

*Below is the text of a eulogy to Mayer Mitchell by his son Richard Mitchell delivered at a campus service on September 28, 2007.*

It's an odd feeling to have mixed emotions at my father's memorial service. Of course, I'm filled with sadness and grief, but although it doesn't show right this second, my primary emotions are great joy and gratitude. You see, I've had some version of this speech rattling around in my head for 38 years, and I'm thankful I didn't have to give it until now.

As many of you know, when I was thirteen, right around the time of my bar mitzvah, Dad was diagnosed with Hodgkin's Disease, and he was Stage Four. There is no Stage Five. And at that time, it was not a treatable disease. He was told that he had six months to live, and he should get his affairs in order. He was told that there was one possibility of an experimental treatment that might give him some extra time, and he told the doctors, whose names have been mentioned to you today, to keep him alive until I graduated from high school. With the help of those doctors, my mother, who was the rock of his life, and a force of will unlike any we will ever know, he got to see me graduate from high school. He got to see all four of us graduate from college; he got to walk his three daughters down the aisle; he got to spend 38 more anniversaries with my mother; he got to see his grandchildren be born-- and I'll talk more about them in a minute. He got to do all the great things that are outlined in the program—with Camp Ramah, with AIPAC, with the Ahavas Chesed Synagogue, with this University. He got to travel the world with many of you, his great friends who are here today, and he got to see Alabama win 12

more Southeastern Conference Championships and four national championships.

I'll leave it to you to decide how he would have ordered the priorities of those items.

He got to see me graduate from high school, and he also got to see seven of his eight grandchildren graduate from high school. And he made it far enough into Sam's senior year to give him advice about where he should go to college next year.

So, for all of that, I am eternally grateful.

A couple of people have asked me today what it's like to be the son of such a man who really was bigger than life and a force of nature.

A couple of years ago, I read Elie Wiesel's autobiography, "All Rivers Run to the Sea," and there was a passage in it that really answered that question for me. He was speaking of his father, who was one of the most prominent rabbis in his native Hungary, and he said:

*I would walk down the street and people would stop me and say "Aren't you the son of Rabbi Shlomo Wiesel?," and I felt proud, delighted to be known as his son, for it means I come from somewhere and that while I am but a branch, the trunk is sturdy, and the treetops stir the clouds.*

There was never a minute when I was not proud and joyful to be his son.

Well, that's not totally true. There was one time, and I'm going to tell you this story for two reasons. One, because there is a Hassidic saying that goes "If you think of something funny to say, and you don't say it, then you are a criminal." The second is that no celebration of my dad's life would be complete without a football story. It was 1978. I was in my first year of law school in California, and Alabama was playing the University of Washington in Seattle. Now, this was before ESPN, and

not every game was on television, but it wouldn't have mattered, as you know, because my dad was going to the game, even if it was in Seattle.

So, my mother and he came out to California and picked me up, and we flew up to Seattle for the game. As is often the case, the University of Seattle gave the folks from the visiting team the worst seats in the stadium, in the corner of the end zone. Bubba did not do the corner of the end zone. So, in his inimitable way, he finagled us some better tickets, and we walked out onto the upper deck of the stadium, and sat down on the front row on the 40-yard-line. Beautiful seats. It was one of the five days of the year it wasn't raining in Seattle, and it was a beautiful day, and I thought this is going to be great. I looked around, and I noticed that there were a lot of very large guys sitting around us wearing purple sweaters with Ws on them. I thought that was odd, so I turned to this gentleman next to me, who looked like a Coke machine with a head on it, and I asked him, "What's the deal with the purple sweaters? What's going on here?" He said, "Oh, this is the Washington football alumni section." I said, okay, this is going to be interesting.

And so, the game progressed. It was very nip and tuck. It was very similar to the last two games that Poppa got to see the last two weeks. Back and forth. A great contest. And, just to show you that some of this has rubbed off, I remember the score, even though it was 29 years ago this week. Alabama was winning 20-17. Washington was driving to either win or tie the game with about two minutes left. And, they had a wide receiver on the team that had been on the Olympic team two years before. One of the fastest players ever. The crowd was going crazy. The quarterback stepped back, threw a pass to that wide receiver, who caught it on the

dead run and looked like he was going in for the winning touchdown. And out of nowhere, an Alabama player came up, and in the parlance of today, blew him up, tackled him so hard that he fumbled the ball. Alabama recovered, and the crowd-- which a minute earlier, a second earlier-- had been screaming in ecstasy, suddenly got very quiet. You couldn't hear a sound anywhere in the stadium, except for one guy in a red sweater who jumped up in the middle of the Washington alumni football section and screamed out, "That's the way to show those son-of-a-guns how to play football!" Although he didn't say guns. At that moment, I didn't know my father. My mother, who had been through a lot of thick and a lot of thin with him, she didn't know him either at that point.

But, he was a survivor. Somehow we got out of there in one piece, and Alabama went on to win the national championship that year.

So, yes, it was a great joy to be his son, but one of his greatest joys was to be asked if he was my father, or if he was Melinda's father, or Joy's father, or Lisa's father, or one of his grandchildren's grandfather.

