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A man for all reasons:

David Brudnoy was a *real* compassionate conservative

BY HARVEY A. SILVERGLATE

DAVID BRUDNOY'S untimely death, on December 9, spurred a massive number of public reminiscences by friends, acquaintances, listeners, and just about everyone who ever crossed his path. The talk-show host, author, columnist, movie critic, teacher, and man about town was the perfect everything, each seemed to say. He did so many things well, in so many different spheres, and yet remained so human, with a special talent for humor and friendship. It was also often said that Brudnoy, "even though a conservative," was beloved and respected by the rich and poor, the well-educated and barely educated, the white-collar and blue-collar alike.

It's true that Brudnoy's anomalous political philosophy deviated considerably from both liberal and conservative dogma. His support of gay marriage and his opposition to obscenity laws separated him from many conservatives, while his criticisms of the "nanny state" conflicted with liberal doctrine. (He laughed appreciatively whenever I, a devoted liberal civil libertarian, reminded him of Barney Frank's pungent observation that some conservatives believe that life begins at conception and ends at birth.) Indeed, a month before his death, he and I agreed to do a series of joint columns for the *Boston Phoenix* taking aim at the current-day idiocies that pollute both conservative and liberal political life. Yet the common view of Brudnoy is that liberals and conservatives managed to tolerate him despite his politics, by virtue of his magnetic and endearing personal qualities.



MEETING OF MINDS: the author, right, with long-time friend David Brudnoy, who could connect as readily with liberals as with fellow conservatives.

There is some truth to this, of course. But all too often overlooked is the true nature of his political philosophy and how this endeared him to people who bothered to know him beyond mere labels. Brudnoy was a courageous, principled, genuine humanitarian: he thought the best of people and wanted the best for them. Everyone who met or listened to him understood this intuitively.

BRUDNOY'S LOVE of people took shape the hard way, through a series of life experiences that revealed the human and personal consequences of failing to treat decent people with decency, and beloved people with care. In his 1996 memoir, *Life Is Not a Rehearsal* (Doubleday), he admits to considerable arrogance and even a dose of cruelty and dismissiveness as a young man, likely the result of his being an only male child of devoted middle-class Jewish parents. Tellingly, the first chapter is titled "The Best Little Boy in the World." But his capacity for friendship also grew as his politics changed.

Brudnoy began his adult life as a political liberal, topping off a period of civil-rights agitation at Yale and then Cambridge with a two-year stint as a professor at Texas Southern University, an all-black institution in Houston. There, he recounts in his memoir, he encountered students eager to learn, and he engaged them intellectually with the same vigor and respect that his talk-show audiences would come to know and appreciate. Yet it was at TSU that he began a serious shift from liberal politics to a more conservative viewpoint, tempered by a heavy dose of libertarianism, and eventually turned away from certain liberal articles of faith. He began to view affirmative action, for example, as based more on condescension than on fairness. While Brudnoy attributes much of this conversion to discovering the writings of libertarian guru Ayn Rand, his daily interactions with black students, whom he described in his memoir as eager "to learn and to make their futures bright and productive," made him suddenly self-conscious about the "patronization" that sometimes emanated from "liberal assumptions." Brudnoy believed in human liberty, equality, and dignity, and he was bound to adopt whatever political philosophy seemed to produce such results at a given time in history.

In other words, Brudnoy's move toward libertarian conservatism was a natural outgrowth of his compassion, not a betrayal of it (he was, in this sense, the true "compassionate conservative," a term much bastardized in Washington these days). Brudnoy garnered the respect and admiration of people from all walks of life and across the political spectrum not *despite* his political views, but rather, in some measure, *because* of them.

And what were these views? Brudnoy believed that every person deserved an opportunity to live a decent life. He believed that government could contribute certain conditions necessary

for the thriving of such a life, but he was adamantly opposed to allowing government power to make such an achievement less likely. He was especially exercised over the failures of public elementary and secondary education, where he found particular fault with administrators and teachers' unions. Paying lip service to the needs of underprivileged children, the system was in fact constructed, he believed, for the primary benefit — one could say welfare — of its employees. His criticism of such institutions surely fit well with conservative-libertarian philosophy, but even a brief discussion of the subject with him could convince even the most skeptical listener that this former Texas Southern University teacher was, in fact, angered by the emotional and intellectual abuse of children that failing public-educational systems inflict. He believed certain services could better be rendered by private organizations and fellow citizens. He understood that, in certain areas of life, government largesse came at a huge price, paid in the coin of humiliation, second-class citizenship, shredded liberty, and excessive dependence on the exercise of faceless official power. He believed that conservatism of a commonsense variety — strongly tinged with libertarian principles and paired with a vibrant civil society united by a shared sense of citizenship — offered the best formula for a decent society. That's why Brudnoy could be as critical of cultural conservatives, and of the current administration in Washington, as he was of the preceding administration.

This helps explain his almost uniform courteousness to his guests and, importantly, to his callers. Brudnoy really believed the best thing about this country was that everyone could have a point of view and not be afraid to express it — in freedom.

