

My Father, My Sisters, Myself

by Donna Marvin-Platt

Since publication of my article, “My Genetic Father, The Invisible Part of Me,” written in collaboration with Mark Strauss for the Winter 2017 issue of AVOTAYNU, my story has experienced some interesting developments. As readers may recall, Strauss, along with his wife Jaye, was responsible for initially discovering my DNA through testing on Ancestry.com. Ultimately, he helped me to find my biological father, Michael Ruttenberg, who had been a sperm donor in New York City while working toward a PhD in biochemistry at Rockefeller University during the early 1960s. Since this life-changing revelation, I have had the pleasure of locating and developing a bond with three half-sisters. In addition, I have learned more about my father, including the fact that he was not cremated as previously thought, but rather buried at the Baker Street Jewish Cemetery in West Roxbury, Massachusetts. I am still in the

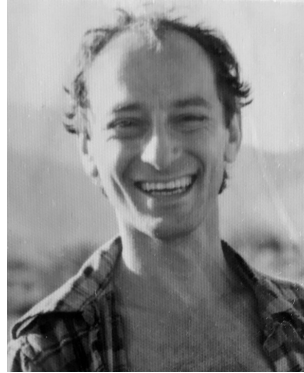
He helped me to find my biological father, Michael Ruttenberg, who had been a sperm donor in New York City

process of sorting through feelings about having had two fathers, one who raised me and one I never knew until now.

One might think that it would be enough to find your father after searching for more than 20 years. It should be enough, by all means, since most are not so fortunate and many, when they do find their biological parent, discover the feelings of elation are not mutual. How profoundly hurtful it must be to learn a biological parent wants nothing to do with you.

Even though my genetic father, unfortunately, no longer is alive, I have reason to believe he would have been thrilled to know me. This is beyond positive. It is strange to think that rejection from a parent might prove to be more hurtful than the death of a parent one never got to meet. After all, what is a parent-child relationship anyway, if it is not mutual or at least presumed it could have been? But then we will never really know, will we? In hindsight, the opportunity to have known something of my biological father from an early age (let’s say 5) and been able to even meet him after turning 18 might have cured me of feeling like a freak in my own family.

Growing up, I felt different from everyone else but never understood why. My brother and I were certainly not like our father who had an angry disposition. We were not like each other either. I was more emotional than he was, for one thing. I also had dark hair and dark eyes and he had light hair and blue eyes (after being brought up Jewish, he was surprised to discover, through a DNA test, that his fa-



Michael Ruttenberg



Donna Marvin-Platt

ther was actually not Jewish. I wasn’t even much like our mother, who was the most genealogically connected to me. I was offbeat and neurotic and she was more of a conformist and not a deep thinker, but perhaps it was more how my parents treated me that contributed to this perception of myself. My mother didn’t seem to understand me and would become exasperated dealing with my obsessions and anxieties. Sometimes it was as if she felt I was an alien from another planet. Most of the time, my dad was critical and reprimanding. We never really felt like a family unit.

Yes, they held the secret that my father was not mine biologically, but, like me, they didn’t know who he was. A part of myself was indeed a stranger to them and something in the way they treated me made me feel that way. Had I been told the truth and learned who I “belonged” to earlier on, I might have developed stronger self-esteem and acceptance. But finally learning about Michael, even after his death, has been healing in itself as it has helped to solidify my sense of identity and appreciation of who I am and who I have been all along. My differences, the reason my parents behaved as they did, who I was, all began to make sense.

Each day, I deal with this discovery on a different level. Sometimes I don’t even give myself permission to think of it, maybe because while growing up, I was taught to ignore any inkling that something was amiss. In her book, *Inheritance*, Dani Shapiro, who also discovered later in life that her mother was artificially inseminated, talks about the “unknown known.” This is something one feels instinctively but does not acknowledge consciously. Even after my mother told my brother and me the truth when I was about 30 years old, I put my feelings aside and never fully allowed myself to undertake a search. I still sometimes forbid myself to think of it, perhaps due to habit, feelings of shame, or even guilt. Is searching for a deeper understanding of, or yearning for, closeness with this unknown father just a way of running from feelings of disappointment with the father who raised me? Perhaps. But I can’t help to think

that part of the reason for this lack of a bond was the fact that, from the beginning, he knew that he was not my biological father and didn't know how to handle it emotionally.

