



Based on NPR's long-running radio show, THIS I BELIEVE, an eclectic group of City Congregation members offered their own reflections and joined this international conversation. Presentations were shared at Shabbat, Nov. 20, 2009.

I Believe You Take What You're Given

Alan Siegel

On Saturday, October 3rd at 1:44 PM, just two days before she was to turn 94, Selma R. Siegel, my mother, went to her eternity.

My mother, my mamma, my mommy is gone. But she is here with me today. This I believe.

Let me tell you how by sharing with you some of the values that I realize now, more than ever, are part of my being. Values that come directly from her.

Collecting, Saving, Re-using - In her apartment, shortly after she died, I found a bag of used twisty-wire things used to tie up other bags, which were right next to a plastic bag full of other plastic bags. And in the freezer in the house I grew up in, she had so many paper shopping bags; we called it the Bag Museum. My mother saved, everything, not because she was anal retentive; she saw the value of things and sought to use them as long as they had a purpose.

Serving and Sharing - From the time she was a young girl, my mother wanted to teach. She wanted to give others their voice even as she struggled to find hers. She deeply believed in helping others, and when she grew weary of teaching, she became a librarian. She lived to serve.

Words and Writing - My mother loved words, not as a talker, but as what makes us human. And how you wrote mattered; when I handed her a letter that Ted Kennedy had written to me many years ago when I wrote to persuade him to vote on a particular gun control bill, she quickly picked up her trusty red pen and promptly circled where he had misused the contraction, its. Say what you mean and mean what you say.

Questioning - Some of you will remember one of the buttons of the 1960s, *War is Unhealthy for Children and Other Living Things*. To me, at the time, as a 14 year old, I thought it was nothing short of amazing; it said what we all new was true. When I showed her mine, my mother paused and stopped rowing – we were in the middle of a lake near the camp I was attending – and said, “Alan, it’s a beautiful button; it’s very nice, but you know, capitalism can make a buck off of anything.” So sobering and so true.

Being Organized and the Value of Time - My mother recognized, I believe, that time is precious and not to be wasted. To not waste any, she’d make lists; and she made them all the time for everything, whether it was for food shopping, or all the things she hoped to do in life. And she kept close watch on all of her responsibilities. She loathed numbers, but made sure that her big, full page calendar and organizer had the dates for where her taxes were due and every bill to be paid. And when we went on long family trips, the hard-boiled eggs were ready, handy in a bag placed on the front seat. My mother was always prepared.

Taking on Challenges - My mother worked as a reference librarian until she was 86 years old. And even 8 years ago, when she stopped working, being not only comfortable, but effective on a computer was essential. She taught herself how to do it so she could do her job. To keep her mind active and agile, she took up crossword puzzles at 90. My mother was not afraid of life.

Being Principled - In 9th grade I decided that I would test the dress code then in effect by wearing shorts to school at the beginning of that June. I was sent home and told I could not come back unless my parents gave me permission. My mother did much more. She wrote a long letter, the gist of which was to say that, "My son, Alan, has the right to express himself in the manner he chooses and I support him in his choice." She gave me the right to be me.

Having a Sense of History and the Absurd - The funeral of my cousin, Joseph, who ended his own life, was very, very painful for his parents and for all those who knew him. My mother, too, cared for him, yet at the grave site, as the coffin was being lowered into the ground, my mother gave me a little nudge, and in a soft voice said, "Look at the grave diggers, they're laughing just like in Hamlet." I loved that she could see beyond the moment and see this life in all its ridiculousness.

I said my mother loved words. Let me share some of hers.

I found these two remembrances among a loosely packaged group of papers – often written on the backs of memo pads – so as to re-use the paper.

9/20/88 - On my walk this warm September day, I breathed deeply. I smell the green, moist earth and I waited in vain for thoughts of atonement, resolution, renewal. I did realize, as I often have in the past, how much an individual needs community. Our liberty, our freedom to be entrepreneurs is freedom to be alone and lonely. So much of people's behavior can be explained by the need to be connected, the need for community.

9/27/88 - I walked to the village today and again the green sunlit quiet of the suburbs; the grass fragrant air, the chirps of birds spread pleasure through my being. But I reflected that on a walk in Brooklyn, the milling of ordinary people - intent talking, harried, smiling, going to work, shopping, pushing carriages. Living everyday lives on city streets also gave me a sense of comfort, of belonging.

Finally, my mother's favorite poet was Emily Dickenson and this was her favorite poem.

If I can stop one heart from breaking
I shall not live in vain
If I ease one life the aching,
Or cool one pain,
Or help one fainting robin
Unto his nest again,
I shall not live in vain.

This I believe.