

Kaddish for Joe

Understanding across differences is a guiding principle of social work practice. It is a value which is often difficult to achieve, especially in our personal lives. The journal entries shared in this article represent my efforts to make sense of the relationship with my father-in-law; a relationship that reached across many differences—across time and age, cultures, religions, and the experience of his loss of his homeland. With the help of Maria Lugones' image of "world' traveling and loving perception," a very special "tour" through the Holocaust Museum, and the model of Marion Van Binbergen Pritchard, a non-Jewish social work resistor, I was offered a window into his world and a mirror on our relationship and on myself as a social worker and teacher.

by
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Understanding across difference has been a value and guiding principle of my twenty-five years as a social work practitioner and, for the last ten of the twenty-five, as a social work educator. I have struggled to figure out what factors get in the way of my understanding and continuously seek models to help me when I inevitably find myself stuck. For the past few years, I have found Maria Lugones' (1990) image of "world' travelling and loving perception" very helpful. Simply stated, she urges that we move beyond "arrogant perception" in which we view "other" from the position of the society in which they are defined as outsider. Instead, she suggests that we "travel" to their "worlds," the culture and meaning systems in which their identities are shaped and formed. By travelling to someone's "worlds" we can understand "who it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes. Knowing another's 'worlds' is part of knowing them and knowing them is part of loving them" (p. 401).

My relationship with my father-in-law was one that was frequently conflictual, often

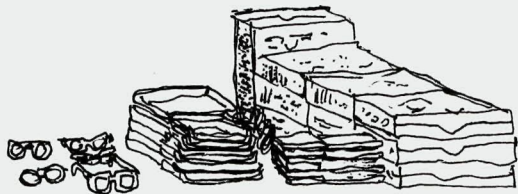
close and ever challenging. It reached across many differences—across time and age, cultures, religions, oceans, and the experience of his loss of a homeland. It was a relationship caught at times in misunderstandings and "arrogant perceptions," his and mine.

After his death, in a most unlikely time and place, I was offered a window into his world and a mirror on our relationship and on myself as a social worker and teacher. It is this experience of "world' travelling and loving perception" that is shared in these journal entries written in the ten days from his hospitalization to the last night of the shiva after his death.

February 6, 1996

He is a man who saved empty cereal boxes and bread bags and paper bags and rubber bands and those green trays they use for vegetables.....stacks and stacks in the kitchen on all the counters, on the dining room table, on the floor around the edges of the room.....He threw little away. You never knew when you might need them....

The cereal boxes were neatly stacked five and six box-



es high and four and five boxes deep....occupying the ornate chairs in the dining room, chairs with their brocade seats still covered in plastic. The boxes sat erect and proper like guests at a formal dinner. Just last Sunday, after 20 years, I asked him about the boxes as I went to move them. "Don't bother them," he said, angry and impatient. I didn't understand. I couldn't understand. Only he understood. "Things are hidden in those piles. Someone might find them. They might get taken. Leave my things alone. I know what I am doing. What's the matter with you?"

We didn't understand. Philip, his second son, and Jonathan, 25 (his oldest grandson who, along with all of his other grandchildren, could never do anything right), and I (his shicksa daughter-in-law, wife of Philip)... we did not, we could not understand.

There was a pile of eyeglasses amid the miscellany collected on the table. Six or eight pair. Ladies' glasses with up-swept wings. Scholarly horned rimmed glasses covered moss-like with the white film that covers aging plastic. Bifocals. Reading glasses. A black, thick rimmed pair with 3/4 inch ear pieces of 1950's vintage, sort of

like the ones Buddy Holly wore. They were my favorites. I picked them up and put them on Philip. To finish the look I selected a cap from the many piled on the table. Handing it to Philip, I asked

him to put it on. The effect was wonderfully absurd. Philip was seated in the one empty dining room chair with Buddy Holly glasses and plaid wool cap. The guest of honor among the other guests. I began to laugh. Philip began to laugh. Jonathan began to laugh. It was such a release to hear laughter in this room, in this house. We continued to laugh until we realized that *he* wasn't laughing. He stood hurt and confused, shuffling his slippered feet. "I don't care if you laugh at me. I need these glasses. None of them really work. I need them all. I never know when I will need them. What is the matter with you? You don't understand." Only he understands. I tried to explain, but it made no difference. I kissed him good-bye and left with a sigh.

