The Chemistry of Friendship: My Lunches With Norman

by Mark I. Pinsky

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There’s no accounting for the chemistry of friendship. Sometimes it’s the shared experience of being young together, or military service, or a function of family — the coincidence of neighborhood or parenthood. It’s often common interests like work, sports, music, or alcohol. Most of the close friends I have today I met in high school and college in the 1960s, and I haven’t made many more since. So I was unprepared for my friendship with Dr. Norman Wall, which began when the retired cardiologist was in his mid-nineties, more than thirty years my senior. In retrospect, I shouldn’t have been surprised. Despite the decades that separate us, we have a great deal in common, beginning with the fact that we are both Jewish Democrats, of a leftish mien, with a strong, enduring commitment to social justice.

Still, the beginning was not especially auspicious. We first connected through Rabbi Steven Engel of Orlando’s Congregation of Reform Judaism, who introduced us above the din of a reception following an evening service. “I think you’ll like him,” Steve told me. I got recommendations like that a lot when I was covering religion for the Orlando Sentinel, and often they didn’t pan out. But this one did. The man I encountered looked closer to seventy-three than ninety-three, fit, lean, and compact, with a full head of white hair, impeccably dressed and obviously vital. As impressive as his physical appearance was, it is the life of his mind that has proved so striking. When he called and suggested we get together for lunch, I agreed.

Over the past three years, the invitations have come the same way. My cell phone rings, I answer, and there is a short pause. Then a gravelly voice says, “Mark? Norm. How about Wednesday at one?” My answer is usually yes, and I look forward to another midday meeting with this remarkable man. Sometimes it’s just the two of us, but often three or more men get the same call or email.

My lunches with Norm have become more regular and intimate, especially after I was laid off by the Sentinel in the summer of 2008. I have plenty of free time and am usually available on short notice for leisurely midday meals, sometimes twice a week. Increasingly, it’s just Norman and me. More than anything, he wants to talk about books, ideas, history, public policy, and philosophy. His interests range from Middle East politics to health care reform to the origins of World War I. We exchange newspaper and magazine clips and recommend and loan books to each other, often upper-middle-brow fiction with Jewish themes and authors. I introduced him to Dara Horn and Alan Furst, and Janet Malcolm’s takes on murder. Going high-brow (and flattering me), he once pressed on me a collection of Primo Levi
interviews and lectures. Other times it was a book about Emile Zola and Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz’s We Jews. His latest was Harry Bernstein’s The Invisible Wall, which he delighted in telling me was published when the author was ninety-five. His favorites are Jewish history and biography; he’s always delving into hard-to-find books that the local library — which by now should have a reading room named in his honor — finds for him.

Norm read and critiqued an early draft of my latest nonfiction book, suggesting, naturally, that I focus more on a crusty, older character, a crusading, small-town lawyer he obviously identifies with. We agree on most issues, like support for a single-payer health care system and a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine, and opposition to expansion of West Bank settlements. We agree to disagree, amiably and respectfully, on others, like the Islamic community center near Ground Zero — I support; he opposes. So far, we’ve never run out of things to say.

Occasionally we eat at Norm’s house in a gated, upscale community, but usually his charming wife Faye wants him out from underfoot for a while, so we go to nearby restaurants. They’re all a short drive for him in his white GMC with the “Save the Wolves” bumper sticker, the one he calls “Rocinante,” after Don Quixote’s steed and John Steinbeck’s camper truck in Travels With Charlie. Over time, I’ve noticed his steps have become more cautious, his gait a little tentative, and his hearing uneven. But the only concession to Norm’s age I’ve made has been to accompany him to and from Rocinante. My motto: “No broken hips on my watch.” Notwithstanding, if Norm gets to the restaurant’s front door before I do, he opens it for me. Wherever we go, the waitresses and maître d’s greet him by name and fuss over him, which he loves. It’s as if by physically touching him they can access his secret to long life. For three years Norm has insisted on picking up every check, because he invited me. I never protested until recently at a local deli, when I grabbed it. He objected, like a father insisting he pay for the pleasure of dining with a son or daughter. But Norm relented when I told him I wanted to say at least once that I took him to lunch.