Seeing me was a constant reminder of his inadequacy. However, in spite of his inability to accept me for who I was, I still feel some guilt over seeking a connection with my genetic father through my new found family and the world to which he belonged. Nevertheless, my exploration into all of who he was has helped me to feel whole. I have found the part of my origin that was missing. Each discovery I make about Michael and my genetic family seems to deepen my understanding of myself. I now know where my creative drive comes from, my eccentricities and perhaps my neurosis, my curious mind and passion for learning, and my ambition to make my mark in this world. It's as if I am putting all the pieces of myself together.

Discovering Close DNA Connection

Almost immediately after identifying my father, I discovered an extremely close DNA connection on MyHeritage with a woman whom I will call Mary. It was hard to believe I might have a half-sister out there but if it were true, I just had to know more about her. Right away I reached out to Mary but she was totally unaware of any artificial insemination and adamantly rejected the notion that Michael could possibly be her biological father. Neither of her parents had told her the truth about her conception and when confronted, vehemently denied having gone through any such procedure. The "shocker," as Mary would later put it, was when we realized we had actually grown up in the same town. She was two years younger and had attended the same middle school, but we never really crossed paths because she had moved to a nearby town before entering high school. We decided that I probably did see her in the school musical, *Bye Bye Birdie*, without knowing it. Still, she was certain that the reason our DNA presented us as sisters was that our parents must have had an affair. Not until she saw my parents' insemination papers and we discovered two more sisters was she convinced that she must have been conceived through artificial insemination. Still her parents would not confess.

Mary explained what prompted her to take the online test in the first place, "One day over lunch, my cousin told me that she had taken a DNA test and discovered she was a tiny percentage ancient Greek. Her results inspired me to get my DNA tested. I wondered what ancient mysteries my ancestry held." She had no clue of the surprise that awaited her—or maybe deep down she did. From our first conversation, I learned that we shared many traits. For one thing, we both had an interest in psychic phenomena, so it was pretty wild when she revealed to me that a psychic once told her she had an older sister who would eventually reach out. And there I was.

While planning a trip to the West Coast to see my brother, I had asked Mary if she might be interested in meeting. She agreed and when we did, I instantly saw the resemblance—same eyes, similar nose and shape of the face. It

was a bit like looking in the mirror. Mary was brought up Jewish and, like Michael, was a warm and compassionate person. Michael had studied and practiced acupuncture and similarly, Mary was working as a massage therapist and healer. She was a free spirit like Michael and reminded me a bit of myself in her love for nature and animals. Mary said that she had also felt a disconnect with her father and extremely unlike her brother. From all that she told me, she certainly seemed to be more spiritually evolved than the rest of her family. About a year later, when she met all of us and told her mother that she knew the truth, her mom finally admitted to having been artificially inseminated, but asked that Mary not mention it to her brother or father. Not an easy secret to keep hidden for so many years.

Another Sister Discovered

Interestingly, all of us discovered each other at about the same time. Perhaps, no more than a month after meeting Mary, when we decided to take another test through 23andMe as confirmation of our results, we discovered our second sister whom I will call Laura. Laura had no idea of the insemination either. She, like us, was in her 50s, but lived in the middle of the country and, similar to Michael, had an interest in science and had even attended medical school. She was now working for a university as an advisor while also assisting with their study abroad program. Laura also had been brought up Jewish and had two sons.

