

*Sandra Ionno Butcher
sibutcher@earthlink.net*

An Open Letter to My Son on the Death of Joseph Rotblat

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Dear Joey,

Today the world papers herald the life and legacy of the man for whom you were named: Professor Sir Joseph Rotblat. You know him as “Prof.” Although at the age of three you do not yet know—and would not understand what this means—he died two nights ago in a London hospital, after 96 amazing years of life. Pictures of you and a painting you made for him were hanging in his room—quite possibly among the last of this Earth’s beauty he was to see. Only a day or so before he died, his friend and assistant, Sally, gave him an update on your antics and activities and the impending arrival of your baby brother. While people around the world mourn his passing, I have been trying to decide how to show my deep appreciation of all that he gave to our world. I think the best way I can do that is to tell you in great detail why we chose to give you his name.

Prof considered it “a great event in one’s life to have a new human being named after one” and he was deeply moved to know that you would walk forward in this world, long after he had to leave it, bearing his name. But what, exactly, does that name stand for?

In my opinion, it stands for brilliance, compassion, patient optimism, humor, dogged determination, an insistence that we can all do better, energy, humility, youthfulness, and above all, humanity.

Let me tell you a few stories of my experiences with Prof.

Professor Rotblat was brilliant. I am not just referring to the cleverness of a young boy who, after having experienced hunger and disease and squalor during WWI, learned a trade and set up his own business at the age of 15 without formal schooling and during a time of religious persecution. I am not dwelling on the intellectual courage of a busy young electrician taking intimidating entrance exams for the Free University and going to school in the evenings after arduous days at work, who quickly secured a position teaching at the school (and who would later earn a doctor of physics, a PhD, a DSc and at least 8 honorary degrees). I am not only thinking of the pure genius of a pioneer of the nuclear age, who saw the future in chain reactions and brought that lofty science down to reality. I am not only contemplating the forward thinking of a man who recognized the need for a new type of international effort to confront the nuclear danger, which he rightly predicted would become one of the greatest scourges facing humanity. I am not even at this point referring to the ingenuity of a scientist who, in the middle of a

prestigious career, changed his line of work and helped harness for medical purposes the very atoms he had previously engineered for war. I am instead remembering the brilliance of his being. Prof had a presence unlike any I have ever encountered. I have seen him rally a room full of a thousand peace activists into a chanting fervor, and I have seen him in very intimate discussions with former heads of state. I have seen him talk to awe-struck high school students and to taxi drivers. In all his interactions, Prof propelled discussions and hopes forward. He had a force of personality that left people inspired and his smile filled a room with light.

Prof had compassion. He was so touched, once, by an older man's decision to leave a small inheritance to Pugwash that he was going to change his travel plans and fly all the way to Canada to thank the man personally before he passed away. He told me he thought it was the only decent thing to do. One time, after speaking at a Student Pugwash USA event, he was deeply concerned when a student came up to him in tears after his talk to thank him for saying words that changed her life. He asked me to make sure that she was okay, and seemed unprepared to realize that he could have that impact on others (and he did have that impact, often). He always had a kind word, an interest in others. He made people feel appreciated.

He had a patient optimism. Here he was, a man who experienced two world wars, a man who lost the woman he loved most dearly to an inconceivable hatred that spread across countries and devastated his hopes for the future. Here was this person who had been vilified for standing up for his principles and refusing to use his considerable talents to further the development of nuclear weapons after he learned Hitler was not developing these weapons. "How can you be so optimistic," I once asked him, "after all that you have seen and experienced?" He looked thoughtfully at me and replied, "What is the alternative?"

I like to remember a visit to a game park in South Africa. We were there for an outing during a Pugwash Conference. Prof had spent a chilly day riding on an open air vehicle, with all of the students rather than the "senior Pugwashites." We laughed as he donned more and more warm articles of clothing donated by the students, to supplement his inadequate light jacket—stray scarves, sweaters, gloves. (It was the only time I heard him give a physical threat, and it was directed at me...he threatened to kill me if I took a picture of him dressed in that manner! I did, he didn't.) But at one point at the game park, we all went down underground, through a long tunnel, to a concealed "close" where we could watch a watering hole without the animals knowing of our presence. If we were lucky, we were told, we might see zebras come for a drink. I will forever have in my mind the silhouette of Prof, sitting quietly at the narrow open window, chin in his hands, long after the other conference participants came and went without seeing any of the promised thirsty striped animals. Prof, however, just sat there quietly, appreciating all that he saw, waiting maybe for a zebra, but recognizing it might take longer than most people were willing to wait. He enjoyed himself in the meantime, and was at peace. I don't know if he saw a zebra then, but I understood a bit more how it was he kept the faith after campaigning for more than 50 years for nuclear disarmament and a war-free-world.

