

Thanks. I Needed That.

And Other Stories of the Spirit

Robert Alper

Read The Spirit Books

an imprint of
David Crumm Media, LLC
Canton, Michigan

For more information and further discussion, visit
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Dedication

TO SHERRI

What greater thing is there for two human souls, than to feel that they are joined for life—to strengthen each other in all labor, to rest on each other in all sorrow, to minister to each other in all pain, to be one with each other in silent unspeakable memories?

—George Eliot

*To everything there is a season, and a time for every
purpose under the heaven:*

A time to be born and a time to die

*A time to plant and a time to pluck up that which
is planted*

A time to kill, and a time to heal

A time to break down, and a time to build up

A time to weep, and a time to laugh

A time to mourn and a time to dance

*A time to cast away stones, and a time to gather
stones together*

*A time to embrace and a time to refrain from
embracing*

A time to seek and a time to lose

A time to keep and a time to cast away

A time to rend and a time to sew

A time to keep silence, and a time to speak

A time to love, and a time to hate

A time for war, and a time for peace.

—Ecclesiastes 3: 1-8

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Read the Spirit: Our Writers

Rabbi Bob Alper

“**SURE. BUT THIS** might take a while,” is how Bob Alper responds when a passenger flying next to him asks what he does. He’s the nation’s only full-time standup comedian who also is a practicing rabbi—and his journey into this unique vocation is long and winding. It’s also a terrific source of stories for his new book, *Thanks. I Needed That*. His long list of comedy shows includes hundreds of joint appearances with Arab comedians; and he is heard daily on the Sirius/XM clean comedy channel. Bob lives in rural Vermont with his wife Sherri, a psychotherapist. His experiences—from leading large congregations to performing stand-up at Toronto’s “Muslim-fest”—make for a wealth of stories that touch people of all backgrounds with warmth, humor, and wisdom.



Wayne Baker

SINCE THE FOUNDING of ReadTheSpirit, Dr. Wayne Baker has been a central pillar in our online magazine. He developed and still writes the influential *OurValues* column, which demonstrates the potential of civil dialogue even on hot-button issues concerning American values. He is a sociologist on the senior faculty at the University of Michigan Ross School of Business. Read his Wikipedia page for more about his multi-faceted research, teaching and writing. Currently, his part-time media director for the OurValues project is Dmitri Barvinok, a writer and web developer from the Michigan State University School of Journalism. When Baker is traveling, his regular *OurValues* guest writer is Terry Gallagher. By summer 2013, Baker and his team will produce the first *OurValues* book for small groups.



Najah Bazy

AS ONE OF the nation's leading experts in cross-cultural patient care, Najah Bazy has advised health-care professionals across the U.S. She also heads a nonprofit organization that helps minority women combine traditional skills, education and grassroots strategies for supporting families. Bazy's other talents lie in energizing young people to engage in their religious communities. Bazy is co-founder of North America's largest Muslim youth group. Her book *The Beauty of Ramadan* is written both for practicing Muslims who want to learn about the inspirational month of fasting—and for professionals in education, health care and other forms of public service who need to know about this practice followed by a billion Muslims worldwide. She and her family live in Michigan.



Daniel L. Buttry

THE REV. DR. Daniel L. Buttry is one of the world's leading peacemakers. He made history as the first full-time, global peace trainer and negotiator employed by a mainline denomination: American Baptist Churches (ABC), the denomination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. As a peacemaker, Dr. Buttry is constantly in motion, training groups in conflict transformation, nonviolence and peace-building in several continents.



His three books for ReadTheSpirit include the two-volume *Interfaith Heroes* series, profiling men and women who risked crossing religious boundaries to make peace, and the landmark *Blessed Are the Peacemakers*, a major book on global peacemaking packed with inspiring profiles from around the world. His wife Sharon is an ordained American Baptist clergy person, as well. They live in Hamtramck, Michigan.

David Crumm

WITH PUBLISHER JOHN HILE, David Crumm co-founded ReadTheSpirit in 2007. Starting as a journalist in the 1970s for several newspapers, Crumm eventually spent more than two decades as Religion Writer for the *Detroit Free Press*. He also has worked widely with universities and foundations, including several tours in Asia with the East-West Center and a year of research as a University of Michigan Knight-Wallace journalism fellow. In Michigan, he works with the Interfaith Leadership Council that regularly brings together religious leaders as well as media professionals for cooperative projects. His book, *Our Lent: Things We Carry*, is a 40-day reader that has been used by congregations nationwide. His signature work for ReadTheSpirit magazine are his weekly author interviews—a list of 100s that includes famous as well as emerging voices in religion, spirituality and cultural diversity.



