



Alan Sonnenfeld
Stories to Share

From notes written to Alan Sonnenfeld

I've been thinking recently how much I have learned and continue to learn from and with Alan and how grateful I feel towards him. Though I readily admit my view is certainly tinted by the lover's rose, I'd venture I'm not the only one who feels they have learned from Alan.

So: an invitation to share your stories. I broached the idea with Alan and he said it would be very meaningful to have the opportunity to hear from you—people whose lives have intersected with his, friends and family. The questions I've been thinking of include:

What have you learned / are you learning from Alan?

What gift has he given / is he giving you?

Or, more simply: is there a particular story you would like to share—perhaps a meaningful interaction or something that changed for you because of time you spent together...

These are unattributed selections taken from the many and longer notes we received. Thank you for sharing a window on how Alan touched your lives.

Sarah (December 2014)



When Alan first moved away [from Stanford], we used to talk on the phone a lot, by which I mean, 1-2 hours a week. This was probably by far the most amount of chatting on the phone that I've done with anyone, and it was before the time of good sound quality. But he would call to chat about his life and, randomly, I was the lucky recipient of this weekly phone call. I have to admit, I actually have quite a phone phobia--but I did pick up the phone when Alan called, because he was a great conversationalist. We weren't romantically inclined, it just seemed quite natural for him to call and talk about his life. I'm not sure how he managed that charm, but I really do have a phobia of phones. I still don't talk on the phone to almost anyone for more than 10 minutes, even my parents. So, Alan, your calls were quite special!

Alan's first party at the Upper West Side apartment was before furniture or utensils and barely after the power had come on. But he'd already made more friends in the city than I had after years of living there. And they were great people---like attracts like. Now, no furniture would be a great excuse to delay socializing. But Alan didn't even notice an obstacle that would have conquered me. Who needs furniture to have fun? Who needs silverware to have a great time with your friends, to meet new people, to be a light against the darkness. I left that party and other evenings with Alan with the world looking a little brighter than it had and with possibilities seeming a little more possible. That was Alan—his strength, his attitude, his joy—rubbing off.

Back at HBS, I loved how reliable you were. I thought to myself: Who is this guy? He never speaks loud. He never shows off. He always eats kosher peanut butter. Yet he seems solid. He seems confident. He has a great sense of humor. There is something like peace in him. He seems approachable. But he never imposes himself. How does that work?

I think often of our walk around the lake with Sarah and you. You both left a very strong impression on me. So much strength, dignity, gratefulness, openness/straightforwardness, honesty, love, and care. So here is what I think I've learned from you: that great strength comes from within, and from sharing. And that I should get married.

I will never forget that Alan was the only Jewish person to sign up for Saudi Arabia Trek at HBS. People thought he did as a joke and would never go but he went and loved it and they loved him and he ate peanut butter for two weeks.

From the moment I met you two, I've been struck by the honesty and love in your communications. I joked with [my partner] that you two exchanged more in a 15 minute car ride than many couples discuss in decades together.

When I think of Alan, I think of the word thoughtful, warm, and welcoming. At business school Alan was always eager to meet new people, have lunch, get to know strangers and was always willing to "make the first move." HBS can be an intimidating place--new people, some aggressive personalities, large classes, etc. but none of that intimidated Alan. In fact, Alan was probably the first in our section to see a sea of new friends instead of a sea of threatening classmates. He was interested in everyone regardless of geography, background, religion, race, creed, gender. He sees the good in everyone, which is a true gift and one I deeply admire.

I remember during my time at Wash U noticing that Alan always had many friends, and I had only one: Alan. To my delight, a genuine and wholesome Alan didn't seem to mind that. Most campus events I went to like Friday night at Hillel I would not have gone were it not for the trusty companionship of my friend Alan. Alan has always been sincere, warm and sensitive, never breaching trust or making hurtful remarks about anyone.

The Simchat Torah after the break up, I bumped into Alan on the very long line to get into Congregation B'nai Jeshurun and while we waited Alan asked about my relationship. When I mentioned the break up, Alan simply said, "Good, you could do better than him." It's something that I had been thinking all along, but it was so nice to hear from someone else and especially someone who I knew in a mostly professional context. I'm dating someone new now who is much better suited for me, but I was so flattered and appreciated Alan's candor so much that I still think about that moment.

