

Phil Ellerin

I was born in Chelsea, Massachusetts, in 1939, and although I have lived in many places and traveled much farther than I ever imagined as a boy, Chelsea remains the place that first taught me who I was.



Phil Ellerin

My father, Myer Ellerin, was born in Chelsea in 1914. His father, my grandfather Jacob, had come there in 1913 from Griva, Latvia, with his wife, Sarah, who had grown up in Lithuania, and their daughter, Beatrice. Three more children followed: Frances, Saul, and Selma. My mother's family came to the United States from the borderlands between Poland and Belarus in the early 1900s. My mother, Lillian, was born in Boston in 1918.

Over the next decade, Chelsea's Jewish community grew so large that the 1.8-square-mile city became informally known as

"The Little Jerusalem."

My grandfather Jacob worked as a roofer and sheet-metal worker. My father began as a sheet-metal worker alongside him. Later, he operated presses at manufacturing companies. He was a strict disciplinarian and an extremely hard worker. My maternal grandfather, after whom I am named, managed a schvitzbod, a steam bath and massage parlor, on Chestnut Street in Chelsea.



Phil's Parents

I grew up on Shurtleff Street with my younger sister Anita and brother Bob, in the first-floor apartment of a three-decker directly across from the Shurtleff School's main entrance. I attended that school from kindergarten through ninth grade. Having the school practically on my doorstep gave me an advantage I was happy to exploit: I was a few minutes late almost every day.

When I was seven, my third-grade teacher, the fearsome Miss Ford, asked us to "bring in a quarter for milk money." I ran across the street, banged on our first-floor window, and asked my mother for the money. She opened the window and tossed me two dimes and a nickel. I threw them back.

"Throw me a quarter," I told her. I was very literal at seven.

That was life on Shurtleff Street. The world was close enough that I could run home from school, bang on a window, and have my mother toss me money.

In the summer, the neighborhood itself became our playground. We played punchball in the middle of Shurtleff Street for hours. In the afternoon, my mother would call me inside for a snack, temporarily stopping the game. I didn't find that particularly embarrassing. What did disconcert my friends and me was the mother of one of them coming outside,

reaching down the back of her son's T-shirt to check how sweaty he was, and ordering him to take a break if she thought he had perspired too much.

On the corner of Shurtleff Street and Central Avenue was a little neighborhood store that some of us called "Spritzies" and others called "Sapsies." I eventually learned that its owner was a man named Sumner Sapsowitz. His vinegar pickles were so sour that they brought tears to your eyes.

For a while, we didn't have a telephone at home. That didn't stop me from using one. I would have my friends call Spritzie's pay phone. Mr. Sapsowitz would then send a runner to our apartment to tell me that I had a phone call.

One day, some older kids were roughhousing in the store, and Sapsie called the police. My friends and I fled up Central Avenue. While running, I tripped over a protruding granite step and gashed my forehead against the corner of a brick building.

Seeing my own blood terrified me.

Our three-decker was a miniature family compound. My paternal grandparents lived on the second floor, and my Uncle Saul and Aunt Selma lived on the third. But when I was hurt and bleeding, I didn't run upstairs. I ran across town to my maternal grandmother's apartment on Chestnut Street.



**Phil's Maternal
Grandmother**

Even then, I apparently knew where I wanted to be comforted and by whom.

Chelsea was a city of neighborhoods, families, small businesses, and people with different backgrounds whose daily lives intersected. My closest friends were Jewish, Greek, Italian, and Black. When we were together, none of that mattered very much. What mattered was whether you could throw a baseball-card "leaner," hit a home run, catch a fly ball, or, as we got older, drive a car.

That was one of the most important things Chelsea taught me: people become individuals before they become categories.

I also learned early that work mattered.

At ten, I got an after-school job at Turkanis Drug Store, on the corner of Shurtleff Street and Central Avenue opposite Spritzie's. I delivered prescription medicines around Chelsea in brown paper bags, earning very small tips or, occasionally, an apple. At twelve, I worked in Turkanis's cellar, sorting empty beer bottles into the proper company boxes so the store could receive its cash credit. From fourteen through seventeen, I was a soda clerk.

