

Bernard Spaner

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As I was reflecting on my father's life over the past few days, I was struck by the fact that he died on the Sabbath, during the holiday of Pesach. The Sabbath, for millennia, has been observed as a day of rest and spiritual rejuvenation at the end of a long week of work. And the Passover, which celebrates the escape of the Children of Israel from bondage, has come to remind us of the importance of continuing the quest for freedom, justice, and human rights in every generation. So it seems appropriate that my father died on the Sabbath, at the end of a long and full life, during Pesach, when so much of his life was devoted to the causes of freedom and to the betterment of humanity. Though his death leaves a painful void in all of our lives, it is this life that we joyfully celebrate today.

He was born nearly eighty-six years ago, (Friday would have been his birthday), in what was then the tiny hamlet of Grande Prairie, Alberta, the second son and third child of Dora and Jack Spaner, themselves refugees from the poverty, pogroms and anti-Semitism of Europe. Life in the wilds of western Canada was difficult. When Dad was still an infant, his mother decided she must take him back to Edmonton to be circumcised. Unfortunately, it was in the spring, and the rail line along Lesser Slave Lake had washed out. My grandmother was held up and forced to live in a tent with her infant son for two weeks before the rail line was repaired and she could continue her journey.

Despite the hardships, my grandparents imbued my father with a thirst for knowledge, an understanding of the importance of family, and a deep feeling for the suffering of those less fortunate than himself. The family moved to Edmonton when he was still a child, mostly due to his mother's insistence of the importance of education. A promising student, he dreamed of pursuing higher education. But the Great

Depression intervened, necessitating a search for work. He traveled across the country, riding the rails with other jobless men, eventually finding work as a laborer at a mine in the Northwest Territories. The experience left a powerful impression on him that would last a lifetime - a deep sympathy for the plight of the working man, and visceral reaction against those impersonal forces that would rob individuals of their human dignity.

As the dark clouds of fascism gathered over Europe, his idealism led him back across the Country to join the Mackenzie- Papineau battalion, a group of like-minded idealists who fought on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil war. But he was too late to enlist, as events overtook him - Franco's armies were victorious in Spain, and the Nazi nightmare was beginning in the rest of Europe. Twice he tried to enlist in the Canadian Army, and twice he was turned down because of his eyesight. His sense of duty would not be denied, and he was finally accepted into the South Alberta Regiment, shipping to Europe in 1942, and landing on the beaches of Normandy in 1944. He fought in some of the bloodiest battles of the war, until the liberation of Europe was secured. At that time, soldiers had the choice of staying in Europe as part of the occupation force, or returning to Canada, to reenlist for the war in the Pacific. My fathers choice was to re-enlist, but the war ended with the atomic bombs over Japan.

He returned to Canada, scarred physically and emotionally from the horrors of his war experience. He rarely spoke of it as we grew up, and never glorified it. Later in his life, he recalled the experience as "soul-destroying," the witness of so much violence searing into his consciousness. But we also learned later from his comrades-in-arms, of his quiet courage under fire, of the respect and esteem in which he was held by his fellow soldiers, how his nickname was "Doc," because of his wisdom and compassion. His reaction to accolades later in life was

characteristically humble and modest. His true desire, as he always told us, was to live in a world where his children would never have to face such horrors again.

Back home in Canada, he finished his University Education, graduating with degrees in science and education, and began his teaching career in rural Alberta around 1947. His father had died during his time abroad, and over the next few years he would commute to Edmonton to help care for his ailing mother, while continuing with his profession. After her death, in 1950, providence smiled on him - he took a position in Thorsby, Alberta, where he met and fell in love with a beautiful young woman from Southern Alberta, who was just starting out on her own teaching career. So began a wonderful partnership with Eira, which, after their marriage in 1953, continued to grow ever deeper and richer as the years rolled by. They moved to Edmonton in 1953, and had five children - David, in 1955, myself 22 months later, Dean in 1959, and his beloved twin daughters, Donna and Shelley, in 1963.

He was a devoted father, and shared with us his love of learning, his curiosity about the universe, and his appreciation for beauty in the arts and in nature. Though it must have been difficult raising a large family on a modest teacher's salary, we never felt deprived, and he always had time for us - coming to our hockey or basketball games, gymnastics meets, piano recitals - he was always in the crowd, making us feel special. And he was an even better grandfather, doting on his five granddaughters and only grandson. My brothers and sisters are his living legacy - they are all accomplished caring people, and share my father's vision of creating a better world.

As a teacher, he was an innovator, introducing new teaching methods, and pioneering such initiatives as the Science fair, which still live today. He had an extraordinary gift for imparting knowledge, explaining complex concepts in ways that made them easily understood. Such a gift

is rare and subtle, but easily apparent to my own children. A frustrating hour of my trying to explain a concept to my daughters would inevitably end with them saying to me, "Let's ask Grandpa for help." Within minutes he would have imparted the essence of the problem. And the joy he took from teaching was the selfless joy of seeing others learn, sharing his delight of learning with the world.