Now, he lies silent in a hospital bed. No one knows why he collapsed. He went upstairs to get a paper and he fell. He wasn't alone, thank God. Freddie from next door was there and called 911. My brother-in-law Charlie phoned us midday on Saturday after Freddie called him. I answered the phone. "Hi, kid. Where's the brain of the family?" "With which of the many brains in this family would you like to speak?" I responded. I knew full

well that he wanted to talk to Philip, but wanted to respond in kind to his flip tone. I walked with the portable phone into the office and handed it to Philip. When Philip got off of the phone, he turned to me and said, "Joe's in the hospital. It's all over."

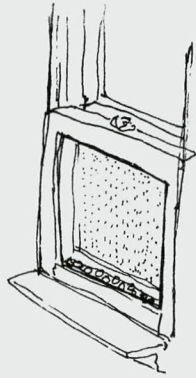
February 10, Shevat 20 5756

Joe died this morning. He was 91. He finally got his wish and traveled to Chicago. We often kidded about death, referring to it as a trip to Chicago. I'm not sure why Chicago. Joe picked the place. He had never been to Chicago. He thought of it as the spot where the railroad from east and west met. The center. We would talk about the stockyards. Whenever Philip or I travelled to Chicago, we would call and let him know that we had arrived in "that place" and he would laugh.

Joe, for as long as I knew him, was expecting death. In the last ten years with his wife Rita's illness and death, he professed a yearning for death. Yet, it is strange. He would never talk about death except as his trip to Chicago or as a wished for state of release from what he saw as the misery and loneliness of his life. He could never *really* talk about his death—or Rita's, for that matter. He couldn't plan for future contingencies like long-term care or his funeral. I don't think he ever really wanted to die.

"I don't need nothing," would be his reply to our offers

of a new TV, a better fan, even a birthday cake. He didn't need anything, because on one hand he believed he had it all and we should understand that he was in control and totally self-sufficient, and on the other hand he believed that he wouldn't be here long enough to enjoy it. No need to travel. No need for books beyond the Torah.



No need to go out to dinner. "What do you need that for?" was his response to our new possessions.

He didn't know what to do with me either. Irish by birth and a "fallen away" Catholic, I didn't fit into his worlds; non-Jews weren't supposed to be trusted. When I helped in Rita's care and listened to his stories, he was grateful, yet wary. When Philip and I guided our children through Hebrew school and Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, he was proud but bewildered. How could a shicksa do these things? My doctorate and the fact that I earned a "good living" further helped to earn his respect. As the years went by, he grew to count on me and I came to count on his counting on me. We became friends. I was different from the Irish he knew as customers in the hardware store. I didn't fit his image of the Irish, a bit like he didn't quite fit in a single family house on a tree-lined street in a suburb of Boston.

Joe never really left Ole-vsk. The Poles, the Russians.... transmuted in America to all who were non-Jews....were always lurking in the shadows, lying in wait. The front door in his house had three locks, as did the back. Windows were always closed with moth balls lined up like white candy mints between the storm window and the inner pane. The moth balls were protection

against the insidious threat of invasion by villainous ants, *mourashkas* as he called them in Russian. On hot summer days the kitchen window was opened just enough to grudgingly permit the insertion of a metal strip with a small fan in the center. In the living room fans would rest on stools, noisily moving the heavy air. Joe would sit and drink his hot tea in a glass.

After Rita went to the nursing home, he would make a dozen pancakes, eat six with tuna fish and save the other six for the next night. He read the Torah in books with bindings reinforced with silver duct tape, leaving notes to indicate the sections which reminded him of recent news events or moments from the past—always moments in Russia. Joe marked the passage of days with the Hebrew calendar and the Saturday Torah and half-Torah portions.

