

# Richard Gardner's Legacy Extends to His Children

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My father's overarching legacy is the profound commitment he imparted to both his children and students to make the world a better place. This sense of responsibility he embodied inspired us and helped me become the person I am today. It had a huge impact on my decision of whom to spend my life with (Francesco Olivieri, a progressive Italian diplomat), and informed the values we have both transmitted to our son, Laurence. My father impressed upon those around him the value of seeking the truth and engaging on issues of social justice, of standing one's ground, and of having the courage to take a road less traveled.

The importance of social justice was something that shaped my father at an early age when he attended the Ethical Culture School in New York City. It became more concrete when, as he said in later years, he fell "under the spell of a very special mentor," who was Eleanor Roosevelt, and soaked up her views on human rights and the rights of the disadvantaged during the period when she was advocating for the creation of the U.N. Declaration on Human Rights. His first experience in government, as President John F. Kennedy's Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for International Organizations, also deeply shaped him, and, by consequence, us. He made us feel that, as children of privilege, we had a responsibility to use our education, extensive contacts, and professional positions to advance certain causes, which for me has meant working on racial and gender equality, climate change, and international human rights in general. This work in turn led me to activism, as we have been slowly witnessing the erosion of the world order my father helped create.

My father was very proud when I chose to intern at a nascent public interest law firm that was suing Union Carbide in wake of the Bhopal tragedy—one of the first major global corporate

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accountability cases. My first opportunity to engage first-hand on international human rights issues occurred when I went to India in 1984 on a Jack Greenberg human rights fellowship while at Columbia Law School. This experience had a profound effect on my decision to begin working in the field of corporate sustainability as an advisor to companies and investors, as well as to teach business and human rights.

In his last years, my father told me repeatedly how proud he was that I was “a professor” too and how wonderful it was that I could share the real-world experience of my consulting practice with my students. He loved that I continued his tradition of, during the first class of each semester, asking students to fill out index cards stating what they expected to be doing at age fifty, as well as having the class over to our home for dinner, as he did. My father and I would often share our frustration about the direction the world was going, and I would explain to him that I was trying to influence the future twenty students at a time—but that it was slow-going. He would always counsel patience and make me feel that what I was doing was extraordinarily worthy.

Teaching others was one thing, but my father did not approve of anyone—educator, lawyer, or diplomat—who was unable to defend his or her principles. My father encouraged us to stand our ground if we believed in something—as long as our belief was based on careful and meticulous research. Early on, he encouraged my brother and me to debate various hot topics of the day—which in the mid ‘70s in our household was the admission of women to the renowned Rhodes Scholarship (Dad had been one in 1951) and the question of whether universities should follow affirmative action criteria when selecting incoming students. Luckily for my father, my brother and I fell easily on different sides of these two issues, which provided years of heated debate.

My Dad’s lesson about standing one’s ground was tested pretty early, when I was a twenty-year-old alternate delegate for New York State at the 1980 Democratic Convention. When a vote came up regarding funding for the MX missile in the party platform, I opposed it. I didn’t realize that, apparently, nearly every delegate had eventually caved on this issue except for me, and they had to send a posse made up of Geraldine Ferraro (the New York State whip at the time) and Harold Brown, then-Secretary of Defense, to persuade me to change my vote, to no avail.

In later years, when working for the U.N. Liaison office in Zagreb as part of the peacekeeping mission in the Balkans, another such situation came up. My husband, who had served as the Italian ambassador to Croatia, was given an audience with then-President

Franjo Tudjman, and I, as his spouse, had the option to accompany him. I just couldn't let such an unusual moment of access pass without making a plea for the human rights situation of the Croatian Serbs in the aftermath of the war—which provoked a tirade from the President and put his diplomatic advisor in difficulty. These two stories absolutely delighted my Dad, and he dined out on them for years.

My father often shared with us the Robert Frost poem “The Road Not Taken”—not realizing the person it held the greatest significance for was himself. It certainly didn't stop him from having such a multifaceted career, but it was precisely this kind of career that was the road less traveled. My father made being a practicing lawyer, professor, and diplomat seem so easy—but I now appreciate how difficult it is to distinguish oneself in even one of these careers. He did, however, believe that the pursuit of true vocation can be a noble commitment, worthy of starting anew when necessary. So when, after graduating from law school, I found myself in a law firm, feeling constrained by the mind-numbing work, my father was there to support my decision to leave. I ended up in a more policy-related position at the Aspen Institute in Italy—which put me on a much more interesting path.

My father's legacy did not stop there. One of the driving forces he passed on to me was a love for globally relevant issues—especially anything that had to do with the environment. He was one of the first voices on climate change, and I have always admired him for that. Ever the eternal optimist, he believed that, sooner or later, people would come around. I found it extraordinary that he managed not to lose patience with the world's deniers and prevaricators. When he was part of the U.S. delegation at the Stockholm Conference on the Environment in 1972, he allowed me to listen to the proceedings, and delighted in the fact that we were both able to attend the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio together (he, as an advisor to the U.N., and I, as an activist). Because of that conference, I later went to the Rio+20 meetings as an advisor to a responsible company.

Dad bequeathed to us a special gift that enriches my life every day: his students, who span the globe and are among the best and most committed people I have ever met. My brother and I grew up knowing how important his students were to him. When he invited them home for dinner to celebrate the end the semester, he always included us—it felt as if he was introducing two parts of his family. As I grew up, many of his students became very close friends (some even coming as guest lecturers in my classes—and vice versa).

Last but by no means least, while my brother, Tony, and I have contributed to this publication, there is a major voice missing—

that of my mother, Danielle Luzzatto, who was taken away from us in an untimely fashion in 2008. She certainly could have weighed in on my father's legacy as a spouse and parent. All I can say is that she and my father showed us the example of what a happy marriage looks like (which I have tried to replicate), and what it means to be a devoted parent (which I have also tried to replicate). My parents complemented each other in every way. My mother was worldly and gregarious, just as my father was more academic and earnest, and she taught him to embrace life. He loved and respected his dear Danielle, was so proud of her long Venetian heritage—and, in both his diplomatic assignments, he very much included her as a co-ambassador. In return, she was the enabler of so much and enthusiastically participated as my father enlarged our European cultural education, teaching us American and British poetry, Gilbert & Sullivan . . . and baseball, a passion he passed on to his grandson, Laurence.

Though there is no way any one person can cover the breadth of the global topics on which my father was an expert, the point is not what he knew but who he was. He thought of himself as a “practical idealist”—and an idealist he certainly was—as he tried to shape a better world order during his life. Dad did teach us that we do not need to do everything at once to make a difference—and that making a difference with integrity and decency is itself a major accomplishment. So when in one of our last conversations he referred to me as his “constructive activist,” I was touched. I love that phrase and will cherish it to my dying day. Truly, it was he who helped me find myself and become who I am.