In 1968, a new adventure beckoned - he applied for and was accepted to a position with the Canadian International Development Agency, to take part in a project to send teachers to Africa that would assist in building their education systems. From 1968 to 1970, we lived in Nigeria, where he worked, and endeared himself to the local townspeople with his warmth, and passion for teaching. I remember the tributes paid to him when the time came for us to leave - a week long celebration of feasts and accolades, culminating in the early dawn darkness the morning we left, when schoolboys gathered around the house, to sing us the hymn, "God Be With You 'Til We Meet Again."

He returned to Edmonton to continue as the head of the science department at McNally High School, until January of 1981, when he retired. He had poured so much of himself into his teaching that by then, at 61, he was ready for a rest.

But I think few people have enjoyed retirement more, or accomplished as much as Dad did, with our mother by his side. Together they traveled the world, from the Great Wall of China to the Great Pyramids, from the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem to the Taj Mahal, from the Greek Islands to the Galapagos Islands, from Bali to Machu Pichu in the Andes. I remember calling my brother in 1991, worried that they were heading off to North Africa as war was breaking out in Iraq. "What are we going to do with these crazy parents of ours?" I remember saying to him.

He continued to learn throughout his life, taking courses in everything from algebra to Shakespeare - he loved classical Greek philosophy and history, and filled bookshelves with carefully underlined and annotated copies of works by Plato, Plutarch, Virgil and Tacitus. He read voraciously, almost a book a day, to the last year of his life.

And he loved, and lived, to serve others in need. He and my mother delivered Meals on Wheels for twelve years in the inner city, until their own aching joints prevented them from doing so anymore. A founding member of the Wordsworth- Irving Socialist Fellowship in the 1950's, he remained interested and active in political movements including the New Democratic Party, until his death. His sense of justice fueled his passion for a politics that did not leave out the less fortunate, the disenfranchised, the dispossessed. He was truly a man of vision, and his own experience with prejudice led him to champion civil rights and equal rights for women long before they were popular stands.

And all the while, his burning desire to see a world free from the threat of nuclear war led him to help found VANA- Veterans Against Nuclear Arms. Although the old guard is now fading, he became associated with Project Ploughshares some years ago, and only a few days before his death, he expressed confidence that they would continue to fight the good fight.

He was a serious man who took the issues of his life seriously, but he was not melancholy. He had an endearing, playful, self-effacing sense of humor, loved to laugh and loved to have fun. He loved all sports and followed them closely. He was a patron of the arts in this community, supporting the Symphony, the Theater, Baroque music, Cinema. He loved Paul Robson and Pete Seeger, Pavarotti and Prokofiov, Schubert and Bach. I suppose my enduring memory of Dad would be seeing him through the front window of his house as I walked up the front steps, head buried in a book, listening to his music.

And then, of course, there was hockey. I remember reading an essay he once wrote for a course he was taking at university in creative writing- he wrote of his love for the game - the speed, the sound, the spontaneity. But he couldn't really explain the effect it had on him - Dad trying to explain why he loved hockey would be like us trying to explain why we love breathing. Hockey was in his blood, it coursed through veins, and filled him with joy. The seasons of his year weren't winter, spring, summer and fall, but hockey season, playoffs, off-season, and pre-season. And for the last thirty years, his greatest passion was the Edmonton Oilers - when the nurses were drawing his blood in the hospital last week, I was surprised it was red, and not Oiler Blue.

He exulted in their successes and suffered with their failures - some of my fondest moments with him were the glory years of the 1980's. Great victories would bring phone calls to him from all over the country, wherever his children happened to be. Their victories would be our victories. When he was taken to the emergency last week, after falling ill while watching a game on TV, the doctor asked him what time his pain had started. "Right at the start of the third period," was his reply.

And it wasn't just the Oilers. He delighted in watching his children in action - the memory of him standing on a snow bank beside the outdoor rinks where we would play as children still brings a warm glow to our hearts. He would tighten our skates before our games, and dry our tears afterward if we lost. And his grandson had no bigger fan - Grandpa rarely missed a game until this year. No matter how full the stands may get in the future, they will always seem a little bit empty without his presence: his familiar cap, his red jacket, and that smile.

That smile. I still see it. Even in the last week, as he suffered great pain with even greater courage - when he caught sight of one of us approaching across the ICU floor, his face would light up. His sense of humor never left him - in the ICU the night he was admitted to hospital

we were alone for a moment. He looked at all the tubes and machines that he was connected to and smiled at me. "I hope the government doesn't find out how much I'm costing the system," he said.

Over the years, he had occasionally talked to me about death. He wasn't afraid, but had said his desire was to just go to sleep one night, and not wake up. And last Friday, two days after he returned home from hospital, surrounded by the love of his wife and children, he did just that. A good death, after a good life.

Dad was a good man. He wasn't a religious man - in fact he was deeply skeptical about organized religion, and didn't hesitate to say so. But his life embodied the call of the prophets to use one's gifts to interfere with injustice. The vision of the prophet Micah was my father's vision:

"For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem
He shall judge between many peoples
and shall arbitrate between strong nations far away:
They shall beat their swords into ploughshares
and their spears into pruning hooks
Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more,
but they shall all sit under their own vines
and under their own fig trees
And no one shall make them afraid."

Dad always told us that the purpose of life was to leave the world in a little better shape than you found it. By that measure, he has fulfilled his purpose.

Shalom, Dad. Rest in peace. You have surely earned it.