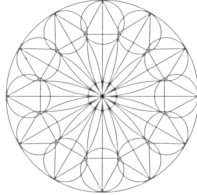


THE WINDOW

(Philadelphia, Pennsylvania - 1943 to 1953)



"Reach high, for stars lie hidden in you.

Dream deep, for every dream precedes the goal." ...Rabindranath Tagore

It felt good feeling sad, as I pressed my head against the windowpane and watched the rain pouring down from the grey July sky; there was an exquisite timelessness in the experience. My tears came naturally, and their warm flow nurtured an intense harmony between a young girl of seven and the natural world. I was the wind, the rain, the storm, and the sky—and it was in that cosmic moment that my melancholy lifted and went away.

I found out at an early age that the most accessible support system known to man is Nature. Indeed, I had discovered quite naturally that flowers, trees, the warm breeze, and the Sun and Moon were what connect us to Spirit. Looking out the window was an important pastime for me, as I watched whatever life passed before me in the little alleyway of the apartment building below. The window opened to a view of old piles of wood with nails sticking out of them, a white fence that was barely able to keep its form, the backyards of neighbors across the way, and a wonderful old maple tree that had somehow survived years of neglect. I was never alone at the window, for I embraced the magic of the experience and kept it in a special place in my heart, where I could always revisit its profound peacefulness.

That day, the leaves were wildly moving about, as the wind touched their surfaces. How many times had I stood there before, in the dimly lit room where the curtains on the window were somewhat worn in places, waiting to be embraced by a force greater than myself? It didn't matter; letting go and just being still was all the soothing that I ever needed. I looked toward my sister's bed; she was sleeping like a four-year-old golden-haired angel. I always felt closer to her when I was in one of my reflective moments; we had a very deep bond, which remained even after her passing. I

saw the raindrops becoming smaller and smaller, and at last the birds were chirping their delight as they knew the earthworms were soon to follow!

My family's apartment was in South Philadelphia, in an area that was old and poor, yet, according to a child's worldview, a fun place to grow up. I lived there with my sister Harriet, who was three years younger, my mother Eleanor, and my father Joseph. Our apartment was on the second floor of a three-story building. I remember hearing my grandmother once say, "This is not a proper place for children to be raised," and, although it honestly didn't seem that way to me at the time, eventually I would come to see that my grandmother was right. Years later I realized how vulnerable and non-traditional our living arrangements actually were; one could say that our apartment was a real-time example of our family's dynamics as they unfolded through the years. Two flights of dark, long, steep, and smoke-filled stairs led up to two separate apartments; ours was on the second floor; another set of stairs led to the third-floor apartment.

A door at the head of the first set of steps opened into the parlor, kitchen, and bathroom area, and to the right were two doors that opened into the bedrooms. Our apartment was actually divided into two different living spaces, along with three separate sets of locks. Thank goodness for the teacups in our bedroom, which served as a secondary bathroom at night when the door was locked! The access to the floor above us complicated the issue even more, as the occupants had to pass by our doors to get to the stairs that led to the third floor. When the doors were open they could see into our world. They were the most mixed-up living arrangements that you could imagine, but that was how it was.

There is more to tell, as if the strangeness of our living quarters wasn't enough; we lived above a small, old, and musty smelling orthodox synagogue, an experience that changed the entire religious dynamic of my life. On Friday evenings at sundown, the sisters were faithfully told by their parents, "It's Friday evening, girls. Try to be quiet;" or "Sha, the Zeda's are dovening." And so my sister Harriet and I would tiptoe about, and place our ears to the old linoleum floor so we could listen to the praying that went on. We frequently looked at each other in utter confusion, not only because we didn't understand the Hebrew that was being chanted, but also because we wondered whether we should. I can still recall the humming sound from the praying, as it rumbled through my bones.

