

He's Just My Dad!

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When Mie and Jim asked me to contribute a chapter to this memorial book, I began to sift through my memories of my father, my stories about him, and my experiences with him. It is so arbitrary, one's view of another. But one's father? If either of my siblings were to write this, each would tell different stories and give entirely different pictures of our father. Here's mine. I am solely responsible for my perception and portrayal of my father, Herbert A. Simon.

Just after my father won the Nobel Prize in Economics, he referred a reporter to me who wanted information about the family. "What was it like growing up with a famous father?" was his first question. I was silent for a long time, as I processed his question. Finally, I blurted: "I don't know what you mean. . . . He's just my dad!" I never experienced my father as famous—he wasn't famous to me. This was the first time that I was starkly aware that people thought my father was truly different, not just as a man, but also as a parent.

But how different? When we were small children, he crawled on the floor and growled when we played "Dinosaur." He lay on the floor, resting his chin on his hand, and played dominoes, checkers, Clue, marbles, chess. He read stories to me. He took me on walks as I walked my doll in her carriage. We built sand castles. We splashed in the ocean waves. We walked to the Bookmobile for library books. These were

things that went on in all homes, weren't they? To me, he was just like other fathers. He was a man much like all others, yet distinctive in his own special ways.

My father was a very private person. His privacy about personal and family information never seemed false or unsuitably modest. His belief in keeping family matters in the family was expressive of his upbringing and his generation. We were taught that our parents' ages, family affairs, and family's finances were nobody else's business. We weren't told these were secrets, just that polite people didn't talk of such things. His privacy extended to his intellectual life, as well, though one often had the impression that intellectually he was completely open. He loved a good debate. He always had facts to back his arguments. But the debates were a game for him—the game of Devil's Advocate. He could so convincingly argue a case he didn't believe in at all that he appeared to promote just the opposite of what he actually believed. After satisfying himself that his opponent had sufficiently defended his or her side with relevant facts, he would reveal his personal opinion, and then engage in intense intellectual exchange of a personal nature. This practice was as true with his children—at least this child—as with his students, colleagues, and friends.

He loved his family and his friends—and he had many good close ones, ones he trusted and enjoyed and much spent time with. Still, he rued that sometimes people didn't get to know him at all. They were inhibited by The Famous Person Syndrome, he said. People who knew him only as A Famous Person worshipped the hero they made him out to be. They couldn't see past the facade that they created of him. This saddened my father, who was so authentic and who wanted nothing more than to be known as himself.

So after my father died, I was delighted when friend after friend expressed a consistent view of him: they knew his humorous side, his loyalty, his intensity, and his inquisitiveness. They said "Your father once said to me . . ." and they'd quote something they remembered my father telling them. Something different had struck each one. This,

they told me, had influenced them in some significant way that they described. I was delighted, but also amazed. And then, one night shortly after his death, I found a document on his computer labeled “Adages” that indicated he had been working on it as recently as the day before he entered the hospital. I remembered a conversation my brother and I had with our father in the hospital less than a week before he died in which we talked about family sayings we had grown up with that inspired our personal perspectives.

I opened the six-page document. I recognized many of them as quotes his friends had shared with me. Some were part of the repertoire I inherited from my dad in conversations or in his letters to me. Some were those we had spoken of in the hospital the week before. As I read them, and now as I write about my father, I hear his voice in my mind's ear. Since the adages were so much a part of my father, you'll find a sprinkling of them in this chapter, and, no doubt as you read them you will hear Herbert's voice in your mind, as well.

I was lucky to know Herbert A. Simon for $58\frac{1}{2}$ years—my whole life. He inspired and motivated me from as far back as my conscious memory goes. It is from him that I developed my love of nature and the out-of-doors generally; the sun, moon, planets, and stars; music; reading; walking; intellectual inquiry; tennis; deep conversation; board games and crossword puzzles; bird watching; art; an understanding of right and wrong; the interconnectedness of everything in our lives; and oh, so many other bits that enhance life. True, sometimes I thought he was difficult, especially when he engaged me, an unwilling participant, in a debate while he took on his usual role as Devil's Advocate. Almost always when those debates ended he was glad to note that I had held my own and had been successful in defending my viewpoint. It was his way of teaching, and he loved nothing more.

