

MY CHILDREN

It is January 1, 2010, and I was wondering if I had any new thoughts for the new year. Each morning, I feel obligated to write something, since I have promised myself that I will complete my memoirs this year.

So I began thinking about my children. Last night I called them to wish them a happy new year. Actually, I called Lewis, assuming that Carol was at the house and I could speak with both of them. But Carol was still on the road. I then called Martha, and David, fulfilling my desire to communicate with all of them.

It just occurred to me that perhaps they should have called me. However, I seem to have established the pattern of my reaching out to them. I am not keeping score, but David tends to call more frequently (possibly to speak to both Fran and me), and Carol and Martha do call from time to time. Lewis calls after I call him. Can I, at this late stage, get my kids to call me on a semi-regular basis? I suspect that as long as I am still healthy, they will take me for granted.

What I was really thinking about is how my feelings and perceptions of each of my children differ. Parents are supposed to love all their children totally, equally, unequivocally, I suspect that this is honored more in the breach than in the observance. And I don't know who made up that "supposed to" business. Certainly not Shakespeare.

Carol was my first-born. It is hard to express the joy I felt at her birth, which continued in the months and years that followed. She was pretty, bright and good. The truth is, my memory of all my children when they were growing up, was that they were beautiful, smart and generally well-behaved. I am sure there were middle of the night cries for feedings and diaper-changings, but that comes with the territory. Fran tells me that David was a "cholicky" baby, whatever that is. I have a vague memory of Lewis picking on Martha, and I assume that Carol picked on Lewis, but I have a picture of four wonderful children. With regard to Carol, Lewis and Martha's schooling, we had to overcome some problems, which grew out of the places we chose to live, not their behavior.

When we moved to Sterling Place in 1957, we didn't think about the school that Carol would attend. We simply wanted an affordable two-bedroom apartment, and we found it in Crown Heights, after a year of looking. From 1956 to 1962, I was working for the Jewish Labor Committee and Sylvia was a full-time mother. When Carol was about three, we found a pre-school for her at a Reform Temple on Eastern Parkway near the Brooklyn Public Library. And then we had Lewis, which continued to keep Sylvia busy.

I am amazed at how vague this period is in my memory. I have a clear picture of the work I was doing, but not of my role as a father to my children. I can remember political activity during this period: picketing Woolworth's in support of the lunch counter sit-ins, with the kids in a carriage or stroller; national and local elections; working for the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy. All meant attending meetings for which we had to

get baby-sitters. And I remember summer vacations at Bantam Lake in Connecticut. We all had fun, or so I thought.

Carol entered PS 138, and was the only white child in her class. She came home with stories about the children touching her hair. It was clear that her “minority” status in school was a problem, but we didn’t make a big deal of it. Sylvia and I were committed to school desegregation. And when Lewis was old enough to start school, he followed Carol into PS 138. I don’t remember if he had followed Carol to the Temple’s pre-school.

In 1962, Martha was born—at the New York Hospital. Lewis was born in Brooklyn four years earlier. I suspect Sylvia wanted New York Hospital because it was classier. During that period, fathers were not permitted in the delivery room, and all I remember was bringing Sylvia to the hospital, and being told that I would be called when the baby was born. I don’t believe we knew the sex of the baby. (But if we didn’t, why do I feel so positive about the names we chose? I still feel gratitude to Sylvia for allowing me to name our first two children after my parents, and Martha after my mother’s mother, as she had asked in her will.)

How involved was I with my children when they were little? Did I feed them? Did I dress them? Did I play with them? Did I read to them and tell them stories at bedtime? I really don’t remember. I assume I did. (I can ask Sylvia, but I may learn more than I want to know, and from her point of view.) I do remember taking them to the Children’s Museum, and baby-sitting when Sylvia was rehearsing, and playing with them in the house, rolling around on the floor. That was some decade: between 1955 and 1965. I make a big deal about the previous decade--CCNY, ILGWU, my mother’s death, marriage, NYU, and the army-- but the decade of my early fatherhood is just as significant.

I have always been proud of all of my children’s accomplishments, from the time they were toddlers, to today. I feel lucky that they were all bright, healthy and good looking. None of the kids had serious physical or emotional problems. They did well in school, they had friends, and each had different areas of interest in the arts. Early on, Carol was interested in dance, Lewis in music and then print making, Martha in pottery, and followed Lewis in print making, and David in drawing and sculpting.

I don’t believe I was ever worried about their school performance, or their personal habits—cleanliness (how they kept their rooms), eating (being picky), or as they got older, their friends or after-school activities. They didn’t smoke or drink or do drugs (certainly, not to my knowledge).

