

THE BOXER AND THE RABBI

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NORMAN HAS SPOKEN AND WRITTEN about our relationship. Today, I speak of his influence on my life. Not as a writer, but as a caring person. You see, I believe he helped me become a better person, but never made a point of it.

When we first met in 1972, we were so different that no one thought we could become friends, or even survive the first month. I was an accomplished, insecure thirty-four-year-old photojournalist who could not read or write properly. He was a literary giant, rumored to have bogged down in mid-career. What we had in common was we were both looking for ways to reinvent ourselves. We each had hit a wall.

At first, working on the book *Marilyn*, we fought. We screamed at each other regularly. He hated the *Time* magazine cover, with Monroe playing with his hair ... that I had designed. "With that cover, I'll never win a Nobel," he said at the top of his voice. While working on *The Executioner's Song*, we disagreed so much on how he was using one interview I had conducted—that we only communicated through our wives. After months of this, Norman sent me a fax that said, "If I knew I'd have to kiss your ass, I wouldn't have shaved." I phoned him and when he answered I said, "Hello Lover." And we were talking again.

On a plane ride from Portland Oregon to L.A., in the late 1970s, I was writing some notes in longhand, when I turned to him, and said, "Norman, how do you spell this word?" He just looked at me and spelled the word. He displayed no hesitation or resentment.

I soon realized that he did not look down on me for my lack of English skills. Not long after that plane ride, I was walking with him in Brooklyn Heights and he used a word that I did not understand. I interrupted and asked, "What does that word mean?" Without a pause, he gave the meaning of the word and explained why he was using it in that sentence. Then, he

continued the conversation. In private, I had the impression he spoke more simply to me. It was Norman, in 1992, who first informed me that I was dyslexic. Several months later he gave me a few books by a writer I had never heard of, the French novelist, Simenon, and said, "Read these and see how simply one can write." In public he may have been Art Aragon the boxer, but privately he was my rabbi.

He brought to my table the wisdom learned by being run over by many trucks in his life. And that wisdom, little by little, by osmosis, I believe made me a better person. We once talked about, how as parents, he had nine kids, I had five, and we can hurt our children without ever knowing it, how mistakes made become opportunities to improve ourselves. Many years after he married Norris, and soon after I married Kathy, he said to me, "We've landed for the last time and we'd better not fuck it up."

During the last two months of Norman's life, much of which was spent at Mount Sinai Hospital, my wife, Kathy, and I were there with Norris, Mike and Donna Lennon and members of Norman's family. In early October, he woke up after six hours of surgery, looked up at Norris, Mike, and myself and said, "Larry, I had a dream about you. I was God and you were the Devil and we made a pact to fight technology. This is our last stand against technology."

Four weeks later, the doctors told us at bedside that the time had come. Norris, Mike Lennon, and I sat in the cafeteria that night and it was decided that a death notice would have to be prepared for the media and I would program it into my laptop so that all I had to do was press "send" and the newspapers would have the information. Less than six hours later, Norman passed. I sat in my hotel room, looking at the computer, unable to press the button. I could not. Maybe he had sunk into a deep coma; maybe a miracle would happen. I cried. Then I called Norris and said, "Should I send it?" She said "Yes." I felt the full weight of the responsibility in telling the world that the man I loved so much had died. Still weeping, I pressed the button.

Thank you, Norman, for helping me become a better person. I love you.