Rodney Curtis

A LEADING photo journalist, editor and columnist, Rodney Curtis's life was transformed by two events: a life-threatening diagnosis of leukemia as well as the collapse of the



newspaper industry. His three books chart his remarkable career, which is a snapshot of American life for millions of men and women in this era of transformation. *Spiritual Wanderer* is his wide-ranging (and dangerously funny) collection of stories about the often-strange and heart-warming adventures of family life in America. Then, *A "Cute" Leukemia*, is his humorous (yes, humorous) and heartfelt account of conquering cancer. His third book, *Getting Laid ... Off*, continues his quirky true-life adventures in an era of corporate downsizing. For many years, Rodney Curtis's regular columns and photos have been mainstays in our online magazine.

Debra Darvick

DEBRA DARVICK understands the importance of celebrating our faith at home. Her inspiring and sometimes funny columns have appeared in *Good Housekeeping*, *Newsweek* and *Real Simple* as well as some of the nation's top Jewish publications: *Forward*, *Moment*, *Hadassah* and *Reform Judaism* magazine. Debra proves the value of her own advice through her active involvement with organizations in the Jewish community. Her children's picture book—*I Love Jewish Faces*—celebrates Jewish diversity. Read *The Spirit* now publishes Debra's signature title, *This Jewish Life: Stories of Discovery, Connection and Joy*, a collection of real-life stories about dozens of Jewish men and women moving through the seasons with their families. In 2013, she is developing a new, multi-faceted project shared between several media platforms: *Advice for families from a real Jewish mother*. She and her family live in Michigan.



Suzy Farbman

SUZY FARBMAN has entertained millions as a writer for newspapers and popular magazines. Oprah introduced Suzy to Americans in a new role—as the author of *Back from Betrayal*, a memoir in which Suzy shared hard-earned wisdom about saving a troubled marriage. However, even as readers nationwide were seeking her advice about relationships—Suzy was diagnosed with advanced cancer. Like millions of Americans, she searched for the best doctors—but she also called on her colorful circle of friends and tried everything from psychotherapy to contemplating angels, from ancient prayers to a hope in miracles. Her warm, suspenseful and often funny journey of mixed disciplines is called *Godsigns*—and is sure to have you spotting your own uplifting Godsigns, too.



Stephanie Fenton

STEPHANIE FENTON has been part of the ReadTheSpirit core team since our founding in 2007. A journalist and photographer, Stephanie Fenton pioneered our unique *Holidays & Festivals* column—the only ongoing column of its kind in American journalism. While dozens of Apps and online news aggregators provide simple holiday calendars—Fenton’s column is different. She freshly reports stories on hundreds of holidays each year, packed with insights into many faiths and cultures. She includes the latest trends and news for families and small groups. Her column also is followed by professionals in business, health-care, education and other fields who need to understand the weekly ebb and flow of world culture. As a photographer, Stephanie styled and photographed the foods in *The Flavors of Faith: Holy Breads*.



Terry Gallagher

READERS OF OUR online magazine enjoy Terry Gallagher's visits as the regular guest columnist for Dr. Wayne Baker's *OurValues* project. Some of Terry's insights also appear in the upcoming *OurValues* book. He has written on a wide range of topics including friendship, neighbors, hospitality, the environment, soup and baseball. His long career has focused on using media to build stronger institutions and communities. For more than a decade, Terry Gallagher was director of university relations at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. He consults with interfaith and human service organizations. In 2010, he became communications director for an environmental advocacy organization. In his global travels, Gallagher earned a post-graduate diploma in literature at Trinity College, Dublin. He and his wife, Prof. Nancy Gallagher, live in Ann Arbor.



