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My View: Treasuring happy times with a dad who knew what mattered

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By Nancy Davidoff Kelton

My father in his coffin looked better than most of the men I dated.

That is the first line of my memoir and stage adaptation of “Finding Mr. Rightstein,” which begin and end in Buffalo. It was my first thought in 1997, alone in the Amherst Memorial Chapel before Dad’s service. Before the funeral director closed the coffin, I put in two decks of cards: one from a bank where my father opened an account, and another from an airline. Banks and airlines once gave things away.

My father liked “free.” He took whatever “came with.”

“Buy? Whoever heard of buying paper?” he said, when I showed him a legal pad from a store. “It comes with.” On Saturday at his office in the Ellicott Square building, as we put pencils and pads into an accordion envelope, he reminded me where to get supplies.

At dinner at Laube's Old Spain when I was 6, after filling up on three courses – soup, salad and the turkey entrée – I told the waitress I didn't want dessert. "You do," Dad said. "It comes with."

My mother's mental illness, manifesting itself with depression and indifference to me, turned me to my father. We painted by numbers, spent time at the Buffalo Zoo, and played games. I laughed at his remarks and disdain for pretension.

"She's the only person who says 'yes' in two syllables, 'Ye-es,'" he said about a stuck-up aunt who bragged about her address near Delaware Park. I made Dad laugh with my own comments.

"The getting is in giving and in showing up," he said.

For my plays at PS 66, he arrived early and sat in the middle of the front row. Each year at the Peace Bridge, as my camp bus pulled away, he remained at the window waving, sometimes crying, as the other parents headed to their cars.



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A month after my parents saw "The Miracle Worker" on Broadway, which enthralled him, he and I flew to New York for the matinee. Years later, whenever I visited from New York, my father stood in front of the other people waiting for the flight, beaming.

“Find work you love. You do it every day,” he insisted, long before the women’s movement was underway, when it became clear my mother’s struggles weren’t only in her head and I should have fulfilling work, creative pursuits, and passions.

At Bennett, I felt pained, not being one of the girls, and decades later the same way as a single parent. Dad said, “Don’t try to keep up with the Joneses. They don’t know what they’re doing.”

My father wasn’t one of the boys. He had a few close friends, one a master bridge player as was he, but next to the company of his family, he enjoyed his time alone, reading and playing bridge hands on the cocktail table.

He wrote “Don’t sweat it” letters when I worried about grades in college. In one, he said, “Some get A’s, some get B’s, some get ejected, some get mono, some get pregnant, some don’t stay. It doesn’t matter what you get as long as you keep your sense of humor. We love you no matter how it comes out.”

One Friday, when my grandmother arrived at 5 p.m. for dinner, earlier than usual, Dad, already out of his tie and jacket, was playing gin rummy with me.

“You won’t get rich at home playing cards,” Grandma said, mentioning two wealthy, prominent lawyers who worked long hours and entertained at “the club.”

“I’m very rich and I’m not a big-shot lawyer,” he shot back.

Right. He was a big-shot dad.

Nancy Davidoff Kelton, a Buffalo native, has written six books in addition to “Finding Mr. Rightstein” and essays for numerous publications.