

Peter Mick's Memoirs of his Parents Edwin and Parthenia

I was about 15 or 16 when my father died, it was an extremely difficult time for me especially because he had anticipated his death approximately two or three weeks before he died and told me that he and I would have to have several very serious conversations in the next few weeks, which we did.

He died about two weeks later. He had suffered with heart condition as far back as I can remember. Seeing him take nitroglycerine pills was a regular daily occurrence. He was very active right up to and including the day he died. In fact on the day he died he was at my aunt Eunice's house finishing an article about Undulant Fever for a Canadian medical journal.

I have no recollection of him being sick other than dealing with his heart condition which he never really talked about. He never was in the hospital as a patient and felt that if he got sick enough to go hospital he would just stay home and die instead. He worked in the hospital one day a week doing surgery as I recall it, and visited his patients there as needed in the mornings.

My understanding of his medial background as it related to his NJ practice, is that, with his training as a surgeon from Queen's University, he was able to, by taking boards or oral exams, obtain his license to perform surgery in the state of New York. This was probably around 1927. I believe he lived in Orange NJ and commuted to New York City. He attended the New York Eye and Ear Hospital where I believe he worked, taught and took courses.

He shared a practice with another doctor in Orange NJ. In 1929 the State Board of Medical Examiners of the State of New Jersey licensed him, permitting him to perform surgery in NJ. This licensing was predicted on his New York State License.

By the early thirties, he had received from the New York Eye and Ear, a degree permitting him to perform medical procedures on the eyes, ear, and throat, ophthalmology plus throat and ear surgery.

He met my mother in the early thirties and they married on December 8, 1933. They moved to Lake Arrowhead near Denville, NJ, a few miles from where I currently live. He commuted to New York and to Orange, NJ. There was train

service from Denville to Manhattan and he would drive to Orange, and hour plus drive in those days due to limited roads as compared to today. After a few rugged winters they bought a house in East Orange NJ where he set up his medical practice on the first floor and used the upper two floors as living space, which became my home for about 35 years. It was sold around 1977 for approximately 1/3rd of what he paid for it in the early 30's.

My mother was a very special person in her own right, Parthenia Ross Mick. She was born in West Orange New Jersey October 7th 1906, she was the second oldest of four sisters and one brother, all deceased now, she died in September of 2002, aged 95 after a full and active life. She had a stellar carrier in high school obtaining all A's and skipping two grades. She then worked in New York for the telephone company AT&T until she married my father.

She had a great life with my father, truly a love affair. They thoroughly enjoyed each other's company and family life in general, never did I hear a cross word spoken. But when he died in the mid-fifties she was left with a tremendous financial debit as well as an emotional deficit in that he was no longer around. She faced the next 40 years as a single parent of two boys. When I expressed to her my concern over the gravity of the situation she would say, just watch, everything will turn out perfect. She had a wealth of friends and family that she turned to, got a job working in a bank, and started night school to learn banking.

Sure enough in a few short years everything worked out, she had graduated with the highest honours in the banking school had ever given, I was in college, my brother was finishing high school and she managed to keep the house. I had suggested to her on several occasions that she start a social life and consider re-marring, and her comment was always "Peter, don't you realize your father and I had a true love affair and just memories are more than sufficient to keep me happy for two life times" and that outlook she would standby for over the forty years ahead and I heard it again the same year she died. She was an avid and prolific writer of letters and after her death several friends and relatives sent me bundles of letters, she had written to them, that they had kept over years because of her ability to express herself in an interesting and sophisticated manner. She was extremely kind and she had s large following of friends, many from her high school years up until they died.

She was an eternal optimist, she was cursed with muscular degeneration and severe hearing loss, she would never complain, she would say things like I can hear well if you talk a little louder, or to her grandchildren, let me touch your face, it lets me see you a little better.

She lived the last twenty-five years of her life in a retirement home in Basking Ridge, NJ. One time she called me, within a few years of her death, and said she had a major problem in that the washing machine and dryer were changed and she could not operate the new ones. She didn't want to bother anyone there because they would become impatient with her questions that she needed to ask in order to learn to operate the new machines. I visited her and by the time I got there she had prepared two large cardboard sheets with the pictures of the dials on them, for the two machines. We went to the laundry room where she asked me to read everything on and around the dials and she proceeded to write on the mock-ups she had made with a heavy black marking pen in lettering that was several inches high, all the words she needed to understand how to operate the machine.

While walking back to her apartment, I was thinking what a difficult she has, age having shrunk her to about 5 feet tall, several physical problems and the compounded events of deafness and blindness which essentially isolated her from the world in which she spent her life contributing to and enjoying. I looked down and she was sobbing and I asked her what was wrong, she said nothing is wrong I was just thinking that my life is perfect again now that you helped me, I'm so lucky.