Lynne Meredith Golodner

AFTER 15 YEARS as a journalist for national media in New York, Washington, D.C., and Detroit, Lynne Meredith Golodner created Your People LLC to provide marketing, public relations and business development for entrepreneurs, businesses and non-profits. Her Detroit-based firm specializes in building business through storytelling and relationship-building. An adjunct professor at University of Detroit-Mercy, Lynne is a widely published author and guest speaker; her eighth book is *The Flavors of Faith: Holy Breads*. Her earlier book on Jewish women and hair covering, *Hide and Seek*, has gone through several printings to worldwide acclaim. Lynne also has published two poetry books and six non-fiction books, including *Stand Out from the Crowd*, a DIY business book. Lynne lives in Southfield, Michigan, with her husband Dan and their four children.



Joe Grimm and Michigan State University journalism students

JOE GRIMM is known to media professionals nationwide as the *Ask the Recruiter* columnist for Poynter. ReadTheSpirit publishes two of Grimm's books on trends in media: *Breaking In* and *Best of Ask the Recruiter*. Grimm teaches in the Michigan State University School of Journalism. In 2012, Grimm connected ReadTheSpirit with a class of journalism students to produce a book about the challenge of reducing bullying. When *The New Bullying* was released, Grimm's team made headlines for producing this carefully reported book with supplemental videos—from an initial idea to final books and online materials in just 101 days. That pioneering MSU-ReadTheSpirit partnership continues with the debut of a new series of guidebooks for cultural competency, the first volume focusing on Indian Americans (due in spring 2013).



John Hile

JOHN HILE is co-founder of ReadTheSpirit online magazine and publishing house. His career spans the Internet age and—years ago while writing communications software for early Windows systems—he also established the U.S. Patent that defined virus-protection software for the digital industry. Leading major software-design projects through the years positioned him to create the next wave of media for ReadTheSpirit. Now, his most valuable project is a sophisticated new software suite for small to mid-sized publishers, moving content quickly from simple Word documents through easy forms of editing and digital styling—toward branching options for print and all e-publishing formats. His system moves smoothly back and forth from original documents to complete publication, allowing the rapid creation of short runs of modified books (like the one you are holding). He also is developing new strategies for web architecture in promoting book sales online.



Heather Jose

AMONG CANCER THRIVERS

nationwide, Heather Jose is an inspiration as a writer, speaker and columnist for *Breast Cancer Wellness* magazine. She's a leading advocate of taking charge of your battle with cancer and enlisting all forms of assistance—including family and friends, nutrition and exercise, prayer and meditation and, of course, the best of medical care. Countless cancer thrivers have been helped by her

book, *Every Day We Are Killing Cancer*. Heather Jose is in demand as a keynote speaker, expert on patient care and as the creator of Go Beyond Treatment Seminars. She also is the host and main columnist for the www.WeAreCaregivers.com portal into ReadTheSpirit's online magazine.

Heather lives in Michigan with her husband, Larry, and their two children.



Kurt Kolka

KURT KOLKA is a journalist and an independent comic creator—the author and artist of Cardinal super-hero comic strips and comic books. For many years, Kolka has been active in promoting the preservation of classic newspaper comic strips—and in promoting independent comics with religious themes. Following on the success of our book *The New Bullying*, Kolka has developed an entire Cardinal comic book on this theme.



While *The New Bullying* is popular with adults who are trying to understand these issues, the comic book will be ideal format for youngsters. In addition, Kolka reached out to his network of other comic artists nationwide—and dozens of responded, contributing their own pages to a colorful gallery of comic story-starters for young people. We are very excited about the launch of this multi-faceted campaign, *Bullying Is No Laughing Matter*. Kolka lives in Michigan.

Edward McNulty

IN CHURCHES coast to coast, Ed McNulty's books on faith and film have helped preachers, teachers and small-group leaders combine Hollywood with Bible study. In addition to his books, McNulty also is the long-time writer for *Visual Parables* magazine, a monthly guide to discussing movies in congregations. ReadTheSpirit already has begun publishing some of McNulty's new reviews and study guides in our online magazine. Now, we are pleased to publish McNulty's latest book, *Blessed Are the Filmmakers*. That book is part of our series on global peacemaking and offers congregations many ideas for using popular movies to start peacemaking groups in local communities. In addition, we plan to market digital study guides for faith-and-film discussions, adapted from McNulty's substantial archive of small-group resources. McNulty lives in Ohio.



