



Celebrating the Outstanding Work of our Students

“Family Values”
by Abigail Lienhard Cohen
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Each person has a set of values derived from family and experience. These values shape the way people think and act. My definition of a value is something that you try to include in your everyday life, or is something that goes with a belief that you have. For example, if you believe that it is up to you to relieve suffering in the world a value of yours would then be compassion, as it is a value of mine.

My great-great-grandfather Meyer Cohen and his values were a big influence on my father’s side of the family. Meyer was born in around 1880 in Kishnif, Moldavia. He was a violent Russian anarchist who was exiled to Siberia at age 15. After two years in Siberia he struck out for China. His journey east to Shanghai took about two years.

With the financial help of friends and his brother in Boston, he got together the \$60 he needed for passage to America around the turn of the century. He lived in San Francisco and worked there as a tailor at least until 1906, the year of the great San Francisco earthquake. The story is that more than one of his friends who knew about his bomb-throwing days asked him jokingly after the quake, “Meyer, did you do that?” Not long afterward, he became an organizer for the International Ladies Garment Union and traveled all over the U.S. – to St. Louis, Hartford, New Rochelle, and Chicago, among other cities.

Meyer toned down the anarchy and embraced the freedom of thought and speech this country offered, but he retained his independence of thought and general sense of defiance.

An example is the name he chose for his daughter, my great-grandmother Sophie Bloch. Sophie was named for Sophia Openskaya, who was accused in the assassination of Tsar Alexander the Second. Sophia was innocent, but was arrested anyway and faced execution. She decided that if she was going to die, she was going to make her death a statement. She claimed that she was the mastermind behind the death of Alexander. Everybody believed it and she became a martyr and a hero to anarchists everywhere.

Great-great-grandfather Meyer respected Sophia Openskaya and the stand that she took. I don’t know if he knew at the time that she hadn’t engineered the assassination, but I share his admiration of her for sacrificing her life to save others who would have died even though they just knew anarchists or agreed with their ideas.

In valuing defiance and freedom, Meyer thought that there should be no government, and that getting rid of the head of government was an effort to free oppressed people. I’m not an anarchist, but can see why Meyer was. I am more hopeful about government’s ability to change because I live in a society far more democratic than czarist Russia.

Great-great-grandfather Meyer also highly valued education and love of family, but I’ll come back to that shortly.

Meyer's individualist streak was also a primary feature of my paternal great-grandfather Joe Cohen and his son, my grandfather, Stan Cohen. Great-grandpa Joe moved his wife Lily and 7-year old son Stan from Brooklyn to Los Angeles in 1939 where they had no extended family. A gifted mechanic, Joe moved for the opportunities that prewar airplane construction afforded. He eventually owned his own equipment rental business.

Thirty-one years later, his son Stan moved his wife Frances and my dad, Andy, and my dad's sister, Lisa, to Phoenix, to take advantage of the opportunities of the real estate market there, soon setting himself up as an independent real estate appraiser. Through two generations, my family has been able to go, settle and become successful wherever they are.

Persistence, self-reliance and community are major values for my mom, Beth Heinsohn. Self-reliance has always been a major value for my mother, and she tries to pass this on to me by letting me be independent and self-reliant. My mom's always been a persistent person with a lot of questions and an inclination to do things on her own. As an adult she put these qualities to work as a journalist. Once she gets going on projects, she doesn't stop until they're done. She's always the one checking my work and making sure that I am doing the best job I can.

Community is also really important to my mom. After several years in Los Angeles, where I was born, and a year in Moscow, my family moved to New Jersey, looking for a community in which to put down roots. The two most important ones are my school, Hoboken's Elysian Charter School, and The City Congregation. Mom was a trustee on the school's board and on the Finance committee in its first five years, giving much of herself and her time to help it succeed. My family's participation in the Kid School and holiday celebrations means the world to her. Though not born into or raised in a Jewish family, Mom has embraced Humanistic Judaism and has found herself fully included in the warmth of The City Congregation.

Hard work, persistence and self-reliance are values my mom got from her parents, Bob and Anne Heinsohn, who got them from their parents and grandparents.

The Heinsohns, Granne and Gramps, as I call them, got it into their heads in the early 1960s to raise their family on a farm. While they were in graduate school in Michigan, they saw people with farms and they thought that after they had their degrees, they could move back East to teach and work a small cattle farm. They had no firsthand knowledge of farming, but that didn't stop them from buying a Pennsylvania farm in 1963 when Gramps signed on to teach mechanical engineering at Penn State University.

On the farm, they had cows, a big vegetable garden and many other animals over the years -- 5 dogs, 7 cats, and once, 3 pigs. They weren't in it for the money; they enjoyed living off the land. At first, they were a bit overwhelmed, but they just pressed on, putting one foot after the other and getting the job done.

Today they still live on the farm and I visit them during school breaks. They don't raise cattle anymore and only have one pet, a black lab named Emma. Whenever I visit them, my brother and I love to walk Emma and during the winter, we sled and toboggan down the hill, while in the summer, we climb trees. Visiting my grandparents is always fun and I have some very fond memories of being with them.

My mom got self-reliance from the farm because there was a lot to do and the kids were expected to contribute their efforts and share the workload. Besides my mom and her sister, Janet, there were foster brothers, Terry and Steve. Working a farm takes more than a few people and the family did everything themselves. My Gramps didn't know how to do anything with cows so he had the veterinarian show him. Gramps fed and watered the herd twice a day, with Granne and the kids helping when he was out of town. Everybody helped round up the cows when they broke out of the barn or the pasture – sometimes in the middle of the night.