He and I were different in many ways. He was very hard-charging as you know. I'm very laid back. He was a Republican, and though it may be dangerous for me to admit it in this crowd, I'm a Democrat. He wasn't perfect. But the best way to describe, I think, the differences between us is that he was a football guy, while I prefer baseball. And, he carried that football persona through everything that he did. He was tough. Obviously he had to be tough to beat cancer five different times, let alone accomplish all the other things he did. One of my favorite pictures of my dad-- and those of you who are AIPACers know this picture very well; those of you

who have his book, it's in there as well-- he was presiding at an AIPAC event at which Vice President Quayle was speaking a number of years ago, and there was a heckler in the audience, and no, it wasn't me. The cameraman who was there captured the moment as my father stood up to point his finger at the heckler and tell him to sit down and show respect to the vice president, and as the person who was on the receiving end of that look more than anyone else-- with the possible exception of my sister Joy-- I know what that heckler was feeling at that time.

He was, also, always in control, even to the very end. How many people can not only plan their memorial service ahead of time, before they pass, but instruct a university president, a rabbi and a minister to keep their remarks to five minutes and have them do it, even after he's gone? But, he was much more complex than that. Like most tough guys, he could be a pussycat. He could get teary-eyed listening to Edith Piaf, and my fondest memory of the softer side of him was the first time I handed him his grandson Jonathan, who is going to carry on the name of which he was so proud. When Jon was only about two days old, my dad was sitting on the sofa, and I said, "Here's your grandson." Dad held his arms out like a forklift, and I placed Jon in there, and he couldn't move. He was afraid to hold Jon any tighter. He was afraid he was gonna drop him. He was scared to death.

He could be stubborn-- I'm sure you'll all be surprised to hear-- and he could stand his ground, but he wasn't as set in his ways as you might have thought. He could change his mind on occasion. I can remember when I was about 10 years old. He donated some land to the city of Saraland to put up a fire station, and the city wanted to name the fire station after him to thank him for the gift, and he said, "No,

**I don't need my name on a building." Obviously, that's something he changed his mind about.**

**But he did that not out of ego, or anything like that. He wanted to put his name on this building and the other buildings on this campus to inspire others to do similar great deeds, to show them what was possible, to show them what could be done if you put your mind to it.**

**In the Torah, King Solomon says:**

*"The days come, and the days go. One generation passes away, and another one comes, but the Earth abides forever. The sun also rises, and the sun goes down. What has been will be."*

**Again, quoting Elie Wiesel from his autobiography, speaking about this passage, he says:**

*"Must we stop time then, and the sun? Yes, sometimes we must try, even if it is for nothing. Sometimes we must try because it is for nothing. Precisely because death awaits us in the end, we must live fully. Precisely because an event seems devoid of meaning, we must give it one. Precisely because the future eludes us, we must create it."*

**Live fully, he did. Create a future, he did. He always taught us that the measure of a person was that he leave the world a little better than he found it. Had he died 38 years ago, he would have accomplished that a hundred times over. These 38 years have been a gift to him and to all of us.**

**Another surprising thing about him that belies the tough-guy image, which has already been eluded to a couple of times today-- Meryl talked about it at the**

graveside service this morning; President Moulton mentioned it in his remarks—  
was that my dad loved English poetry. He could quote the entire canon of  
Shakespeare off the top of his head. He used to regale us when we were kids with his  
dramatic rendition of Kipling’s “Gunga Din.” So, I chose a poem from that period  
to read because I thought it was appropriate today. It’s called “Crossing the Bar”  
by Lord Tennyson.

*Sunset and evening star,*

*And one clear call for me!*

*And may there be no moaning of the bar,*

*When I put out to sea,*

*But such a tide as moving seems asleep,*

*Too full for sound and foam,*

*And that which drew from out the boundless deep*

*Turns again home.*

*Twilight and evening bell,*

*And after that the dark!*

*And may there be no sadness of farewell,*

*When I embark;*

*For tho’ from out our bourne of Time and Place*

*The flood may bear me far,  
I hope to see my Pilot face to face  
When I have crossed the bar.*

This is extremely appropriate, especially the line about “may there be no sadness or farewell.” He didn’t want us to be sad. In fact, on his last day as we knew the end was near, he reminded us again. He could hardly speak. He couldn’t open his eyes. We were sitting around him, holding his hands. Everyone was crying. He finally opened his eyes, looked around at us and said, “No crying.” One last order. One last request. He told us he wasn’t afraid of death. He’d faced it down too many times. He had a great ride. Fifty-four years plus of marriage to his best friend and soulmate. Living to see the seeds he’d planted all over the world come to fruition.

Another thing that was different about us was our musical tastes. He didn’t get rock ‘n’ roll. I have quoted to you today from Elie Wiesel and King Solomon. I would like to finish with a quote from another great Jewish philosopher, Dan Fogelberg. Dan Fogelberg was a third-tier, at best, singer-songwriter from the ‘70s, and I wasn’t really that big of a fan of his. And, I can tell you, kids, just in case you’re worried, I don’t have any of these songs on my iPod. But he did write a song about his father when he passed away, which I would like to close with today.

His father was a musician also. He was a leader of a swing band, and he wrote a song called the “Leader of the Band,” and the chorus goes like this:

*The leader of the band has died  
And his eyes are growing cold*

*But his blood runs through*

*My instrument*

*And his song is in my soul--*

*My life has been a poor attempt*

*To imitate the man*

*I'm just a living legacy*

*To the leader of the band.*

**We are all part of a phenomenal legacy. He wouldn't want us to be sad today. He would want us to be thankful for all the gifts he received and those he bestowed. Most of all, he would want us to be inspired by his life, to carry on that legacy he has left us, to each make the world a better place than we found it.**