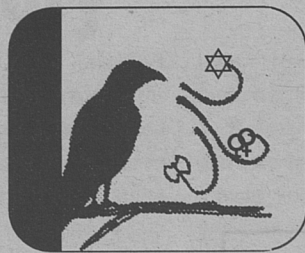


feature

CROW'S CAWS
by crow cohen



A Tribute to My Dad

I was born on Father's Day – June 20, 1943.

My dad, may he rest in peace, was pretty mellow. I was lucky. He owned a drugstore that was only a five-minute walk from where I grew up, so I always knew where to find him.

Like most men of his generation he didn't focus on "parenting skills." Instead, he took me fishing, played cards with me, let me drive his car, and gave me a job working in the drugstore when I was sixteen. He was remarkably tolerant, definitely a "good enough" parent.

Not until I was an adult did I try his patience in a big way. I came out as a dyke. That confused him some, but it wasn't the biggest problem. It's the kind of dyke I became that upset him – a downwardly mobile, radical lesbian feminist.

Shortly after I divorced my husband in 1979, I decided to give away a large sum of money to the lesbian community. In the divorce settlement, I acquired some stocks; since I didn't want to be a "capitalist," I decided to donate this money to us. People gave money to organizations like battered women's shelters, alternative schools,

and the March of Dimes, but nobody gave the Burlington Women's Community much at all. So what that we weren't officially organized? (In truth, we were downright anarchistic.) I suggested we form an ad hoc committee to distribute the funds, and I would just be one voice in the group. Honestly, I didn't want the responsibility of deciding who got what. A part of my motivation for giving away my money in the first place was to fit in. Most of my friends were earning precious little doing shit jobs in order to free up their time to be revolutionaries. I can imagine I wouldn't have stayed popular for long if I tried to divvy up the money myself. It didn't much matter. All hell broke loose anyway, but that's another story.

I remember a conversation I had with my dad during those tumultuous times. We were taking a walk on the beach in Niantic, Ct., where we had spent our summers since I was a little kid. He accused me of being immature. Who, me? How dare he! (I was a tad self-righteous back then.) I said to him, "So who the hell do you think is mature, Dad? The president of IBM?" He didn't get the subtlety of my class politics,

poor guy.

Our relationship was strained after that for years, but to give you an idea how tolerant he was, he continued to enable me financially until I was 45 years old, at which point I decided to clean up my act for me. He couldn't help it. He was an extremely generous man, and he didn't understand the concept of enabling. It took me a long time to grow up, but I'm not blaming him. He did the absolute best he knew how.

During the last couple of years of his life, (he died in 1996, when he was 88) he withdrew a lot because he was hard of hearing and just didn't want to work that hard trying to understand conversations that didn't directly interest him. I can understand that. My ears are beginning to fuzz up, and I find myself tuning out now and then. It was hard to maintain intimacy with him, and since I had blessedly grown out of rebelling against him or looking for his approval, we didn't have a whole lot to say to each other. I loved him a lot, though. He maintained a wonderful sense of humor. He loved to learn and decided to become bar mitzvahed at the age of 83 for the first

time, since his family was too poor to give him one when he was 13. He told me he was also a wise guy in Hebrew School back then, which probably didn't help.

One of the biggest blessings of my life was that I was able to take him through his dying process. I'm a hospice social worker, so I'm familiar with the territory of death and dying. He contracted colon cancer and preferred to die at home, so he signed onto hospice. My mother tried to keep him at their home in Niantic, but when it came down to the wire, where he no longer wanted to eat and was too weak to leave the bed, she couldn't handle that level of deterioration. She put him in a nearby nursing home, and I decided to move into the next bed in his room until he died, which took about two and a half more weeks. He was pretty uncommunicative at that point. He only said what was absolutely necessary.

He said he wasn't in any pain, and he said he didn't want to keep eating. That was a hard one for all of us, being

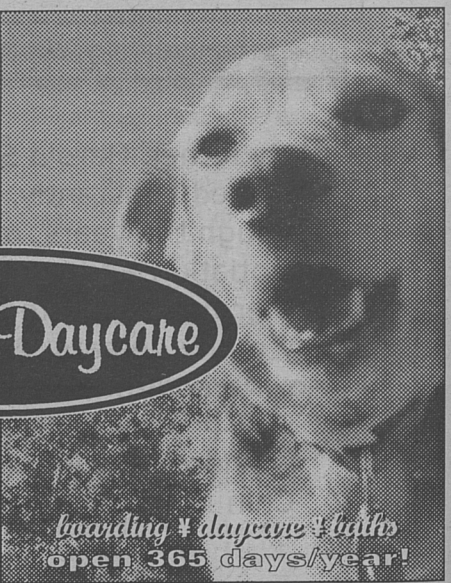
a family full of Jewish mothers. I kept wondering whether he really wanted me there. He was wasting away, so I'm not sure he wanted people around that much. On some level, I felt I did not fulfill his expectations of being a dutiful daughter even though he never said those words. I was a lesbian, a renegade. I was never able to pull off the sweet nuclear family scene. It was clear that I was hanging in there with him for my benefit, in the same way I finally became financially responsible because I recognized it was crucial to my self-esteem several years earlier. I also had learned enough in my hospice work to understand that most people do not want to die completely alone. And one day, when I was sitting by his bedside working on a writing project about the Burlington lesbian community, he simply said, "Don't leave me." That was the biggest gift he ever gave me in his life. Our whole family was in his room as he drew his last breath. Thanks, Dad. I love you. ▼

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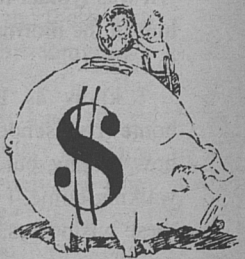
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