I had so much fun traveling through India with Alan when we were both there after the MBA. I thought I was doing fine in India, and that overall I was a great world traveler, having visited a lot of different places and cultures already. Alan proved me wrong...he showed me how culturally inept I was in India, and how much of a wimp I was in life! Well mannered as I was, I stood neatly in line (uhm it's India...which line did I even imagine was there?) and asked people in a friendly manner what I wanted...most of the time not getting what I asked (or paying way too much). Alan had this efficient way of asking people nicely once, perhaps twice, but when he didn't get what he wanted he'd get worked up and gone was the politeness...and guess what—he was a lot more effective at getting us what we needed than I was! You might think it odd I picked this story—but truth is that I often think back on that story, whether I'm traveling or just here at home in the US...being kind to everyone may not really be a great principle to the un-kind in society...while being assertive to get what you want may be (I have definitely occasionally embarrassed my family since when going to stores or restaurants and insisting on getting what we want). For that, I'm grateful to Alan.

Alan and I overlapped over a brief period at Bernstein, while I had been unfortunately quite swamped by the workload for a highly competitive and equally demanding analyst. Thus, our interactions were quite limited, although from the first day that I met him I found his sense of humor highly highly endearing and every time I passed his cube I felt a smile build up, as well as this urge to give him a goofy smile.

When Alan was living in La Jolla, he once called to invite us to dinner the next Friday night. [My partner] took the call. She asked if she could bring anything--

perhaps a salad. Alan said that would be very nice. We thought how nice it was to see a bachelor extend himself to make Friday night dinner for guests. When we got to Alan's apartment on Friday night, we found that Alan had invited six or eight people in all. We learned that everyone had volunteered to bring something. In the end, all food for the meal was brought by guests. Alan's dinner preparations were limited to providing the idea and the venue. Everyone's affection for Alan took care of the rest. I thought to myself, "That's the best kind of leadership."

I remember your story of a run [in Central Park]. You were being cheered on by passersby who thought you were likely part of a bigger race, and you took in the cheers :)

Shabbat at Alan's was always exciting. Not just the Indian food, the curries and spinachy delicacies to eat. More intriguing was the eclectic group of people around the table: business folks, spiritual seekers, travelers, Jews and gentiles. Alan managed to get them all around a Shabbat table for a traditional meal and good conversation. For a person like Alan who did not grow up so traditional, this was really a melding of worlds. Friends from different parts of life coming together around a table. For me, this exemplifies a certain kind of worldview, a rooted cosmopolitanism that believes in the best of people. At its core, a Shabbat table like Alan's says that good people of good will can learn from one another, can share time and space and can do so in the context of a specific tradition while appreciating others. This is a profound lesson for me on how to be a Jew today.

What struck me about you in all these interactions was your genuineness. At times, HBS can be an unwelcoming place filled with posturing of ambitious folks, becoming who they think they want to be. You were different. You weren't trying to be someone else. You impressed and influenced me by being yourself.

I can sense from your writing that decades of love have passed between you two in the past few months.

Your nurturing, gentle, and humble support over the years never waned. If someone would have told me that you would call me on the first Monday in June, I would have said it would have been to give me career advice.

I had come over [for Shabbat]--not just me, not just me and a friend, but me and my friend Jose (Hispanic, not Jewish, as you may recall) and his mom, who can speak only some English and can be shy with new people. It felt natural for me to somehow invite people you'd never met to your place, which I'd never been to, for an event that was not part of their normal routine. And somehow you made them all comfortable, with Jose's mom telling a (unusual for her) long story, and soft light falling all around.

You had invited me to grab dinner the at a kosher restaurant nearby. We walked across the street, parting ways with [another friend], me feeling honored that you wanted to spend time with me, even without Sarah having mediated or arranged it. We sat in that small glass enclosed kosher spot, other people coming in and out, and eating off disposables, and simply chatting. We didn't have anything pressing to say-- a meandering conversation, those rare quiet moments in New York where nothing in particular has to be *conveyed* or *gotten to* but just discovering topics as they come. I felt so clearly that you cared to get to know me, and I felt complimented, both as me, and as a sense of your caring to get to know anyone Sarah cared about.

What I cherish the most about my times with him are the impromptu calls after we left business school. Every once in a while, I would get a call from him "just to catch up." No special reason, just wanted to see how I was doing and chat for a bit. They were always unexpected, but always a welcome surprise in the middle of the whirlwind that our lives have turned out to be... To this day, I think about those phone calls as an example of the incredible value of slowing down the world around me to catch up with a friend, just because.

One lesson I have learned is that the journey of life is not always what we want or what we expect. The shift in your lives from when you left for Europe to when you returned to Kansas City is the most drastic, slow-motion version of being hit by a bus that I have ever witnessed. I don't say that to add pain, I say it so that you understand that I will never let this experience be taken for granted... I have learned that a person who starts out as a voice on the other side of a phone could have more impact on you than you could ever imagine.