Rodger Murchison

DAVID CRUMM and John Hile met the Rev. Dr. Rodger Murchison during a week-long pilgrimage to the Iona community off the coast of Scotland. Although Murchison served for many years as a pastor at a church in Augusta, Georgia, he travels widely for research and speaking tours. His early academic work at Princeton and Oxford resulted in ongoing connections with those schools. He still occasionally returns to the UK to speak at conferences. His entire career of study—and decades of ministry with hundreds of families in grief—went into his *Guide for Grief: Help in surviving the stages of grief and bereavement after a loss*. In addition to helping countless individuals, Murchison is a pioneer in developing grief support groups and seminars, which he explains in his book. Now retired from active ministry, he and his wife continue to live in Georgia—when they are not traveling.



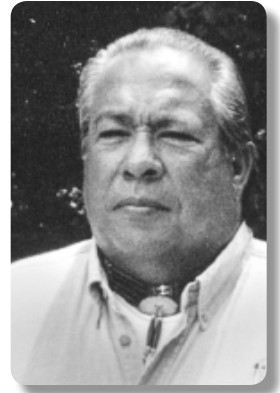
Robert Pasick

DR. ROBERT PASICK earned his doctorate in psychology from Harvard University. For the past 30 years, as an organizational psychologist and executive coach, he has helped CEOs and executive teams profit in challenging circumstances. The author of five books, he has appeared on the Oprah Winfrey Show, the Today Show and NPR. Rob is founder of Leaders Connect and CEO Connect—leadership development and networking programs. In *Balanced Leadership in Unbalanced Times*, he shares many of his practical insights. His central theme is that relationships matter even in fast-paced corporate culture. Married for 39 years, Rob's roots are in both Detroit and New York City. In addition, Rob is known nationwide for a beloved book of reflections he wrote while caring for an aging canine friend, called *Conversations with My Old Dog*.



Warren Petoskey

WARREN PETOSKEY is an elder of the Waganakising Odawa and Minneconjou Lakotah nations. He is a writer, artisan, musician and dancer—and lectures on the infamous history of Indian boarding schools. He and his wife Barbara, whose ancestors survived the Trail of Tears, live in Michigan. Warren’s passion as a writer and teacher is to convey the depth, the beauty—and the enduring vitality—of Indian culture in the Americas. But he shines, especially, as a storyteller. Each chapter in his memoir, *Dancing My Dream*, invites readers into a real-life story from Warren’s world. Many authors, today, claim to express Native American ideas, but few are actually Indians living in tribal communities. In her preface, anthropologist Kay McGowan explains, “Warren’s words are prayers for Indian people: prayer of hopefulness against all odds.”



Benjamin Pratt

THE REV. DR. Benjamin Pratt is a veteran pastoral counselor in the Washington D.C. area. He travels widely to learn from other caregivers and non-profit groups. *A Guide for Caregivers* is based on his life's work. Dr. Pratt is in demand for radio, newspaper and conference appearances. He has helped ReadTheSpirit develop an innovative shared column with the website for *Day1*. Later in 2013, he will preach one of the week-long, five-part sermon series on the nationwide *Day1* radio network. Dr. Pratt has part of the ReadTheSpirit team since our founding in 2007, beginning with his first book *Ian Fleming's Seven Deadlier Sins & 007's Moral Compass*. That book for small groups now has been used in congregations from New Zealand to Panama—and by U.S. Army chaplains. Dr. Pratt has become a master at developing columns that will be widely shared by individuals and congregations.



Kristen Shamus

KRISTEN JORDAN SHAMUS is a lifestyle columnist and editor for the *Detroit Free Press*, Michigan's largest newspaper. She's now writing, *Cultural Stew: Memere's Favorite Recipes and the Flavors of a French Family's Life*, about the stories and recipes unique to families of French-Canadian heritage, including her own. Growing up in northeastern New York, just a few miles south of the Quebec border, Shamus recalls countless summer days spent picking fresh berries, beets, cucumbers and tomatoes for canning with her French-Canadian mother and aunts. Winters were spent in her grandmother's kitchen, making all sorts of delights with maple syrup. She lives now in suburban Detroit with her husband, photographer Gregory Shamus, and their children. You can read her weekly columns online at www.freep.com/section/col26.