How did this compare to the sound of the wind or the warmth of the Sun, which filled my heart with joy? In my world, the thread of vulnerability and non-conformity especially rang true regarding my being Jewish. I had a religious identity issue, which was totally understandable given my early connection with the wholeness of Nature. I remember asking my father Joseph, "Were we really Jewish, Dad?" Funny, I don't remember getting any clear or specific answers to my questions. I was never quite sure why I asked the question about belonging anyhow; I was completely satisfied being with my family. I do recall asking my mother what she believed, and she said, "The Ten Commandments take care of everything, honey, and if you follow them, you can't go wrong." Her words rang true, and I appreciated her guidance; she had a gift for presenting reality, which was so helpful to me. I did know in my heart that all my ancestral threads were Jewish, and belonging or not belonging to a synagogue as others in the extended family did, didn't change that fact that I was Jewish. In fact, my mother's

great-grandfather was a rabbi. Listening to the praying, yet not being a part of the synagogue's membership made me acutely aware of our non-establishment status.

My family's cultural rather than formal religious practice was a comfortable fit; it gave us identity and self-determination, in an unstructured way. Our Jewishness was marked by an independence of thought along with a discerning respectfulness for the religious practices of others. Though my family ate and loved the traditional fare that most Eastern Europeans thrived on, we would often be treated with worldly delicacies that my father brought home from the Reading Terminal in downtown Philly when he had extra money to spend—or oftentimes when he didn't. I was exposed early on to the gourmet delights of other countries, particularly the breads, cheeses, jams, and salamis from many European countries. The appreciation of food can help us to understand the subtleties within different cultures: among the varieties of blue cheese, Roquefort, Stilton, and Gorgonzola have distinctions in their bite and smoothness, as surely as the French, British, and Italian nations do.

I discovered that I could really be complete by not being the same as everyone else. I knew that when I was with my family, I was whole; being formally religious wasn't an essential way of being for me. Religion's organized fold never captured my imagination or my heart; why would I want to limit myself to read from a prescribed book of prayer when I could be free to commune and create my own narratives? My parents themselves modeled moral and ethical behaviors, which was a source of great pride. Isn't that what the function of religion is all about? I was encouraged to respect and be open to all kinds of people that came into my life.

It was in the summertime that Mike, a wheelchair-bound young man with cerebral palsy, would come and visit the neighborhood children. He was a storyteller and had a heart-warming smile that went from ear to ear. It was his vulnerability that drew me to him, perhaps because I felt a certain kinship with him. This early memory of Mike nurtured my young feelings of compassion and respect—seeing him so helpless, and yet so able to make a difference in my life, left a lasting impression upon my psyche. He rose above his challenges, and to a young girl of seven was a great hero. I sat on the stoop of the clean and brushed white marble steps, listening to his tales; they took me far away from my surroundings, and all else ceased to be. It was during those moments that I found myself in the timelessness of a kairos experience, and I knew the bliss of being in the moment. I loved my mother for appreciating my fondness of him; she was able to understand his gifts as I did. I learned that there are some moments in our lives that become the seed thoughts that always stay with us. It was such a thought from those times that developed and stayed with me all the days of my life: *Love and kindness don't require a container to be made of silver or gold; the human heart doesn't have to see, it only has to listen and feel.*

Many times Harriet and I would sit on my little bed while we talked and shared our thoughts and feelings as loving sisters. It was within this rarified atmosphere that we co-created the bedrock of trust that lasted throughout our relationship of fifty-nine years. We two young girls—innocent, yes, but profoundly wise for our years—would chat for hours about life and our perceptions of it. The words, “I come from another place,” were stated to my sister one morning.

“From where, My?” she asked.

I said to her what I knew to be my deepest inner truth: “I come from Jupiter.”

The precious, highly intelligent little four-year-old child looked at me with an expression of complete trust radiating from her luminous green eyes and said, “I believe you.”

If my sister believed me, then it was true! This was a pivotal moment in my life, all realities emanated from my core belief, and yes, I believed that I was from another planet. I felt lighter after sharing my truth; it was a cathartic experience, as if I had come out of the closet. We never discussed this again during our childhood years; it wasn’t until almost fifty years later that the subject, never forgotten, would come up again.

