

JUDGE NOT

I was the oldest of four, the youngest of four, and an only child. If you think that is confusing, imagine how I feel. Of course the reason rests with my mother's life as much as mine. But this is not her story; it is the story of finding my father.

Nineteen thirty five was not a good year for Jewish-Gentile marriages. My father was from a very orthodox Jewish family of recent immigrants and my mother was a "shiksa" from a prominent old Chicago family. My father was one of the youngest in the family and a twin. He may even have still been in college. My mother had just graduated from high school. They married in secret. I know little or nothing of their courtship, except that my mother said every woman wanted the handsome, athletic young man with inside out blue eyes---so she married him. This celebrated All American Quarterback from Vanderbilt was happily accepted into my mother's family. The situation was entirely different in my father's family.

Upon learning of my mother's pregnancy, my paternal grandmother went to the Jewish cemetery and grieved my father's death, for that is how she viewed the situation. She remained day and night and ended up catching pneumonia. When faced with the seriousness of the situation, Mom agreed that Dad should go to his mother's bedside and remain until the family impasse was resolved. He never returned. They divorced a few days before I was born. Not wanting to see me pulled from one parent to the other, they agreed that I would be totally raised by my mother. I never saw so much as a picture of my father until I was 43 years old.

I was born on February 15, 1936, my maternal granddad's birthday. I was the only child of his only child. I have been told that my birth was the happiest day of his life. No question that I was loved. I became the center of both of my maternal grandparents lives, Mom's too but she was busy working and trying to create a stable life for us all.

Once a very wealthy family, they had lost everything in the Depression except for what they had on their backs. The shock sent my Granddad into deep depression from which he didn't fully recover until I was born. New life can change perspectives and I became a whole new focus for him. Although we were apparently penniless, one of Granddad's dearest friends owned a hotel on Michigan Avenue; today it is called the Chicago Hilton. We lived in an apartment high up---I remember pretending to run the elevator to get us down.

My early childhood memories are filled with Granddad taking me to Grant Park where I would roll down the mountain that held Grant's statue. We heard the Chicago Symphony rehearse in the newly built Chicago band shell. I can still remember feeling the vibration of the violin and cello when the musicians invited me to feel their instruments as they played. We were frequent visitors to the mummies at the Field Museum and the Dalmatian at the fire station was MY dog. That dog and I rode together on the fire engine in parades. Everyone knew and loved my Granddad---but not nearly as much as I did.

I never noticed the loss of my father, although I always knew that I had one who was a very special man. I was told three things. I looked very much like him and that he was the first All American Jewish Quarterback---who had wonderful inside out blue eyes. I accepted this as natural.

I soon had a step-father whom I loved dearly and raised me to adulthood, paid for my education, walked me down the aisle in my wedding, loved my children, and is the source of my well being to this day. Garth Follett, had many foibles, but he was my Dad in every way----but birth. As you grow older you begin to think about your family history. And so the questioning began.

I remember Mom asking me what I wanted for my 21st birthday. I thought about it and said that I wanted to meet my birth father. To my surprise, she went to the phone and dialed his number. She invited me to get on the extension and listen to

the conversation. I heard my Dad say, "No, I don't ever want to see 'Where have you been all of my life?', in her eyes. I have lived up to my part of the bargain". "I understand," she said and hung up. I remember holding the phone and thinking --- *wait a minute, you guys, what about me. Don't I have any say in the situation---I'm an adult now.* But the words never were spoken.

Years passed, and I nearly died of spinal meningitis during the pregnancy of my third child. As I recovered I thought about this and realized that having never met my birth father was an empty page in my personal history. It was a page that I would have to take the initiative to fill. So I wrote my birth father a letter---more appropriately a tome of some 20 pages. "I am not writing to ask for money---I only want to know my family's story and you" I began. I told him all about myself and that I had three children he would enjoy meeting. I got no response. That felt like serious rejection ---and I privately questioned whether my husband had ever mailed the letter because surely any father would answer.

