Symposium

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The last time I spoke with my father I was in Nacogdoches, Texas visiting my aunt and uncle, Esther and Sam Levy. Daddy called to tell me my little brother Herby had a date that day, and they'd all gone swimming and that he missed counting my freckles popping out in the sunshine.

He mentioned that his toe was giving him trouble, then he said, "See you tomorrow."

The next day, I took the train back to Houston. When I arrived, I saw standing on the platform my father's two sisters, Aunt Mamye Kalman, Aunt Rose Tiras, and my little brother. I loved my two aunts, but I wasn't expecting them. They told me Daddy was sick, so they came to pick me up. I began to cry and Aunt Rose said, "Don't cry because you'll make us cry."

Herby and I sat in the back seat. "I brought you a present," I told him. He looked down, shook his head no. "You're gonna really like it," another silent no. Something was wrong.

We turned off Ennis Street onto Wichita; there was an ambulance in our driveway. Probably my heart stopped. I remember getting out of the car and Mama running out of the house, catching Herby and me on the grass—on a little slope of the front yard I thought of as a hill. I could see people on the screen porch and the small Plumbago bush with blue flowers by the front steps.

Together we fell on the grassy slope: "He tried so hard to live," Mama said. "He tried to wait for you. He loved you both so much."

The year was 1952. Daddy was 40. Mama was 34. I was 9 and Herby was 5. Philip Kalman had succumbed to the ravishes of uncontrollable type one diabetes. That day lives in my memory as crystal clear as if it were yesterday—a Moment of Being as solid as brick. If you were to drive by 3007 Wichita, you wouldn't see a hill. It didn't disappear because of climate change. It was just so slight, but to me it was a hill I loved to climb up and roll down onto the sidewalk.

Rabbi Malev conducted the funeral, but Herby and I didn't go—Mama thought that was best. Maybe she was right. Family and friends came in droves every night—we had a huge Kalman and Pepper family on Daddy's side and the Levys on Mama's. They were all at the *minyans* each night.

One night Cantor Wagner took me for a walk. We walked up Ennis and across Rosedale toward Sutton Elementary. He told me to think of my daddy as up in heaven watching over me: "He's watching us now. He knows you miss him, and he will always watch over you." I looked up at the sky and thought that was better than nothing, but not exactly what I'd wanted. Remember, I was only 9—nearly 10.

Loss became my new normal; expectation of good, a curse. I went back to Sutton, fifth grade, feeling different from others, frightened. Herby started first grade. Mama taught Beth Hayeled. I thought we were doing pretty well, until Mama started dating. That's a weird feeling. Then came a man who turned up in our living room several times. I hated him on sight. He was a widower with three sons, 7, 5, and an infant. We went to their house for the baby's first

birthday; my soon to be brother Steve lay in his crib covered with chicken pox. His mother had died when he was 2 months old.

Frances Levy Kalman and Meyer Rose married three months later, despite my pleading for her not to do this "to me," to us, to our family. Herby was thrilled. He inherited two new brothers his age he could play with.

The first morning we all lived in the same house, I woke up and wandered into the kitchen. I was almost 13 by then and the scene I encountered is another moment imprinted on my soul: Mama was cooking, feeding the baby in the high chair, putting food on the table; my brother and those two other boys were wrestling on the floor. I don't think she saw me standing there in shock amidst the chaos—noise, clatter, shouting—food everywhere. Noise. Noise. Noise.

I ran back to my room and shut the door, filled with a new realization. Now I'd lost my father, my mother, and my own brother with whom I'd played all our lives. Even my grandmother, who had shared my room, had escaped to the Jewish Home.

Johnston Junior High saved me. New friends and old, some I still know and love today. My extended family of aunts and uncles provided ballast as I tumbled in the turbulence of another new normal.

Once when Mama and I were alone in the car, I begged her. "Please, let's just leave. I hate him and his kids."

"How can I leave?" she asked. "What would become of little Stevie?"

"We can take him with us," I proposed, knowing I was defeated. And then came Joe, my fifth brother. Chaos prevailed, but of course I learned to love at least the two babies. The rest would come later. Meanwhile, the term

"blended family" wasn't even a concept back then. I felt more alone than ever, never imagining what it was like for all the boys who'd lost a parent too.

San Jacinto High saved me again. And then a summer job at Allen's Shoe Store in downtown Houston. When I walked into Allen's to apply, Bobby Friedman looked up at me from the staircase below. As I recognized him from the old neighborhood and all three of our schools, I thought, " Goody. Finally I'll have a boyfriend."

I was not quite 15; Bobby was 16. Years later he told me that when he saw me walk in he thought: "She's the one. I need look no further." We were together for three years, *bashert*. We never argued, never doubted one another. We went to all the BBYO parties and when he started U of H we went to all their basketball games. We planned our life; our combined goals resonated with Jewish values, Jewish identities. Coming from two families of limited means, we decided while he went to medical school, I would go to college, define a career that would allow me to work and earn the money to help complete his training. It was a good plan, honest, humble, and realistic.

My mother didn't think so. Halfway through my senior year she began to try to break us up. She was furious about my dating just one boy and she hated it when I discovered the then new profession for women called Dental Hygiene. It only took two years and I would have a respectable profession; then I could work and we could get married. It was the way things were back then, if you were lucky. Bobby and I were lucky. And then we were not.

