

When I was young my family was poor, as were many other immigrant families of that time. The maxim, 'Don't spend bread money for flowers,' was more than just a saying; it was a way of life. I was a teenager when the depression hit, magnifying the existing dire poverty. I graduated from high school in 1932. In those days it was still regarded as a special accomplishment. I had the opportunity to attend City College of New York, tuition free. I chose to go at night and try to find work during the day. But jobs were scarce and hard to find. After a year, I had to give up college, and join the Civilian Conservation Corps to earn money for my family. I was paid \$30 a month, plus room and board, but I saw only \$5 after \$25 was sent directly to my parents. I stayed in the CCC's almost a year, and later completed my evening education at Pace Institute. I became a Certified Public Accountant in 1940.

A couple of decades later, when success in business allowed me to be more liberal, I still tended to be fairly conservative when it came to spending on "frivolous extras". My family had everything they needed, and then some. I thought I went somewhat overboard to endow my children with educational and other privileges I would never have imagined for myself as a child. We did lead what I would consider an extravagant life style compared with what I encountered when I was young. But, this was the American dream and I reveled in it.

We traveled to New York frequently. Also, we went on multiple trips to Jamaica, Europe, Hawaii, and Japan. We drove new, although, ordinary cars. Our home was beautiful, but not extravagant. We had good friends and neighbors with whom we

socialized, but parties were hardly a norm, except on traditional occasions such as New Years.

We did wind up with 4 cars for 4 people. Also, I had to induce Helen to buy a mink coat. But she found that she felt uncomfortable wearing it in the supermarket in front of our neighbors. She got rid of it.

The one memorable party of my middle years was my 65th birthday party, which was instigated by my wife, her employees and our children. The catered party was held at our home, and attended by a large group of friends and family. Since it was virtually impossible to engineer a surprise party at home, I knew about it somewhat in advance.

What I did not know was that the conspirators had arranged for a scantily clad belly dancer as a surprise. She was "snuck" in via the downstairs entrance, and on signal, my daughter Amy changed the music on the turntable. As she mysteriously appeared and performed for us, my neighbor from across the road, who was my age and had a very beautiful wife, leaned over and whispered in my ear "I don't need a belly dancer, I get enough of this at home"!

Twenty five years later, I am still fairly conservative, but not parsimonious, in my spending. So with my 90th birthday approaching, I had planned to let it pass quietly, with perhaps just a family dinner. My children pushed me to consider doing something more. After attending my dear friend's 80th celebration, which turned out to be a sweet success, I decided to reciprocate. I asked daughter Amy to act as my secretary and create a party. It turned out to be a grand affair.

We had about 30 people. There were younger neighbors from Bedford, where we lived for 44 years, whose children regarded me as grandpa, as well as other friends, neighbors and HILR colleagues who are dear to me. After the usual birthday proceedings, people arose spontaneously, one after the other, to shower me with encomiums which made me feel like a candidate for sainthood. For the record, and before I forget, here is some of what was said to and about me. I have a need to remember and treasure these sentiments.

A neighbor:

“We named our younger son after this wonderful human being because of his great integrity, intelligence, generosity and wonderful spirit.”

Another neighbor:

“I consider it a great honor to be his friend. I cannot hold a candle to his intellect. His Harvard colleagues may not know that Abe is such a super warm-hearted human being. He took our daughter and turned her into his granddaughter, and at the age of 85 got down on all fours and let her ride on his back, then whipped out his harmonica and serenaded her.”

A dear friend:

“I’ve known Helen and Abe since the seventies, when I was in graduate school, and needed some extra cash, walked into Helen’s shop and was hired on the spot. They’ve seen me through graduate school, through getting married, and before that a lot of social mishegoss, and two children. They have been like surrogate parents to me and surrogate grandparents to my children. I love you both.”

An HILR colleague:

“I’ve known Abe for a while at HILR. Abe never taught a class but he teaches good things as a student: compassion, love and kindness.”

A neighbor and HILR colleague:

“2000 was a miserable bombshell of a year for my husband and me ,and Abe came by and gave us good support.”

My daughter Amy:

“I’ve talked to many different people from many places and backgrounds, and I’m surprised at what others have been through. I realize that I am fortunate to have always had unconditional love. He’s my father, my best friend, he took me to riding lessons, went to horse shows with me, introduced me to the music I love, bought me guitars, schlepped me to guitar lessons, riding lessons, and Hebrew school. I realize more and more just how lucky I am. I love you.”

So I happily concluded the celebration on Saturday and resumed my normal routine, including my classes at HILR. In my memoirs class on the following Wednesday, which was my actual 90th birthday, matters proceeded normally until near the end of the session, when there appeared from nowhere, 2 bottles of champagne and a wonderful birthday cake from Formaggio, with my name on it. Also, I was presented with a note which read:

“Dear Abe, your memoir confrères wish the best of health, joy and peace to you on this special day. You are unique in our study group, and in our hearts. With great affection,”

signed by all members of the group. In addition, many members of the group sent me praiseful birthday wishes via e-mail.

After all of this, I was walking on air. I didn’t really want to make a big deal of the birthday, but I must say that it was a rewarding experience. All the testimonials and praise created a contest with my ego because I think I know myself better than others do.