Laura's relationship with her father had been quite different from mine in that they had shared a close bond. This is how she describes her reaction to finding out the truth:

I have one and only one father. The generous man who donated his sperm gave me life, but not a life. That's something my father and mother did. Despite years of protestations to the contrary, they did a pretty good job raising me to be the person I am today. I may have inherited my donor's intellectual skills, but they had to be cultivated and nurtured in order to develop and mature. Also, from what I learned from my mother, my parents genuinely believed that my father's DNA material was still a part of me.

Both Laura's and my parents had been told by their doctors that they mixed the donor sperm with the husband's sperm. Back then, this was common practice as if to offer the parents a bit of hope, but mostly to set the stage for what was to become a lifelong family charade. In *Inheritance*, Dani Shapiro talks about how she also believed her father may have thought she was his biological daughter. During that time, people were not as medically savvy and may not have understood that it was impossible for a person to have two biological fathers.

Laura told us that another reason she thinks her father may have believed her to be his was that she very much resembled her mother. One might wonder whether the relationship with my dad might have been different had he held the same belief, the "illusion" having been compromised by the fact that I looked nothing like him and not much like my mother either. I was definitely cut from another cloth altogether. Laura was fortunate enough to have grown up with

a healthy father/daughter relationship, which may be one reason she doesn't share my passion for the search. But, similar to all of us, she grew up feeling oddly different from the rest of her family, which is why she moved far away from home early in her adulthood. Unfortunately, her dad is now deceased, and her mother has asked that she not mention anything about this to her brother or sister.

Yet Another Sister Found

I can't remember which sister we found first because it was practically the same day when we discovered Laura, that a third half-sister found us on MyHeritage and reached out. Coincidentally, she happened to have the same name as Mary, so I will just call her Mary G. Mary G is the eldest (by maybe six months) and lives only about 15 minutes away from me! She has a son and daughter and her son is close in age to my son. Instantly, I became an aunt to four more nieces and nephews! I invited Mary G. and her daughter over for tea. Mary G. has her own travel agency and our father, Michael, had actually spent most of his life traveling. That was one of his passions. She traveled primarily to Japan, which was also interesting because our son has been obsessed with Japan for years. Both her daughter and my son were able to talk to each other in Japanese.

Mary G's brother had just found his biological father online. He was fortunate enough to be able to connect with him by email and over the telephone. Like Michael, he also was a doctor since, back in the 1950s and 1960s, most donors were medical students, residents, or science PhDs paying their way through school. His biological father told him that he had donated at the Mount Sinai Fertility Clinic in New York and that the donations would often be taxed to nearby medical facilities for insemination. He also mentioned that the clinic was founded by Gisella Perl, a world-renowned Holocaust survivor/gynecologist, who had been both an inmate and physician at Auschwitz. She had saved the lives of hundreds of women by terminating their pregnancies secretly because pregnant women often were killed or experimented upon. Later in life, Gisella devoted herself to helping women become pregnant.

Mary G.'s brother had begun his search after discovering he was not genetically related to the father who raised them. His children had taken online DNA tests. Since none of the matches made any sense, he decided to take his own test, which eventually revealed the identity of his biological father. Although Mary G.'s brother and sister recommended that she never mention anything to their parents, Mary G. did confront her mother during the Passover holiday, while her father was out shopping. Her mother admitted to the artificial insemination but requested that she and her siblings not tell their father that they knew. (Her parents had never told anyone, not even their own siblings.) Mary G.'s mother said, "Your father would be humiliated if anyone knew that he could not have children and that his three children and six grandchildren are not really his."

Could it be that withholding the truth for so long had

helped to create a distance between all of them? Mary G. mentioned that she never felt close to her dad growing up. She says, "He was never a 'warm and fuzzy' kind of guy. There was always some anger or resentment. However," she continued, "I forgive him for that, because despite lacking compassion as a father, he has been a wonderful, loving grandfather."