(January 9, 2010) When we moved to DC in the beginning of 1965, I wanted Carol to get a secular Jewish education and sent her to the Chaim Weitzman Shule in Silver Spring. Classes were Wednesday and Sunday. Sylvia would take her on Wednesday and I on Sunday. This continued with Lewis, and for a while, we arranged for the principal, who lived near us, to bring Lewis home on Wednesdays. (Sylvia made it clear that she no

longer wanted to be a chauffeur.) It resulted in history repeating itself: My mother took me out of the Workmen's Circle Shule and sent me to the neighborhood Orthodox Synagogue's Hebrew School, and we took Lewis out of the Shule and sent him to the neighborhood Conservative Synagogue's Hebrew School. And when Martha came of age, she went there as well. I believe Martha is the only one of the three that made a lasting friendship with a Hebrew School classmate.

I have written about my mother's "Jewishness" and about my growing up in a Jewish world in the Bronx, and how being Jewish is central to my identity. So how Jewish are my children? We are now in 1970-71. (David doesn't enter the picture until 1981.) My children are aware of my involvement, both vocationally, and extra-curricularly, in things Jewish: my work with the Jewish Labor Committee, my Workmen's Circle involvement, my concerns about anti-Semitism, Yiddish, Israel, and Soviet Jewry. And we finally joined the Synagogue, Tifereth Israel, in large part to support the liberal, pro-civil rights, anti Vietnam War Rabbi, Buddy Abramowitz. But Sylvia and I did not make a "Jewish home" for our children. Of course, there were latkes and a menorah at Chanukah, and matzah and a Seder at Pesach, and I went to Shul on Rosh Hashanah--Yom Kippur, and when the kids were of age, we all went. I lit Yahrzeit lamps for my parents. But we did not light candles and say Kiddush over the wine, and the Motzie over the challah on Friday night.

Kids learn by example. Our liberal values were transmitted. We were for civil rights, for labor, for peace, as our most important values. And secondarily, for the "Jewish stuff." We assumed they would learn about Jewish history, holidays, rituals, prayers, language, literature, in the "Jewish" school. As I said, I thought my involvement in Jewish matters was evident, and would be transmitted. Not as much as I would have liked. When I brought up "Jewish stuff," I suspect the kids felt I was being pushy, and resented it.

We didn't live in a "Jewish neighborhood." We lived in an "integrated neighborhood," both in Crown Heights and Shepard Park. Though most of our friends were Jewish, "being Jewish" was not what brought us together; it was the shared values of "pro-civil rights, pro-labor, pro-peace." And I am happy to say that my kids absorbed these values. In retrospect, I realize we expected too much from the "Jewish" school, and did too little at home. My children's friends were both Jewish and non-Jewish. They dated Jews and non-Jews. We did not say: "Do not marry a non-Jew" but they obviously knew I would have preferred that their life partner would be Jewish and that their children would be raised Jewish. This seems to be a concern of everyone of my generation. Talking to my friends, I find that I am more outspoken with my children about this issue than they.

My three older children are affirmatively Jewish, but it remains a secondary value. Less so for Carol, whose husband is Jewish. They were married in a Jewish ceremony, their son had a "briss," and attended a Jewish pre-school and summer program, and they are involved with a neighborhood synagogue. Though Lewis' partner Marion was not Jewish, he found ways to observe the holidays over the course of the year. Martha's husband Mark, (ethically Japanese, r eligiously Christian) was raised in a Jewish neighborhood, his friends were Jewish, and he has no problem raising their children

Jewish. The “problem” is Martha’s unwillingness to join a synagogue which is a requirement of most synagogues and temples if you want your child to go to their Hebrew school. Hopefully, she will be able to find something in San Francisco.

MY CHILDREN’S EDUCATION

I am committed to public education. I have remarked that I “sacrificed” my three older children on the altar of public integrated education. Both Carol and Lewis went to the neighborhood public school when we lived in Crown Heights in Brooklyn, and they, together with Martha, attended the neighborhood public school when we lived in Shepard Park in Washington. PS 138 was an average New York public school, and it was convenient to where we lived, less than three blocks away.

It was on May 17, 1954 that the Supreme Court handed down its decision outlawing school segregation. And, there soon followed endless discussions about de jure and de facto segregation. Segregation in the South was de jure; in the North, de facto. In 1956, I went to work for the “anti-discrimination division” of the Jewish Labor Committee. We worked with unions to fight discrimination in every aspect of American life: employment, housing, public accommodations and education. When it came time to move from my neighborhood in the East Bronx in 1957, how could I not move to an integrated neighborhood? And when it came time for my children to go to school, how could I not send them to the neighborhood public school?