There was more hard work on the farm in vegetable “freezing parties.” In the summer, everyone on the farm would pick and prepare vegetables from the garden to freeze so they could be eaten the next winter. It would take a long time; pick vegetables in the morning, cut all day, blanch and bag after dinner, sometimes until midnight. It had to be done all on the same day or else the vegetables would lose their freshness.

Along the way, Gramps became interested in the history of his and my grandmother's families. He collected the existing genealogical documents and began assembling the family tree. He brought his interest to life, so to speak, by naming the cows after our ancestors. My mom remembers that the first bull was named Amos and the first cow Lydia.

In later years, Gramps persuaded family members to write their stories and then assembled them along with accounts he researched and wrote, into a book with photographs. Here it is. And then he kept going. He traced his mother's lineage back to the Mayflower and has become a historian and active member of the Pennsylvania chapter of the Mayflower Society. Some family members listed in the genealogy go back to 16th century England. Currently he's tracing his father's lineage back into Germany. He's found records of the family dating back to the 1500's.

To me self-reliance is thinking and acting for myself. My parents are always trying to foster self-reliance in me by letting me do things on my own that they are pretty sure I can handle but are also challenging.

I see persistence going along with self-reliance but I also see a role for community. I think that having a goal is important and that everyone should have something to strive for, but you shouldn't be afraid to ask for help.

Community and self-reliance are the yin and yang in my values system, the values that contrast but are also complementary. Community is something I need more than self-reliance but it has its limits. It is important for me to contribute but sometimes I need time for myself. I cannot expect others to solve my problems for me. At the same time however, I know I can rely on my friends and family for support when I need it. Having my community behind me gives me the strength to be self-reliant, which makes me a stronger contributor to my community.

There are two important communities in my life – my congregation and my school.

Humanistic Judaism says that we are all part of a big community and we should work together and get each other's opinions. We do things that involve everybody; like the Kehilla Circle, our social action projects and the discussions that take place during holiday services. Everybody at City Congregation comes together and makes you feel like you're part of something.

Community is also an important value in my school, the Elysian Charter School. My parents chose this school because the direction of work comes from the community of students (our interests) and the community between teachers and students (the way the teachers challenge the students). Our teachers assign work that teaches us and is meaningful. We are encouraged to make connections -- in our work, between teachers and students, between same-age students and between younger students and older students. They also encourage you to ask questions. My school is a community because we all work together and help each other.

A value that my school and congregation share, and that is important to me, is education. Education is also important to my family. My Granne, Gramps, Grandpa Stan, Aunt Janet, Uncle Bob, Uncle Howard, Aunt Lisa, Great-Uncle Ming and Great-Aunt Helen and Mom all went to graduate school and six of them are teachers. My Grandma Fran has also been a teacher.

There's also a strong tradition of self-education on both sides of my family. My Great-Aunt Joyce told me that, as a political science major in college, she was deeply impressed by the home library of Great-great-grandfather Meyer (the anarchist). It was a wide array of history and political books. Neither one of my grandfathers was particularly intellectual in college or graduate school but both became avid readers as adults. I think it is no accident considering how smart my grandmothers are.

My dad, also very well-read, educates me by monitoring my interests and trying to match them to new books.

Through my media-oriented dad, I've come to value humor, another important tradition on both sides of my family. My dad introduced me to The Onion and the Daily Show. My family knows the importance of humor and always appreciates a good laugh. When I visit Granne and Gramps in Pennsylvania, we always watch Monty Python. My friends like to joke around a lot and so does my family, so I am always laughing.

There's a lot of kidding in this humor and I believe as my father does, that we kid because we love.

Love is being appreciated for who you are. Love is also being cared for. My Great-great-grandpa Meyer took Great-grandma Sophie to the opera and to concerts, sharing the music he loved with someone he loved, and proudly introducing her to his friends. To Great Uncle Chuck, whose dad died when he was little, Grandpa Meyer was a loving father figure and, in Uncle Chuck's words, was "a gentle guiding voice in my life."

My Granne and Gramps opened their hearts and loved every person and every animal that came to their house. They expanded their family of four to include two little boys, brothers named Terry and Steve, who lived with them for a number of years, and for a time to a family friend who wrote a book while living with them.

My mom and dad are like that too, sharing the things and people they love with me. I think that love is very important and everyone should be loved. My parents love me and I think that all kids should have a nice place to live and somebody that loves them.

In love are the seeds of charity and charity is an important value in my family that I share. Charity to me is helping someone by giving money or actually improving somebody's life in some way. I'll talk more about my personal experience with charity later.

I believe in charity because I feel that I have enough in my life to share with others. My parents are always there for me, provide me a comfortable living and lots of opportunities for me to better myself. I also know people who are not as privileged as I am. I feel that everybody should be able to have those opportunities and that we should all do what we can to better the world. I like helping people even though it's hard work sometimes. I feel that we all share this world so we should make it a nice place for as many people as possible.

As I studied my family's history and examined the values that have been passed down to me, I found the story of Meyer Cohen, my great-great-grandfather from Kishnif, to be the most compelling. He wasn't much older than I am now when he stood up for his beliefs and was exiled for them. His struggle to live the way he wanted to live and to express his beliefs freely embody some of the values I hold most strongly and that are common to both sides of my family. Knowing where my values come from has given me greater confidence in their ability to guide me.