

Butch Freedman

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Heritage

Even now, in this late stage of my life, my parents long gone, I am still trying to come to terms with my relationship with my father. Let me name him here, it's a good name—Meyer Freedman, M.D. The M.D. was always included. Something to be proud of. We all were. Mom told us we should be. All the neighbors called him Doc and looked up to him. That name, on an illuminated sign, was on the doorpost of our house, and his office on the first floor, he was the neighborhood physician. Everybody counted on him.

Our family life played out on the two floors above—though always impacted by the activity on the first, the people in the waiting room, the closed door of his office, the need to be extra quiet during office hours, day and night. We were a doctor's family. And a Jewish one. Made for lots of questions in my mind. What made us Jewish when most everybody else was a different religion? And why were we not supposed to talk about it? How did Dad become a doctor? Why did Mom want me to be one also? And why did my father always seem so sullen? But these things were never discussed, certainly not with children. Our opinions, if we dared to have them, were not to be expressed. We knew this without being told.

Dad was a strict parent, and a silent one. But he wasn't intentionally mean or uncaring. I'm sure he cared a great deal about his three children; he just didn't know how to express it. Maybe that was part of his generation's idea of how a man should behave. Do your job, take care of your

family, and show no emotion while doing it. Emotions were equated with weakness. I never saw my father cry, not even at his mother's funeral. And Mom and Dad were not visibly affectionate with each other—though I'd seen photographs of them when they were young and handsome and in one of those they looked at each other like they were deeply in love. I still have and treasure that picture. Dad never hugged his children or told us he loved us. I think he did, love us that is, but how were we to know? Still, I loved him, in that innocent way children love their parents. And, at the same time, I was also thoroughly scared of him. Funny how that works. But that's how it was—love and fear, accompanied with the occasional, and rage-filled, physical punishment from the old man. I won't say more about that.

I recently watched a documentary about Martin Short, the comedian. What touched me was the depiction, through their trove of home films and photos, of a genuinely kind and hilarious family. Their love for each other was clearly expressed, and celebrated. They laughed and played together, even through all the usual traumas and heartbreaks that families experience. But kids were allowed and even encouraged to talk and joke with their elders, and Marty Short came out of that environment a caring, feeling, happy and funny man. As I watched, that show, I couldn't help feeling saddened that I never knew my parents in a similar way. We didn't do much laughing or talking. Not even at the dinner table—especially at the dinner table. I could never wait till I had finished my meal and could ask to be excused.

I hope that my own two children felt loved and cared for, felt included and free to express themselves without fear of punishment or disparagement. We never made them feel unimportant or didn't listen to their ideas or worries. My father was my model. I did everything he did not.

I have forgiven my father any offense he may have committed; his lack of expressed love I know was not a lack of deep concern and affection. He was there for me when I needed him and was, as was a marker of the time, a "good provider." Though we didn't talk much except about sports, Dad did take me to watch almost every Penn football game. He was an alumnus and cheered on the team like he was still an excited student. I can still recall the lyrics to the Penn fight song.

Fight on, Pennsylvania

Put the ball across that line

Fight, you Pennsylvanians

There it goes, across this time

Red and blue, we're with you

And we're cheering for your men

So it's fight, fight, fight, Pennsylvania

Fight on for Penn

His excitement at those games was a side of him I found both shocking and lovely. I wanted him to be that man at home.

Dad also served his country as a captain in the Army Air Corp in World War 2. I asked him once to tell me about the war, but he said only, "It's something I'd rather forget." I get that now, didn't understand it then. I did see some photos of his time overseas. In one he is amongst a group of smiling soldiers; beers in hand, cigars in their mouths. Dad looked happy. I hardly recognized him.

In his time, and in his particular way, I believe my father was a good man. A man who had to overcome both prejudice and poverty, raised by immigrant parents, to become who and what he was. I am who I am today, scars and honors both, because of Meyer Freedman, M.D. I only wish we could have gotten to know each other better when we had the chance. It's taken me a long time to fill that void. Now I do it with memories of the good times—and with the vision of my dad smiling at my mom, in love, cheering on his alma mater.