I traveled alone by bus to Hood's Milk in Charlestown, where I learned how to make ice cream sodas, banana splits, and hot-fudge sundaes, and how to operate the soda-fountain equipment. I learned that you had to jerk the soda fountain handle back and

forth to dispense carbonated water. Sometimes I thumbed a ride home rather than spend the bus fare.

Looking back, I can give those jobs impressive-sounding titles. At ten, I was a "drug dealer." At twelve, I was a "closeted alcohol distributor." At fourteen, I became a "soda jerk," a pun on soda clerk inspired by the "jerking" action a server of ice cream sodas had to master to drive the fountain handle back and forth when adding the soda.

But the real lesson was simpler: work for what you have, understand what money is worth, and don't waste either.

My Jewish identity formed in a similarly uncomplicated way. Religious celebrations were family occasions, usually preceded by a compulsory visit to the synagogue. We were not especially strict about religious observance, but certain rituals mattered. My mother lit the Shabbat candles and said the prayer every Friday night. She made chicken soup and gribenes. My father ate schmaltz and gribenes on dark rye while watching televised boxing, and I ate them with him.

I loved the holidays because my dad's mother, Jenny, and my mother would cook together. The house smelled wonderful.

I am a secular Jew who loves being Jewish, not simply because of religious observance, but because of the morality, ethics, history, and resilience embedded in the tradition. The story of a people wandering for forty years without knowing exactly where they would end up has always moved me. Something universal lives within that uncertainty. At some point, all of us must move forward without knowing precisely where we're going.



**Phil's Paternal
Grandmother**

That idea has stayed with me.



Phil's Uncle Saul

My father's brother Saul was the only college graduate in our family. One day he drove me down Storow Drive, pointing out Harvard and MIT and telling me how important it was for me to attend college.

I listened.

I went to Boston College, although I couldn't afford to live on campus. I was one of only three Jewish students there, and I sometimes regret not living in the dormitories, where I might have met a much wider variety of people.

But I had another kind of education. For three and a half years I lived with the family of a Boston College classmate, only a short distance from campus. He was of Arabic heritage and became one of my closest friends. Years later, after we both graduated from Tufts Medical School, he became Chief of Surgery at New England Baptist Hospital and Chairman of St. Jude Children's Research Hospital in Memphis.

Once again, life taught me that the boundaries people imagine between one another are often far less important than the friendships that cross them.

The summer after my junior year at Boston College, I worked as a bellhop at a hotel on Cape Cod. One guest was Dore Schary, the Jewish screenwriter, playwright, film producer, and MGM executive. He gave me a fifty-dollar tip, an enormous amount of money to me in 1960.

That summer led indirectly to one of the most important encounters of my life.

A co-worker told me she planned to work at an all-girls camp in Maine the following summer and suggested that I find a job at a nearby co-ed camp. I took her advice. In the summer of 1961, I went to Camp Abenaki.

There I met Barb.

Three years later, while I was in medical school at Tufts, we were married.

After graduating from medical school in 1965, I interned at Highland General Hospital in California. It felt like the California dream: a new wife, a new car, and a new life.

Then, in 1967, the Army drafted me to serve in Vietnam.

Saying goodbye to Barb on the tarmac at the San Francisco airport was unlike anything I had experienced before. For the first time in my life, I felt truly lonely. I thought I might never see her again.

When our military plane landed at Tan Son Nhut Air Base in Saigon, we got a command I have never forgotten:

"Keep your head down and run for the hangar to get your assignment!"

I served for two years. For the first year, I was a captain with the Ninth Infantry Battalion in Vietnam. For the second, I was a major and Chief of Dermatology at Fort Carson, Colorado.

In Vietnam, I was the only battalion dermatologist. I traveled by helicopter to different American bases to diagnose and treat skin problems among combat troops. The Army also asked me to investigate a problem affecting many soldiers' feet.

My research showed that the problem was fungal. By identifying the cause and ordering antifungal treatment, we reduced its incidence from approximately 50 percent to 3 percent. The Army awarded me a Bronze Star for that work.