One of my favorite stories (of all time!) is one that Alan told me about his Harvard tour to Saudi Arabia. He was catching a flight within Saudi Arabia one morning and needed to daven and lay tefillin. Alan went to the rear of the plane and put on his tefillin behind the prayer curtain. During the Amidah, the curtain opened and in walked another person to pray. While Alan continued to daven, the new entrant unrolled his prayer mat and proceeded to prostrate and pray on the mat beside Alan. When finished, he rolled up the mat, left and closed the curtain behind him. No words were exchanged. I can't help smiling every time I think of that story. I wish I was there to have witnessed it. I wish I would have had the courage to daven like that in Saudi Arabia. I'd have probably waited for a more private moment later.

I love you so much and am so proud of you.

There are so many ways that I can say thank you for your help during my job search. I met you during a time that I was unemployed for more than 14 months, and I had little direction and opportunity. You sat with me patiently and provided me with guidance and inspiration to move forward and find a job in a new industry. Within just weeks of our conversation, I had interviews lined up, one of which turned into my current job. Getting this job was a huge milestone in my life. I will always have you to thank for pointing me in the right direction during a time that I needed it most.

Alan - you're one of the kindest, more sincere people I've ever met. I've never heard you utter anything even remotely mean about anyone, and everyone you say and do is incredibly genuine and sincere. I've been thinking about those qualities of yours a lot over the last several months, and many times I catch myself thinking before I speak to avoid saying something hurtful to someone else.

Alan, I remember from our many office chats and lunches at Novartis how intent you were on finding the right person with whom to share your life and build a family. I don't think I have ever met a person so intentional and purposeful about finding a mate. I remember you had a list of what you wanted in a wife—but unlike so many crazy people with lists of "requirements," your list was self-aware and thoughtful and a realistic basis for a successful marriage. I recall you dated a number of "Miss Right-Nows" who were never going to be "Miss Right" and certainly never "Mrs. Sonnenfeld." I recall, as you contemplated changing jobs, how important it was to you to live in an area with a vibrant Jewish community—and you rejected Basel on that basis. This was never casual or whimsical. This was as serious and vital in your life as breathing or eating.

But ask the question--what is Alan really all about? I think I wasn't the only one who was most awed by the sense of romance. And thank you for promptly getting down to the business of being super-cousinly elder cousin.

We were at the Harvard Chabad Rosh Hashana dinner. The courtyard where we were sitting could not contain the dozens of students who came, and it was buzzing from new year energy and a bit of wine. The meal had just ended, and students were starting to mingle. I stood up and gazed around me, a little overwhelmed by the crowd. I spotted Sarah and Alan and approached them, glad to find familiar faces. Alan says to me, "[Friend], can I give you a little unsolicited advice?" Sarah rolls her eyes a bit and grins. Alan continues, "Go up to a guy you find attractive and start talking to him." I was a bit taken aback; that was not what I thought he was going to say! But Alan was absolutely right. I needed a little push, and his confidence convinced me that all I needed was a little guts. On that evening Alan taught me how to be brave in a crowd, and that strangers cease to be strangers after you start talking to them. Now, whenever I'm in a gathering of unfamiliar faces, I think of Alan's gentle advice and it reminds me to go meet someone new. Thank you Alan!

I think back to the early days of your diagnosis, when all of the tests were being run. You two were running around like mad trying to contact anyone you could think of for treatment options. Both of you so serious and focused. Then they took Alan for a test that required sedation. When he returned I got to see his true, funny personality and I got to see Sarah laugh. It was the first time you had let your guard down since arriving at St. Luke's. That is when I knew you would forever be one of my favorite patients/families.

You made friends easily, and for as long as I have known you, you have never been judgmental toward others. You welcomed everyone, from all walks of life, to your Shabbat table, even in your business school dorm, you always had a welcome policy, a gift of making people feel a part of something. This is something you have taught me, and I deeply cherish this about you. I remember in school and after in Manhattan, going to events, knowing no one...and seeing you among the crowd, and feeling 'ok' because there was Alan. What you represent as a person to so many is your deep humanity for making people feel welcome, like they have a place. Thank you for this...

Alan and I were classmates at HBS, and both lived in Morris Hall (notable for its tiny rooms, long before that apparently became an urban chic thing). The entry doors normally required an RFID access card, but I recall Alan using a mechanical key and/or waiting for someone else to enter with their card, in order to remain true to his Sabbath beliefs. I interacted with Alan in many other settings (especially in our healthcare classes), but my enduring memory of him from those days was his steadfast devotion to a core personal value, right there at the door to Morris Hall.