Years passed. I was 43 years old, had been an educator and then became a successful community volunteer. I was invited to do some research on school bussing by the Dean of Urban Studies at DePaul University, Dr. Jimmy Fuerst. After we had completed our study and it was published, he invited me to lunch to thank me for my participation. I remember his saying to me "Ah my good shiksa friend and what do you resolve for the New Year". I replied, "The same thing I resolve every year---to meet My Yiddish Daddy". Jimmy, a very Jewish gentleman, was shocked and asked who my father was. I only said he was the first Jewish All American Quarterback. Jimmy immediately replied, "That's Eddy Schwartz---I know your father and he is a very fine man. My Hanukkah gift will be for you to meet your father". My response was, "And the star will rise again in the East". "Bite your tongue", he said.

A few days later the telephone rang. I was rushing around the kitchen getting my children off to school. I answered the phone. It was Jimmy. He said, "Sit down and

write this phone number down". "Oh Jimmy, I don't have time for you to be so melodramatic, what's up". "I have spoken to your father and he is waiting for your call---now dial that number" and he hung up.

Gulp!!! And I dialed.

For the first time in my life I asked for my father by name. I went through a switch board and a secretary. Then I heard, "Hello (in a high pitched voice)", pause, "Dawn?" "Yes," I said, "Oh please keep talking because I am scared to death". "Don't be scared" he said, "I don't bite. Tell me about the children." Well, ask me about my children and I will go on and on---but I stopped mid-way. "Wait," I said. "Do I have any sisters or brothers?"

He asked what I knew about him and I repeated that I understood that he was the first Jewish All American Quarterback, had inside out blue eyes, and I look a bit like him. There was a long pause. "I'll tell you what," he said. "I'll cancel my appointments for Monday and you do the same. Let's get together and talk." I agreed---and we made the arrangements.

Then panic set in. Oh my God, what if he doesn't like me?

The next day I was giving a speech at the Oak Brook Sheraton and when I finished I got down from the podium and collapsed. Nothing moved but my mouth (and that has never had a problem). My husband was called and he came to pick me up. He got me home and called our doctor. It was decided that I was having an emotional crisis (no kidding!!) and things would be fine shortly. Later that day my daughter came home from college and we talked all night. By Sunday morning I was able to move and Monday morning I was up and dressed.

You can only begin to imagine how truly scared I was. I wanted my daughter to come with me---but she said this was the mountain I had to climb by myself.

As I drove downtown I realized that my birth father's office was only a few blocks from my step-father's office. I parked and went into the building. There was a sign on the elevator saying out of order. I sighed and looked at the staircase that seemed to go on forever. As I climbed the stairs I felt like I was climbing that mountain. At the landing there were two glass doors opposite each other. One said private, the other reception. I went inside and for the second time in my life I asked for my Father. The receptionist called him and asked me to wait. I turned around and saw a portrait of the man who was my Grandfather. The artist had caught him as a small square built, indomitable looking man---with the sweetest smile. But he was dark; brown eyed and didn't look anything like me. This was the right church, but the wrong pew. And I started to bolt.

Just then the nicest looking man, with inside out blue eyes came out of the other door. He reached for the door knob but couldn't open it. I realized that dads can be scared too. So I opened the door. He put his hands on my shoulders and looked me in the eye and tearfully said, "Welcome Home." To say that was the most emotional experience of my life is an understatement. I cried.

I had brought pictures. "Here I am Dad running up the mountain to see Grant... See Granddad and me at the beach playing..My graduation, wedding, children"....then I stopped. "Do I have any sisters or brothers"? I asked again.

Dad told me about falling in love again with another Mary, also a Gentile. They had two beautiful daughters (his picture time). Only this Mary died tragically of breast cancer. He said he had always thought that might be his punishment for leaving Mom and me.

I stopped him there and placed my hand on his across the desk. I said, "Dad, all of that happened before I was born and was strictly between you and Mom. It has taken me over 40 years to find you. Let's not judge the past, and let's trust the

future. We have each other now and that is all that matters." I will never forget the expression on his face as he squeezed my hand.

Oh, and about the riddle of my siblings. I was Ed Schwartz's oldest of four; Garth Follett's youngest of four, and my mother's only child. Aren't I lucky?

Dawn Schumann

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