

**Oheb Shalom Memorial Park Reisterstown MD**

**Fran Forman at her father's graveside, the Unveiling Ceremony**

**Mid-May 2001**

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*Joel 1:3*

*Tell your children about it, and let your children tell theirs,  
and their children the next generation.*

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This may be the last party we give to honor my Dad, Len Forman, but it will not be the last honor we give him.

We honor him in our happiness and our successes, and there have been so many times this past year I felt we should have called him, so that he could “*quell*” with the pride he so often evidenced. It has been so hard these past 10 months, not to pick up the phone to tell Dad about our various accomplishments: Yvonne’s new directorship, Avi’s return from Australia and decision to jump-start college, Rosha’s success at her public radio show, Hannah’s first year of her amazing new high school, Sophie getting into City Ballet, my job - which I still have, Bob’s job, which he still has. He would be truly thrilled to hear of all our successes, big and small, to know we are healthy and fine, to know how much we care about him, how much we want to tell him ...

Of course, there are things he wouldn’t have wanted to know - such as our president’s dubious election, and maybe the decline of the stock market - despite his dire predictions. But even these, he would have greeted with a joke.

Len grew up in a modest home, the adored son of Sarah and Morris Forman. His only sibling, Elaine, was six years younger, so I imagine both felt like only children. His grandparents spoke only Yiddish. Len was a gifted student, and as a child he built model airplanes, collected stamps, and he read voraciously, including the National Geographic. He studied business in school and then switched to an academic course of study, and he was the first person in his family to attend college. He went to Johns Hopkins University at age 16 and he majored in economics, and he

cherished the excitement of a stimulating intellectual environment and made many life-long friends.

His father, Morris, was a sweet-tempered man whom Len positively adored. Morris worked as a salesman for a single paper company. When Len returned from the War, his father was abruptly fired, which was a devastating and humiliating experience for the family. Utilizing the skills learned from the paper business, Len and his dad decided to set up a small paper distribution business together. Len never planned to achieve financial success, but rather sought a modicum of financial security for his and his dad's families. Initially, or so I remember, they sold paper products out of the family basement, delivering them from his station wagon. I remember the wood paneled basement where he and his father kept their office. Then they moved to a office and small warehouse somewhere near the harbor; I remember being frightened to visit them there; I distinctly remember rats scurrying around. But I also remember Morris, my grandfather, affixing posters all over his office - they were black cardboard boards with different color 'truisms' -silly thoughts for life. I can't remember a single one - just the colors.

During the 1950s the business took off, and my family was able to achieve some real financial security. Dad never took credit for his success; he said it was just good luck - a booming economy, suburban expansion, and a wasteful society. I suspect his acumen and energy may also have contributed to his success. I think he was proud of the success of the business, that it grew to become the largest paper distribution company in the entire middle Atlantic region.

Dad had breakfast at home - cereal, as I recall, and left his office for home promptly at 5, to pull into the driveway at 5:30. When I was little, I would run to the door to greet him; but eventually my mother would have to prompt me, "*Go meet your father at the door,*" and soon after that, she gave up. Dad would take a shower and a quick nap, and dinner was on the table at 6. We had formal dinners; we sat in the same places at our beautifully arranged and polished dining room table; the food was beautifully arranged and formally served. Alas, none of these habits have stayed with me; to the contrary, our meals, if you can call them meals, are hastily arranged and usually consist of leftover or store-bought something, and my family rarely sits down together.

I remember little of our dinner conversations; as I reached the sullen prickly teenage years, I remember only wishing for the dinners to be over so I could return to the privacy of my room. One afternoon, when I was 16, my dad put his arm around me - or he tried to. I was so surprised and horrified, because he had never before displayed any physical affection towards me. It was my mother who was physically affectionate towards me, never my father. At 16, I felt it was too little, too late, and I rejected his touch.

My teenage attitude towards my parents can be expressed in one word: ambivalence. I was a difficult teenager - cold and haughty and withdrawing towards my parents, often sullen and angry and embarrassed in their presence, disappointed in their inadequacies. Yet I desperately needed their support. My early years at college were characterized by loneliness, disorientation, culture shock, homesickness, and personal confusion. I was utterly unprepared to be on my own, and I failed miserably - academically, socially, personally. I was drawn into odd and potentially dangerous relationships because I needed personal support and buttressing, the role my father had provided. I knew I couldn't survive on my own.