He had a sense of humor, and was not unwilling to laugh at himself. Prof was always calculating the most efficient routes to take, and one day in his late 80s or early 90s he was rushing on an escalator in the London Underground. He apparently asked a group of teenagers to step out of his way so that he could move faster than the long escalator was able to take him. The teenagers, surprised, said “You’re in a big hurry for an old man!” And he replied, “It is precisely because I am an old man that I am in a hurry, please get out of my way.” Perhaps never was he more willing to laugh at himself than when discussing the state of his “archives” (anyone who has seen his home knows why they now estimate it will take three years for someone to catalogue this amazing collection). Joey, you once played in his home office, where vertical stacks stretch from wall to wall with yellowing pages, numerous files, and books that chronicle some of the most dangerous days of human history and some of the most exciting times of scientific discovery.

He let you sit in his big leather chair and spin and spin. He had more faith than I did that you would not knock down any stacks. And amid those piles of paper, which were scattered throughout his house—his dining room table, for example, was inaccessible for years—Prof always kept a supply of new children’s books, as gifts for any young people who might visit.

Your first meeting with Prof, when you were an infant, did not go nearly as well. Prof’s sister-in-law, Hala, who lived across the street from him and who was a great companion for him over many years, had made us a splendid lunch during which you insisted on screaming non-stop (jetlag having conquered your usual good nature). Hala suggested we might try to let you nap on a bed (you refused). This led to a story about a time when Prof and Patricia Lindop traveled to Wales to see Bertrand Russell with one of Patricia’s children. Russell’s wife, who did not know they were there, walked unsuspectingly into the bedroom where the child was asleep. When questioned after coming out of the room if she saw anything unusual, she apparently replied that with Russell, anything was possible. On your next meeting with Hala, as a toddler, you instantly had an affinity for her—and not only because she gave you chocolates. You reacted with charm to these two older people whose warmth was apparent even then to your young sensibilities.

Prof had a reputation for being incredibly determined. In his later years, when I knew him, this took the form of a staunch insistence that Pugwash never lose its focus on the need to eliminate nuclear weapons. His insight on this topic could be razor sharp. When we would meet, he often would quiz your father on recent developments in Washington. These were challenging discussions that your dad always enjoyed, because Prof forced him to think in new ways about longstanding issues. In Pugwash working groups, I used to enjoy watching Prof sit there quietly with his eyes closed—some newcomers, I am sure, were probably blaming this seeming lapse of attention on old age and were unprepared for that moment when Prof would inevitably open his eyes, ask for the floor, and make some sort of interjection that would bring the whole discussion back on task or move it forward in a creative way.

He was willing to change his strategies, and found himself, he said, at the end of his life right back where he began his anti-nuclear career: focusing on the need for a vast public education campaign. After Prof left Los Alamos, he organized a traveling exhibition called the Atom Train that toured throughout England and in different parts of the world. Early on, he took his concerns to the BBC and other media outlets. Likewise, in the final months of his life he had an op-ed in the *New York Times*, and helped to launch a Weapons of Mass Destruction Awareness Campaign in the UK, which is involving students, world leaders, and rock stars. In the years in between, he focused on engaging scientists, policy makers, and scholars in more private discussions, where new ideas could be discussed in a unique environment. Today's papers are outlining some of the accomplishments of those discussions—the numerous treaties that drew on ideas from Pugwash meetings, and the significant contributions Pugwash made to reducing conflict and furthering understanding of topics related to peace and disarmament.

Professor Rotblat believed—insisted—that we can and should do better as a society. My favorite quote from Prof comes from his Nobel address, and these are indeed words which I hope will guide you and your generation through this crazy world. Sitting in the elegant hall in Oslo in December 1995, the day after my 31st birthday, the importance of these words—and the holistic view toward life that they represent—left me awestruck. “The quest for a war-free-world,” he said,

has a basic purpose: survival. But if in the process we learn how to achieve it by love, rather than fear, by kindness rather than by compulsion; if in the process we learn to combine the essential with the enjoyable, the expedient with the benevolent, the practical with the beautiful, this will be an extra incentive to embark on this great task.