It's those happy memories I keep coming back to—the crazy last minute drive you made down to DC during a hurricane to be at our wedding; the fun I had at your wedding; the “moose” hand signal Alan and I developed in NY as a sign to one another it was time to bounce from bad shabbat / passover lunches. I'll keep thinking about those things because they bring a smile to my lips every time.

From you both, I feel I have learned what love among peers looks like. I have seen unconditional love between my grandparents, my parents, and others, but I have yet to see a peer couple be as tested as you and Alan have been, and rise to the occasion with such caring grace.

One thing I've been thinking about is how often lopsided our relationships are. I get frustrated thinking that I'm usually the one that calls people to get together. I start thinking “Why doesn't anyone call me!?” Alan has shown me that it's okay

to be the one that calls. He always called me. (He even called me when I was in NYC a few years ago after I posted something on FB.) Please let him know that his actions mean the world to me. I should have called him the way he called me. I will think of him every time I pick up the phone to make plans with someone.

One story I want to share about you captures, for me, your warmth, inquisitiveness, openness, gentle confidence, and general awesomeness. You told us that you went to a lecture, in which one of the speakers was one of the leaders of the Church of Latter Day Saints. I do not know the topic of the lecture, but I understand that you were inspired by his words and appreciated the opportunity to hear him speak. Most people would have thought “Gee, that was interesting” and gone home. Maybe they would share a thought or two about an interesting event they went to with an impressive leader from a religion that many people find confusing, foreign, and even strange. But you are not “most people,” and you weren't done—you wanted to continue the conversation. You went up after the talk and engaged him some more. You exchanged contact information.

Now here is where this story, to my mind, takes a particularly Alan-like turn: You invited him to experience a Shabbat dinner with you and Sarah at your apartment. Who does that? Not many people have the thoughtful, giving, sharing instincts that invitation evidences, nor the quiet confidence that: Yes, of course a top leader of a religious institution who is not your age and knows no one in common with you, would enjoy a beautiful Shabbat evening around your dinner table. That confidence was not misplaced: Of course he would!

We've hosted many people for Shabbat, and some will send a thank you card. Some will call later and say they had a nice time. Some will say thank you as they leave. Alan was different. Yes, he brought a hostess gift and definitely said thank you, but he did much more: Alan stayed in touch. He valued the relationship, and he didn't care if we are the same age as his parents. He would call every Yom Tov just to say hi and see how we're doing.

Alan, even though we grew up together and have stayed in touch on and off as adults, I know we were never close friends. Yet, you feel like family in that way that lifelong familiarity brings. I will always remember that one Shabbat when I joined you at one of your dinners. It was amazing to see the once-shy Alan holding court, bringing friends and strangers together in your home to enjoy a Shabbat evening together. You had clearly come into your own, and I will always treasure that I was able to be a part of that evening.

It was a blessing spending time with you. You remind me what it is to be a good, caring, warm person, and your accomplishments forever impress me.

Here are a few things we learned from you:

Always believe that you can beat the odds. • Make wonderful friends and then introduce them to each other. • Bring people together for Shabbat meals (OK, we believed this before we met you, but love that we share this philosophy). • Be kind, no matter how you're feeling. • Love as you want to be loved. • Always build people up. • Ask questions, but make them good. • Learn as much as you can from people you admire. • Advocate tirelessly for yourself and the people you love. • Hold hands. • Find a job you love and work with people who really care. • See the world. • Never stop learning. • Always try to push yourself just a little harder. • Accept when you've reached your limit. • Smiles are precious, and also something you can dispense generously. • It's better to let people in than to shut them out. • If you need something, ask for it. • It is humanly possible to cook Shabbat dinner for 12 in 1hr 40min (including shopping). • Do everything with integrity. • Be proud of who you are. • Don't waste time.

Last week, I asked you if we could see you again in a few weeks. You looked doubtful, and told me you were very tired. Another lesson: Be straight with people; don't tell them what they want to hear.

Your dad told us recently that you started out as a special ed student in school. He said it was because you had to fight so hard to overcome your obstacles that you became such a tenacious and accomplished student. I was amazed by that story, and will carry it with me always.

I worked with Alan in the pharmaceutical industry and had the pleasure of his companionship on at least two business trips. One was to Chicago where we met with companies about possible alliances. This conference had a structured Internet-based protocol whereby company representatives would confidentially express mutual interest in holding brief 1:1 discussions. After the first day, Alan and I along with our company colleagues met at our hotel's lounge to recap these discussions and share our plans for the next day's meetings. While the rest of us cited upcoming system-generated appointments, Alan mentioned some prospects that he'd identified outside of this restrictive protocol. When asked how these forthcoming discussions came to be, he answered, "I sat next to them on the shuttle bus to- and from the convention center and we got to talking."

