

I am a Jew

Mel Waldman

THE CENTER

I never hung out in poolrooms until 1967. In '67 I landed a job in a senior citizen center in Coney Island. My title was *Housing Assistant* and I worked for the Housing Authority. I was sent into the geriatric center to be a recreation worker. Strange things began to happen in this Coney Island hideaway. And although I had looked forward to a *rest* and an easy going lifestyle, there was more *action* there than in Peyton Place or any of the soaps on TV.

A block from the boardwalk and the Atlantic Ocean, the center exists. But after my first day of work, I wondered if I had landed on Mars. Months later, I realized I was the Christopher Columbus of Coney Island. I hadn't discovered America. Still, I had found my new *home* for the next two years. Welcome home, Kotter!

II

I hid in the poolroom where the old men taught me how to shoot pool and protected me from spirited old ladies in search of a dancing partner. The slick old men taught me how to hold a cue, to chalk up, and to play a smooth game of eight ball. And when lascivious old ladies found my secret hiding place, the wise old men formed an impenetrable fortress: "You can't have him now! We're in the midst of a serious game of eight ball. Come back later."

“I’ll be back!” said one old lady who smiled sardonically at me. “We’ve got a serious fox trot to do!” And she scurried off.

III

Looking back, I realize there was more life in the center than in most places for younger folks. A few times over the years, I returned. I walked past the familiar oasis, but did not walk in. I suppose I wanted to keep the sacred memories intact. Re-entering the center would have severed my poignant ties and holy images.

In the castle of my mind, I see the little building whose structure is long and low and labyrinthine, flanked by tall buildings. Magically, it empowers me.

But can I walk through Yesterday’s door and share a nostalgic journey with my old buddies? Almost 40 years ago, I said goodbye to the gang. It was my time—a special time for a young man. A time of new beginnings: love, marriage, family, and career.

Yes, four decades and invisible boundaries separate us now. Where are they?

IV

Mr. Murphy, Jimmy, and Mr. Polanski were my mentors in pool. And of course, there was the tall cripple with the twisted torso. I can’t recall his name. The skeletal man frightened me but warmed my heart too. Nameless possessed a demonic laugh, played a wicked game of pool with his trembling hands and a mean game of checkers.

The three wise men and cripple empowered me. How? What was the source and nature of their power? And what did they pass on to me? The gift of the Magi?

V

“Hello there,” says Mr. Murphy in a lilting voice, as he pirouettes across the room like a young James Cagney.

“Hi, kid,” says little Jimmy, about five feet tall, with the voice of Humphrey Bogart and the lonely eyes of James Dean.

“Get your cue stick! We ain’t got all day!” roars Mr. Polanski, a gentle lion of a man who might be John Garfield in disguise.

In the corner, Nameless grins sardonically. He’s really the scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz*.

Mysteriously, they empower me. And the old ladies bewitch and enchant me. They are the white witches of Coney Island. Their power is beautiful and magical.

“It’s time to do the Peabody, young man. Are you ready?”

“Well...”

“Of course, you *are*!”

“Of course, I *am*!”

In those antediluvian days, I was endowed with the power of the universe! I miss those early days. Yet they exist even now within the private theater of my mind. And sometimes, when I breathe in the ocean at Coney Island or smell the scents of the passing seasons, gentle memories of that lost era emerge.

VI

I miss the magic. One day, an old sorceress said: “You must get married! I’ll ask the rabbi to bless you.”

I suppose the rabbi blessed me (cursed me?), for I got married a few months later to a woman I hardly knew but loved. Such magic! Such power! (I never found out who the rabbi was.) Such joy! (And such sadness!)

VII

I miss my old friends. Murphy died a few months before I left. I went to his funeral. I'd never been to an Irish wake before. I looked at him in the open coffin. He didn't look bad. Indeed, he looked majestic.

Now, he's back in the poolroom. "Hello there," he says to me.

"Good to see you," I answer.

"I'm always happy here."

"I know."

"Of course, you can't feel other wise. Not here."

VIII

In the sprawling mansion of my mind, my old friends exist. Mother is there too. She died 42 years ago. And when she passed away, my soul was broken, lost in a black hole of despair and unbearable grief. Neither I nor Father could tolerate her absence. After her death, we could not heal each other. Indeed, we could not live or be together. Our grief was cutting, fiery, and chilling, compelling us to separate and sever all ties for a while. Later, when we finally got together, we were separated by a vast, soulless Waste Land, watching each other from a distance in mutual unreality. Without Mother, we were strangers in a barren universe.

