

Lessons we learn, lessons we transmit

• BATYA L. LUDMAN

I recently received the news that a colleague, a senior psychiatry professor I worked with in New York a number of years ago, passed away after a short illness from a very aggressive cancer. Hearing from another colleague just how old our mutual friend was, I was shocked to discover that he was 78 years old. How was it possible that since I hadn't aged, he had? I couldn't imagine him being "that old," in part because he was always so young at heart.

While my body reminds me that I, too, must be getting older, in my head I haven't aged more than a year in the 33 years ago since the three of us would occasionally put out the "Do Not Disturb - In Session" sign on the door in the Mount Sinai Hospital clinic and sit together for a very serious session - of Trivial Pursuit!

My dear friend, the assistant department head at the time, showed me back then that, while we knew how to, and did, work very hard, we also knew how to have fun. Over our games of Trivial Pursuit, we got to know each other well, and in many ways that was where the real work of developing trust, team building and strengthening of our departmental goals was achieved. Back then, without having to punch a clock, with tremendous dedication, we always ensured that our work got done.

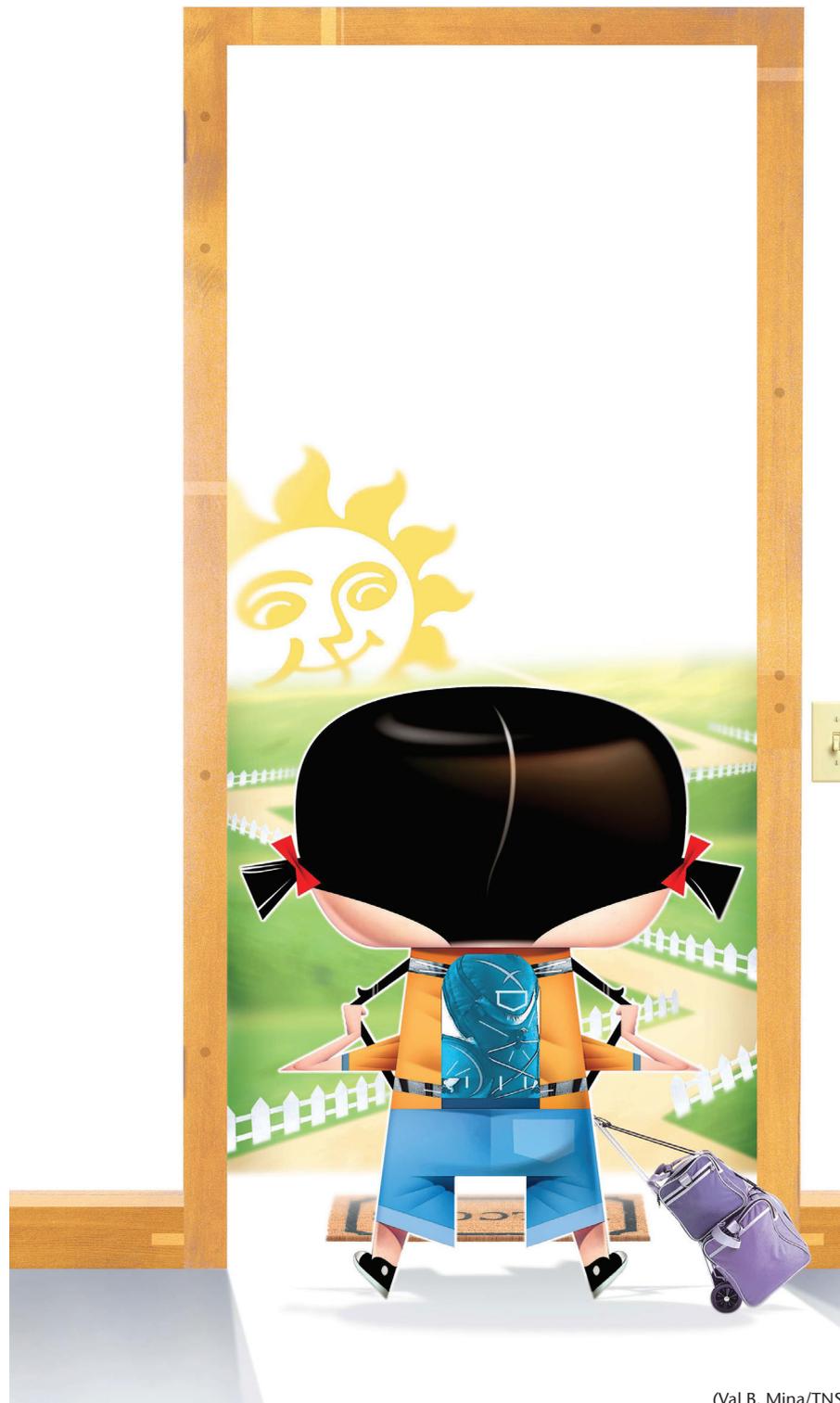
As a young professional starting out, he taught me many valuable lessons. Here are just a few.