Dad wrote me about once a week, typing his letters on his manual typewriter at his office. His letters were funny, full of good cheer and humor. I always loved getting them.

When President Kennedy was shot on January 22, 1963, it was my father whom I called - on the payphone from my dorm floor. While I was talking with him, I heard over the radio that Kennedy had died. From the perspective I have now, I see this as a loss of naive innocence - for the country as well as myself. My father could not protect me, as I'd always assumed, nor could I depend on the stability and permanence of our country's institutions. (Later, of course, my understanding of the US involvement in Vietnam cemented that awareness and disappointment.) Although initially cautious about my involvement in civil rights and anti-war demonstrations, my parents came to be supportive and proud of my efforts. It's possible that they hoped that, in addition to speaking up for a just cause, I would jettison some of my unorthodox friends.

Unfortunately, I developed a relationship with a brilliant but particularly unsavory man, and my involvement with him and my parents' utter inability to convince me of the danger caused no end

of anguish in our household. The only time I ever saw my father weep uncontrollably - until the illness of my mother - was over my relationship with Pierce. Dad was sitting on the edge of his bed, sobbing. (My mother, more expressive of her feelings, wept and raged more often, and one time - while visiting me junior year - had to be rushed to the hospital.)

During this period, there was no communication between me and my parents; even when we were together, we couldn't connect, as if we were speaking two separate languages. I ignored their pleas and indeed did marry Pierce, and my parents had to make the best of it. They treated us with warmth and generosity, despite their considerable and legitimate misgivings, and I did everything in my power to make them - and me - believe that my marriage was a good solid one of trust. Of course, the charade didn't last more than 3 years. After the breakup of the marriage, my parents never - not once - expressed anything to me other than continued love and support. Never "*I told you so*" or "*Thank God you got rid of the bum*" - just unadulterated love and support. And that support continued, as I abandoned my career as a social worker, and as I planned a "*trip around the world*" - alone. They took me to the airport one cold day in January, not knowing when they would see me again, nor where to reach me. Somehow, though, we managed to keep in touch by mail, and it is their total support that I remember now, more than the details of my eight months away. I cannot even begin to imagine that I could summons one iota of their serenity if one of my kids were to behave in such a way. I'm not suggesting they were serene - just that was the face they showed me - total support and acceptance.

During that trip, in the spring of 1974, while staying in Israel, my father and brother Bob came to visit, and met me at the kibbutz. I was genuinely happy to see them. Dad planned an excursion in Israel for Bob and me, and we spent several days on tour. I saw a side of my father of which I'd been only dimly aware, and it was not a pretty sight! As soon as we would reach our destination, my father would immediately be planning the next stop or the next meal. And upon that stop, the next, and so forth. After a few days of this, my brother and I were suffering from jiggled nerves, and it came to a head when Bob lost the return airline tickets. I'm sure he misplaced the tickets out of total frustration, but we all ended up screaming at each other.

My father's propensity for immediately planning the next step of the trip or the next meal continued to drive me to distraction. Occasionally we could tease him (and his good-natured response, "*I'm not here to be made sport of!*"), but usually I lost patience within a matter of seconds.

Equally well-known of Len's foibles and peculiarities was his love of food - all food, as far as we could tell, good and bad food, especially plenty of it. He always said, of course in jest, that some people eat to live, and he lived to eat, and I suspect this is true. Unfortunately, despite our deriding him about this, my brother and I seem to have developed the same nasty habit - or inherited that love-to-eat gene, descended at least from my grandparents.

Once, many years ago, Hannah asked him, "*What time is it, Grandpa,*" to which he responded, "*I think we're having chicken.*" This sums up where his mind always seemed to be.

Which brings me to another one his foibles - his inability to hear - selective hearing, we called it. I often felt he didn't listen to me. I am SURE this superseded his hearing loss due to aging. It was indeed hard to communicate with him; I often felt so far away from him. He would ask me a question, and before I had time to answer it, he'd ask me another question, I would become so exasperated! His hearing loss only exacerbated this problem.