Forty of my $58\frac{1}{2}$ years, I lived away from my father and mother. I left home at 18 to attend college, and never lived there again. In the intervening years, my mother provided me with weekly letters recording their social events and trips and life-as-usual. I also treasure my father's

annual birthday letters to me, in which he mused about all manner of subjects, including his thoughts about family and friendship. I met many of my parents' friends when I was home for visits and I liked them. But, even so, when my father died I was unprepared for the outpouring of deep love and admiration his friends expressed. I had not expected the wealth of stories they shared. All different. All genuine. All deeply personal.

None of this, so far, seems so different from what I've observed other people experience with their fathers. But I remember even as a young child that I had the sense that other people thought there was something different about my father. That puzzled me very much. I understood one difference: he was a college teacher. Most of my friends' parents were business or trades people, so just what a professor did was a mystery to them. But, like all the fathers I knew, he went to the office every morning and came home just before dinner. So what was so different?

He talked more than many of my friends' fathers. And he listened well, always interested in what we children had to say. While my mother prepared dinner and I worked on my homework on the breakfast-nook table, he paced around the kitchen "talking shop," as he was fond of saying. I'm sure I heard about many controversies without knowing it. Only if he were furiously angry with someone would he say anything negative, and even then he was respectful of the person, while he disagreed with their behavior or ideas. I never heard him say anything negative or critical about friends. (Knowing how intensely my father felt about things, I can't believe there were never conflicts, so he must have moderated his shop talk, saving shocking news for private times with my mother when our little ears weren't tuned in.) Even when dinner was put on the table, he wasn't talked out. But when we were all together, he turned to other topics: he questioned how school was that day, who we had seen, what we had learned. Then he initiated discussions about current events or intellectual ideas. Not infrequently someone left the table momentarily to get

the dictionary, the atlas, the almanac, or a volume of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* so we could define a word, resolve a question, or locate a place. These were upbeat conversations, lively, intellectually challenging, and mostly impersonal. We children were included in the discussions and encouraged to contribute, but the conversation did not revolve around the children. Nor was it pitched at children's level.

My father's name and photograph also appeared in the newspaper from time to time. Why, I was never quite sure, but I gathered it was related to his job at Carnegie Tech: the development of a new program, receipt of an award, or announcement of a new book or discovery. One of my friends would inevitably ask why my father's name and picture were in the newspaper. I lamely replied that he taught at Carnegie Tech, thinking that would explain it. When I went home, I read the newspaper to find out why. My father and mother never made a big deal—or any deal, for that matter—about his appearances in the newspaper. I wouldn't have been aware of his public exposure if it hadn't been for other people's questions and attention. This continued throughout his life. Occasionally my mother sent me copies of articles that mentioned or featured my father and his work, but often she didn't. Instead, if I heard about his achievements, it was usually from my friends and colleagues. Did my parents want to shield their children from Father as a Famous Person, or were they truly casual about this public coverage of my father's professional life? I don't know. At any rate, I grew up with very little sense of the impact my father's work had on furthering the understanding of the world.

Before it was announced, I was totally unaware that my father had been nominated for the Nobel Prize. So imagine my confusion when the telephone rang before 5 A.M. central time on October 10, 1978. In a groggy half-sleep, I answered the phone, "Hello?"

I heard an excited voice: "Hello! Kathie! This is Dick. Congratulations. Imagine! Your father won the Nobel Prize!"

In my half-awake state, I could make absolutely no sense of this except that my friend must have lost his mind. All I could think of was

that it was 5 A.M. and nobody calls anybody at 5 A.M.! “This is not a funny joke,” I said. “Do you know what time it is?”

Dick was obviously very embarrassed as he uttered, “I’m sorry. Don’t you know about this? Uh, perhaps I made a mistake. . . . I thought I heard it on the radio just now. First they said that Herbert Simon won the Nobel Prize, and then they announced that John Paul was appointed the new pope. Perhaps I heard it wrong. I’m really sorry to call you so early.”

I struggled to sound gracious as I answered, “Oh, that’s okay, I’ll check it out and let you know.”

I stumbled out of bed, found the phone number of one of our big news stations in the phone book and dialed it. “Do you have anything on your ticker tape about Herbert Simon winning the Nobel Prize?” I asked.

I waited while the man at the station looked at the incoming AP news releases. He returned to the phone and breathlessly said, “Yes, here it is. Herbert Simon was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics. . . .”