The lunch bunch around the table occasionally varies. Sometimes, Norm selects a topic for discussion and assigns one of us to make a formal presentation — one included a laptop PowerPoint — which he calls the “Wall-Pinsky Seminars.” Often Rabbi Engel joins us, and from time to time so do Norm’s visiting sons or one of his grandchildren, or my daughter. A retired school administrator or a developer may sit in, but the group usually has a strong medical bent: Dr. Cliff Selsky, head of pediatric oncology at Florida Hospital and a molecular biologist, as well as a member of the Congregation of Reform Judaism choir; and Dr. Leonard Dreifus, a former president of the American College of Cardiology. Once, noticing all the high-priced medical talent sitting at the meal, I was tempted to ask if I could take off my shirt and climb onto the table for a consult.

I am amazed at how sharp Norm is, his mind still nimble, his attitude feisty. He reads the New York Times regularly and watches “The Daily Show” nightly, subscribes to Mother Jones and is Web-savvy. His humor is by turns clever, droll, and sarcastic. There are also coincidental connections: my rabbi during high school in Southern New Jersey in the 1950s, the charismatic Harry B. Kellman, turned out to have been Norm’s religious mentor and teacher while he was studying at the University of Pennsylvania, just across the river, and gave him the Jewish education not available in his small home town. “He taught me what it was to be a Jew,” Norm said.

And Norm is about the same age my father would have been if he hadn’t died in 1978. Perhaps that’s a part of it — he is a father figure without the familial baggage. Once, after my return from a trip to my home town in Jersey and a visit to our old next-door neighbor, who was eighty-seven and living in a Jewish assisted living facility, I shared with Norm her story about a mitzvah my father had done — which I hadn’t heard before. It was the only time I ever saw my lunch partner tear up, as if the secret act of charity was typical, a testament and a tribute to his own generation.

Without making a conscious decision, we tend to steer clear of some topics that might be too sensitive or too intimate — like parenting adult children. Norm’s own children — who are about my age — and grandchildren live far away, so maybe I am a fill-in son. My two kids are college age. He gives advice, but only when asked. In any event, I see him as a role model, something to aspire to in however many years to come there are for me.
Like everyone else, I can’t help asking myself what Norm’s secret of active longevity is. He’s still driving and, when we first met, he was still playing golf. Among the books he has written is Living Longer, Living Stronger. Genes aside, his younger son, Harry, attributes his extraordinary vitality to “exercise, naps, reading, good conversation, and — since his retirement — two belts of Chivas whisky a night. I’ve often said Chivas should make him their poster child and pay him in an ad campaign for ‘living longer, healthier.’” He is very attached to the Congregation of Reform Judaism services (where his High Holiday seats are much closer to “courtside” than my own) and its programs, as well as the Holocaust Museum and Research Center in Orlando.

Norm wants to be useful, and is. He no longer practices medicine, but when neighbors ask for help, he calls friends and colleagues to get them in to see specialists. After I had minor heart surgery, Norm volunteered to be my back-up cardiologist, reviewing my tests and exam results, and he calls to check up on me when I am sick or injured. For months, while I was recuperating from a burn injury and a subsequent skin graft, and feeling reclusive, my lunches with Norm were the only thing that could draw me out of the house.

"After I had minor heart surgery, Norm volunteered to be my back-up cardiologist," the author writes. "While I was recuperating from a burn injury ... my lunches with Norm were the only thing that could draw me out of the house." Credit: Nizar Swallem.

