

Larry Gelfand

December 10, 2010

My name is Alan Weinstein. Larry Gelfand and I were friends for the last twenty-some years.

Larry was cut from an unusual cloth. His passion for broad swaths of life was stamped by his humor and his, clear, searching mind. He was unstoppable, until last week.

Larry and I met in 1990, when this synagogue wanted to help sponsor an academic conference. Two years down the road, the year 1992 would mark the five hundredth anniversary of Columbus's voyage to America. 1992 would be filled with conferences. But 1992 would also inspire events world-wide to honor another anniversary of 1492, 1492 as the year that Ferdinand and Isabella expelled the Jews from Spain, inadvertently creating the world of Sephardic culture. My job, representing this synagogue, was to see whom I could find in the University, to help structure a Sephardic conference in Iowa City. The response was terrific. Many superb people jumped at the idea, and eventually many departments came on board : Spanish, History, Religion, Comparative Literature, and Hancher Auditorium. And it was, finally, Larry Gelfand who was eager and willing to articulate a vision for the three-day event, and to take on the organizational challenges.

He was tireless. His vision was broad and deep. He relished finding brilliant scholars. Afterwards he took pride in the final result: hundreds of people at scholarly events in University lecture halls, in this synagogue sanctuary as a venue for Sephardic liturgical music, at Hancher for a concert of folk music, at the Union for a grand Sephardic dinner.

In the year preceding the conference, I learned a lot about Larry, over many lunches, (Larry loved lunches). His core, it seems to me, held vast pools of profound respect. Many of the passions of his life were crystallized in this event; his passion for history, his intrigue with the arts, his Judaism, his love of scholarship and his commitment to the ideal that one of the roles of the University is to share knowledge with the public,--- all these magnets for Larry's respect were embraced in the Sephardic conference.

Larry had that same profound respect for individuals. In all the hours I spent with Larry over twenty years, I never heard him disrespectful. I never heard humor at someone else's expense. I never heard him judgmental. Mind you, he was always analytical. Chronically analytical. Always trying to sort through the complexity of facts. Our lunch conversations often yielded wonderful insights, insights that still inform my own thinking. Let me give you a single example.

I asked Larry once, discussing the nature of Jewish life in Iowa City, why there were so many Jews who were not affiliated with the synagogue. Larry said, analytically, " You have to understand Alan, that before the 1960's, most Jews who came to Iowa City from around the country did not come here for freedom OF religion. They came here for freedom FROM religion."

And in a flash, my own experiences, growing up in Jewish Toronto in the 40's and 50's, in the shadows of the war years and in the wake of the war, and the birth of the State of Israel, seeing the vast panorama of urban Jewish life I knew in my youth, in a flash my own experiences came more clearly into focus. It was only one line, but it opened a window. That was 20 years ago: I'm still thinking about it.

I loved Larry's mind. I loved his heart. Those pools of respect I mentioned? There was a bottomless pool for Miriam and Julia and Daniel and Ronald. Whenever we talked, and he brought me up to date on the children, it was with steady, solid pride.

One last story. A couple months ago, --- this will not come as a surprise--- I met Larry for lunch. When I got to the restaurant, he was already seated, tentatively I thought, on the edge of the bench.

He looked pale. He said he had fallen in the parking lot, needed help getting up and in. But if he sat still, he was OK, he said. We had a good talk. It was a long lunch. I asked things I had never asked before, and found out things I never knew about his youth. Like taking a part-time job doing paper-work in a penitentiary in order to get free room and board while working on his PhD. Like meeting Miriam, and knowing after a few weeks that she was "the one for him". At this point he stopped, interrupted his thought, and spoke to me as though I was a 20 year old student. Suddenly didactic." Dating is very important, he said. I think you have to date a lot. Do you know why? Because dating teaches you who you can't imagine living with for the rest of your life. So, when I met Miriam, I knew. I knew I could live with her for the rest of my life."

And he did.

Larry couldn't get up from the table himself. We walked to his car an eighth of a step at a time, with pauses. The pain must have been excruciating. He insisted on driving home by himself. Seated in the car, he said, he was fine, just fine. We called Miriam. Larry was focused, stubborn, determined, independent. Miriam met him with a wheel-chair. Larry had broken bones.

One of the lessons I learned from Larry, is that having lunch with a friend is very, very important.

Another, is that character traits like focus, determination, stubbornness, and independence are productive and enviable. And so are unwavering civility, and love, and passion for one's calling.

Larry Gelfand was a good friend. He always had sense of perspective. He always had a sense of humor. I think he would chuckle now, and I think he might be patient, when I tell you in all sincerity that as I get closer and closer to his chronological age, Larry continues to be a role model.