Meeting Each Other

Now that we all knew of each other, we felt we just had to get together and meet in person. We made a plan to rent a condo in San Diego for the weekend during the summer near where Michael's good friends, Sandy and Fred, lived so that I could introduce all of them. Fred was a physician who had worked with Michael; his wife Sandy, an art therapist at the time, had inspired Michael to take up a painting career later in life. Sandy and Fred invited us to their place on the beach for wine and appetizers, where my sisters met even more of Michael's friends, namely Alan, a psychiatrist, who had been Michael's roommate in medical school at the University of California San Diego. Michael had been a bit older than the other students at the time and because he had already received his PhD in biochemistry, was able to tutor Alan and others on the subject. Later in life, after practicing medicine, Michael decided to get a masters degree in painting. In fact, Sandy and Fred generously gave us some artwork of Michael's that they had kept safe since his death in 2000.

Over brunch in La Jolla, we all had an amazing time learning about each others' experiences growing up and discovering how we were similar and how different. We compared everything from body parts to ailments to personality quirks. I realized that we are all similar in that we are warm, compassionate, ambitious, smart people. We all have a sense of humor and a spirit for adventure and, like Michael, are all short in stature – only around five feet tall. Actually, Mary G. and I are more like 4'9." We learned that our grandmother, Jennie Shactman, also was very short.

A second meetup in June the following year also was quite wonderful. Mary was planning a trip to New York in December, near where Mary G and I live, so we all decided to get together again. This time we went to dinner in the city, listened to live music, and visited the New York Botanical Gardens for a day. We also went to hear Dani Shapiro talk about her book, *Inheritance*, at Sarah Lawrence College. She spoke about how discovering her biological father so late in life had turned her world upside down. Shapiro's description of her experience felt familiar to all of us in that growing up, she always sensed something was a bit off, but could not put her finger on what it was. The air had been thick with unspoken truths. When she asked the audience for questions, we stood and introduced ourselves as newfound sisters. The audience applauded.

Trying a Psychic

One of the highlights of the weekend for me though, was trying out a crazy idea I had. Since my sister Mary and I share

an interest in psychic phenomena I thought it might be interesting and fun to see if we could make spiritual contact with Michael and get his take on all of this. We decided to meet with a psychic medium and do a group reading for the four of us at my place. As it turned out, the medium was surprisingly accurate about so many things. She knew that Michael was a doctor and a published research scientist and that he had traveled to third-world countries to help people in need of medical care. Also consistent with what we had heard, she said he often wondered about his biological offspring to the point where he would look around wondering whether this or that person might be his son or daughter, and did they know. The medium spoke of how he struggled emotionally and had become very good at self-medicating. She assured us that, although his death could have been viewed as a suicide, it was not. He had died in his sleep. We had initially arranged the reading on a whim as entertainment, but because we felt a strong connection, it was all the more worthwhile.

For some reason, after Michael died, his friends in California had thought that he was cremated, but while researching on Newspapers.com I discovered a notice revealing that a burial and graveside service had taken place at the Baker Street Jewish Cemetery in West Roxbury, Massachusetts. I had been in contact with Michael's friends and some of his relatives on his father's side (the Ruttenbergs) but no one I spoke with had been informed of anything. We guessed that his relatives on his mother's side (the Shactmans) had arranged for his body to be shipped from California to Boston in order to be buried at the cemetery in the Shactman family plot. It is curious to me why the Shactmans never told any of his friends or the Ruttenbergs about the burial. On our way to drop our son at Tufts for his first year in college, my husband, daughter and I decided to visit the cemetery. After a bit of a search, we found Michael's grave in the Shactman plot. The graves of our grandmother, Jennie and grandfather Meyer were next to his. I took photographs and sent them to my sisters. As I placed a stone atop the headstone, I closed my eyes and prayed, thanking G-d for helping me find my father, and thanking my father for allowing me to find him.