My sister’s early maternal bonding experience was different from mine. I believe that there is truth to the saying that even though siblings may have the same parents, in reality every child’s relationship with them is unique. In my case, being the first child had advantages; my mother was very healthy after I was born. She blossomed in motherhood, even though the times (1943) were very difficult. I heard many stories of what it was like being a war baby. I had a wooden carriage and my own set of food stamps; yet being the first grandchild on my mother’s side of the family seemed to balance out the complexity of the times.

My sister’s early experience was dramatically different. The actual birth experience was joyful, as my mother would speak about her *slippery* little girl, who was born in record time, likely making for an easier delivery. However, my mother became severely depressed shortly after my sister’s birth, and probably had what we know now as a severe post-partum depression. My father had to take over the responsibilities of caring

for my sister, and I recall many days when my mother had great difficulty getting out of bed to go out for walks with my father, as he wheeled the baby carriage. It took almost a year for my mother to fully emerge from her depression; such was its power to quiet her. The dynamic of our family was further changed by depression's grip; while it altered the bonding of mother with infant, it enhanced the bonding of father with daughter.

We lived at 432 Dickinson Street, which was 2,643 square feet in size and built in 1915. Some of the other houses on the block were built in 1879; I guess that made our building a newer one. This was not the historical part of the city, even though the red brick fronts and marble steps at the entrance to our building were similar to other nicer parts of the downtown Philadelphia area. Across the street were the dormitories for the residents who were training at Mt. Sinai Hospital, Daroff Division, whose entrance was around the corner on Fifth Street. Currently, the area is known as Queen Village/Pennsport.

On the path to our apartment was a single house, the only one of its kind on the block. The little house had a once-white picket fence, with flowering vines that clung to it and added to its unique character. The green of the vines and the small white blossoms were a stark contrast to the red brick of the houses; I enjoyed seeing them whenever I was on my way home, as they broke up the drabness of the view. The flowers beckoned to me; it was a relationship that enhanced my life in ways that the material world never could. Early on in my life, I learned to value Nature; a leaf, a flower, or a tree helped me to be plugged into a high-speed connection to something far greater than myself.

I am never alone, I thought to myself—how comforting to learn this at such a young age.

My dad was my hero, a man of intense intellectual capacity that was juxtaposed with the experiences of a traumatic early childhood. I always knew when my father was home, as smoke would waft down the steps and out the front door into the street; we were inundated with a nicotine haze from an early age. Smoking, drinking coffee, and reading books were my father's signature behaviors. At one point he was up to four packs of cigarettes a day. The amount of his smoking reflected the current level of stress that he was experiencing. Smoking was the only stress management tool available to him; unfortunately it was an addictive strategy that lasted till the day he passed. I would plead with him to stop smoking but learned very quickly how hopeless my actions were.

My sister and I became each other's support whenever the stress levels in our family became too high. In later years, we spoke openly about the fact that we don't know how we could have made it without the other. Along with the cigarette smoke, we were exposed to the residue of our father's lack of fulfillment; the experience was eruptive and scary at times.

Our shock absorber was the world of imagination and play. Together we would be born and re-born, travel to different countries, and engage in the street games that kids who grew up in the city reveled in. The games were numerous and part of the Philly street scene; there was jump rope, hopscotch, jacks, pick-up-sticks, and all kinds of ball games—I loved “mimsies/clapsies/roll your hands/do backsies, king a high/king a low/touch your feet/touch your toes, and higher we go.” There was a lot of joy attached to

growing up in Philadelphia; the streets were our playground, and I remember many more days of laughter than I do anything else. In the summer, neighbors would bring out their garden hoses to *cool* the children down. The water would sting when the nozzle was adjusted to its thinnest spray adjustment, but that was all part of the experience.

My sister was very creative and intelligent; at seven-years-old, she got into a painting project, choosing Dad's books as the recipients of her labors. The eruption from my father was severe when he saw his beloved books wet and dripping from her efforts. He struck my sister with the power of someone greatly wronged. I remember my mother, my sister, and I huddling in our bedroom after he had stopped ranting; we were still shaking and cringing with fear. During this time of intense female solidarity, I held my mother and my sister in a non-childlike embrace. Strength surged through me, and I have often wondered where it came from. I said to my mother, "Leave him, we will be fine on our own."