I thanked him; as I hung up I heard him shout, “Wait! Who is this? What’s your connection?”

But I was off the phone. Without thinking, I picked up the phone again and dialed my parents. It wasn’t uncommon for my father to be up and alert this early (it was now after 6 A.M. Eastern Time). When my father answered, I told him what I had heard. He affirmed that it was true, but, he admitted, he had not heard the news officially. The reporters in Pittsburgh were not on the job yet, it seemed. My dad said he learned unofficially late the night before from a friend in Europe that the official announcement of the economics prize would come from the Nobel Committee the next morning. True to form, my pattern of hearing first from friends about my father’s achievements rather than from him continued.

Later in the day I phoned my friend back to thank him for alerting me to the news and to apologize for my early-morning crossness. He

was relieved, as he teased me: "I'm glad to hear this. For awhile after I talked with you, I thought that maybe I had got it wrong—that maybe he had been appointed pope!"

How else was my father different? I became aware early on that our family was different because, in the early years, my parents did not own a car. Unlike all our neighbors, we did not vacation in Florida, but spent summers in California or shorter vacations in Maine, Georgia, North Carolina, Colorado, the Southwest, Wisconsin. My father did not attend team sporting events, nor did he listen to them on the radio or television. In fact, rarely did my father listen to the radio for any reason. My parents only bought a television in 1957 after peer pressure from my younger sister prevailed, but I was never aware of his watching it—ever.

However, he read avidly, almost anything he could find. This included the daily newspaper, which he read each day devotedly, grumbling all the way through about how you couldn't believe what you read. Since he had amassed years of experience in which newspaper reporters misquoted him in interviews about his achievements, he had reasonable doubts about the accuracy of what he read. He read, he said, to get the gist of what was going on in the world, but, he repeated every day, you can't believe everything you read. You have to collect data yourself to ascertain what is true. After his disturbing morning newspaper reading, he soothed himself by completing the daily crossword puzzle (in later years, two). Most Sunday afternoons he and my mother enjoyed the challenge of the *New York Times* puzzle, which often took hours to complete, including many trips to the bookshelf for peeks into his reference books.

My father was also different because of the ways he spent his spare time. Evenings he sat in a chair in a corner of the living room after putting a record on the phonograph, often something by Beethoven, Bartok, Mozart, sometimes Stravinsky or his college friend Ellis Kohs. Then he chose a book, now and then in one of the dozen or so languages he knew or a new one he was learning, and read for a couple

of hours. About learning languages he said: "Anyone can learn quickly to speak a foreign language, badly but effectively, if she or he has no shame." He would stop reading periodically to help me with my homework, or to discuss an interesting aspect of the current chapter in history I was reading, or to answer a question about a physics or math problem I was struggling with. Mid-evening, he climbed upstairs to his study to write on his typewriter, later his computer. Sometimes he played the piano for an hour or so before we went to bed. Bach preludes and fugues, and Mozart and Beethoven sonatas were his favorites; he executed them all with great skill and feeling on the Steinway baby grand that he inherited from his pianist mother in the 1950s.

We had strange art on our walls: a large print of Van Gogh's wheat fields hung over the sofa; an elegant Egyptian bitch with large teats hung between the front windows (as a teen, I demanded that my parents remove this, because I was so embarrassed to have my friends see it); a giant red modern original oil by my parents' friend Sam Rosenberg. As the result of a bathroom leak that left a large irregular abstract stain on the living room ceiling, my father painted the large shape in shiny red enamel. Voila! ceiling art (quite a conversation piece) that stayed for several years until the ceiling was finally repaired. Gradually my parents began to collect other art, occasionally representational, but, more often, abstract or whimsical.

My father loved beetles. He knew their Latin names, and he knew facts about their habits and where they lived. Most of my friends, like many people, loathed beetles, so I realized this was something unusual about my father. I also learned to appreciate the beetles' beauty because of my father's deep fascination with them, as well as with the birds and tiny rodents that we saw when we hiked in various parts of the country. My father believed that we humans are not unique and set apart from nature; we are an integral part of nature. Our task, he believed, is not to use our intelligence to dominate nature, but to learn how to live in harmony with all of nature on this fragile planet that we share.