My life with my parents improved immeasurably when Bob Flack came into my life. Although initially reserved, Bob soon warmed up to my parents and seemed to bask in their warmth and generosity, to him and his kids. They readily accepted Betsy and Jesse and gave them, in turn, a taste of what real grandparents could be like. Of course, their true love was Rosha, their first grandchild, and you'd think that grandchildren had never been discovered before she was born, the way they carried on so! They were equally ecstatic at the arrivals of Sophie, Avi, and Hannah. Sophie and Rozzie bonded immediately. And Mom was so excited at Hannah's birth, that she carried her out of the hospital - to the dismay of hospital staff and stiff regulations! Roz's greatest joy - bar none - were her grandchildren. She said that she wasn't afraid of dying, only that she wouldn't be able to spend more time with her grandchildren, and she feared they wouldn't remember her. But how can they forget her warmth and affection and generosity, of

getting down on the floor to play with them, to dress them and walk them and take them to feed the ducks, to lavish them with beautifully wrapped, thoughtful gifts, and kisses...

When Roz died, it was Dad that picked up the torch. He did his best - clearly he couldn't equal her in the gift department. But he displayed his love and affection in equal measure. Often a phone call: "*Hello, it's me!*" Or a funny card. Or perhaps stamps ("*hint, hint*"). Or a check. And the trips... When Dad turned 70, he took us to France, and we spent a glorious month in Avignon. We returned to Avignon when he turned 75, but this time for only two weeks - the most time our ridiculously busy lives would leave us. This must have been a disappointment for Dad, but as usual, he never expressed disappointment or displeasure. Dad wanted us to see Venice, his favorite city, and he didn't want to wait until his 80th birthday - just in case, he said, he take us to Venice earlier - so we went when he was 78. But the trip was a difficult one for him; Evelyn's injury prevented her from making the trip at all, so Dad shortened his stay with us in Italy to only a week. And there were more problems - his luggage never arrived, and he was unable to keep up with the touring and the walking and higher energy of the group, which had already solidified without him. But Hannah often kept him company, enjoying glacia while we ran around little hill-towns. He knew this would be his last trip, and he was right, sadly for us all.

My dad had his fears and foibles, and as I've mentioned, he could drive me to distraction. But what was most remarkable about him was his effervescence, his incredible zest, his gregariousness, his warmth, his sense of humor, his bear hugs and omnipresent smiles, his jokes (which he told with great flair), his generosity, his affection.

What was less obvious, but equally remarkable, was his incredible courage. My dad lost his vision in 1987, and with it he lost his independence. He lost the ability to drive a car, to read a book or to read the labels on food or see the signs at airports, to walk in the dark, to recognize our faces from a distance. Yet he was so incredibly brave; he never complained - maybe he sometimes expressed frustration - but he accepted his loss, often made a joke about it, and just went about his business. (I think he must have felt that Jews developed a great sense of humor in order to ward off the evil eye, and if there was nothing you could do about it, at least you could laugh.) His philosophy - "*what can you do*" - was not the outlook of a defeatist but of a realist, of

one who accepts life's surprises and just goes about his business. He learned to compensate; he listened to books on tape, he studied the clothes we wore so he could find us from a distance, he remembered highway signs, he moved to the apartment on Park Heights, which was convenient to the Club, to many of his friends, to his Hadrian, and was on a bus line. But most of all, he regretted the loss of driving, because for him it meant dependence on others, which he hated. He had to learn to take buses, to arrange for Hadrian to take him to the fitness center or to the supermarket or cleaners, to depend on the kindness of a friend, to depend on Evelyn. He really hated not driving.

Dad taught us that you cannot control what happens to you in life, but you can control how you react. Dad saw the world as half-full; no matter how bad something is, it could always be worse. And it was always worth making a joke about, too.