Mother died in '65, two years before I discovered and worked at the Coney Island senior center. Looking back, I realize that a significant part of my healing process occurred at the mysterious center ensconced in Coney Island. There, I rediscovered how to love and learned how to mourn for the departed and be one with the divine universe. According to Kabbalistic practice, I had discovered the principle of *tikkun* or repair-the process of restoration and redemption.

At this mystical center, I found Mother again. And by repairing myself, I was able to find Father too. Now, Mother and I continue to have loving dialogues. During our shared existence, she empowered me. Even now, she fills me with faith. But sometimes, she is silly. She makes funny faces and I laugh uproariously. She rolls her eyes back and forth, her cross eyes launching me into a fit of laughter. Such joy! Such power! With each new dawn, the crepuscular insects rise and Mom, who is eternally resurrected in my soul, empowers me once more.

IX

Father sits next to her and holds her hand. At last, they are reunited. They look like two teenagers madly in love.

Father died 19 years ago in a nursing home in Florida. He had Alzheimer's disease. But he died of a heart attack.

A year before he died, he stayed with me for almost two months. He had problems with his third wife. (Eventually, he returned to her. Such was his choice.)

I took him in. At that point in time, we empowered each other. How? How did this happen, for almost two months, at the end of one lifetime, between a father and son who never *saw* each other?

X

At my father's funeral, I stayed with him in the synagogue for a few eternal minutes. We were alone, the coffin open.

None of the others looked inside the box. I had to look! He was buried Israeli style. Like Mr. Murphy, he looked majestic.

I looked closely. He was really dead. And so very much alive! His gold-filled teeth glittered.

Inside the silence, we spoke. In those unmoving moments of death, Dad was more real and alive than in all the deadened, soulless years of life we shared.

"It's a miracle, Dad!"

"Yes."

"How did this happen?"

"I don't know." (Dad gives me a big, childlike smile, his gold-filled teeth illuminating the darkness.)

"It doesn't matter, Dad. We love!"

(But now I truly believe that the miracle began at the Coney Island senior center where I discovered the mystical principle of *tikkun*. According to Kabbalistic teachings, before the beginning of our universe, the Divine light contracted. And the vessels that contained this Divine energy shattered. Holy sparks were scattered and hidden within every thing. I have

heard that with the repair of the self, the shattered universe is mended. And the holy sparks are reunited with the vessels of Divine light.)

XI

At this mysterious time in my life, I am enchanted by the power of being, the source of my creative energy and healing power.

I remember the late '80s and '90s when I worked in Brooklyn nursing homes in Bensonhurst and Canarsie as a therapist/consultant. I believe I rediscovered the divinely inspired power of being, originally found in the Coney Island senior center, in those lonely Islands of Oblivion.

Yes, I remember...The power to be! My presence is powerful. My presence heals. On the third floor of a Brooklyn nursing home near Coney Island, I sit with old ladies and men who drift in and out of reality. I reach out to them. I talk to them-my abandoned children! I tell them what day it is, and the date and time and place and what is happening in the world.

Slowly, my old children come out of their cocoons. They emerge and reveal themselves. One precious lady, who hasn't spoken in hours, recites a poem about a flower which hides from the world. "And you too are a beautiful flower," I announce. "Don't hide my lovely flower! Reveal yourself!"

My youngest child is 78 years old. My oldest-100. I sit with them and feel their presence. I feel beautiful. They make me feel like the most powerful man in the universe. And I empower them too. What is the source of such power?

XII

I discovered the power of being many years ago in the center. I was a young man then and open to new experiences. I allowed the old folks to enter my soul and they filled it up with beauty, faith, and old-fashioned enthusiasm. They *knew* the secrets of life and fed me an endless supply of creative energy and love.

Even now, when I sit with my patients ages 5-70+ in the South Bronx in an underground office within a community health center, where we disappear into the mysterious Labyrinth of the Human Mind and travel across a barren Waste Land of rage, hopelessness, and despair, the eternal center empowers me. It is a place where the dying breathe life into the living, a place where a young man is blessed by a rabbi and destined to find his bride, a place which some men call home.