Phil in Vietnam

One moment during the research reminded me how strange my circumstances were. My immediate superior ordered me to participate in a search-and-destroy mission with other troops. I had received very little training in combat procedures or firearms, and I was sure the first firefight would get me killed.

So, I did something that seemed perfectly reasonable to me: I went over my immediate superior's head and appealed directly to the base's lieutenant colonel. I explained that I was a physician and that I believed finishing the medical study as a foot doctor was more useful than turning its investigator into a foot soldier.

I never heard anything more about the mission. I like to think the Army agreed with my logic.



While I was serving in Vietnam, Barb moved from the United States to the outskirts of Tokyo so she could be close to me. I received leave three times that year and spent a few days with her on each visit.

When my tour ended, we took a long, circuitous route home through several countries in the Far East and Europe. That journey opened something in me that has never closed: a love of travel and a curiosity about the wider world.

Then came the next chapter, the one that mattered most to me. When Todd and Lauren were born, I felt like a million dollars.



Todd and Lauren

Our children grew into accomplished adults. Todd became head of the Infectious Disease Department at South Shore Hospital and began appearing on television to discuss medical issues. He and his former wife have two children, Ruby and Brett. Lauren became Director of Marketing and Communication at Phillips Corporation. She and her husband have two daughters, Olivia and Sydney.

I call our grandchildren "the fabulous four." And I mean it.

My professional life in dermatology lasted forty-seven years. I taught residents weekly for more than thirty years, ran skin-cancer clinics, lectured at local hospitals, and consulted for the Boston Celtics.

Barb was an important part of that professional life, too. An art major at Boston University, she brought an entirely different set of skills to medicine.



Barb and Judy

Together with her close friend Judy, an experienced registered nurse, she created Dermacare, an aesthetic cosmetic department within my dermatology practice. They used their artistic and clinical abilities to help patients with scars, stains, and other cosmetic skin defects.

It added another dimension to my practice, and I valued it greatly.

In 2019, after forty-seven years, I sold my practice and retired.



Phil and Barb's Grandchildren

For much of my professional life, I had lived within certain boundaries. Medicine requires protecting patient privacy, and an academically oriented profession carries its own expectations about how a physician should conduct himself. I had accumulated a great deal I wanted to say but rarely had the opportunity to.

Retirement changed that. I began writing almost every day. I call these pieces *Midnight Musings*. They are reflections on things I hear on television, read in newspapers and electronic media, or discuss with family and friends. I send them out in group emails and enjoy hearing what people think.

Over the past seven years, my journal entries have filled eight bound volumes. None has made a bestseller list. But my family loves them, and that means far more to me.

I keep writing to inform, inspire, and entertain, but mostly to connect. Perhaps connection is the thread that runs through my entire life.

I began in a three-decker on Shurtleff Street, in a neighborhood where the school was across the street; the corner store was a source of pickles and telephone calls; and the middle of the road was a ball field. I grew up among people of different religions, races, and backgrounds and learned that friendship could matter more than difference. I learned to work, save, improvise, laugh at myself, and appreciate small pleasures.

I also learned that you can leave home without leaving behind the lessons home gave you.

I carried those lessons through college, medical school, marriage, military service, fatherhood, medicine, travel, and retirement. They shaped how I raised my children and how I relate to my grandchildren.

I hope they carry some of them forward.

I want my family to know that a series of grand events isn't necessary for building a meaningful life. More often, it builds itself from ordinary moments: a mother tossing coins through a window, children playing punchball in the street, an uncle's advice about college, a first meeting at summer camp, a goodbye at an airport, a family gathered around a holiday table, a patient whose life is made a little better, a story written late at night and sent to people you love.

Those moments accumulate. They become a life.

And when I think about what I hope remains after me, I don't think first about the medical practice I built or the awards I received. I think about the people I loved, the friendships I made, the family Barb and I created, and the stories I have been able to pass along.

I started in Chelsea learning how to get along with people, work for what I wanted, appreciate what I had, and find humor in everyday life.

After all these years, those remain the lessons I believe are worth keeping.