Jane Wells

JANE WELLS understands the best connections between popular culture and faith. As an author, she created *Glitter in the Sun*, a book-length Bible study exploring themes in the popular Twilight novels and films. In spring 2013, she is working on a similar book drawing lessons from the Hunger Games novels and films. Wells uses those talents, as well, in her role as Marketing Director for ReadTheSpirit. Jane Wells' daily work focuses on spotting trends in new media. She is an expert at independent publishing, new social-networking platforms and media marketing. She also is an accomplished small-group leader, both in church and in secular settings. Jane Wells writes regularly about her ongoing work and her fresh ideas that can help you, your friends and your congregation. Follow her columns at www.glitterinthesun.com.



Women of WISDOM



TOO OFTEN IN the heat of conflict, men stop talking. That's what happened during one global crisis when four courageous women from different religious backgrounds decided they could make a difference by forming a new cross-cultural network of friends. They called themselves WISDOM for Women's Interfaith Solutions for Dialogue and Outreach in MetroDetroit. As they became noted specialists in forming healthy cross-cultural friendships, dozens of the WISDOM women shared their personal stories in *Friendship & Faith*. Their book is inspiring women around the world and, in addition to their own moving stories, the book shows others how to reach out and make new friends. It's a perfect book for small-group discussion—and now is widely used in high school and college courses as well.

ReadTheSpirit: Our Editors

EDITORS ARE CRUCIAL to the quality of our work at ReadTheSpirit. Many of our writers featured in the previous pages also are editors, including our overall Editor David Crumm. In addition to our writers, we have a team of multi-talented copy editors and digital stylists.



DMITRI BARVINOK graduates from the Michigan State University School of Journalism in 2013. He is the part-time media director for the *Our Values* project. He also edits and digitally styles book manuscripts and works on web development projects for ReadTheSpirit. He has been a major force behind our first two book projects with MSU.

CELESTE DYKAS is a copy editor and digital stylist on our book projects. She has special interests in the fine arts, food, history and cross-cultural issues. For *The Flavors of Faith: Holy Breads*, she tested all recipes as she copyedited them—then worked with photographer Stephanie Fenton to style the food

photos for the book. She lives in a historic farmhouse, where the food photographs were taken, in the Detroit area.

BECKY HILE is an experienced web designer with expertise in graphic arts, digital styling, web analytics and social media. Becky specializes in research, styling, writing and editing online content as part of the sophisticated new architecture we are developing for the online marketing of books. She also works on our new web analytics systems. She lives in Michigan.

HENRY PASSENGER is a copy editor with decades of experience in newspapers before his retirement. We value the wide span of age, experience and cultural background within our staff. For example—Passenger, the retired journalist, worked with Barvinok, the student journalist, in copy editing Rabbi Bob Alper's new book. He lives in rural Michigan with his wife: the Rev. Margaret Passenger, an educator, writer and retired United Methodist pastor.

BETH MILLER is a content editor helping to shape book projects for ReadTheSpirit. She is nationally known as a leader of youth programs, a playwright and a developer of small-group educational materials. Her past books were published by Abingdon Press. She has special expertise in cross-cultural ministry. Her biggest content editing project this year is Dr. Wayne Baker's OurValues book. She lives with her husband in rural Utah.

PATTY and MICHAEL THOMPSON: This husband-wife team works with ReadTheSpirit in many ways. Patty Thompson is the head of our business operations and develops our unique materials for interacting with authors on everything from quarterly accounting reports to daily calls on modified short orders of books. She also heads our operations that channel our new books into the publishing platforms for our multiple e-editions. In 2012-13, her husband, software developer Michael Thompson also has worked with ReadTheSpirit

as a designer and developer with John Hile in the new digital architecture behind ReadTheSpirit.

THE REV. MEGAN WALTHER has been the youngest ordained minister in the United Methodist Church's conference covering eastern and northern Michigan, although she will lose that title as an even younger minister is ordained in spring 2013. A graduate of Wesley Seminary in Washington D.C., she specializes in cross-cultural issues, connections with popular culture and the development of materials for small congregations. This spring, she is working with Beth Miller and Wayne Baker to finalize the OurValues book for small groups and communities. She and her husband, the Rev. Joel Walther, serve three churches in rural Michigan.

Introduction

A RABBI WHO did stand-up comedy before 2,000 Muslims probably has a few good stories.

