

FOR THE WRONG WE HAVE DONE BEFORE YOU
BY OUR UNWILLINGNESS TO CHANGE
WHETHER BY INTENTION OR MISTAKE

My father, Jack Ackerman, was born in 1916 and grew up right here in White Plains. He was the oldest of 6, and, as was true of his generation, the depression was a monumental event in his life. My Dad's father, Benjamin Ackerman, had come here from Romania, and he made a very modest living from a "general" store he owned on Main St. My grandfather was not an easy person. He was neither materially nor emotionally supportive, and by modern standards, would probably be considered somewhat abusive. The family income was meager and for that reason my Dad began working at various jobs by the time he was 12 or 13. Despite having a keen mind, due to this need to help support his family my father never completed high school.

After returning from service in WWII, my Dad had a successful career working for others, and then for himself. He was the quintessential self-made man who ran his own show, which was also central to how he viewed himself. And, in stark contrast to his own father, my Dad was in almost all respects a warm, funny, engaging, outgoing and very generous person.

However, Dad's all-consuming need to be in charge and to "run the

show”, extended to his relationships as well; he had to have the final word on most everything. As a child, and even into adolescence, I was a great admirer of who he appeared to be and, in particular, his “self-made” aura.

This was not, however, a recipe for smooth sailing as I progressed from adolescence to young adulthood. When I finished college, I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do. I went right on to law school, but the decision to do so was not really mine to make. When I finished the first year of law school at Buffalo, which felt like the 17th grade, I was even more unsure about whether the money for it was being well spent by my parents. At the same time, I was increasingly uneasy over being 22 years old and still fully financially dependent on them. I longed to at least begin supporting myself. Small wonder where those feelings came from. But my parents had always placed education first before anything else, and the idea of my working while in school was strongly discouraged.

Before going back for the second year of law school, I was sufficiently distraught about this to tell my father that I wanted to work at a law firm during that year while in school. I added that I wanted to get a better idea - beyond the classroom - of what the law was really about. His response was both distressing and predictable, he said: “no son of mine will have to work while he’s in school”. I then said that I might drop out and just go work somewhere to support myself - doing something, anything, for a while - until I could clarify my

thoughts about law school and my future. I don't quite recall his exact response, but it was certainly not: "sounds OK to me".

I went back to Buffalo in a state of considerable anger and frustration, but still determined to proceed with my plan with or without his approval.

However, within a day or two of getting there, and before I could even begin to look for a job or start classes, I received a call that my Dad was seriously ill, and that I should come home right away. I learned when I got back that he had suddenly collapsed at LaGuardia airport and was in a coma at the ICU at Elmhurst Hospital. He passed away no more than 2 or 3 days later. In addition to the deep sadness and confusion it caused me, his death revealed that his career had not been quite so successful, and that I would now, all of a sudden, have to become as financially independent as possible.

I went back and finished law school despite my uncertainty about whether it made sense. And I was extremely conflicted over feeling that although I was finally standing on my own two feet; my independence had come at such a terrible cost.

I know now that my father's inflexibility about my law school path and his stubborn refusal to acknowledge my feelings - not to mention his inability to see the similarities between us - resulted from the best of intentions and was not meant to wound or cause me hurt. It *was* a mistake, and it *was* wrong, but it also

helped me become a better listener to my own child than he was to me, which is certainly a good thing. So, at this time of year, as we say an Al Chet for the wrong we have done by our unwillingness to change, I think of him, my loving but often inflexible father. I try to be honest about the unintended wrong he did, but I also try to be forgiving and grateful for his love and for the positive lesson I was able to take from it. May his memory be a blessing. L'shanah tovah.