Alan, you are in my thoughts frequently, and I wholeheartedly wish that research could proceed 1000 times faster than it does. Please know that our company has a substantial and growing pancreatic cancer research effort underway (as exemplified by the AACR abstract that I shared, with an ASCO abstract in the works also), and this is not something that we ever would have started if not for you. Your courage and persistence are having a lasting impact on our team and the direction of our research. I know that we will eventually see the research through to something that makes a substantial difference, because of you.

You both have really opened up a new world for me. On an almost daily basis I care for people with life-threatening diseases and many lung cancer patients. They often share with me what they're going through. Usually what they share with me, however, is on more of a physical than emotional and spiritual level. For sure, it is a combination. But reading about what you go through has really helped expand my understanding of the experience. I think I can empathize with my patients to a better degree than I could in the past. You both have also taught me a great deal about facing difficult situations with love, dignity, respect, and perseverance. You have continually inspired me with your courage. I think this is making me a better doctor and a better person.

We learned that Alan loves okra masala :-)

I have always admired your drive in life - academically, professionally, in pursuit of religion, physical fitness, even in the search for a partner. It has always seemed that if you are going to do something - then there is no half way.

What have I learned from Alan? I thought a lot about this question. Having met Alan but twice and talked but a few times, there is still so much to choose from. I think it comes down to this: How to love in all kinds of ways.

While doing and saying nothing extraordinary that I can point to, all the exchanges with and around Alan are vital and true. I can't think of anything more important. Thank you Alan!

Alan has this peculiar and amazing ability of somehow saying nothing but being right in the heart of it all. One small recent story to illustrate: Alan was sitting with a friend, a nice, early/mid 30s guy who will be someone's catch someday but who just hasn't yet had relationships that work. Friend is dating someone new. Only been 2 months but he is excited, thinks things are going well. He asked Alan for advice, which was: "Have important conversations." Friend asks how. Alan's answer: "Do it." So simple and quietly said that the friend had to ask him to repeat it. Repeated: "Do it." And it's like--yes, you don't need any other words and that's like the best advice ever.

Always a big laugh-n-learn talking about girls. I remember vividly sitting on your couch in Boston hearing about how you'd go on ~3+ dates per week in NYC. How persistent!

I think often of you when running—I run for Oreos.

That time I was jogging and you two called out to me from the park bench and Alan shouted, “Get those knees up!” and I was like, who is that over there, anyway? It was you two hecklers. He was right, though! I’ve been working on it.

I’m grateful to you for loving Sarah, for taking such incredible care of her, for making her even more playful and happy.

I can’t help but contrast how you guys have handled Alan’s cancer vs. how my parents handled my father’s. My father retreated and closed himself off. No one knew he was sick until the very end. He refused to tell anyone, he refused to ask for help, he made no effort to reach out and connect with his friends. He shut down.

Now look at what you have done. You have reached out to your friends. You have not only maintained but strengthened your connections with those you love and with those who love you. You have asked for help. You have shared the most private, difficult times of your lives through Caringbridge and in conversation. You have made tremendous sacrifices to see people in New York, in La Jolla, in Boston. You have opened yourselves with the indefatigable good humor, good nature, and joy in life that characterizes both of you.

One of my favorite Alan memories: Asking for cupcakes on vacation. He would often sneak into the kitchen early in the morning when I was the only one up and ask for a cupcake, like a little kid who might get told no from his mom and be disappointed--of course I handed him the entire box (and then said no to my kids, lol!).

I shall be forever grateful to you as the one who has given my dear friend Sarah the gift of what seems at least from the outside the uncomplicated kindness of love. This is no small matter—there is really nothing greater a human soul can give to another as we pass on our brief journeys through this world. In catching glimpses of who you are through the prism of your relationship, it seems to me that you know yourself well and in so knowing have learned to give the blessing of really coming to know and appreciate another.

Alan, when I think about you, I picture your smiling face. It was a beacon during a very challenging time for me. As you know, HBS was different for me than I had expected. I found the size to be intimidating and you were a support from the earliest days. Over the past six-and-a-half years since we’ve graduated, you’ve been an important sounding board. I have loved being part of your life—meeting your friends at Shabbat dinner and at other dinners with [my partner]. I envision your smiling face and I, involuntarily, smile myself.

The first three things I remember knowing about Alan are: his taste for ice cream, his enthusiasm for socks, and how much he adores dogs. Of course, I’ve gotten to know him more since then and I guess those things could seem a bit superficial, but to me this is what they say: He is full of love (for ice cream, for dogs, for socks, for you, for family, etc.)...