Gradually, Norm has told me the story of his life. He is the youngest and lone survivor of nine children. His father left Russia at the end of the nineteenth century, part of the large migration of Jews escaping persecution and seeking a better life in America. The patriarch’s saga was a familiar immigrant’s story, not unlike my grandfather’s: an itinerant young peddler whose journey took him to a small mining town in the Anthracite coal region of Pennsylvania. There he opened a dry goods store and made a decent living in a community made up largely of Irish, Polish, and Baltic immigrants.

Over the years, the family did its best to repay the nation. During World War I, two of Norm’s brothers served in the army, one wounded, and a sister who was a student nurse perished in Philadelphia treating soldiers with the Spanish Flu. The family gave similar sacrifice and service in World War II. Another sister, in the Women’s Army Corps, was killed in a tank accident.
By happenstance, Norm likes to say, his was a “good war.” Some of the young doctors he trained with in the months before World War II erupted were later killed in the Pacific or en route to other assignments. Norm served as a medical officer, first in 1943 with the Army’s 24th Field Station Hospital outside Tel Aviv, a tent and Quonset hut camp established to treat expected Allied casualties from the North African campaign. But after British Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery stopped German General Erwin Rommel’s drive toward Cairo at El Alamein, Norm’s unit was ordered out in 1944, and scheduled to be turned over to America’s English allies. But Norm, fearful that the supplies would then fall into the hands of the Arabs, took it upon himself, without authorization, to commandeer the surplus medicine and equipment. He used his jeep to deliver it to skeptical Haganah soldiers (who distrusted anyone in an Allied uniform, especially someone with an English-sounding last name), who stashed it in the hollowed base of a kibbutz water tower, next to an arms cache.

The priceless supplies were ultimately transferred to a crumbling Ottoman-era building in nearby Tel Aviv, where the legendary Dr. Chaim Sheba was treating civilians and Jewish fighters. In the process, Norm formed a lifelong relationship with Dr. Sheba, for whom Tel Hashomer-Sheba Hospital — established on the hilltop site of the U.S. base after it was captured in 1948 by the nascent Israeli Army — is in part named. In a small way, Norm’s experience had a personal resonance for me; I was a civilian volunteer attached to the Israeli army in the Sinai in 1967.

In early December of 2010, Norm was recognized for his contribution, along with the U.S. Army, to sowing the seeds of what has become the largest medical center in Israel. It was a moving ceremony, bringing together what Norm devoted his life to — medicine, his passion for Israel, and his love of America — and celebrated in Orlando, where he has made a niche as elder statesman in the community. He also had the tact not to mention, in the presence of a general on hand to accept the Army Medical Corps share of the award, that Captain Wall’s superiors were unaware of his contribution to the Jewish underground, then technically at war with the British.

Later in WWII, Norm headed Army station hospitals in Africa and the Middle East, rising to the rank of lieutenant colonel. While commanding a mountaintop medical unit in Eritrea, he rounded up the unit’s five Jewish soldiers and drove them to the East African capital of Asmara for High Holiday services with Italian colonial expatriates and dark-skinned, Ethiopian Jews.

Norman’s activism on behalf of Jews and Israel in the years that followed was often behind the scenes. In the late 1960s, at the request of the National Conference on Soviet Jewry, Norman and Jay, his older son, smuggled medical supplies, especially insulin and digitalis, to Russia and the Ukraine. During the 1973 Yom Kippur War, with the assistance of Mossad, he arranged for a surgical company in the Midwest to donate highly specialized equipment, quietly spirited out of the country to Lady Sieff Hospital in Safed, where it was used to treat Israeli soldiers whose bones were being shattered when the tanks they were in imploded under attack.
The five hash marks on Capt. Wall’s uniform indicate the three years he had already served overseas when this photo was taken in 1943. Courtesy of Dr. Norman Wall.

Norm refights other, older battles. He is still nettled about his struggles in the 1930s against restrictive quotas barring Jews from applying for scholarships at University of Pennsylvania and its medical school. After World War II, when his father died, Norm discontinued a prestigious fellowship and a bright future at Boston’s Lahey Clinic, en route to a planned career in a major medical center. He returned to his small home town of Pottsville in Schuylkill County, in order to support his large family. There, he was hired by the Catholic nuns who were preparing to build a modern hospital; they were grateful to have such a talented doctor, despite his faith.