The only western calendar day that he observed was July 4, the day his boat landed in Philadelphia. We would sit in

the yard and he would describe his life in Russia. His grand uncle, Avram Joseph, owned the ice house and was the only one in the town who could read and write. His grandfather was Shimon Levi and his grandmother was Hindel. It was in their house that services were held for the community. Joe learned his Hebrew from helping with these services. On Hanukah, in good times, each of the children in the family would get an orange. Joe did not want to leave his grandfather to come to America. He remembered his grandfather's tears at their leaving.

February 11, 1996

Joe was buried today. We travelled on Route 128 to Sharon Memorial Park in the pouring rain. I was silent for the ride.

We are early. When we arrive, we see the announcement sign and Joe's name. Philip stops, reading the sign aloud sadly saying, "My Joseph." The sign makes it all real. We drive to the grave site. A small canvas canopy and an open hole draped in green. "Is this the right place?" Philip gets out to look and comes back shaking his head. It is clear to us all that this is the right place.

Before he reaches our car, another car approaches and a funeral-type person rushes out anxiously and officiously to inquire if we are here for the Millstein internment. He confers with Philip. Philip gets into the car annoyed. "What does he think we are here for? Now he wants us to go back to the en-

trance to line up, so that he can lead us back to here." Disgusted, frustrated, sad, quiet, he drives us back to the entrance. We line up behind two other cars, which clearly had not transgressed by passing beyond the entrance unassisted. Jakov, Uncle Jack, Joe's brother who is 85, gets out of the first car in line. He stands in the pouring rain in his Florida polyester suit and khaki short jacket. Our son, Matthew, goes out to give him an umbrella and he walks over to our car. I lower the window and take his hand. He is crying. He looks up at the rain and says, "Sad day for a sad man. Sad man for a sad day. He was never able to enjoy anything. He couldn't take any pleasure." I had nothing to say and lamely offered, "He lived the way he wanted to live. It was his choice." Shaking his head, Jack said, "It could only be his way." Only Joe understood.

February 12, 1996

We are sitting shiva at Charlie's just a few miles from Joe's house. This is Joe's community, at least his community for the last forty years. Visitors stop in to pay their respects. He has very few contemporaries to share memories, so we sit politely and chat. Everyone is in agreement that Joe's death was a blessing. He was lonely and unhappy. He lived a long life. He didn't suffer. He and Rita did a good job raising their three doctor sons. We chat about how difficult and stubborn he could be. Someone recounts how he would argue with the Rabbi out

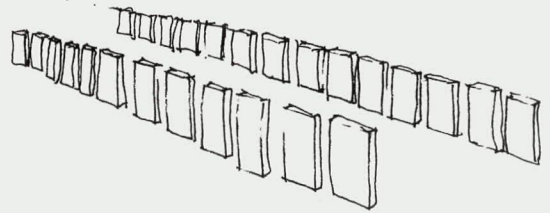
loud in the middle of services. Another talks of working with him at a rummage sale and his love of bargains and bartering. The grandchildren sit in a separate room talking and playing games. I join them and try to talk to the older boys about their grandfather, his life in Russia, his adjustment to America, the struggles of understanding him. They listen politely, but it is clear that the children do not know him just as he was unable to know them. Looking around, I wonder what Joe would think about all of this.

February 15, 1996

When we arrived in Washington today for the Council on Social Work Education meetings, Mary and I went right to the hotel. Avoiding the pull to register and officially enter the world of our work, we quickly deposited our bags in our room and hurried across the street to grab a sandwich at a small deli. We had a mission, a mission we resisted yet pledged to fulfill.

I picked a "Beaver Cleaver" from the menu, bologna and cheese on white bread....very American I thought to myself; perfect for the nation's capital. I refilled my water bottle and we hailed a cab. As we got in, we asked to be taken to the Holocaust Museum. The cabby didn't know what or where it was, or

maybe he couldn't understand our English. We repeated our request as I showed him the tickets and address. Traffic was halted and horns tooted while he waved over another cabby for consultation in a language we couldn't understand.