From his home in rural Vermont, Rabbi Bob Alper writes about growing up in Rhode Island, completing college and rabbinical seminary, and serving as rabbi at large congregations in Buffalo and Philadelphia. He was always funny, he notes, from delivering bad puns as a toddler to entertaining during teenage youth group retreats. In his synagogues, he regularly used jokes and humorous illustrations in sermons—so, as he tells the story, he has “years of experience performing in front of a hostile audience.”

In 1986, living in a Philadelphia suburb and armed with a doctoral degree from Princeton Theological Seminary, Bob was charting a different path, trading congregational life for a counseling practice. But at that same time, comedy reared its ugly head in the form of a “Jewish Comic of the Year Contest.” Bob entered, came in third behind a chiropractor and a lawyer, and went on to make stand-up a full-time career. He’s now

heard daily on the clean comedy channel of Sirius/XM satellite radio, and has performed in over 2,000 shows, from The Hollywood IMPROV to London's New End Theatre, as well as hundreds of synagogues, churches, mosques, theatres, colleges and corporate events.

Particularly gratifying to Bob is his creation of "The Laugh in Peace Tour," non-political comedy performances with Muslim and Christian colleagues. Juliana Oyegun, Chief Diversity Officer of The World Bank, observed "...your voices offer powerful lessons of reconciliation and understanding through the language of laughter and joy. I can't think of a more timely message for our world."

There's literally no other storyteller like Bob Alper, the world's only full-time standup comic who also remains a practicing rabbi.

In this book's 32 true stories, Bob writes about his journey and, in particular, the people he's met along the way: a brave Russian Jew contending with the KGB; a severely injured pilot; a deeply spiritual stained glass artist; an eccentric Englishwoman and her small dog; a grieving carpenter; a religious Polish prisoner exiled to Siberia; and so many more, including a cat named Dracula. Bob finds his inspiration both at home and during his travels, focusing on ordinary people whose lives yield lessons that evoke laughter and tears, often on the same page. And Bob reports from a wide range of locations including a general store in Vermont, a prestigious London church and synagogue, backstage at *The Tonight Show*, and an apartment in a gray Moscow suburb.

Though infused with Bob's trademark humor, *Thanks. I Needed That.* artfully, and sometimes unexpectedly, touches readers through stories of ordinary people: their struggles, successes, failures, and often, the unintentional and surprising ways strangers enhance the lives of others.

—David Crumm, Editor at Read the Spirit Books

CHAPTER 1

Find Me a Husband

IN THE SPRING of 1992, my wife, Sherri, was working at her alma mater, Bennington College, directing adjunct academic programs. One Thursday afternoon, she happened to pass by the office of her friend, Irene Rozensweig.

Typical late day chat, ending with Sherri explaining that she would be away until Monday. “I’m doing some workshops at a convention in San Antonio.”

“Have a safe trip,” Irene called out. And as an afterthought, added, “And by the way: find me a husband.”

Irene, a Jewish woman, child of two Holocaust survivors, never-married, in her 30s, was at that time involved in a going-nowhere relationship with a going-nowhere man. So the funny, ironic request, “Find me a husband,” was neither unusual nor unexpected.

But Irene may have been surprised just a bit when Sherri responded, “Irene: I’m going to a convention of rabbis.”

To which Irene responded, “Oh—that’d be all right.”

Two days later Sherri found herself conducting a workshop for 30 or 40 rabbis. One rabbi in particular stood out from the crowd.

Not surprisingly. Physically, he towered above the rest. About six feet four inches, heavy-set, bearded, what people often describe as a bear of a man. But it was his gentle, warm, bright personality that particularly caught Sherri's attention.

When the workshop ended, Sherri the instructor became Sherri the matchmaker, something she'd never before done.

"Tell me about Howard Jaffe," she asked her friends at the conference. And the responses were all the same. "What a sweetie." "A real *mentsch*." "A doll." "Thirty-six and never married. Would like to be married. Great guy." "His congregation and his colleagues all adore him."

So Sherri sent him a note: "Hi, Howard. I've never written a message like this before, and I don't mean to be intrusive, but after meeting you today, I thought that—well—I have a friend, Irene ..." and so on.

Later, Howard met with Sherri in the lobby.

"Sure. Give her my number."