In 1989, after Mom died, Dad wrote his memoirs. He never completed them, but they're a fascinating recollection of his life with his grandparents, his love of his father, Morris, his excitement about college, his war experiences, and his many years building a business. The story is quintessential Len - sometimes funny, often perceptive, always humble. I must admit, my feathers were somewhat ruffled when I realized how little I figured into his story, but he assured me, he had only begun.

Also, after Mom died, Dad bravely set out to travel on his own. He spent several months in France, living with a French family and taking classes at a local school. He was 69 years old, legally blind, with severe coronary artery disease. I think his efforts were extraordinary. He took a few other trips, but it was clear to him that he preferred the company of friends and family. He lived a brief life as a Casanova, embarrassing me no end, and we were so delighted when he found Evelyn. They were wonderful companions, and she was able to laugh at his jokes while tolerating his idiosyncrasies. Despite complaining about her driving (he was unbearable to have in the passenger seat), he loved her and was grateful for their time together.

Dad was almost phobic about eating alone. Almost every evening meal was planned ahead of time, usually with friends, and usually in a restaurant. (I'm sure he was frustrated being with me,

because I often prefer eating alone, and I'm a chaotic meal-preparer - that is, if I prepare a meal - and I often prefer eating at home - especially when the kids were younger. )

Dad had many friends; people loved being with him, because he was so upbeat and warm and funny. He adored his friends, and barely a day would pass without him talking with Burt or Jack or making a date for lunch. The talk centered around the stock market primarily, which was a great big game and puzzle for him, and if he "*made a few nickels*", so much the better. His understanding of the stock market was deep and impressive, and he taught us so much about investments - well, he mostly taught Bobby; I was too dumb to absorb any of it.

And he loved intellectually challenging games; he had no patience for games of chance, only strategies interested him. Bridge, of course, was his favorite game later in life. He was a terrific bridge player, and so delighted that Evelyn also learned to play and enjoy the game.

When I was young, I thought he was omniscient. I thought he was a big mogul, rich and powerful, a pillar of Baltimore philanthropy. Of course, I overstated his status in the community, or perhaps his powers diminished. Sometimes I felt he was frustrated by his desire for certain ambitions and his reluctance to actually engage in them - like buying a small apartment in Paris or growing a beard. But as I age, I have come to understand him. I, too, make grand pronouncements - I'd love to join the Peace Corps and work in Rwanda and visit gorillas and save the elephants or drive a Jaguar or live a stylish life in New York. But what I'm discovering is that I just want to be with my family and friends, to do the work I'm doing, to see a movie, to listen to my music, to be with my children, to crawl under my covers with a terrific book. So now I'm beginning to understand the conflict between Dad's fantasy life and his truly desired life - he just wanted to be with family and friends, to feel safe and healthy, to eat good food and play great bridge, to engage in stimulating conversation, and to fantasize about trips to European villages. But the fun part was the planning, not necessarily the being there. He was content to be in his shtetl, just as we all come to make our own shtetls, where we can feel safe and secure and loved.



I learned from Dad the importance of a big smile, of laughter, of good cheer, of family and friends. I also learned that - despite my desires - life really doesn't continue forever, and that my dad can die, that I can cry for ten months off and on and miss him and feel rattled by guilt and sadness, but that I can still be happy, that I can still love my family and my friends and my animals and music and my work and my house. I guess this is the ultimate paradox.

It's been almost 10 months since Dad died, and this really has been about the saddest 10 months of my life. But it's also been a happy 10 months for me, and I've been puzzled by this paradox. I've pondered this a lot, and now I understand. Despite the loss of this most extraordinary of fathers and grandfathers - generous and available and warm and funny - I've been left with so many gifts, and it is these gifts that allow me to feel basically content with my life. Among the gifts my dad gave me are: the love of family, the courage to face hardships, the warm smile, the importance of humor, the need for challenging and meaningful work, the love of children, the love of food, the companionship of good friends, a comfortable lifestyle without the need for extravagance or ostentation, an appreciation of good music and movies and books, the need to stay in touch - and did I say the love of children. Without these gifts of my dad, and many, many more, I could not have weathered these past months. I don't know if I ever had a chance to say '*thank you*', but for all these gifts - mostly the gift of unconditional love and his constant support

- I say thank you.