

Albert Cohen Remembrance

October 2, 2021, SHP

Albert was the dad I could talk to. He came from the same kind of East Coast WASP family as my father, just substitute Philadelphia for Boston. He joked about how growing up in his house you knew something was important because nobody talked ever about it. Oh yeah, I recognized that. I loved my dad, but we never really *talked*. He didn't know how to open up to a son.

But Al did. He'd talk about most anything. And laugh about it, get sad or angry about it.

I remember his big craggy grin as we came in, his big embrace at the door and how he'd share a funny story about the absurdity of life or something that was weighing on his soul, an outrage to justice, an act of meanness. He always wanted to know immediately and in detail, what was going on with me and the kids and Linda. He and Faith at 696 South Madison, were a treasured part of our West Coast lives.

After my father died, I began to consider ministry, and in my discernment process, I met with Al. A lunch out on the patio at the Athenaeum – of course. He heard me out carefully. I can't remember what he said, I don't expect there was any extraordinary piece of wisdom or insight – that wasn't Al's way – but he quietly encouraged me. Honestly I don't know what I would've done if he hadn't. His support then and later when I went into jail ministry, was the affirmation that I needed. It grounded me. If this man who for me personified the way of Jesus, said "good on," then it was good.

Albert was a father figure to many others too. He was in the old-fashioned and best sense a gentle – man. A gentleman. But I want to share one other thing about Al, that turns the gender thing around.

In this last year I read book that made a big impression on me, a memoir by the forestry scientist Suzanne Simard, called Searching for the Mother Tree. She describes her research into how trees communicate with each other through fungal

networks. How they exchange information and resources, even between different species. She discovered that in healthy forests there is usually at the center of the community a mother tree. Who nurtured the young, and helped the struggling through difficult times. Often this tree was old. It might now be in decline. But even at the end of the tree's life, especially at the end, this great being would give away all she had for the life around her. So the forest might flourish long after she was gone.

And that of course was Al. Nurturing us, every day. Without fanfare, without ego. Just by seeing us and hugging us and hearing us out. By giving himself with grace and tenderness, so we would know to do the same.

As we go on in this manic world, so full meanness, please remember Albert. Remember, how much he gave to the music, light and joy of this planet. And remember that this gift of his is now ours to pass on others.