Which Sherri did when she returned to Bennington. Soon Irene placed a call to Howard at his synagogue, but when the secretary answered, Irene panicked and hung up. Fortunately, her nerves calmed and she tried again, leading to hours and hours of conversation and The Meeting two weeks later. The following December, Howard and Irene were married.

Soon they began working on their most heartfelt goal: a family. But getting pregnant was difficult. They endured the usual round of clinics and experts and finally met with success. Success and success: Irene became pregnant with twins.

I'll skip the details, but simply report that the pregnancy was difficult, and the birth scary. Ultimately Howard and Irene the couple became Howard and Irene the family, blessed with a son and a daughter.

Sherri and I drove down to New Jersey for the huge celebration that marked the bris of the son and the baby-naming

of the daughter. It was an incredibly joyful time, and Sherri was hailed for her role in the wonderful story, just as she had been, deservedly, at the wedding.

After the hugs and kisses, after we admired the gorgeous infants, wrapped in flannel and surrounded by all things soft, after we became reacquainted with the siblings and parents and cousins we had met at the wedding, after we ate a bit of the tons of food that filled the dining room, we sat in the living room, talking quietly, in groups of two or three.

That's when Irene told me a story.

Both of her parents were concentration camp survivors. Irene's mother, Helen, was liberated from Auschwitz. Her father, Izzy, survived Dachau, Bergen Belsen, and other camps. The Germans murdered their entire families: Helen's mother, father, and two brothers; Izzy's mother, father, and his four younger sisters. Of their immediate families, Izzy was the sole survivor of his, and only Helen and her sister survived from their family.

During the months of pregnancy, Irene told me, she and Howard debated which names to use, as all expectant parents do. A boy would be named Nathaniel, for Howard's late father. But a girl—for a girl, there were several possibilities: Esther, perhaps, or Sophie, women who had been important in Irene's life, women Irene knew.

And then, as the due date drew close, somehow, quite unexpectedly, Irene had a revelation: through all the years, it was as if her other aunts, her father's sisters, had been forgotten. Nobody carried their names. And so Irene and Howard decided, during the last days of pregnancy, to honor the names of Sela and Pessa Rosenzweig, two teenage girls murdered by the Germans, two teenage girls whom only Izzy Rosenzweig remembered.

And so the names were chosen. The boy would carry the name of his grandfather. And the girl would carry two names honoring her great aunts, Sela and Pessa.

Then something unexpected happened.

For fifty years, Irene's mother told her, Izzy Rozenzweig never, ever spoke of his sisters. Never mentioned their names. It was simply too painful.

But when he learned that his granddaughter would bear the names of his sisters, for the first time it seemed as if a padlocked doorway had sprung open, and the memories poured forth. After 50 years of silence, Irene's father was finally able to articulate his pain, to recall his sisters, and, one might certainly infer, feel a sense that these martyrs would be remembered always through the life of his granddaughter.

Irene and I drifted to different topics. Others joined our small conversation. People entered and left the room, nibbled and toasted, typical of a mid-size celebratory gathering. I continued to chat politely, but my thoughts remained far away, fixed on what Irene had told me about her father.

I was also tired. It was getting late, and we had driven many miles. I sat deep in a comfortable chair, and soon the conversation bypassed me as I pretended to listen. But I wasn't listening. I was watching. The voices became a hum, words indistinguishable. My eyes scanned the living room: people sitting, some in chairs, some on the floor, others standing. Frequent peals of laughter, animated faces, hand and arm gestures.

And beyond them all, the dining room. A table laden with gifts and platters of food, and beside the table, a new playpen where the two infants slept peacefully. Everybody had migrated to the living room. The dining room was empty. Empty except for the babies in their playpen.

We Jews are a people who know unfathomable tragedy. But what our history, both ancient and modern, has shown us, is that sometimes, after the darkest, most frightening, most destructive storm, there is always the possibility of a rainbow.

So this is what I saw through the chatting people sitting and standing in that crowded living room. This is what I saw in the background:

A dining room. Overhead lights out, the space dimly illuminated by the glow from the adjoining kitchen. A playpen with two sleeping infants.

And Irene's father.

He sat alone, in a straight back chair, beside the playpen. Leaning forward. Looking down, silently. Watching the babies. His forearm lay on the rail, and his chin rested on that arm as he stared below at the infants.

With his other hand, he reached down and gently, with the weight of a feather, caressed their soft, tiny heads.