

Harvey Coustan, z”l

July 1, 1939-May 25, 2022

My father was a curmudgeon or, at least, that’s the initial impression he often gave. He could have a gruff exterior, and, at large gatherings, he would occasionally find a spot on the couch and pull his hat over his eyes. He really did like people, but he didn’t much care for small talk. He preferred discussing politics, giving someone career advice, or analyzing the latest movie he had seen.

My father could be irascible, stubborn, and judgmental because he set the highest standards for himself and for everyone else. But the defining qualities of his life were honesty, integrity, and love. He could be honest to a fault, a trait that softened over the years because my mother taught him that communication is not just what we say, but how it’s heard. She was, as he always used to say, his most important advisor and confidant. In spite of his proclivity for bluntness, he was an empathetic listener and enjoyed hearing about other people’s lives and work. No subject was off limits with my dad, a trait that was sometimes embarrassing to us as kids. As an adult, however, I really appreciated this. My father offered good counsel, he was open to people’s thoughts and ideas, and he loved being challenged. Nothing was left unsaid with my dad.

My memory of our childhood home was that it was filled with love, laughter, and raucous debate. Our home was open, and our friends grew to love my dad after they got over being intimidated by him. When they would call and ask if we were home, he would say yes...and then get quiet. After a minute of uncomfortable silence, he would ask one of our poor, unsuspecting friends if they would like to talk with us. “Yes,” they would say hesitantly, not understanding why he wouldn’t just give us the phone. When interrogated, he would say, “they asked if you were home, not to talk with you.” That was dad, exacting about communication and always teasing—qualities that were simultaneously frustrating and endearing. Our friends eventually learned to give it right back to him.

As children we learned how to write by example. My father would show us documents that were poorly written by colleagues at his accounting firm and ask us to correct them. My best friend from high school, Shari, remembers how he would look over her shoulder while she was typing a paper and ask if the word she had just typed was the word she really wanted to use. My father could be maddening, but we knew his corrections and challenges came from a place of deep love. He not only corrected Shari’s papers, but attended her dance and theater performances. There wasn’t an event or a game or a misplaced comma that my father missed.

When I think about my childhood, I also think about all the activities we shared as a family. We owned a six-seater toboggan so that we could all sled together at Centennial Park in Highland Park. We went bike riding, skating, and skiing together—both downhill and water skiing. We used to spend a week as a family at Camp Ojibwa in Eagle River, Wisconsin. When I couldn’t get up on water skis, my dad took the tow rope in hand and trudged through the water, pulling me around the lake so I could get the feel of skiing. There’s nothing he wouldn’t do for his children.

I also think about the amazing love he shared with my mother. They enjoyed an active life-style and relished their travels. They were also the best dancers on any dance floor. My dad appreciated how adventurous my mother was and that she pushed him to do things like hike up a glacier or hang-glide. They modeled for us what a good marriage looked like. They were open with us about their struggles and showed us how to work through issues honestly and fully no matter how hard it might be.

In the debate about nature versus nurture, my father taught us that nurture was the more important variable in our development. Even though Harvey wasn't our biological father, Charles, Liz, and I are our father's children and like our brother, Brad, embody so many of his qualities. I learned from him how to think analytically and strategically, how to work hard and pursue a goal, and how to relish a good debate. He also loved his professional life and was a very successful tax accountant. I remember a trip we took together to visit colleges in the Northeast. On the plane, I was scribbling away diligently on some homework. My dad asked me why I was working so hard. "You don't need to be the best," he said to me. "Why not?" I responded, "You are." We all admired his work ethic and wanted to achieve the way he had. Most important, he taught us how to love fiercely and to stand up for people, ideas, and causes that mattered to us.

My father didn't always understand our choices, but instead of this becoming a wedge between us, it often brought us closer. My interest in Judaism confused him for a while. He felt that Judaism and God had failed him. The early death of his mother, the arcane rituals, and the observant people he encountered who were unethical or unkind turned him off to religion. The first thing he said to me when I told him I wanted to be a rabbi was, "How is it possible you're my daughter?" Then he said, "Does this mean I have to go to synagogue more?" Instead of turning away from me, however, he signed up to study Talmud with a black-hatted rabbi who came to his office weekly. (I think he sort of relished the raised eyebrows of colleagues around the office.) In later years, he took classes at the synagogue (he especially loved David Zarefsky's politics class), and, much to my surprise (and especially thanks to Elaine) even became a more regular service attendee recently. Over the years, we had many theological conversations. He wanted to understand how to think about God. For my ordination as a rabbi, he and my mother wrote the prayer that the parents of the ordinees recited during the ceremony. A strange turn of events in a way, but none of this was really out of character. It illustrated how much my father loved learning and his desire to understand and be close to those he loved.

Dad had an extraordinary relationship with his grandkids, Yonah, Liora, Maya, Aden, Victor, Ava, Eli, and Ari. He supported them unconditionally, appreciated all their various talents, and loved being with them and being there for them. He knew intimately what was going on in their lives, and shared with each of them what the others were doing. Nothing gave him more pleasure than taking them tubing on Paw Paw Lake, or watching their recitals or performances, or taking them to a ball game or out to dinner or playing a game of chess or, when long distance, Words with Friends. Or just engaging them in conversation, or a good debate, whether it was about who was the best starting quarterback or what the administration in Washington was screwing up or why this or that was a good movie. He was always ready to share his view and eager to take in theirs.

The last few years were challenging given my mother's decline due to dementia. But my father cared for her lovingly at every step along the way. He made sure she got the best care and spent long visits with her after she moved to the Carrington senior living facility. A year ago, he was fortunate to find new companionship with Elaine with whom he enjoyed travel, the arts (she even got him to like opera), discussing current events, and laughing incessantly. We are grateful that she was such a devoted and loving caregiver for Harvey over these last few months.

My dad always said that the best gift my mother gave him was her three children. And the greatest gift for us was that Harvey Coustan became our father and relished being our father and the patriarch of our family. We have been blessed beyond measure to call him dad.