

EULOGY FOR MY FATHER, ARTHUR AARON JANIS

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My father did not have a lot to say for himself. One had to discover him. He was an amazingly able person, physically and mentally, but he didn't proclaim his abilities. He thought deeply but rarely told his thoughts.

If you gave him a job to do, a role to play, a song to sing, he did the job, played the role, sang the song -- not just well but with joy at having a job to do and being able to do it. But you had to give him the job or the role or the song, because it was part of his nature not to choose. Choosing was for him like imposing, and he was profoundly uncomfortable about imposing.

When I was a boy, I thought he could do everything. He was surely my hero. He seemed the total master of the physical world. He was for one thing a terrific ballplayer and swimmer and had been a fencing champion at college, though he rarely stirred himself to do any of those things any more.

He could do anything to a building: I used to watch him jacking up bungalows to fix the plumbing underneath, cutting glass in a vise in his shop and sawing planks at his table saw, climbing a three-story ladder to paint the shingles or fix the roof, install a bathroom where none had existed before, in an old, unused back stairwell. And this role as building-master was just a sideline, something he did because my mother decided they should operate a summer rooming house in the Rockaways.

His real job was as a high school teacher, and I could tell that his students loved and respected him. The latest piece of evidence I obtained just this past summer, when my father was already in a nursing home. I met a woman at a wedding, who, when she learned my last name, said she'd had a teacher named Arthur Janis about fifty years ago -- he had been her favorite teacher, the only one she'd ever visited after graduation. She spoke about him with excitement, after all those years... We embraced, and when we parted it was with love, love for my father.

Teaching a class is kind of like being on stage, and my father was also wonderful on a real stage. When given a role, he could be animated and passionate in ways you would hardly suspect if you only saw him doing the things he would do when left to his own devices -- like eating a cheese sandwich, spacing bites of a pickle to make sure the pickle lasted as long as the sandwich, or doing the Sunday Times crossword [in ink!] or snoozing -- a lot of snoozing.

Best of all for me, as I look back, was his singing, when my mother prompted him to sing and played the song on the piano. He sang beautifully and movingly, in a husky bass-baritone that was always striving upwards to an ardent beatific falsetto. His face shone when he sang...but he never sang without my mother's prompting.

When in the last couple of weeks it became clear that my father's death was imminent, I started to think about what I might say about him. One thought was that maybe it was best not to say anything at all -- to let him die the way he lived, without fanfare.

I asked my sister Eleanor about this. For her, knowledge of my father is personal, not easily or readily shared. My sister said "My father died the way he lived -- sweetly and quietly."

She went on to say: "He had a very pure soul and his passing was serene and gentle. There was no meanness in him, but his kindness was very quiet, almost covert. People benefited by his existence even though they didn't always know that that's where the goodness came from.

"I don't feel the need to relate various incidents [she said] I only want to remark on the generosity of spirit that lived in him, on the kindness of the man. The actual day-to-day things -- the fun things that we did, the sad things -- those are personal to me and to him."

But for my part -- I know that I like to hear at funerals from those who have known and loved the person who has died, so it seemed like the right thing to do: to say at least a little something.

I was strengthened in this idea of talking about him by remembering that, though he didn't talk about himself, he did not seem to object when my mother would sing his praises to assembled company, as she fairly regularly did.

For me, the purity of spirit that my sister describes was something achieved late in life, not a life-long fact. Perhaps a daughter can discern better than a son what her father's real and ultimate spirit is like. But for me, his son, it was in his most recent years that he somehow, with a great deal of introspection and considered thought, contrived to purify himself of the angers that had constrained him.

When he was first institutionalized, in Florida, in January of this year, I came up to his bed and asked "Dad, do you know who this is?" It wasn't at all clear at this point how much he could hear see or know. He answered "Yes. It's my one and only son." A miraculous answer, to be

followed by something even more amazing. A few minutes later, when I was standing across the room, he managed to see where I was and he beckoned to me. When I came near, he said "I hope you know I didn't mean any disrespect to Henry." There was of course some painful history in this. I said, No Dad, don't worry -- I *am* your one and only son, Henry is your grandson, but thank you very much for saying that.

I didn't see him from February to June, partly because I had the mistaken idea that his mind was gone and that he was no longer connected to the world. But when I visited him in June, I found to my amazement that if I spoke into the right place in his ear, and waited for him to focus his mind, that he was all there. And that he had been thinking about me. He asked "Do you remember that play 'I Never Sang for my Father' "? I guessed where this was leading, and, with some sort of modesty perhaps akin to his own, I tried to head him off by being literal-minded and reassuring: "Yes, I know that play, but I *have* sung for you Dad." Slowly and carefully he said to me "Well, yes it's true that you have sung - though I'm not so sure that you were singing for ME. But I am not sure that I have ever told *you* how much your singing pleased me and mattered to me." And it was true, he hadn't. But now he *was* telling me and that was like telling me that he loved me, and he was even able to say *that* too in this last year.

It was also wonderfully characteristic of him, of his dry and unsentimental understanding, that he brushed aside my blandishments: he wasn't going to let me get away with saying that I had sung for him.

I'm sure that if you asked my father what was the best thing he had ever done in his life, he would say that it was finding and marrying my mother. One of their old friends called me the other day and talked about the spark between them, about what a wonderful pair they were. They were together in marriage, constant companions, for almost fifty-eight years. During those fifty-eight years, she was constantly discovering him and proclaiming him. She was proclaiming him to others certainly, but most importantly she was discovering and proclaiming him to himself. It was she who gave him the song of his life to sing. And he sang that song of life, the song that she gave him and prompted him to sing, with all the love and joy that was in him. And now, as a famous lyric from my parents' generation puts it: "The song is ended, but the melody lingers on..."