

Qi Heals

NEWS FROM THE SIKE HEALTH QI COMMUNITY
December 2010, Vol. 6, No. 40

Thoughts At Year's End 2010

"Sometimes one can do nothing to help a person, and the sight of so much suffering is painful. A man should not only have his own way as far as possible, but he should only consort with things that are getting their own way so far that they are at any rate comfortable. Unless for short times under exceptional circumstances he should not even see things that have been stunted or starved, much less should he eat meat that has been vexed by having been overdriven or underfed, or afflicted with any disease; nor should he touch vegetables that have not been well grown. For all these things cross a man; whatever a man comes in contact with in any way forms a cross with him which will leave him better or worse, and the better things he is crossed with the more likely he is to live long and happily. All

things must be crossed a little or they would cease to live—but holy things have been crossed with nothing but what is good of its kind.”

Samuel Butler, 1903

The Jewish sage, Hillel, was challenged to expound on the essence of Judaism while standing on one leg. He raised his leg, said “Compassion”, and lowered his leg. The Hebrew word *rachmones* (compassion) is derived from the root word for “womb”. Compassion is the feeling of a mother for the child in her womb. It is a feeling of love, of nurturing, of protecting, of sustaining, and of responsibility. These feelings, both individually and in a blended unity, are what Hillel meant in the single word “compassion”.

We usually use the word as a limited sense of sympathy or pity for the unfortunates of the world, both human and other. A dog hit by a car or an elderly parent requiring caretaking bring out the compassion in us. This is a fine and decent spirit. However, the quality of compassion that we, in the

spirit of Hillel, posit is not limited to the unfortunate and piteous. Compassion extends to all. ..it is universal in scope and application. It applies to the universe itself and everything within it. If everything derives from the same Creation, then everything is worthy of our compassion—our sense of responsibility for doing no harm, our wish to sustain and nurture the good and joyous, and our protection of everything in creation from depredation, degradation, and destruction.

When we attain the true spirit of compassion, we feel the unity of the universe and the divinity that informs it. We are no longer fragmented. We are part of a whole that we sustain and are sustained by. We are active in our spirit, and have the clarity of vision that all that we behold is full of blessings. We fall in love...with ourselves, with others, and with the universe that sustains us. It is the happiest and holiest of feelings.

*For true love is a fire
In the mind every-burning;
Never sick, never old, never dead,
From itself never turning."*

UNCLE ARNIE (conclusion)

I would have attended Arthur Pillars's funeral had not Uncle Louis taken a turn for the worse. The Manager was wrong. Louis had not yet died, but was fading. Mort was distraught, and urged me to come to Los Angeles on the first available flight. Uncle Louis died from his injuries the day after I arrived. I seemed to have banshees trailing behind me. All of the surviving brothers and their wives came to the funeral.

We had a family dinner the night before our several returns. I was, of course, the centerpiece of conversation, the star attraction. Paul was cantankerous and sarcastic. He hoped I would spend my inheritance wisely. I promised to do so. Ruth suggested it would be fair of me to split the money

with my cousins, her daughters. I agreed that it would be fair. The conversation lagged when the topic turned to Benny's upkeep. Paul had to be verbally restrained by Ernest from discoursing bitterly on Arnie's financial irresponsibility. He managed to get out only, "I told you he had no financial sense." Mort and Ernest archly offered to create a fund --The Arnold Balsom Memorial Scholarship-- for the care and feeding of destitute Balsoms. The two brothers' crosstalk managed to imply that Paul and his seed might one day be award recipients. Paul and Ruth scowled like mirror images, and left early to return to their rooms. In their old age, they were allowing themselves the luxury of sleeping apart. The motion to create the fund passed with laughter and good will.

"To Arnie," Mort raised his glass in a toast. "I can't figure him out. Benny's a prick, always has been. And there was nobody he treated worse than Arnie. And now the brain dead prick will live in comfort until his body's dying day thanks to Arnie's generosity."

We downed our wine. It was excellent. Mort had at the start offered to pick up the tab, and no Balsom offered a free meal ever ordered cheap.

"He was the salt of the earth," said Lilah, her favorite accolade for the man she never met.

"He was a saint," Ernest's wife said tearfully, and raised her glass for a refill. She had been moved by the beauty of the thought or the sensation of the wine.

I tried to turn the talk back round to reality. "I'm relieved that Arnie paid for Benny out of his own free

will, and not out of fear for his life. I worried that Benny and/or Bruno D'Angelo might have extorted money from Uncle Arnie."

This was Ernest's outlook of choice. "How do you know they didn't? After all, you have only the word of the money-grubbing manager," he intoned darkly, and brought the bright gaiety of the table crashing down. In his own way, he was as heavy a hitter as Benny Balsom had ever been.

"But he was a saint," his wife gushed. "Who would hurt a saint?"

Just for a moment I had the suspicion that my aunt and uncle had rehearsed this scene. She was setting him up just a little too smoothly. "You forget, my dear, what it takes to become a saint. No pain, no gain." He snorted appreciatively at his own wit, a sound not unlike the death rattle of a hog.

