

On Forgiveness: 'Morty's Riddle'

I decided to call my father. It was the night before I was due to land in Albuquerque, in the Spring of 1979, when I was heading to New Mexico for a job interview with the National Health Service Corps to serve as a Physician's Assistant in a clinic in Truchas, near Santa Fe. We had reached an unspoken agreement since he left my mom: he would call me. I could call a number he gave me, but only if it was urgent and really important.

When my mom found Morty's brief handwritten note, printed in tell-tale block letters, one December day fifteen months earlier, it was dreary, wet and cold. He had left it on the fireplace mantle in the suburban home outside Philadelphia where they were house-sitting. They'd been back in the States from Bali since September, taking their annual break from unending global adventures to check on aging parents. This time, they said, it might be for good. Or that's what Thelma hoped once they both started looking for work. By the next day, when she figured out that he was gone for good, and with half their savings, she called me. I was 23.

He answered the phone after two rings. *"Hi Dad..." "Hey, kiddo. You okay?"* I tried to sound matter-of-fact about my travel plans, then asked, *"Would you want to see me tomorrow?"* I held my breath. I had not seen him since he disappeared. *"Of course!"* he said, without any hesitation, in that playful, loving voice I missed so much. *"I'll pick you up tomorrow at the airport and drive you up to Santa Fe... we'll have dinner together."*

As promised, he swooped me up curbside at the Albuquerque airport, and we headed north on the highway. I remember how the late afternoon sun lit up the Sandia mountains, turning the old station wagon's interior a soft orange-pink. Right hand on the wheel, tanned left arm propped on the open window, he asked about my life and my work, and how my older sister was doing. I asked him no questions in return. Having figured out that he was staying in touch with just three people since he left: his mother, his oldest friend Herb, and me, I was willing to do most anything to stay on the short list. We rode on in silence as the sun set, heading North.

After a while, I told him how much I missed him. That I loved him - no matter what. And that I was afraid. *"I don't think you're going to be there to walk me down the aisle when I get married some day..."* I said in a small voice, staring straight ahead. *"I don't think you are going to know my children or be their grandfather."* He kept driving, eyes on the road. Then, ever so sadly, he said: *I think you're probably right.*

That Fall, when my mother came to tell me that he had killed himself, I wasn't shocked. Just profoundly heartbroken. Morton Samuel Peck was a 55 year-old University of Chicago Business School grad and one-time entrepreneur with a well thought out plan to end his life. It worked. He overdosed in a non-descript motel room in Tucson, Arizona, on a lethal combination of carefully hoarded antidepressants and really good gin. The handwritten note

found with his body, printed in block letters, was to me: *Take this \$100 and do something that makes you happy. I Love You. Pop.*

My dad suicided at on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. *Why would a non-observant middle-aged Jew - who adamantly rejected organized religion, and raised his family to be secular 'Jews by Bagel' - choose the holiest day of the Jewish calendar to take his life?* It became *Morty's Riddle*. On the first anniversary of his death, I decided to fast and went to a synagogue for Yom Kippur services. And every year after that. When first-born son Samuel was in kindergarten, we joined a synagogue, and I began studying too - to catch up on what I might have missed about atonement and forgiveness.

I learned that in the late afternoon services on Yom Kippur Day, an hour is set aside for *Yizkor*, a special service to honor loved ones who have died. Twenty some hours into the Fast, we say special prayers and remember them in silence. Year after year, I could hold it together until the *Yizkor* service, when I'd just lose it and cry.

One Yom Kippur, about eighteen years after his death, I settled into *Yizkor*. Dim the lights. Cue soft organ music. Ready to weep. But this time... no waves of sadness. I waited. Still nothing, so I closed my eyes to conjure up tearful memories. I imagined opening a series of doors along a long dark hallway, poking my head in each, turning on the lights to reveal a different Morty story.

(Open a door) The time he taught me to waltz one New Year's Eve. Dressed to the nines in a crisp tuxedo, he invited me to stand in stocking feet on his shiny black dress shoes. I came up maybe chest high, as he held me in formal stance. Then we counted, together: 1-2-3, 1-2-3, 1-2-3, one... dancing around the dining room to imaginary Strauss.

(Open a door) Those crazy times when he would get a sudden hankering for Philly cheesesteaks with hot peppers from Pat's – not Genos. He'd make us pile into the old wood paneled station wagon and drive us to Pat's, in the South Philly neighborhood at 5th and Wharton where he grew up.

(Open the door) Even the time we took that last ever ride, to Santa Fe. How he hugged me a long time at the hotel entrance, and kissed me on the cheek. *I love you, kiddo.* he said, and drove off.

And still no tears. Instead, after each memory, I just smiled. By the end of the hour, when I opened my eyes, everyone around me in the pews was somber or sobbing. Me? I had this huge grin on my face. At that sacred, unexpected moment, I felt so loved....by my Daddy.

That's when I started to understand: My father suffered from chronic depression. We never spoke about it, but we all kind of knew there was something really dark behind the mask. He did his best to hold it at bay for many years, on the run from his demons - until he just couldn't or wouldn't anymore. Maybe there were unspeakable traumas for which he could not forgive

himself. Maybe it was brain chemistry askew, genetically passed on. Or maybe he just didn't want to be inscribed in the Book of Life for another year of pain and running. The only way to solve Morty's Riddle was to let it go. And the only thing I could do was forgive **him** for leaving his baby girl, and simply savor and pass on all the love and memories he left behind. And so, I did. Still do. *Love you too, Pop, love you too.*

V3.M Peck. April 2019