Finally, we were on our way. Driving by the Taft Bridge and along Rock Creek Park into the center of the city, we ate half of our lunch. I found myself remembering bits and pieces about the Washington of my childhood. I thought about the school I went to in third and fourth grade, Holy Name in Northwest. I was bussed in from Maryland to an under-enrolled school in a Black neighborhood. A priest cousin had recruited my sister and me, and my parents, ever obedient to priestly requests, had agreed to this educational adventure. It was not a political decision for them, simply a matter of faith and obedience; somehow that made me sad. How odd it was that I didn't remember much about being one of the few white children in the school—just sparse, yet vivid, images of singing songs on the school bus on the hour-long ride from DC to Maryland and of being with the nuns. I smiled as I recalled Sister Catherine Thomas, my third grade teacher. On cold days she

let me put my hand in the pocket of her habit as we walked to Mass.

I stared out the window at the Lincoln and Jefferson Memorials, the big golden horses on the bridge crossing into Virginia, Lee's house on the hill, the Arlington Cemetery, and, finally, the Washington Monument just as we pulled up at the museum. We made our exit from the cab slowly, our deli wrappings and unfinished sandwiches clenched in our hands, crumbs on our coats.

I sighed and looked at Mary. We were both dreading what lay ahead. With ten minutes before our appointed ticket times, we focused on finding a place to finish our lunch, knowing that there would be no eating in the museum, at least not in this museum. Sitting on a cold wet bench on the side of the building, we ate and made small talk about school, the conference, dinner plans. Chilled, we moved toward the entrance. Before pushing open the large glass door, I stopped and turned to look at the gray sky and metallic blue Potomac. Silently, we entered and proceeded through the security system.

I was immediately lost. Mary and I wandered. We couldn't find the coat check, the entrance to the permanent exhibit, the elevator. I didn't know where to turn. My eyes were drawn upward toward the metal beams that crisscrossed the tall ceiling, prison-like bars against the exposed light of the sky that now seemed too far away even to imagine. Three times we were given directions by gentle mu-

seum workers who seemed to speak extra kindly, extra softly. They understood. Daily they bore witness; I couldn't imagine how they could do it.

At the beginning of the exhibit, signs directed us to take an "identification card." I opened my card and saw a picture of Rachela Rottenberg, born May 19, 1920, in Sandomierz, Poland. I read her story and waited as Mary finished reading her card. We then, "identification cards" in hand, entered the stark barren elevator. It was just Mary and me as the car ascended with a set of images being projected on the wall. I don't know what the brief film was about. I couldn't look. We walked out of the elevator into a corridor of exhibits. We were in Europe in the decade before the war. I stood before the screen



which showed footage of Russia in the 1920's. I watched the village life, the horse-drawn carts, the booted men and scarved women and "saw" my father-in-law Joe. He was 15 when he left this movie in 1921. His village was burned by the Poles. He and

Mamasha, Beryl, Jakov, and Ettle walked from Olevsk to Antwerp and waited to make passage on a boat. It took two years to get to Philadelphia and then to Cambridge to join their father. Meyer had left the village four years before they did. He had to; otherwise he would have been conscripted by either the Poles or the Russians. Conscription for a Jew meant inevitable death.

I stood, remembering the story Beryl told me several days ago. They were in Antwerp, staying together in one room in a rooming house and checking at the dock daily, waiting for space on a ship. When passage seemed imminent, they were required to put their papers in order. Each one needed a photograph. Mamasha went for her photograph to be taken. Beryl went for his photograph to be taken. Jakov went for his photograph to be taken. Ettle went for her photograph to be taken. Yosel, our Joe, and the oldest of the children, refused. He would not be photographed. Mamasha pleaded with him. Beryl pleaded with him. Jakov pleaded with him. Ettle pleaded with him. Time was short. The ship could leave any time. They all must be ready. He refused. No one understood why. Only he understood. Finally, when their ship was almost ready to sail, he agreed. Grudgingly, reluctantly, silently, he agreed. The photo was taken. The journey was made.