My mother looked at me with an expression of great surprise in her beautiful brown eyes—she recognized that although I was only ten years old, I was dead serious. Her facial expressions quickly shifted from surprise to surrender, and I knew that nothing was going to change other than my hope for a more peaceful life. Our family remained intact, which set the structure for fear and uncertainty to develop their taproots in its members.

I learned from that day forward that not all women are aware of their strength, or of the power they possess. Love blossoms in soil enriched with self-esteem, but even love that has great potential can diminish when a woman's native gifts are not encouraged.

Strangely, when I myself was a young mother I recall my father saying, “It is the woman’s self-esteem that drives the family.” In later years, I realized that sometimes the longest distance in the world is between the head and the heart.

My mother was beautiful; she was often compared to the actress Gene Tierney, who was born four years later in 1921. In her family of one older brother and two younger sisters, she was called the *Princess* and was known for her singing and dancing abilities. How fortunate we were to have had her for a mother. Many afternoons were spent in musical bliss, two happy little girls and their mother, smiling and swaying to the current rhythms of the day; we would take turns stepping on Mom’s feet as she guided us around the parlor. One of our favorite numbers was the “Tennessee Waltz,” sung by Patti Page. We also loved to sing “Mona Lisa,” by Nat King Cole, whose warm, melodious voice filled the room like a soft, puffy cloud that wanted to spread itself into every corner. I remember playing the classics over and over again, stepping up to the record player with my stool. My parents had a wonderful collection of 78-rpm records, and my favorites were mostly those by Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff. The beauty of those days was my discovery that music, when received with an open heart, can heal wounds that aren’t even known to exist. It is sound that can connect us to Spirit and support the work of the soul.

The beauty of growing up in our neighborhood was that our grandparents, aunts, and great-grandmother lived only a five-minute walk away. My grandmother Sarah was the oldest of ten children, a leader in the family, strong and respected. Her hair was dark auburn, and her eyes were big and brown. I could easily see how my grandfather Morris fell in love with her. He was a quiet and gentle man, always generous to his

grandchildren. It was Sarah, with her unique tailoring skills, who helped bring her entire family over to the United States from Bryansk in the Russian Pale. Her backyard was decorated with pickle barrels filled with cucumbers and tomatoes that were like green jewels floating in a sea of brine, waiting to be picked at just the right moment. There wasn't anything that she couldn't sew, cook, or bake well. Whatever my grandmother made, whether it was knishes, strudel, stuffed veal breast, brisket, or latkes, it was superb. My mother loved her dearly, and the respect that they had for each other found its way to the younger generation like a road that had no obstacles in its way. I learned that women were valued in our family; they were regarded as one of its greatest strengths. My mother was respected and loved, and that fact alone was a great source of significant satisfaction.

My grandmother Sarah passed when I was eight years old; she was a young woman of sixty-four years old. The news of her passing was my first recollection of grief's impact, as I saw my mother fall to the floor in disbelief. My mother was inconsolable, and her loss rippled through our family as a quiet wind penetrates the stillness of a forest, touching every leaf in its path. It took a long time for her to fully re-enter our lives; her vibrancy returned about six months later when she smiled at us with her large brown eyes and wanted to take her girls to a fun Saturday movie experience. I was so happy we had our mother back, and recognized how profound the loss of my grandmother was.

My father's parents also lived relatively nearby, but my early memories of them aren't as clear; I was ten years old when my relationship with my grandmother Edna blossomed. I remember her beautiful, warm smile, but her sky-blue eyes were her outstanding feature; her gaze was wise. The chicken soup she made for me when I visited

on Friday evenings was delicious; I would sit in my grandparents' kitchen and feel like royalty. I loved my grandfather Louis; he was always well dressed and treated me with delicatessen goodies. We would walk to the store together and I felt pride.

