taking care of the house and curating Pop's artwork, papers and books. Soon Jane will live there while she goes to college. She wants to study film at Brooklyn College. I think pop would smile knowing Janey will be in the house. She will have access to his library and will breathe some new life into the place. We are already planning Thanksgiving in Brooklyn next year when we can get the whole family together. But it won't be the same house. My mountain is empty at the top.

I speak less to my brother and sister now than before. When Pop was alive, the three of us would talk multiple times a day. It's not uncommon for adult children to rally together when parents are at the back end. We did, and we did it well. As Kathy and I have explained to Jane and Jona and Charlie, at the end of the day siblings have each other and they will rally together when it comes to caring for their parents (we hope). But now, I speak to Jeff maybe twice a week, and Victoria once a week or so. Our relationships did not weaken after Pop died they are as strong as ever, we just have less to talk about now. The business of that family flows through me and while at times it was a burden, I figured it out. The baton was passed. My mountain is empty at the top.

My relationship with my father was always good. Even at challenging times when I was growing up it was good. I learned many things from him. But what I think learned the most is that parents know what is in store for their children. It comes from having navigated their own waters. They want to make things a little better, and to help you develop the skills to navigate rocky terrain.

It's easy to teach children how to enjoy the easy stuff, handling the tuff stuff is difficult.

However, every parent tries. Most children do not see these as talents of parents while growing up. Most of the time they see it as nagging or interfering with their freedom. However, every kid knows the parent is the safety-net. When all else fails, mom and dad can help solve the problem—till they are gone. Then all that is left is the book of their life in the library of your own mind. Each and everything learned becomes the most important reference as it is the only thing left to recall. I did not feel this way when my mother passed, but I do with Pop gone. I think it's called disenfranchised grief. My mountain is empty at the top.

It is been said that one does not become an adult until they lose a parent. I think losing the first parent is the preparation for losing the next one. It reinforces that life is fragile, exposes one's mortality and provokes self-reflection. That time between the death of two parents is the training grounds. It's where you revisit the lessons, the information, and the values implanted while making ones own life.

So what have I learned about myself in the past two years? I've learned I am much more like my father than I ever thought. While I have many of my mother's traits, it is those of my dad's that I am embracing. He liked to help the underdog, meaning he had an eye for knowing where his help was most needed. He was a good friend, he had few, but he was always there for them. He

valued education. It did not have to come from a fancy university; he knew how to find knowledge from the best people. Above all, he loved his family.

I think the work I have been doing over the past two years fits in line with how pop did things. Being back in school has been an exciting journey. I have one semester left, and if all goes well (despite the B- I just ate in a brutal class), I should graduate with a 3.80 GPA. There have been some college students I've worked with on bigger things than just classwork, and I am happy for that. The friends I have are important to me; I do what I can for them before they even ask. I am working with Jane and Jona to prepare them for college, but it's always hard to do that with your own kids, but I keep trying. Now two years later everything has settled, my life is full and continues to find its level, for the most part everything is good. My mountain is empty at the top.

The eight day after pop passed I wrote, "I have neither a single regret nor unfinished business with my father. When the call came to take care of him, I went willingly. The experience of caring for him these past years has been a privilege. Now to care for his spirit and memory." I think I have done exactly as he would have wished. I am closer to the person he knew I would become. He also knew his children would become orphans as he and his sister had become, and as every child becomes before they are adults. And so another year has passed, and my mountain is still empty at the top.

Abraham M. Silverstein October 25, 1920 - December 16, 2013