She didn't bestow the genetic materials for that attitude on me, in fact my father's attitude was similar to hers and he kept his genes from me also, my brother was somewhat an optimist and a very diligent worker and dedicated father to his two extremely attractive daughters, Laura and Christina. His two daughters are very intelligent and athletic. Christina, the younger, has an outlook like my father's wanting to be of service and help people in trouble, and she has the academic prowess of my mother in that she is attending George Washington University Medical school with a full medical scholarship.

My father was in his mid fifties when I was born January 3, 1939. My general recollection of him was a very jovial person with a propensity to laugh at the drop of a hat. He always had jokes to tell and used many hackneyed sayings that in my youth used to make me cringe but remembering now I recognize it as one of the many emblems

of his uniqueness. I realized that I had very special parents, but didn't have the necessary skill set to work that to advantage, instead I succumbed to what almost felt like obligation, to be rebellious. In my early teen, electronics and girls captured my attention. My father would pleadingly explain to me the importance of getting goof grades in school, having diverse interests and being an active participant in the family. I must have been deaf at the time, nothing registered.

He had interests in addition to medicine. He was an insatiable reader, newspapers, current events magazines, recent books, classical books of fiction and history as well as poetry. He was an insomniac and would sit in bed reading surrounded by papers, books, and notebooks all night long maybe drifting off for fifteen minutes now and then. He would generally eat lunch with my mom, then take a short nap, asking her to wake him in fifteen minutes. I felt his passion for poetry was something I had to endure, he very frequently felt the need to recite a poem before dinner or as an after dinner family activity, which at the time, I felt most unbearable.

He had an avid interest in cabinet making and always had some major project underway that would eventually end up as a family heirloom in a relative's or patient's home, to be passed down through generations. To this day, I still have many things that he made. He was always looking for something that we could work on together, in fact I participated as an apprentice in a lot of his cabinet making projects. One of the togetherness projects was building a small hydroplane which turned out a little too large to get out of the basement and required removing part of the foundation to extricate it. A few weeks after it's maiden voyage I turned it into a million toothpicks after hitting a dock.

We also enjoyed building balsa "stick model" airplanes, but he wanted to leave them uncovered to show the craftsmanship, and flying them after all that work did not agree with his way of thinking at all. The models were built with surgical precision and masterpieces in their skinless perfection.

My grandfather on my Mom's side had a piece of property near Washington NJ, that we called "The Farm" it was about 15 acres with about ten acres cleared. Five of those acres were an apple orchard. The house was an old large three-story field stone house that used to be a wayside inn for stagecoach runs. The walls were three to four feet thick on the first floor and the fireplace on the

first floor took a 13-foot log. The house was built circa 1725. It had a barn that had about ten stalls, to house the horses.

The Farm became one of the centerpieces of my father's recreational life and indelibly emblazoned in my mind as far back as my mind can take me. During the summer my mother, brother and I would spend five to eight weeks there with my father visiting on weekends and sometimes on Wednesdays. During the winter, he and I would go on Wednesdays, weather permitting. It was here that his origins became apparent, he loved taking care of the orchard and planting five acres of potatoes, corn cucumbers, squash, watermelons and berries of a variety of strains. He loved it all, planting, grooming the land and harvesting. He would get up at dawn and make a big breakfast and go out and work until dusk, sometimes taking a break to go swimming in the local swimming hole. I felt he was more in his element there than when he was dealing with an office full of sick people as a doctor.

On many occasions, we went to Canada to visit his sisters, two of which had a home on Lake Muskoka outside Gravenhurst, ON. There were several family reunions we attended with all his sisters present. I had great affection for his sisters and respected their sophistication, diverse personalities, and warm human concerns. I never met any of his brothers. After my father's death, I remained in contact with, and visited my aunts many times, Delta, Irene, Muriel and Ida (in her pastoral setting on Bainbridge Island WA).

East Orange was changing at the time of his departure and his patient base was shifting. The average patient was no longer affluent and white collar, but instead, were now people with low incomes and large families. He listened to many hard luck stories and felt an obligation to be responsive to their needs. This frequently included not charging them for medical services as well as frequently paying for their medicines. East Orange being a high-density population area, the word spread fast about his charity and the patient population continued to shift and grow towards the needy. This caused additional problems to the family, deepening the already substantial debt that the family was carrying.