Like longtime CBS and CNN newsman and National Public Radio commentator Daniel Schorr, who died in July 2010 at age ninety-three, Norman is a living history book, especially when it comes to the healing arts. His life has spanned a century of dramatic changes in the world of medicine, from the discovery of penicillin and the advent of open-heart surgery, to the takeover by the HMOs and money-driven health care. As he likes to say, “I had the best fifty years of medicine.” A keen, intuitive diagnostician of the old school in the years before (and after) sophisticated testing and technology, he believed in treating his patients holistically — before that term was commonly used.

For half a century Norm cared for everyone in the area, from coal miners to bankers. He turned his work on the miners and their dust-damaged lungs and hearts into more than twenty academic papers in national medical journals. These were a response to cynical mine owners who insisted that workers had tuberculosis, rather than Black Lung disease, to avoid paying even meager compensation. This experience, he says, like the penury he experienced growing up, fueled his commitment to social justice. He began bringing promising young medical students from the United States and Israel — where he helped develop Ben Gurion Hospital and Medical School in the Negev — to his hospital for summer training programs. Some of his former students are now among Israel’s medical mandarins.

Norman rose to prominence in his community, a town made (in)famous in the novels of native son John O’Hara. In his books and short stories, the writer called it “Gibbsville,” lacerating local society for its open tolerance of gambling, prostitution, and Prohibition-era speakeasies, as well as its pious hypocrisies. In the decades that followed, Norman and other members of the town’s small Jewish community were still barred from the local country club and main civic organization. Norm took them on, because he could, as the top cardiologist who often took care of the same bigots, as well as the few who helped him start changing the restrictions. When the bars fell in the 1970s, it was a small but notable victory. While medicine was his profession and calling, he made an impact on his community, mainly through local activism; he later served on the national stage with the Anti-Defamation League.
Norm admits to a certain vanity at this point in his life. On my first visit to his house, he showed me a photograph of himself with Salvador Allende, a fellow physician and then president of Chile, who was killed in a U.S.-backed coup in 1973. It was years later before Norm told me that after he returned from the much-publicized visit to Santiago, shortly before the coup, FBI agents informed him that Chilean security officers had intercepted a letter that contained poison addressed to him at his hotel.

On the wall he has a framed copy of an op-ed column he wrote in 2005 for the New York Times about bringing foreign physicians to the United States to respond to the doctor shortage, arguing that it was wrong to bring foreign doctors here rather than encourage them to practice in their own, Third World countries where they were needed most. He’s also had letters to the editor published in the Times. An auditorium at his old hospital in Pennsylvania is named for him and many of his medical protégés have inscribed dedications to his honor in their textbooks.

Sometimes, I notice, he repeats stories he has told me before — but I do that too. If he has any serious regrets about his long life, Norm has kept them to himself, or dismisses them with a shrug: “What are you gonna do?”

The Yiddish expression bashert literally means destined, or fated. In recent years, it has come to refer to a future marriage partner, because it connotes soul mate. But I think it was fated that Norman and I would meet. For all the Mondays and Wednesdays and Fridays with Norm, our lunches are not tutorials on life like Mitch Albom’s Tuesdays With Morrie. I haven’t been watching him die; I am watching a life well lived — and living. I’m still learning from him, but our lunches are meetings of equals. For my part at least, the formula for our friendship is a mix of equal parts admiration and affection. There is no way I could ever live a life like his, but I thought that just by listening to his unfold, by sharing it, even vicariously, I would become a part of it.

Recently, I asked Norm, now ninety-seven, why he thought our relationship has become what it is. “That’s easy,” he said with a chuckle. “You learn from me and I learn from you.”

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