

ROL

My non-ROL friends and my children have heard me mention ROL so often, I have decided to try to describe its origin, and how it has developed over the years. ROL stands for “Reading Out Loud,” and those who make up ROL are my closest friends. As I write my story, I send each piece to my ROL friends and to my kids. We have come to think of ROL as family—“mishpukhe.” We are on each other’s list of invitees to events, joyous or sad. Our photograph albums are filled with pictures of all of us at those events, and at our frequent get-togethers.

How did it start? I believe it started when several friends who were members of AYD (American Youth for Democracy) wanted to party apart from AYD. One of the group (Arthur) baby-sat for a family that encouraged him to have friends over to socialize and square dance. I, and a few others were invited to join them. We had all been in junior high school together. We eventually moved on and started getting together at each other’s homes. It was then that we began to call ourselves “Reading Out Loud.”

Was it 1944 or 1945? Who came up with the idea that we come together and share excerpts from books that we were reading? It was then expanded to listening to music, and to singing, A few other friends were invited. In 1945, Phil and Mel enlisted in the military, then Sol in 1946, but Bob and I received school deferments. Why Alex and Sid were not affected, I don’t know, though Sid had poor eyesight.

By the late ‘40s, a few of the couples were clearly defined: Sid and Barbara married in December 1949, and Alex and Bernice in December 1950. Bob and Evelyn broke up, but Bob met Edna at summer camp, and she became part of ROL. Berna was also part of ROL, and Sol started to date her. In December 1949, Bob wondered if Phil would like to take Edna’s sister Martha to our New Year’s Eve party. He said yes, and the rest is history. They married in February 1951. I started seeing Sylvia around April 1951, and we married in December. Sol saw a lot more of Berna, went off to Yale Law School, and in June of 1952, they married. Bob started dating Rose and in 1954, they married, and then Mel met Ruth and they married in 1956.

Rereading this chronology, I am appalled how mechanical it is. No sense of the excitement of first love, of their personalities, their intelligence, humor, warmth and the anticipation of two people beginning their lives together. The fifties saw the forming of permanent friendships, as well as permanent, and a few not so permanent marriages.

Politically, there was a great deal happening at this time. World War II had ended, but the cold war was beginning. We were all liberals, progressives, idealists, activists. We grew up supporting FDR, and in 1948 we were for Henry Wallace. We were all children of poor Jewish immigrants. We were part of a blessed generation. We received the best education, jobs were awaiting us. We lived in New York, the center of culture—art, theatre, music, dance.

Some of us went on to teach in the New York schools: Bob, Rose, Sid, Barbara. Phil, Mel and Alex were in the sciences. Sol became a lawyer and moved with Berna, who had also been teaching, to Arizona. I went to work for a union, and Sylvia had different jobs, including teaching. The group spread out. Phil and Martha went to the Boston area where Martha finished her studies at Radcliffe, and Phil did graduate work at Brandeis. Alex and Bernice (who also had done some teaching) found themselves in Florida. Mel and Ruth (who also did some teaching) moved to New Jersey.

ROL was no longer meeting regularly, but we all kept in touch. We were now spread out even further. We had started in the Bronx, and only Sid and Barbara stayed there. Bob and Rose moved to Queens and then Oceanside Long Island, Phil and Martha to Yardley PA. Mel and Ruth to Princeton, Sol and Berna to Phoenix, Alex and Bernice to Sudbury, and Sylvia and I to Brooklyn, then to Washington DC. We all had children, a few of us lost children, and over the years, Sol divorced, I divorced, Sol remarried and divorced, I remarried.

And we kept getting together, and talking, and reading and singing, and reminiscing, and maintaining this remarkable friendship. For years, we would find a hotel or a motel somewhere in the northeast—New Jersey, New York, Connecticut or Massachusetts—where we would get together for a weekend. Something magical happened then. We were transported back to the 1950s and 1960s. We may have been 60 or 70, but we felt we were half that age.

Then, Mel and Ruth's son Dan bought a home in the Berkshires, and a new tradition formed. Since Dan and his family used it on weekends, and in the summer, we became the beneficiaries, getting together there during the week twice a year, in the spring and fall.

Age and cancer were catching up. First Sid, then Mel died of pancreatic cancer. Sol was afflicted with what was initially thought to be Parkinson's, but was worse. Martha was having serious mobility problems, and Phil had broken a hip, and they moved into an independent living facility in Doylestown, PA. Their conditions worsened, and they are now in the nursing facility. Fran was diagnosed with lung cancer, had surgery, chemo and radiation, and has been told that she is cancer free, but has energy loss, trouble walking, and hearing.

The standing joke is that our get-togethers may turn into organ recitals. Our conversations touch on our mortality, our children and grandchildren, and the world we are leaving them. We are all slowing down, but we are all involved in something. Bernice gets the prize for being the last one to retire. Most (or should I say all) of us have some physical limitations, but we are going to keep getting together as long as we can. And we are going to remain more than close friends, til death do us part.