

Eulogy for Everett Gendler – 4/4/2022 – Emily Loeb

Everett Gendler

August 8, 1928-April 1, 2022

My name is Emily Loeb, and I am one of Everett Gendler's nieces. Some of you may also know that I've run the Gendler Grapevine Project since 2012. I was lucky enough to have a close relationship with Uncle Everett throughout my entire life, and taking on this professional role allowed me to grow even closer to him. In the first six years of the project, we honored him by supporting projects across the country that perpetuated Uncle Everett's vision of recognizing and celebrating the deep connections between Jewish tradition, social justice, and the environment and then translating those ideas into action. One of the other things we did was develop a website to serve as a repository for his articles, and one of my projects was to scour the internet looking for articles by and about him. This research segued into writing a book about him.

Writing a book about someone is an intimate process, and I didn't realize how this project would change our relationship. In many ways, we worked on it as a team. I'd call him and discuss a time period of his life, then do a bunch of research, write the chapter, and then send it to him for review. We had fun, and he enjoyed this intense reminiscing about his life and reflecting about it from a bird's eye view, thinking about how it took shape over the decades. He encouraged me to follow tangents, which resulted in unexpected and incredible results, such as interviews with Ambassador Andrew J Young and articles on topics such as the rainbow tallit.

I'd call Uncle Everett and ask him about a time period of his life, and because he was slow and deliberate with his words, I was able to write the words down verbatim. And as many of you know, he was so eloquent, that off the cuff, he'd say these beautiful, poetic statements that sounded scripted even though they weren't. When talking about the rainbow tallit, he said, "Zalman refracted the divine light into colors of the rainbow." He referred to his time in college as "eyes-, ears-, and spirit-opening years." And one of my favorites was his practical explanation of how he was inspired to invent the solar ner tamid: "One day I was thinking about the eternal light and thought, 'This is absurd. This thing is illuminated by power generated by diminishing fossil fuel or poisonous nuclear power. 'What's eternal about that?'" Doing the right thing always seemed so simple when it was explained by Uncle Everett. And like the solar ner tamid he invented, Uncle Everett's words and actions are eternal.

One of the greatest joys of working for the Gendler Grapevine Project was getting to serve as, for lack of a better term, Uncle Everett's de facto secretary. As the key contact

for the organization, people from all over the world, who had lost Everett or lost contact with him reached out to me, wanting to know where he was, if I could pass along a message, or if I could coordinate an interview. I think the last interview he conducted was about a month ago with a graduate student who is studying the Birmingham campaign. The messages I've received were touching and shed light on the impact he had on the countless people he met over the years. I thought I'd share a small sampling of some of them with you.

A student wrote:

I took every one of your classes. I asked you to the Student/Faculty dinner, where you came with Mary and where the two of you, off-hand, entirely changed the course of my life. I remember you both saying, "You must go to Dharamsala! It's the best place in the world" and, idolizing you, I did just that, and thus I have had -- an entirely different life. I spent a long time in Dharamasala and... now live in a tiny room in Mexico, reading and writing endlessly.... Rabbi Gendler, I have quoted you and talked about you umpteen times in my life, but the moment I talk about most often is a time you walked into class and announced, 'Did you see the world is beautiful today? If you don't see it is beautiful, you will not be motivated to save it.'"

A congregant said:

"Everett was my mentor. He inspired me to think about how to live outside the system, how to bring forces of change to bear on rigid and repressive organizations."

Another congregant said:

"Likely you won't remember me. (side note – he remembered EVERYONE!) I was one of your young students in Princeton in the mid-1960s. Your work inspired me towards social activism expressed in my professional career in medicine."

A student at Phillips who was not Jewish told me this:

"Patient to a fault, Rabbi Gendler would often pat my arm and answer my questions with questions.... We would discuss the Old Testament and the New Testament, with which he was greatly familiar. When I asked him at one point if he could conceive of Jesus being the Christ, he shrugged and said, 'Could you conceive Him not?' Then we both laughed."

Another student said:

"You were one of my most dear and admired teachers at Andover. I still remember your warmth, passion, kindness and never-ending belief in me. I took ... a course on the Holocaust, where you showed us vintage films, and sat with us, one on one, and held our hands as we cried and tried to sort out the overwhelming emotions that surged

through us as we watched those horrific scenes. It was a life-changing event for me, and really propelled me towards a lifetime journey to try to maintain a decent, compassionate and empathetic life.”

Someone on facebook said:

“I only met him once 28 years ago. He changed my life and I am forever grateful.”

And finally:

“I would not be the rabbi I am today without Everett.”

I know you all believe me when I say this is a very small sampling of the messages I have received and likely will continue to receive.

Uncle Everett was an inspiration. He wrote countless articles, received numerous awards, invented the solar eternal light, revived ancient traditions long forgotten or abandoned, was involved with the Civil Rights Movement, knew and worked with the Dalai Lama, gained admirers everywhere he went (from the pulpit to the ticket window), stood up for nonviolence and social justice, to name just a few things. All of this is remarkable. Yet, I think the stories people tell of the impact he had on their lives – how he changed the direction of peoples’ lives – was one of his greatest accomplishments. I think we can all say that we were touched by Everett. I know I would not be who I am today without him. Like all of you, I will miss him dearly. May his memory forever be a blessing and may we continue his legacy of doing good in this world.