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Love Makes A Family

“LOVE MAKES A FAMILY”

JONATHAN ROSEN*

Peter Cicchino was, among other superlatives, the best teacher I have ever had.

I never actually took a class with Peter; I was more a student by marriage. Peter was the partner of Jonathan Springer, my wife's brother, and it was during family gatherings, car rides, scrabble games, meals and walks that Peter did his teaching.

Great teachers have never needed classrooms. Peter once pointed out to me that neither Jesus nor Socrates would have gotten tenure, so focused were they on the embodied lesson and the spoken word. Peter, who was, of course, a distinguished academic, managed to make all of life, in the manner of his two role models, an open-air seminar. Keats called the world a school for the purpose of building souls. Peter behaved like the self-appointed substitute teacher of Keats' school, filling in until God showed up.

I could write a great deal about the many things Peter taught me—theories about capitalism and socialism, how to talk to children, the pleasures of baking in bulk, church history, the wisdom of the founding fathers, the importance of Star Wars (the movie, not the defense program)—but I would like to focus on two particular encounters I had with him in the four years that I knew him. For some reason they both took place in or near hospitals. This is noteworthy because, although Peter was very sick at the time, it was Peter who was doing the visiting—which of course constituted a lesson in itself.

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On the first occasion he was visiting me—or more particularly, my daughter, who had just been born. Peter, who had less than a year left to live, was giddy with excitement, absolutely energized by my daughter's arrival. Several times he said aloud, joyfully, "new life!" as if this were the greatest possible thing in the world.

"Life is the only wealth," said John Ruskin, and I never knew anybody who embraced that philosophy more fully than Peter. Still, people far older than Peter—with a lifetime to get used to their own finitude—do not always greet with such open arms somebody else's new beginning. How remarkable, how inspiring—I'm still drawing energy from it—to find such generous joy in a man not yet forty whose own rich existence was coming to an unfair conclusion.

Peter and I took a walk that day—we went to get food for the other visitors and to get some air—and Peter kept talking about love. He talked about how lucky Ariella was to be loved so much already. He spoke about the many children he had worked with over the years, abused and abandoned, who had not been loved. What was happening around my daughter's arrival was, Peter implied, how the world ought to be.

It was like Peter, while celebrating my own joy and sharing in it fully, to remind me of those less fortunate than my daughter and me. He raised my consciousness in the subtlest way and broadened the circle of my own thoughts, without at all diminishing the situation. On the contrary, he elevated it. He made my happiness a door through which he let the larger world in.

He also did something else. He taught me a phrase I'd never heard before. "Love makes a family," he said, as we walked back to the hospital, carrying our big bag of sandwiches and potato chips and fruit salad.

I thought he had made up the phrase and told him it sounded like the title of a novel I would like to read. It had a powerful beauty and simplicity that I associated with Peter (though his phrases could be Byzantinely complex). When Peter explained it came from the gay rights movement I was surprised, perhaps because (and I'm not proud of this) I associate political movements, however noble, with leaflets and anger and political arguments. Peter (who certainly understood the role of leaflets and anger and political arguments) understood that there were many ways of participating in a movement. He used to talk very persuasively about transcendent laws that should apply to all people on the grounds of common humanity, and he made me realize that fighting for gay rights should be viewed simply as a logical extension of my own humanity. If I didn't feel part

of the gay rights struggle I ought to—not out of a political obligation to gay people but out of a personal obligation to myself.

I never knew anyone who gave politics such immediacy and warmth. Politics had always seemed to me like math—an abstract category you could elect to skip once you reached a certain age. Peter subtly signed me up. He went on to talk about how, because there are so many unloved people in the world, it is doubly criminal to deny gay couples, capable of loving children and eager to be parents, the right to have families. What were biological categories compared to a community of love? Peter had loved his way into my family so what he said was self-evident. He seldom taught me abstract notions but rather things he embodied. What's amazing to me now is how obvious his words were and at the same time how radical.

This was reinforced after Peter died and I found myself trying to explain the scope of my loss. I often simply said that my brother-in-law had died, but that would engender confusion since many people thought my wife's brother or my sister's husband had died, which wasn't true. But when I said my wife's brother's partner had died, the immediacy of the relationship was lost in what seemed an awkward and artificial locution.

How to impress on people that my daughter had lost a loving uncle and I had lost not just a friend but an absolute member of my family? There was no way, except to explain the nature of Peter's relationship to my wife's brother, to explain that they were married and to wish desperately that the world had a category equal to their relationship. I often found myself using the phrase "love makes a family" in my explanation. It was, in a strange way, a sort of "coming out" indirectly, in the act of mourning and in the act of explaining. It was a lesson begun at a joyful time of life but it continued, inevitably, beyond the grave.

The second hospital visit I want to mention took place just a few months before Peter died. My father had gotten very sick and it looked as though he was going to die. He was in the hospital and we did not believe he would ever get out. Peter, though he was at this time quite weak physically and much more aware that his options for treatment were dwindling, insisted on visiting my father. For an intellectual he had a profound appreciation for what only the body could do. Showing up in a sick person's room was one of those things. And while he was alive and mobile it was something he was determined to do.

Peter and I walked across Central Park to get to the hospital. He talked about dying with remarkable openness and clarity. But these

are not the things I wish to recount. I want to write about how, when we were just outside the hospital, Peter stopped to buy some flowers for my father.

He did this in a characteristic fashion. The man selling flowers was sitting on a stone wall reading a book—his flowers were not impressive and the man seemed bored and unhappy. Nevertheless, Peter bought two bunches. He also engaged the vender in conversation and learned that the man was newly arrived from Mexico, that he hated selling flowers because you had to sit around so much, but that he spoke almost no English and hadn't been able to find any other way of supporting himself yet. Peter learned his name, told him his own, and said a few encouraging words. Then we walked on.

I do not know how often I had passed this man but I had always seen him without seeing him. From that day on I always said hello to him, and there was a different place in my consciousness for him, as a person, as an immigrant, as a man with a life and a history and the hope of a future. Nothing, of course, ought to be simpler. But somehow I needed Peter to shed his humane light on this man in order to see him better.

To this day, I always try to have those little Cicchinesque encounters. Not so much for the sake of the man selling flowers—or bagging my groceries or driving me to the airport—but for my own sake. Kindness can, after all, be a matter of self-interest. For me, these conversations are a way of touching a tiny piece of shared humanity out of which, Peter taught me, everything else grows—politics, law, society and love.