- Make time for fun. Life is short and you never know what tomorrow (or even a few hours from now) will bring. If you want to do something, just do it. You probably won't regret it. For me personally, I have always felt that the only regrets I have are over what I haven't done, not what I have done.

As you age, you may even decide that you won't do anything that you don't really want to, or have to, do. But, with everything you strive to do, work hard, do it well, have fun doing it, and always make time for laughter. Humor is an essential element of life and makes us feel good. If you take yourself so seriously that you cannot find even a little bit of humor in whatever situation you find yourself in, you just are not trying hard enough. Laughter, as they say, is great medicine and has been proven to be good for the soul.

- Treat everyone, especially those junior to you, and most especially your children, with great respect. Being treated so respectfully as a young intern gave me the confidence to take chances. I felt heard, and even if my ideas did not bear fruit, I always had the sense that what I said mattered. Imagine conveying that message to your children. It is incredibly empowering.

- Don't take on anything that is not yours to take on. You may have broad shoulders, but only take on what are your issues or concerns, not those of others, unless you tru-



(Val B. Mina/TNS)

ly choose to do so. If you do choose to take on issues that are not yours, be mindful of this and recognize and acknowledge that you have made the choice to do it, and, as a result, there will be consequences, both good and bad.

While, as a society, we must care for others, you cannot do this to the detriment of your own well-being. As they say on the airplane, put on your own oxygen mask first, before helping others. Sometimes we are doing so much for others that we inadvertently neglect our own needs, and then everyone suffers.

- Always ask for clarification. Even if you think you understand someone, don't be afraid to say, "Let me see if I understand you. So you mean..." and wait for the "Yes, exactly" or the "No, that's not what I meant at all. Let me explain."

This is the key to, the very essence of, the couples work I do. Often, the longer couples are together, the less they ask their partners for clarification, assuming they know what the other is thinking and feeling, but often they really don't.

The assumption that you know what others are thinking may result in your responding in anger or feeling stressed, or cause you to shut down, when the other person may not have even spoken a word. If he (or she) did, you may have misunderstood what he (or she) said. Clarification of what was said is so easy, yet so often not done.

- Be consistent. Say what you mean and mean what you say. While the three of us ate most of our lunches together, our friend made it clear that what was his was his when it came to food: no tasting, no sharing. This was especially odd, as he was always so generous in sharing his thoughts, ideas and everything else. Initially, we thought he had to be kidding, as he wouldn't share so much as a potato chip. We will never know why, but we admired him for having his rules and being clear and consistent about them. Being consistent is the backbone of successful parenting, and he parented the two of us very well.

There is never a good time to die, and for those we love, who are young or young at heart, we can't help but feel that they died before their time. As we soon

leave behind the hot days of summer, head back to school and look toward the New Year, it is so important to reflect on the values of those loved ones who are no longer with us, remind ourselves of the beauty within each and every one of them, and work on ourselves to see if we can transmit their legacy to others in all that we do, as we carry on our lives without them. Our goal should be to make the world a better place, and those who have taught us so well help guide us in how to transmit their message to others. ■

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