Mom, Harriet, and I were collectively known as the *Wexler girls*. We would go on our weekly shopping trip to the Italian Market, where we would fill up on food supplies. We lived very close by, within easy walking distance: Fifth and Dickinson Streets was our main intersection, and the market was on Ninth Street and Washington Ave. As we approached the Italian Market, the sounds and smells shifted from the residential quietude of the little row houses to the bustling, vibrant commercial ambiance of the marketplace. The first smell to hit my nostrils was always the live poultry that were kept in wooden cages, waiting for the next customer's dinner table. Poultry has a distinct odor, and there was plenty of it for sale along the street.

The sounds that could be heard were from the vendors calling out their prices for the customers. The streets were bustling with life! At Ninth and Washington Streets was P & F Giordano's, where we always stopped for produce. There were Fantes' kitchen supplies, Esposito's meats, Di Bruno's cheeses, Ralph's and Palumbo's restaurants. All were part of the magic of the Italian Market, with its little stalls lined up along the street, each one filled with fruits and vegetables, and each vendor offering the best deal. Summer in Philadelphia was a gustatory delight—peaches, apricots, nectarines, red plums, green plums, and grapes, all splendidly juicy and perfect. The summer beckoned us to buy the sweet watermelon that was cracked and ready to be eaten. The green beans made a perfect snap, and the cabbages had a perfectly sized head protected with dark

green leaves, just right for the prakes (stuffed cabbage leaves) that Mom would be making for dinner.

Mom's little cart was soon filled with the fruits and vegetables of the summer season. It was, as I remember, a long walk home, one that seemed much longer than the trip we had embarked on earlier. The three of us pulled the cart, and before long we were approaching Eight Street, then Seventh, Sixth, and finally Fifth. We were home! The scent of smoke was the cue that Dad was home; he schlepped the cart up the long flight of stairs, which was a relief for Mom. We had some lemonade, and soon went outside to play in the summer's heat and sticky streets.

As a family of four, we typically didn't go places together; it was Mom, Harriet, and I who went first, with my Dad coming later. I grew up becoming comfortable with my father's choice not to leave together, and my mother's acceptance of his behavior; it was, after all, simply the way our family did things. With no car, we used public transportation, which for me was an adventure. The *Wexler girls* were very self-sufficient; we found our way very well, knowing that Dad would eventually meet up with us wherever we were. Dad required an inordinate amount of freedom, and Mom seemed to have resigned herself to his procrastination.

My early taproots were nurtured by a sense that women can make things happen on behalf of themselves, and that fathers, though loving, don't always accommodate themselves to the needs of their family. I always remember my father arriving several hours later, with a smile on his face, and my sister and I running out to meet him with

open arms. He was a five-foot, five-inch man who was larger than life, and his daughters knew the special power that he wielded over them.

Thus, it was both joy and apprehension that marked the emotional overtones of my early childhood. Some days, it was more difficult to navigate between these two emotions than others, as we never knew when my father's mood would change. We were uneasy most days, never knowing if we would be greeted by a scowl or given gifts that were unaffordable. It was difficult to understand the actual cause of my father's erratic behaviors; suffice it to say it was a lot easier when we went our own way without him. I was very fearful of dogs and heights, which were the mediators of my internal angst. I kept hoping someone would be smart enough to figure out what the cause of my fears was, but this never happened. Looking back, it was an unrealistic expectation. I believe my fears served as a way to shift the discomfort that I often felt onto something else—fear has a way of commandeering creativity, allowing it to take on a life of its own.

Embedded in my experiences of early youth was a fearful recollection that gripped our family for many months. I overheard my mother talking to my grandmother about my father.

She said, "He can be deported, Mom. What will become of us?" The conversation was very intense, with undertones of my grandmother's initial concern for my mother's marriage in the first place.

"What does deported mean, Mommy?" I asked.

"It means your father may have to leave the United States and go back to Russia, but we will fight this."

I was stunned and upset. “Live without my father at all,” I said, in a trembling voice.

I do recall going with my mother to an attorney’s office in downtown Philadelphia.