And, remember as you read those words, that this was a man who only learned English as a young adult, a man who spoke several languages, a man whose eloquence transcended cultural divisions.

So, how is it Joey, that I came to know this remarkable being? It was because he looked across the generations. He valued the thoughts of someone much, much younger than he was. He sought out people unlike himself. He did not intimidate others with his considerable resume. There was nothing false about his humility. Until the last few years of his life, when physical limitations made travel challenging, he always flew economy class and his work took him all over the planet. In pre-9/11 days, he was once held up at an airport because he was carrying a treasured pen knife. I am sure he did not mention to the security guards that he was a Nobel Peace Laureate and unlikely to cause trouble with the tiny blade. A special indulgence he did allow himself was to fly on the Concorde one time before it was finally grounded, fulfilling a dream. Here was a scientist in his 90s whose efforts to learn how to fly planes as a young man in Los Alamos brought suspicion from those who doubted his motives and assumed he must be a spy who wanted to fly with nuclear secrets into the former Soviet Union—this youthful and daring soul who wanted to taste this mastery of motion, flying beyond the speed of sound, at least once before he, and the Concorde, faced permanent rest.

Professor Rotblat gently guided others and shared his limelight whenever he could. During the Nobel Prize ceremonies, I was floored to hear him mention from the podium an initiative Student Pugwash USA took as a response to the Nobel Prize, an effort to get young people to sign a kind of Hippocratic Oath for young scientists. Prior to that moment, I never in a million worlds dreamed that something I had a hand in could become part of history in that way. And then, later, he asked me to write the history of this organization he created. He wrote once of the urgency of the task, and said that he became melancholic when he saw my proposed timeline because although he wasn't a betting man, he would bet that he would not see the finished product.

And here we are. I have spent the day reading his obituaries and the history is still in progress. And despite many lovely hours spent with Professor Rotblat learning about his remarkable background and that of Pugwash, I mourn today for the vast wealth of knowledge and insight that he takes with him. He was a bridge to some of the leading moral and scientific giants of the last century (and indeed to those of the preceding century as well). Unfortunately, he never wrote an autobiography, he said he had too much work yet to do. I hope I find within myself the skills to help a wider group of people understand this wonderful man and his accomplishments through my work on the Pugwash history. Maybe someday you will give me your opinion about this.

In all our various conversations and communications, he never forgot, Joey, to ask about you and he always placed his hopes for your future in the context of the need for a better world. And these good wishes even preceded you. When he learned that your dad and I planned to get married, he wrote:

The entire staff of the Senior Pugwash London Office (i.e. Tom and myself) send you warmest congratulations on your wise decision to enter into the state of matrimony.

You have been working hard to avert a nuclear catastrophe. You have been calling on the student population to be responsible members of the community. You are now demonstrating—through your own example—your conviction that a stable world will be built in which new generations can be brought up in peace, harmony and love.

My cordial wishes for the success of your laudable enterprise.

I think that joyful note, written with such good cheer to a much younger colleague, says a lot about the man.

My dear son, Joseph is a name you should wear with pride. Be a rebel, when it is for a good cause. Do not be constrained by limitations others set for you. Treat others with dignity and with loyalty. Stretch your mind and open your heart. Insist on an equitable world, and seek peace in every situation. Refuse to compromise your values. Laugh with

others. Live simply and with meaning. Do not judge people by their titles or their age, but by their creativity and vivacity. Envision a long and productive life, and then exceed expectations. If you do all of these things, then you will honor the example set for you by Joseph Rotblat.

He changed my life, and extended for me the sense of what's possible. He became a friend. Who ever would have thought a kid from the New Jersey Shore could one day say she had a friend who was a 96-year-old Nobel Peace Laureate? But I did. And I miss him already. Together, Joey, we will continue to share his legacy with the world.

And Joey, if Prof were to have any parting words of wisdom for you, I believe he would say, "Above all, remember your humanity."

In sadness, but with hope for all that you represent,

Your mummy