

Dad
Robert Richman

When I picture my father, I almost always picture him the same way, deep in a conversation, his chin in his hand or arm hanging over his head, listening and asking questions. My father was an incredible man in many ways and among them was his unique ability to connect with people in a way that few people can. In part this was because he rarely talked about himself and made almost every conversation about the person he was talking to. It's not that he didn't like talking about himself. He was comfortable in his own skin and with his thoughts and opinions. It's just that he was genuinely interested in other people, in their lives and choices and what they had to say.

While I think I've always understood how special my father was, it was still overwhelming to see the outpouring of love and support that came in so many ways over the past few months. They came in conversations and cards, letters, phone calls, notes and emails and sometimes just in a hug or a handshake. For those of you who know my mother well, it won't surprise you to hear that she created a file folder to save the written thoughts in a well organized manner. The folder was aptly labeled, "Harold is Great."

I think that the contents of this folder, both the words and the sources, paint a better picture of my dad than my words ever could.

From a staff member of an organization on who's board he sat, "As always, your ideas help us grow, your thoughts make us ponder (and scratch our heads) and your suggestions align our focus to what's important but missing from our work."

From a cousin of my generation, "When I walked in the room and took your hand, you asked me what have you been doing to change the world? And my reply truly came from the heart when I said, trying to follow in your footsteps. I do really want to change the world . . . and you were there all along showing me how to do just that. You did it by example, by your own work, and by encouraging like-minded souls to follow."

From a livery driver. The guy who used to drive him downtown to meetings and to the airport way too often, "you are remembered in my heart and mind as a man of class and deserving of great respect."

From a colleague, "I particularly appreciate the time you have always been willing to take to listen to concerns and to guide me through difficult issues. The patience you have shown to me and the trust you have placed in me have helped to build my confidence, to nurture my intellectual curiosity and inspired me to be a more patient person and now parent."

And finally, from one of his doctors." In my experience, you are really an unusual man in many respects. You care for others and what they do. That in and of itself is really unusual. Even more remarkably, you are able to do this despite personal suffering. You have a wisdom that comes from having lived life the way it should be lived, directed towards helping others and your family that gives you a piece of mind few others achieve."

Of course, had it not been my mother labeling the folder it would have been labeled Harold and Marlene are great. Many of these notes and messages were really about the two of them. Theirs was a truly unique love affair filled with mutual respect and admiration, support and common interests. And on top of it all it was clear that they just plain enjoyed each other's company. A child couldn't ask for better parents or a better example of what a marriage is supposed to be.

You all know that there has never been any question that my mom is a strong woman, but watching her these past months has redefined that word for me yet again. I couldn't imagine anyone handling such difficulty and sadness with such grace and determination. I often tried to tell her how remarkable she was, only to get a typical Marlene Response. "I don't understand why people say that. How else would I act?"

Mom, I know that the weeks and months ahead will be difficult. I'd ask that you take a moment and look around you at this incredible gathering of people. I know you will say they are here for dad but they are not just here for dad. Everyone here cares about you and is here for you as well. In this family and in this unbelievably unique community, however lonely you might feel at times, you will never be alone.

My dad was the consummate teacher. Teaching wasn't just his chosen profession, it was at the soul of who he was. For me, his teachings weren't about social policy or poverty's effect on children. He was my teacher in life. I know I'm not the only person that felt this way and I'm painfully aware that I wasn't exactly his easiest student.

My dad, along with my mom, taught me how to be a member of a family and a member of a community. My dad taught me responsibility and discipline but also how to take risks. He taught me how to take my work seriously without taking myself too seriously. He taught me the importance of living a life without regret and even taught me how to die in peace and not afraid. He taught me how to be a man, a husband and, I think, most importantly, he taught me how to be a father. My greatest hope is that I can live up to his example in that department.

I love you dad.