Growing up I sometimes thought that my father could have been more directive. I realize now that he was a superb (and subtle) guide. Rather than telling this child what to do, he asked questions, made proposals and suggestions (always many)—laid out the options, the possibilities. He sought to learn my opinions and encouraged me to express them. He taught me to think for myself, to have the confidence to make decisions and to live with the consequences, to know that I am responsible and that I can trust my basic inner essence. In not telling me what to do, I was not able to rebel against him. But in guiding me, by mentoring me, he gave me tools for the rest of my life. I phoned him from college in my freshman year when I was so miserable that I wanted to drop out or transfer. I asked him what I should do. Gently he answered: "I know you'll make the right decision." I was infuriated! I didn't want to make the right decision! I wanted him to tell me what to do! In time I realized he was right. His confidence in my ability to make a good decision for myself has stayed with me all my life. Over the years, when, in my mind's ear, his voice, returning again and again in vastly different situations, says: "I know you'll make the right decision," I am thankful for that voice. That is perhaps the greatest gift he could have given me.

He was also the strongest advocate of self-competition and cooperation I ever met. He taught me to focus on doing my very best regardless of what other people were doing. He taught me that working with others would accomplish more than working competitively alone. He said: "Avoid zero-sum games. Don't mire yourself in a game where you lose whatever others win and win only what others lose. Non-zero-sum games are not easy to design. They require that winning be measured only against your own performance, past, present, or future, and not by comparison with the performance of others. If humankind is to survive, we must invent a non-zero-sum game that we (including both human and non-human life) can all play together."

Many people said Herbert was the most rational person they knew. Yes! he lived what he believed: he was realistic about the demands of

life and he knew how he liked to spend his time. He believed that “people satisfice because they do not have the wits to maximize” and “information is not the scarce resource; what is scarce is the time for us humans to attend to it.” To maximize time for learning and teaching and talking with students, scholars, family, and friends, he needed to streamline less important activities. Once, early on, he made two decisions: what to eat for breakfast every day, and what to eat for lunch every day, thereby eliminating two daily decisions he would have had to make about something he considered trivial and uninteresting.

Another example of his reasoning occurred when we moved to Pittsburgh in 1949 when Herbert was hired at Carnegie Tech as Head of the Department of the Graduate School of Industrial Administration (GSIA). We moved into a wonderful house on Northumberland Street. It allowed a lovely walk, exactly one mile long, down many blocks on a tree-lined street with large brick houses spanning a half-century of architecture, across a golf course with a breathtaking view of the hills across the river to the south, and the steepest hill I have ever had to negotiate outside of San Francisco. My father walked the round trip every day, year round, in all weather, “down” to the office in the morning, home in late afternoon. Some neighbors along the route have been heard to say that they set their clocks when he passed by each day. This was his thinking time, so I felt especially honored on those occasions when he invited me to trot along and talk beside his measured stride the mile down to school. He was fond of telling people that the way he and my mother chose the location of our house was to draw a circle on the Pittsburgh map, the center on the corner where GSIA stood and a radius of a mile. They only considered houses for sale within that circle. I prefer to think that they only considered houses for sale *on* that circle (satisficing in the ultimate sense of the word). What did he figure out as a result of this decision? “I hold one world record. Nearly every day for 47 years I walked back and forth to the university, a total of about 25,000 miles, the distance around the world. Who else has walked 25,000 miles on Northumberland Street in Pittsburgh?”

So, you see, Herbert Simon was just my dad—no famous person, he. I know how widely he touched my life, though I admit that until recently I was rather oblivious to the extent of his influence on the wider community. From my vantage point, he played games with me, listened to me practice my piano and violin lessons, accompanied me on the piano when I played the recorder, reviewed my homework assignments and term papers and critiqued them only when asked, discussed my newly assigned history chapter, woke me at daybreak on cool summer mornings to play tennis, patiently instructed me how to drive, taught me to identify trees, beetles, birds, and stars on our family's hikes, initiated outings to art exhibits at the museum. He was steady and made sense. I viewed him as being just like everyone else. Maybe not. I guess that's how it is with people who are deeply in your life—you interact with them, you know them so well that you don't realize their uniqueness, and you don't think how the process of being together works.

Herbert enjoyed his life. He did what he thought was important in a manner he felt proud of with people who shared his vision and his desire to do good work. He died as he lived: rationally, intensely, thoughtfully, peacefully, and with dignity. All of us who knew him reaped the benefits of his gifts to us.