"Well I don't believe it. Arnie was a wonderful man. Taking care of Benny was just like him, and I don't want to hear otherwise!" Lilah spoke with the dogmatic finality of the newly converted, and effectively closed the conversation, the evening, Louis Balsom's funeral weekend, and the unscheduled family reunion.

A month after Arthur Pillars's death, I received by post a cashier's check for \$65,493, the full amount of Uncle Arnie's estate.

Shaken by the news from Mort about Uncle Louis's critical condition, I forgot about the fat and thin envelopes. I simply stuffed them in my pocket as I sped from the Manager's office and got entangled in Benny Balsom's walker. The last words he ever heard from my lips were neither endearing nor flattering. I am sure he enjoyed them. It was not

until I had returned to my hotel room, booked my flight to Los Angeles and packed that I remembered them. Arthur's thin envelope was the easier to dispose of, so I began with that. It was addressed to the Manager.

Dear Sir, I can't do what he asked me. Sorry, Arn.

Arthur

I turned to Uncle Arnie's will for the body of the riddle attached to this punchline. The will contained no surprises or clues until the very end. Uncle Arnie had had someone with a fine, precise hand --the sort of hand likely to be employed by a legal firm-- add a note directed to his beneficiary, Arthur Pillars.

Like I told you, I want you to go and see her and give her some of the money. Thanks Arthur, you're a pal. Arnie

Arthur's note to the Manager was not unrelated to his cause of death. I had been far closer to the truth than Helen McElroy. It had been easy; I did not cheer.

I held Uncle Arnie's estate between four tense fingers, and did not for a moment consider Aunt Ruth's suggestion to do the fair thing. I had from the first decided to do the right thing. I sent the check by registered letter to the woman on Lantern Street, together with a short note detailing the goings-on since I had left her house that Sunday morning. It was only a month before, but I felt years older, and more confused than wise for my troubles.

I received the receipt of the registered letter after eleven days. It was signed by the woman, but I could not decipher her name from the thicket of ink

marks. She never wrote or called out of gratitude or curiosity.

Surprisingly, she sent me short replies to my Christmas cards. Mrs. Arnold Balsom's handwriting was small and timid, as if all the fire I had seen in her had been extinguished and she was writing from ashes. We communicated in this way for five years. Uncle Arnie's estate was never mentioned, just conventional greetings and promises to write in more detail. The sixth year, my card was returned unopened, stamped 'No Longer At This Address'. I have not been able to trace her in five years, and assume she is dead or soon will be.

Paul died in Florida three years ago. Age has not withered, nor custom staled, Ruth's evil nature. At the funeral she managed to imply that Uncle Arnie had in some way been responsible for Paul's death.

Today she lives in a balmy retirement community in South Florida, shunned by and shunning the rest of the family.

Ernest is in his early seventies and as incommunicative as ever. I hear that he broods less than he used to, but that could mean he devotes a good six hours a day to brooding.

Benny Balsom is, I suppose, still alive. At least, Silver Birches has not informed us to the contrary, but is spending our endowment on his upkeep. In fact, the management requested a fresh contribution three years ago, implying that Benny has outlived our expectations. It is possible, indeed, I have suggested to my father and uncle, that Benny is now extorting live coals (or whatever they use as currency) from the devils in Hell. None of us has the slightest interest in confirming this speculation. We would

rather be robbed by Silver Birches than go to verify Benny's existence with our own eyes.

My father is in the best of health and spirits. He retired from dentistry several years ago and travels the world. Lilah contracted a passion for paperweights, and their lure has tempted her, with my father bobbing along behind, to visit almost every country in the northern hemisphere. She became friendly with my wife and sent her what she described as a 'unique scrimshaw paperweight'.

Expert appraisal confirmed our visual suspicions: the Norwegian paperweight was, in fact, an Inuit dildo. One wonders about her collection. Still, she keeps my father from moldering at home. When in the U.S., he has taken to badgering me to have children. Of all the brothers, only he produced a son; Paul had two daughters. Unless I produce a male child, the

Pittsburgh Balsom name will go the way of the giant sloth.

My father and I did not talk about Uncle Arnie for almost ten years. He did not know about Arnie's wife or Arthur Pillars's death until I began to write this book and asked him for details of family history. He was under the impression that I was going to write a book about him, and so he shaded his story in a way that excluded most of what was vital to Uncle Arnie's tale. I had to disillusion him, gently I hoped, to have him recall memories of his twin from beyond the pale where he had relegated them since Uncle Arnie's death. He was not flabbergasted or astonished at my information. In fact, his reaction to the news was predictably Balsomesque.

"Why didn't Arnie tell us?" he said, shaking his head in exasperation as if to add, "That darn Arnie!"

The news did not displease him; Arnie's secretiveness upset him.

"We'd have been thrilled to know Arnie was being looked after." I did not know whom he counted as his confederates in that feeling, but it could not have been Ruth and Paul.