AS HE GOT OLDER, Brudnoy mastered the art of being a loyal and devoted friend. But he tended to define the relationships in which he was involved. He never counted sexual loyalty on his part as a prerequisite to a sexual-love relationship, although he often did expect his partner to practice monogamy. This was indicative of a larger aspect of Brudnoy's personality: by sheer force of his enormous energy, powerful personality, personal charisma, and towering intellect, much of his world revolved around himself. While he no longer may have been "the best little boy in the world," he remained forever a Jewish male only child. One got an enormous amount out of a relationship with Bruds, but it was evident that he established the parameters. Those parameters defined a very large number of relationships fulfilling to both Brudnoy and his many friends. Given Brudnoy's evident talent for love and friendship, engaging in a relationship on Bruds's terms was an enormously satisfying undertaking. He was a terrific partner in the waltz, but it was pretty clear that he led.

Bruds the libertarian-conservative, and I the libertarian-liberal, became friends more than 15 years ago. At one time in his life, he considered going to law school, but realized that it just was

not for him. I, on the other hand, was a journalist before entering the practice of law. We tapped each other for experiences and perspectives neither of us had, due to our career choices. Brudnoy was fascinated with those aspects of my criminal-defense and civil-liberties practice that kept the big, bad government from wrecking the lives of my clients. I was fascinated by his ability to tell truth to power and still retain the admiration, even the friendship, of the powerful.

Our philosophies overlapped in an extraordinary number of ways. We shared a virulent disdain for government officials and school administrators who abused the souls and minds of students. He railed against them on the air; I railed against them in the courts; we both railed against them in print and, on occasion, on his radio program. Indeed, Bruds was a formal adviser to the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), a nonprofit I co-founded for the purpose of restoring liberty and academic freedom to students and professors in higher education. Like me, Brudnoy was fiercely intolerant of repression in all its forms, whether it came from the right or the left.

But Brudnoy's consistency and wisdom as an adviser went well beyond his work for FIRE. Occasionally, if friends ran into trouble, he would direct them to me for informal legal advice or ask me for help on their behalf. Often the objects of Brudnoy's concern were his students; he took great interest in their lives. He often got to know their parents, and when his students married, he got to know their spouses, and later their children. He was genuinely interested in his students, and they repaid him with a loyalty and devotion that most teachers today never see. When he taught at Emerson, he became a surrogate father for a fraternity there, and even when he left for Boston University his Emerson frat kids made Bruds an honorary brother, a title he retained to the day of his death.

Brudnoy was remarkably gifted at advising others on how to deal with life crises, having survived several of his own, including his multiple near-death experiences since his diagnosis as HIV-positive and, later, full-blown AIDS. His wisdom, combined with personal interest mixed with affection, could always be counted on — by me and countless others. One could always learn something from David Brudnoy, and he was forever forthcoming.

I LEARNED FROM Bruds right up to the very end. When I visited him at Massachusetts General Hospital just a couple of days before he lapsed into a coma and then, hours later, death, he motioned me into the room. I approached the skeletal figure lying in the bed. The eyes were those of Brudnoy — bright and inquisitive to the end — but the body was that of a scarecrow. He extended his arm toward me, with obvious effort, and took my hand. He explained that the end was near, and that he'd already ordered the cessation of most nutrition and medication.

"I'm about to meet my Maker," he commented, and, just to let me know that the notorious agnostic was not having a deathbed conversion, he added: "whether He, She or It." I was suddenly struck dumb, without words adequate to deal, as frankly as my friend was dealing, with his imminent death. I therefore replied with some humor of my own: "Or perhaps They." Bruds tried to laugh, but it obviously hurt too much. I sat there, trying to have a serious conversation, but I just couldn't get myself to face what he had already faced with candor and grace — his imminent death. Before I could recover my focus, a recording crew entered to tape Brudnoy's remarkable deathbed interview with Gary LaPierre, which was to be played the following night on what was billed as the "last 'David Brudnoy Show.'" Although long-time Brudnoy friend Peter Meade hosted the show, Meade was careful to note that it was "directed by David Brudnoy," as indeed it was.

Walking back to the T in a torrent of cold rain, I realized that I had not only failed to engage Brudnoy in a discussion of his imminent death, but forgot even to tell my friend that I loved him. I thought of returning to the hospital, but it was too late. The taped interview would have already begun. I went home but couldn't sleep much.

The next night I listened to the interview, and I heard my dying friend explain to his loyal listeners, via the taped interview, what was happening to him and how he felt about it. Among many other things, he said that he'd come to realize the importance of telling people you love that you love them, before they're dead — the very subject that had obsessed me since my awkward departure from MGH the night before. I frantically dialed into the program, where the interview was being followed with several hours of Brudnoy's friends and associates sharing their reminiscences and views of this remarkable man. I managed to get on the air and, after saying a few things about David's admirable political and philosophical consistency, and knowing that Bruds was listening to this final broadcast of "The David Brudnoy Show," I told David that I loved him.

I HAVE BEEN struggling to find the words with which to end this appreciation of my dear friend David Brudnoy. Unsurprisingly, I found those words when re-reading *Life Is Not a Rehearsal*. About midway through, Brudnoy recounts a tribute he wrote in the *Boston Herald*, where he was a columnist at the time, to a just-deceased close friend to whom David felt he had not paid adequate recent attention. "As Mrs. Loman says of her husband Willy in *Death of a Salesman*," wrote a grief-stricken Brudnoy, "attention must be paid; attention must be paid to this man."

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