The images on the screen. The photographs on the walls. Joe's frozen image on a passport photo. Birthday cakes

refused and cereal boxes in the dining room. Joe was everywhere. He was my guide. Silently, Mary and I came together as we continued to walk down the gray corridor following the exhibits. Each one's eyes scanned the other, checking in, reaching out, respecting space, and then moving away again.

Time became irrelevant. Several hours had passed, marked only by the throbbing in my bad knee and the fatigue in Mary's

face. We were close to the end. The content of the exhibits subtly shifted from victims to those who resisted. The names and countries of non-Jewish resisters formed a border on the wall as we walked the final hundred yards of the exhibit. Under each name was a description of the person and his or her act of resistance. I began to read each description, slowly and carefully. I was looking for something but wasn't sure what until I finally found it. Ona Simaite, Irene Sendler, Marion Van Binbergen Pritchard. I salvaged an envelope from my purse and carefully wrote each name. Mary joined me and asked what I was doing. I told her I was looking for gentile women resisters who were social workers. She joined me. There were not many listed in black letters in the white border. When we reached the end, I was both sad and elated. Joe had led me to

these women.

We stood quietly for a few minutes before leaving the exhibit, walking through the final door into a narrow room with barren walls. Standing in the white-brightness, I knew what I had to do.

Assuring Mary that I wouldn't stay more than a half hour, we went to the library/bookstore in the museum. Libraries and books are my solace, still points in the turning world. I yearned for a still point. En-

tering the store, I immediately felt at home. Books I knew. Books I understood. I passed by shelves labelled by country—Rowanda, Burundi, Serbia, Armenia—reminded of other holocausts past and present. I sighed and moved on to the section of biographies and diaries. My list of names was in my hand. I could find no book by or about my three social work compatriots.

When I shared my dilemma with the clerk, he showed me a section on the Rescuers, non-Jews who helped save Jews. I began opening each book and searching the index for my three names. Finally, in a book, *Rescuers: Portraits of Moral Courage in the Holocaust*, I found a chapter on Marion Van Binbergen Pritchard and began to read. As a young woman in Amsterdam, she had hidden a Jewish family. After the war, she had come to Boston. Boston! My

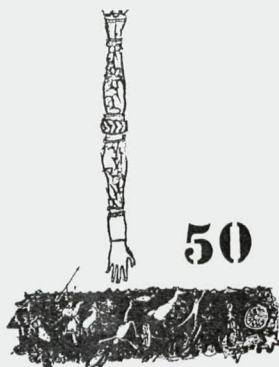
heart leapt and my spirits rose. Cliche, but apt description of my joy at this discovery. Marion had worked as a social worker at Jewish Family Service and later at Beth Israel Hospital. She was retired and, as of 1992 when the book was published, living in Boston and in New Hampshire. I hurried to show Mary my find. It gave a meaning to Joe's presence as my guide through the museum. I felt better, closer to Joe and to a piece of myself.

It was time to go. I bought a pin that said "Never Again" and we left the museum.

February 16, 1996

In the midst of a busy conference day, I didn't think of Joe until about 6:30 P.M. when I woke up from a nap. I had lain down about 4:30 P.M. and fallen into a deep sleep. I opened my eyes thinking of Joe. It was shabbat, Friday night. Shabbat in his shiva week. I was in a hotel room in Washington D.C. It was shabbat and all I knew was that I had to say kaddish for Joe. I dressed quickly, looked at the schedule of receptions I had planned to attend before an 8:00 dinner reservation, and immediately decided to go to the reception for faculty and alums of the school at which I earned my MSW. I needed a minyan; I needed kindred spirits.

Walking into the semi-dark "Woodley Room," I was intent on my task. I needed ten Jews, preferably ten Jews who knew the words of the kaddish since I only knew the first few and the very last words of the prayer. I saw a Jewish classmate



and friend from home. After hugs and a few minutes of catching up on kids and school gossip, I blurted out, "Judith, do you know the kaddish?"

Not missing a beat, she replied, "Not all of it. Why?"

"My father-in-law died six days ago. It's shabbos, the end of his shiva week and I feel he would want me to say kaddish for him tonight."