Uncle Louis was the only man scrupulously honest enough to remind my father that Arnie's cowering, cowardice, and remoteness had been the family's creation. But he was dead, and I did not care to take my father's forgetfulness to task and force him to confront the family's responsibility. Stronger-minded than the weak-headed Arthur Pillars, the family in its prime would have killed Arnie rather than die of shame. Ruth, no doubt, would have struck the first blow.

Was that the reason Uncle Arnie never left Pittsburgh to live full-time with his wife? I am sure that fear of the family's wrath entered into it. If Ruth's harangue over the possession of a couple of condoms could temporarily terminate his sexual appetite, even my heart races in panic when I think of what she might have said to his possessing a wife. Yet he was the only Balsom in Pittsburgh for the last ten years of his life, and lived free of Paul and Ruth's baleful influence. He could have moved in with her -- if not full time, at least more openly-- without the family having been any the wiser.

Two other reasons strike me as being more probable: the thought never occurred to him, and his abiding attachment to Arthur Pillars.

A long-held routine is nearly impossible for the holder to break; some routines become like religious

convictions, others like superstitions, and still others place the body at ease. Uncle Arnie's wife never suggested that he break the routine and live with her, which may mean that she found their lifestyle perfectly satisfying and saw no reason to change it. It may mean that she, too, fell so deeply into the depths of habit that she could not rise high enough to peer over the edge to view a different vista. Or, as I consider most likely, she realized how necessary Arthur Pillars was to Arnie, who could not bear to have that kind, gentle man excised from his life.

Did she sacrifice a live-in husband for her husband's greater good? Was Arnie's frank affection for her declared enemy the reason she assigned to his living five days a week in Pittsburgh? Was this the reason she never questioned him on his life and time spent without her, but rather allowed him to

**enlighten her according to his judgment and
prudence? Indeed, she knew almost nothing about
his life at Silver Birches. She never saw him in his
green serge uniform sitting in the lift. She could not
imagine that he had been living in an underground
cage while she tidied the Lantern Street house. She
never heard about his hamburger feeding frenzies.
Even his string collection was a part of his intimate
history as inaccessible to her as his ivy-covered
grave. She allowed him a life discrete from theirs,
though their life was all she had.**

**As a woman who spent over twenty years turning
men's passions and desires to profit, she could have
had no doubt of Arnie's feelings for Arthur. So she
never suggested they live together, never placed him
in the ugly position of having to choose between the
two people he loved. It was clear that they could not**

all three love together, and so she resigned herself to loving separately. She had not been long-suffering. Arnie's love for her was unquestioned and had sufficed. His love sustained her during his absences, just as it sustained Arthur while Arnie was apart from him. She knew better than to be greedy or grasping; she had allowed him his full measure of love.

Arnold Balsom's life was resolutely untragic. Apart from his yearly vacations with his family, hardly a day passed in the last thirty years of his life in which Uncle Arnie had not partaken of love and friendship. He was not a coarse brute for whom living in subterranean squalor was as natural as eating slop from a trough. He had been a sensitive man, susceptible to the finest feelings. His appalling confines were made habitable through his friendship with Arthur Pillars and his weekends with his wife.

He lived in a cage, but not like a prisoner. He had climbed through machinery, grimy but undaunted, to emerge to a whitewashed house with a front porch where an adoring woman was waiting to place carpet slippers on his aching feet. He had been an anonymous member of a residential community; had been house-proud, seeing to it that the grass was always mown, the flaking paintwork restored, and the birdhouse kept in readiness for its first occupant. He had sat in an easy chair, and been fed home-baked delights. He had enjoyed sex and watching television. He had returned to his other life --the serge uniform and the doddering residents and their attendants ordering him to proceed to this or that floor-- to find Arthur Pillars jubilant to have him back.

And at the home, with his friend Arthur he watched television, read funny papers, and took walks about town like any other average American. Thanks to Arthur Pillars, the home was truly a home; and also thanks to Arthur, Arnie's average American's ordinary activities of daily life became extraordinary for the bond of friendship that informed them.

A man with two homes --a woman in one and a man in the other-- is a rarity, and surely, if not to be emulated, then to be envied in the most secret reaches of our hearts. We hesitate to tell our spouse that our friend stands as high in our affection as she does; we conceal with bluster and sham bonhomie the fact that our oldest, dearest friend has been reduced from primacy to equality of affection by the advent of a new spouse. Uncle Arnie stood like Libra with a friend and a wife equally weighted, each

comfortably sitting in his and her scale, glaring at the other.

The posthumous revelations of Uncle Arnie's life give cause for profound relief and joy; for the man himself, of course, but even more for the realization that a vast potential exists for optimism. The Balsoms were neither malignant nor malicious. They suffered from a deficiency of vision. Self-deceived, they denied themselves the affection of their youngest member who, ironically, was the Balsom most capable of sustained affection.

My teenage vision of Uncle Arnie had not been ecstatic after all. It was a powerful explosion of an optimism that willed itself towards life and affirmation at a bleak moment. Uncle Arnie never did stride manfully as he did in my vision. Squinting,

shuffling, and stumbling he created a radiant, self-sufficient world. He clove the shining ether.

Dixi et animam levavi