Contact with Relative of Birth Father

Only a couple of months after discovering this burial plot, a third cousin on the Shactman side, Michael Richman, happened to read my first AVOTAYNU article, saw Michael's name and realized his relationship to me. He is the great-grandson of Michael's grandmother's sister, in other words, his second cousin once removed on his mother's side. This was amazing because it was so random, and I had yet to connect with anyone from the Shactman side of the family since I discovered my father, Michael, about two years earlier. Michael's (my father's) mother, Jennie Shactman, had three brothers: Arthur, Jacob, and Samuel. I had tried to get in contact with a few of their descendants but to no avail. I was fortunate enough to have the oppor-

tunity to meet Mark Strauss' wife, Jaye (my new found second cousin), and speak with her uncle Dan Klubock (my father, Michael's, first cousin) both from the Ruttenberg side. They were so warm in welcoming me to the family and were more than willing to meet with me and share photographs. From them, I learned that Michael's father, Myer, had three siblings, as well: Molly, Minnie and Joseph Ruttenberg, the famous, Russian-born Academy Award winning cinematographer.

When Michael Richman first contacted me, he explained that he had been very interested in family history and had done quite a bit of research himself. As part of his quest for more information he visited family in California, including a meeting with Michael a few years before he died. Richman said that Michael was warm and hospitable, and that he even gave him a few very old family photographs. Richman kindly forwarded me images of these photographs of my grandparents and great-grandparents on the Shactman side, which I excitedly shared with my sisters.

Pondering About Birth Father

I sometimes wonder if, at some point in life, I may have walked right past my father without knowing it. Were we in New York at the same time? Did we pass each other at the museum? Were we standing in front of the same painting contemplating what it meant, feeling inspired to create something similar? Did we make eye contact? Did he do a doubletake wondering whether I might be his daughter? My sister, Mary, lives only about ten minutes away from the house where he lived in California. They are so similar that they must have frequented some of the same places. To think that he was right there, maybe even touching us at one point, and we did not even know he was our father.

I often wonder about Michael. I miss not knowing him and wish things had been different and we could have met. Would he have mentored us? Would he have inspired us to take risks? Would he have listened and understood us? Sometimes, I wonder what it would have been like had my mother and Michael lived long enough to meet. She had a sense of humor so she probably would have had a good laugh. I have a series of Michael's paintings on my wall that consist of four self-portraits ranging in style from total abstraction to realism and I placed them in that order. Some people say they are meant to be displayed the opposite way. This order makes sense to me because I feel as if I am piecing my father together one brush stroke at a time as I piece together myself.



Self portraits by Michael Ruttenberg

Mary sums up her experience as follows:

I can't speak for us all, but to me it was like G-d thought of dropping an amusing gift into my life. Suddenly I went from having one brother and no children or nieces and nephews, to having three additional sisters, two nieces and four nephews! I feel truly blessed! I thank G-d for this gift of extended familial love.

Laura says:

Am I glad I know? I am. I'm just the kind of person that wants and needs to know "all the things." I'm grateful that I didn't find out until my father had already been gone for several years. It would have broken his heart if he knew that I knew my origins. It shouldn't have. He was and will be my one and only father. For that, I thank my donor.

Mary G says:

My sister and I were completely different. She was the bad girl—smoked, had a boyfriend at age 14, ran away from home, was so brilliant that she never had to study, and she was tall, nine inches taller than me! I studied all the time, was always exhausted, was a little bit whacky, and never had a boyfriend. We fought a lot. My brother, the middle child, often had to intervene to break up our fights. I could never imagine how we were related. Now things finally made sense!

Conclusion

I am glad to have my sisters. We share a familiarity and mutual understanding. They are the embodiment of Michael, his gift to each of us. I accept it gratefully as I do my life, and I appreciate his sacrifice was more than anyone, including himself, could realize. He willingly gave a piece

of his being to create us. We are all a part of him and part of each other, but we each have a different take on what that means to us. I'm happy to know that the revelation of a once considered shameful truth has now proven to enrich our lives in so many ways. We have each other...but how cool would it have been to have Michael too?

Donna Marvin-Platt has art directed for more than 30 years and is currently Group Art Supervisor at a medical communications company in New York City. She wrote and produced the short film, "Mini Happy Returns" and performed her one-person show in New York City.

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Adam Brown

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