She scanned the room, took my hand, and off we went in search of social work Jews who might know the words and make our minyan. Seven attempts later, we had run out of possibilities. No one knew all the words. We moved from the room and into the corridor, a bit discouraged, but still not daunted. Leaning up against the wall in an alcove next to the room, we were surrounded by tall metal racks filled with empty white coffee carafes, used linen napkins, and empty water pitchers. We were silent. Finally I said, "There are plenty of Joe's landsmen, his Jewish family, in this conference center. We have a minyan. No one will get us on a technicality. Let me tell you about Joe and then we will do the best we can saying the kaddish."

So, standing in the alcove, I told Judith about Joe...about the cereal boxes, about his rigidity, about our arguments and my intolerance of his racism and bigotry (especially when I was its object), about the way he was so frightened and unsure that he always had to be in control—always right; even at the expense of his sons' self esteem and his

grandchildren's affections. I talked of the many hours over so many years that I had spent listening to Joe, laughing at his yiddish jokes, trying to cajole him out of his sadness, often angry at his stubbornness, struggling to understand, ultimately feeling I had failed, yet refusing to give up. I talked about the Holocaust museum and "finding" Joe in the film. I thanked whatever Higher Being there was for giving the world Joe. Without Joe, I would not have my husband and our two children. I would not have had the opportunity to struggle with our relationship and with myself and to "travel" to Olevsk.

When I was through talking, I asked Judith if she was ready to try the kaddish. She



nodded and smiled and we began: "Yisgadal v'yiskadash, sh'me, rabbo, b'olmo, d'hoo....." We stumbled along until the last phrase, the one we both knew. Together we sang quietly as we stood behind the metal racks of dirty dishes: "Oseh, sholom, bimromov, hu, ya-aseh, sholom, olenu, v'al, col, yisroel, v'imru, omen." "May He who establishes peace in the heavens, grant peace unto us and unto all Israel; and say, Amen."

Shalom havarim. Good-bye Yosel, my friend. I finally think I somehow understand. See you in Chicago and we can talk about it.....over a glass of hot tea.

As social workers and teachers we are frequently striving to "world travel" as we work to make connections with our clients, students, and communities. We may call our efforts empathy, connected learning and teaching, or cultural sensitivity. Regardless of the name, we are attempting to understand "other," often from a position of dominance and power. Frequently our efforts are not as successful as we would like. Sometimes we are aware of our thwarted journeys. Often, we are not. As Simone Weil stated, "Someone who does not see a pane of glass does not know that she does not see it" (as cited in Young, 1990, p. 39).

How do we make bridges from our own experience into the experience of others? How do we "travel" to another's "world" without trivializing and with a full recognition that we will never fully "know"? As I reflect on these journal entries and the experiences that they represent, several things come clearer to me. The ways that we construct ourselves as both connected and other and view our experiences as both the same and irretrievably different have something to do with being able to enter into and identify with another person's context and with knowing who we are.

The museum offered me

an opportunity to enter my father-in-law's cultural and historical context. The museum was designed to help me and others step into a darkness, stripped of our names, holding Jewish identity cards. This stripping away permits us to transcend the position of "other" and to identify, often through recognizing shared feelings. Museums, movies, and literature are all possible vehicles for creating this simulated context. We can never feel the actual experience or appropriate it, but we can connect to it, if only fleetingly.

However, context alone is not sufficient. I needed to "see" Joe as my guide and to

"find" Marion Van Binbergen Pritchard, a non-Jewish social work resister who could mentor me through my experience in the museum. I needed a way to ground myself in my own experience as wife, as mother and daughter-in-law, and as social worker. I needed to position myself not only as a possible oppressor but as a potential resister. I was then able to view myself as Joe might have viewed me and to "see" him more fully. How we empathically engage the "other" and "world travel" is based on understanding and relating to our own experience just as much as it is on understanding and relating to theirs. It is a humbling, complex, and

highly personal process; for to "see a pane of glass" is to see our own reflection. □

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Peace and Social Justice – The Challenges Facing Social Work



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