Ultimately my mother won. I gave in to her demands, against my better judgment though even until her dying day, she could not explain her action, not accept she'd been wrong, and I could never accept what I'd let happen to me so

long ago. That loss redefined my life and reinforced my belief that if you love something you can be sure: you will lose it.

In Rabbi Lyon's book *God of Me*, his chapter "God Loves Me" imagines God as a parent. If I had been seeing god as a parent, no wonder with every disappointment I felt abandoned. My mantra had become: "God Hates Me." I thought, "If I could just hide from god, maybe the hurt would stop. Maybe my luck would change."

Yet, even as I feared God's presence in my life, I held tight to my identity as a Jew. I married a man for whom I was totally unsuited and though our marriage struggled through the years, we maintained a Jewish home and family life. Once, recently, while writing a play I "heard" a character say: "In a bad marriage, even the good times are bad. In a good marriage, even the bad times are good." How'd she know that, I wondered.

Nevertheless, my children, Pepi Harris Wucher and Earl Kalman Harris, demonstrate in their own lives, our success together as parents. I take pride in watching them weave the lessons of their own lives into good parenting and marriage skills.

After forty years of struggling against every challenge, trudging up those hills, tumbling down, splattering my disappointments onto harsh pavement, I realized the challenges were not so steep after all. I could have walked up those hills without breathing hard. I could have walked down them, standing proudly upright. I didn't have to crash into the cement with every challenge. I could have made softer landings.

Real personal growth began when I chose to leave Dental Hygiene as a career, return to college to expand my understanding of the world. I arrived with

two questions: First, how do other people know how to live, to create a place for themselves in the world? And second, what is courage if you're a woman? Those questions became the quest that led me to literary studies—biography and memoir--and women's studies through life stories.

In the course of my journey one of my goals was to discover a "lost woman writer," and bring her back to Life. Even as I say those words, I wonder if I was searching for myself. Although Claire Myers Owens wasn't Jewish, her spiritual quest for self-realization led me to my own, and opened me to the universality of all spirituality. My research led me to become a leader in the National Women's Studies Association and Chair of their Jewish Caucus for eight years—with a new intellectual connection to Judaism.

I finished my doctorate when I was fifty-five years old. As others looked forward to retirement, I contemplated tenure and publications. As others wound down, I sped up. I moved to Fort Worth and began a new teaching career as a tenured professor in an English department I enjoyed and respected. And here I began to believe in my own self, my power to sustain a positive existence.

It was time to call Bobby. He'd had his own set of struggles as a result of our breakup. Our youth was gone, but this time our wisdom saved us.

We've been blessed, lucky. Bobby and I together have created our own blended family at a time when blended is a recognizable term. We are learning to celebrate even those occasional moments of regret and self-recrimination as gifts we can re-live and re-solve together. We have lived to find the words to articulate our pain and loss, to take responsibility for the hills we saw as insurmountable, to rediscover faith in our love for one another.

Not long after we got together, my son Earl needed heart surgery for a defective aortic valve discovered the year he turned thirty. Bobby brought his expertise as a doctor to support. Each night Bobby would call Earl and help him manage his pain medications in an effective and safe way. Then he'd call me and sing the *Mi Shebeirach*; we'd both fall asleep in a haze of renewed faith, knowing everything would be all right. And it was, and it is.

For too many years I wallowed in resentment and bitterness, unable to recognize the gain that was part of my pain. Then our brother Phil Rose developed two devastating cancers. Elliott, Herb, Steve, Joe and I, and all of our spouses, pulled together as our individual love for Phil and one another erupted in support! Perhaps we hadn't realized how strong our childhood bonds had grown over the years. At least I hadn't. Losing one of us, one of my five brothers I'd so resented in my youth, gave me a new appreciation of the gift of this large, messy, chaotic, noisy, but loving family. Now we are more than a blend, we're a merger. We've cried together, but more importantly we dance, celebrate our children's and grandchildren's mitzvahs and we laugh! Laughter, I believe, is God's reward for living through the hard times.

Over the years I've come to understand that in order for god to love us, we have to love ourselves. If we are created in God's image, then loving ourselves is the equivalent of loving God.

Today is my birthday. You can put away your calculators—it's my 75th year on this planet. And in the words of Octavio Paz: "I am not finished with myself, yet." I stand here now and can say: God, I'm not hiding from you anymore. *Hineni*. I am here.

As for Mama, we always stayed close; always loved each other. We talked and visited frequently. We took pride and pleasure in my children and in all of her grandchildren. She loved to celebrate her boys-become-men—all professionals—and she called them "good citizens." Still, we argued about how she'd interfered with my life, how hard I struggled to right that wrong. But we never abandoned one another. And now, fourteen years after her death, I still want to call her up and *kvell* over my grandkids, tell her all the funny stories she'd have loved hearing.

As Mama grew older, she began to think a lot about death. After several mini-strokes, she would call and ask: Is Aunt Mayme still alive? No. Aunt Rose? No. What about Esther, Sam? Raymond, Sara Martha. Dora? No. Aunt Faye? Did she die too? Yes.

"I thought so," she'd say.

Then one day Mama called in distress:

"Miriam, what if I really do go to heaven and Philip Kalman and Meyer Rose are both there waiting for me? What'll I do?"

"Mama," I said. "You don't have to worry. It'll be heaven. You won't have to choose. " *Shana Tova*.