“My, wait for me on this bench. I’ll be out to get you as soon as I am done,” Mom told me in a firm voice. I looked at the dark, carved wooden office furniture, and was able to sense the severity of the situation that my family was now in; I was trembling with fear of the unknown, and asking myself: *How did this happen? What if my father had to leave the country?*

Mom came out of the office with their attorney, Arnold J. Silver, Esq., who seemed supportive of my family’s plight. Family members helped contribute to the attorney’s fee; such was the drama and intensity of this gripping time in our family’s history.

When we arrived home, my mother went door-to-door around the neighborhood with a self-drafted petition in hand to obtain signatures attesting to my father’s fine character. The plan was for her to get as many names as possible, and she did. My father wasn’t able to serve in the military because of his unilateral deafness, but he did serve as an air raid warden, which attested to his loyalty to our country. He was seemingly caught as part of the *catch of the day* in a net strewn for nationalized citizens who were supposedly involved in un-American activities. Senator Joseph McCarthy’s fear-mongering web had touched our lives and destabilized our family. It was, of course, proven that my father was never a member of the Communist party, and the outcome was

excellent—no deportation. I sensed, however, that my father changed after the incident; he aged quickly and seemed dispirited, like a prizefighter who lasted twelve rounds yet wasn't judged to be the winner.

Shortly after our family's deportation ordeal, my father took me on a day trip to the Wissahickon Creek area of Philadelphia's Fairmount Park. I remember it as a spectacular day; the sun was bright, and the best part was that I had my father to myself for the entire day. My mother had outfitted me with a khaki-green bag pack and an aluminum canteen, so I was prepared. We hiked the trails, stopped by a stream to see spiders twirling on the top of the water, and then ate our lunches together from our brown bags. Up and down the trails we went, watching the sun streaming through the tree canopies; we were like two adventurers who were gathering information to share with their cohorts back at the base camp. The experience we had together at Wissahickon Creek enhanced our bond as father and daughter; I still draw from the beauty and simplicity of that day.

When I was around ten years old, my family moved to another area of the city known as West Philadelphia. Though my family rented the small porch-style home, which was 977 square feet in size, it was like a palace to me. The house had a porch where we could sit outside in all kinds of weather, and a little fenced-in garden out back decorated with blue and light purple morning glories. I remember running up the steps to see my room; the window had a view, and I knew I could easily make the transition.

Reflection on The Window

Our strange living quarters and non-traditional religious expression forged my character. I saw the world through the lens of an outsider, which remarkably expanded my view. Truly, there were no boundaries, and it would have been easy for me to drift away, yet that didn't happen. As I stood there, fully awake yet dreaming, unbeknownst to me the structure for my future had been formed; I have been traveling on its grid my entire life. To unite what is on the outside with our hearts is to begin to fully awaken.

I was born on April 25, 1943 late in the evening, in the quietness of the day's end. When I arrived, there were only forty-four minutes left until midnight. My blueprint for potential at the time of my birth was the Sun in Taurus at 5 degrees bridging two houses, the fourth of roots, and the fifth of self-expression. The Sun is masculine, and thus its energy thrusts outward. Taurean energy is determined, stable, patient, and earthy. The Moon was in Capricorn at 19 degrees in the first house of the Self. It is the coldest Moon, loving in a very organized and productive way, thriving in a structured environment. It is feminine and therefore receptive; the Capricorn Moon waits for love to come its way, and then offers loyalty as its reward.

Sagittarius was at the Eastern horizon, making Jupiter the ruler of my chart—the place where I believed I came from! At my birth on that Sunday evening in Philadelphia in 1943, my Taurus Sun/Capricorn Moon/Sagittarian Ascendant guides grandly started to accompany me. Standing at the window was a perfect metaphor for how I have lived my life. I was a peaceful embracer of the natural world, one who critically strategized in a trustful and optimistic way. I knew that I would be able to figure things out, and I always did.

I trust that the mystery of my life's origin will reveal itself in the future; I choose to be open to the ebb and flow of my life as it evolves. Patience is a staunch ally of mine.