He was dedicated to his patients and frequently when they were too sick to come to his office he would visit them in their homes. Near the end of his life he had me drive him, I, would always without a license and frequently it was in the middle of the night. I would listen to him

during the drive, he would tell me in detail about their life, their family and the maladies. He spent the amount of time with each patient that he felt was necessary to find out what made patients sick. If he got very far behind during the day, he would ask patients to come back at night to continue the conversational/diagnosis. He had a following that were cult like in their appreciation of what he was doing. There were many examples of people that had been to many doctors trying to correct their medical problems and all prior treatments failed but with my father's care their problems were corrected and many attributed to him the honour of having saved their lives. Although he still continued the eye practice, a good percentage of his patients were using him as a general practitioner.

During my early maturing years up until a few weeks before his death, he made continuous attempts to get me to share his outlook on school, education, responsibilities to my mother and tried to draw me into philosophical conversations about life, medicine, education, morality and the need to prepare for a future. He didn't get through.

It was my sophomore year in high school, I was heavily involved in reading about electronics and was an active radio amateur, having built much of the equipment I was using. It was approaching the peak of the sun spot cycle, an eleven year cycle that yields startling communications for about four or five hours a day. The bands used to open up at about eleven PM and remain open until three or four in the morning. I had become a radio amateur after getting caught by the FCC using a diathermy machine of my fathers that I had converted to a transmitter. I used HS for reading about electronics and resting from the night before on the radio.

One night, in the wee hours of the morning, his room was adjacent to mine and he came in and sat down and watched me for a while and said finally, "you have a serious problem". Asking him what the nature of my problem was, he said, "I will be dead in a few weeks and you will be the new head of the family". It startled me because he didn't have a flare for the dramatic, he dealt with situations without embellishment. When my maternal grandfather was dying with cancer we used to visit him every night so my father could treat him, he was my fathers best friend, and he was hopelessly ill and bed ridden for over a year. One nigh we were driving to see him and my father said, "I want you to spend some time talking to him, because after your finished talking to him, I'm going to

put him out of his misery, I have waited too long selfishly wanting to have him around". There was no talk of morality, right, wrong or justification beyond the obvious. He also said, "it should be clear to you not to tell your mother". My grandfather was in too much pain for me to talk to him, but the next morning my Grandmother called saying he had died in his sleep.

When my father told me about his impending death it caught my attention like my attention had never been caught before, or since. This started a series of nightly conversations that ranged in subject matter quite a bit because for the first time I was seeing him as a person that had a background, a history, that I knew almost nothing about and had never even thought about it, prior to his announcement.

I asked him to tell me about his childhood and that seemed to be a touchy subject that he didn't want to provide much detail on, other than to say it was very difficult and one of his childhood dreams was to make life in that area more pleasant to live. His war experiences were limited to a few anecdotes and general philosophy that war was a horror and the experiences that stood out in his mind would not be good material for me to hear. He did talk about his practice in Cobden a little and again the need to provide medical services to the area. He talked about how he had appealed to Queen's University to provide medical doctors to the area, which they eventually did. He said the school had honoured him for his work in the area. But he was not freely disclosing his past, but every little bit of it I found interesting because before the evening chats (very late night) I had erroneously assumed he was born the same time I was.

He had a major concern over my Mom surviving the financial problems he would be leaving her and made me promise to pitch in and salvage the situation. He also tasked me with doing what he said he was unable to do, and that was for me to fly right and grow up. He said even with my academic disaster including that fact that if I wouldn't be able to graduate HS he thought he could get me a scholarship to Queens based on his laurels. But this offer was couched with the caveat that I become a doctor, I would never make more than a modest income and put the profession of helping people above all other concerns, he made me promise that. I had no driving aspiration to become a doctor, especially after watching the heartache he went through, suffering along with his hundreds of patients and sobbing when they died. They say for a doctor to be

effective he has to emotionally detached from his patients in order to maintain his objectivity. I observed the opposite, my father made his patients his friends and with a genuine curiosity asked them about their lives and their hopes. When they became ill he helped them as a skilled physician and also as a very concerned friend, this of course carries severe penalties in terms of time and emotion but the results spoke for themselves. The detached physician doesn't have the cure, the only attachment is to the patients wallet.

About two weeks after he announced my problem I came home from school and the house was full of people and my Mom was crying very hard. He was dead. The funeral parlour was packed, he was cremated, there was a nice service that was attended by several hundred people, overflowing all the standing areas of the home. His ashes remained in a cemetery office for about forty years, and two years ago when Mom died I buried them both at the Rosedale cemetery in Orange NJ.

Possibly, far in the future some omnipotent and omniscient being or energy will decide to genetically manipulate the human condition in order to put it on the road to utopian civilization. The product of this effort will doubtlessly yield a genome that will be startlingly similar to my Mother's and Father's. now far in the past.

April 16, 2004