



"BEN STEIN'S DAD"

I recently came across a column from the Washington Post. It was written in the late 90's by the actor/producer Ben Stein who had grown up in Silver Spring. Some of you may remember him from his tv quiz show Win Ben Stein's Money or the movie Ferris Bueller's Day Off. Stein is the teacher who repeatedly calls on the kid skipping school, "Beuller? Beuller?"

Ben Stein has also been a speech-writer for Presidents Nixon and Ford, has worked as a poverty lawyer, a trial lawyer and university adjunct as a columnist for numerous magazines and newspapers. And significantly for the purpose of this column, he is the son of noted economist and writer Herbert Stein who served as chairman of the council of Economic Advisors under Presidents Nixon and Ford and was a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.

Here is what Ben Stein wrote:

"My father, Herbert Stein, a brainy economist, once said that the goal of people who work should always be to do something that returns more value than its cost of effort.

I never could figure out how to apply that rule in the swamp of Hollywood business. But I did figure out a way, about ten years ago, to do something that always provided psychic and emotional income far beyond its cost. Call my parents!

They lived in Washington DC and I in Los Angeles, but I could pick up the phone and call them many times a day, and I did.

I called my mother when she was at home alone to ask her what she had for lunch. I called my father at his office to ask what he had for lunch. I called them in the evening to ask them how the fifth run of Murder, She Wrote went. I called them in August to ask if it was too hot to go outside and in January to ask if they could see snow flying over the Potomac.

In 1997, my mother died. I stayed with my father for a couple of weeks and then, when I got back to California, I began a regimen of calling him like a blizzard. I called him to see what he was doing for lunch. I called to find out what he was doing in the afternoon. I called while I was watching my show or Jeopardy to see if he knew the answers. (He usually did, but he would pretend he did not if I missed them)

We did not talk about deep subjects. No discussions of budgetary policy or the nature of a great president. We did talk a lot about his grandson, Tommy.

We also talked for hours about the woman he was seeing and with whom he was in love, starting about a year after my mother's death.

I brought him my problems and he brought me the word that I was doing fine and that my fears were unfounded and that everything would be all right...

So we connected and calmed each other and kept each other company as he rushed through old age and loneliness, and I rushed through middle age and the jungle which is Hollywood.

My father entered immortality on September. I cannot call him anymore and it tears me to pieces. But if I could call him, this is what I would say. 'Pop, it's lonely without you. I thought that I was calling you all those times to cheer you up and to do you a favor. But now I realize that you were doing me that favor because you were always there for me, always available, never ever putting me on hold, never saying you had to call back because you have another call waiting, always willing to make conversation even if you were tired or making your pitiful little solitary dinners.

'Pop,' I would say if I could talk to him now, 'Pop, it's scary being the Pop of the family now, without anyone between me and eternity. Pop, it's lonely and scary, realizing that I don't have you to tell me it will be all right and not to worry because it will all turn out okay in the end. ...

Then sometimes I will snap to my senses and realize how silly that is and that after all, I am a grown man with a family and a tv show and a mortgage and I have to be more sensible.

So now, I will do something sensible and tell you, dear reader, that you should - RIGHT NOW - pick up your phone (maybe after the service) and call your parents and your wife or husband and your kids and tell them how much you love them and how much they mean to you and how miserable you would be without them.

Call every day...you cannot know how glad you will be that you did call when you still could."

For most of us who come to say kaddish, the opportunity to call the one we loved has passed. As I read Stein's wise words, I feel a twinge - maybe you do too - of regret or more simply, a sadness that I can't call that person I love. But our tradition is a life-affirming one and even as we gather to mourn our losses, we also remind ourselves of the importance of life, the importance of those we love who are alive, right at the other end of a call. The meaning of yizkor is to remember - certainly it is to remember those who have died, but maybe it is also to remember to work at the connections we need with those who are living.

Another short story brings the point home, I think: Bear Bryant was the coach of the University of Alabama football team, one of the most successful football coaches of all time. The Southern Bell Telephone Company camp up with an idea for a tv spot. Everyone knew and revered Bear Bryant, so all he would have to do is come on screen for a moment with that angry look he was famous for and growl three words "call your momma."

The day for filming the ad came and Bryant showed up. They practiced the shot and then the lights went on and a camera rolled. Bear Bryant looked into the camera and instead of growling, he said in a soft voice, with tears in his eyes, "Call your mother. I wish I could."

For all the loved ones you have lost, may you find comfort in this service of remembrance. For your loved ones who live on, may you find the inspiration to hold them a little closer and give them a call, as often as you can.

Amen.