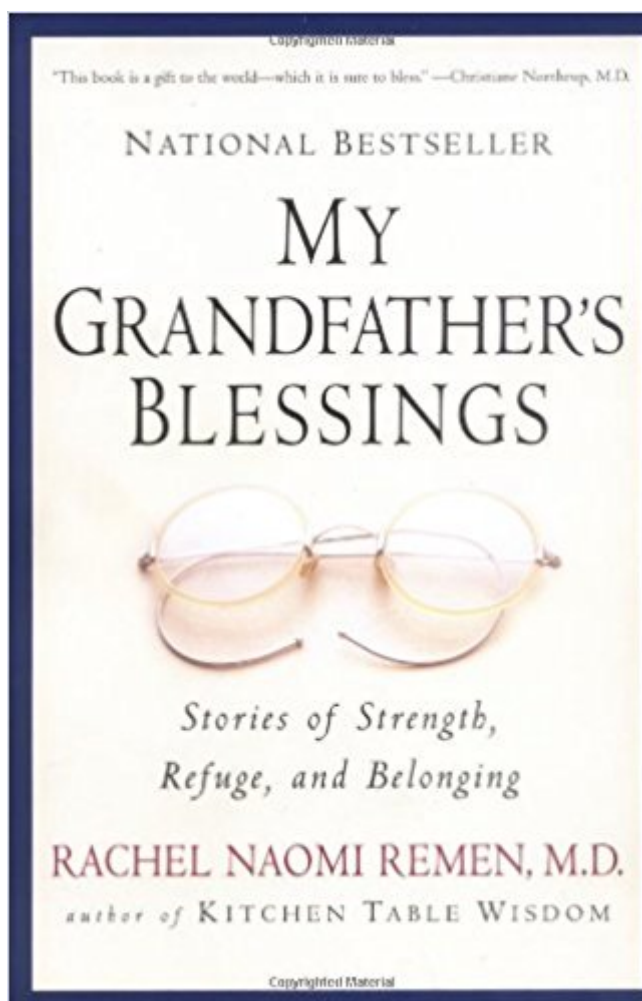


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My Grandfather's Blessings: Stories Of Strength, Refuge, And Belonging



Synopsis

In *My Grandfather's Blessings*, Rachel Naomi Remen, a cancer physician and master storyteller, uses her luminous stories to remind us of the power of our kindness and the joy of being alive. Dr. Remen's grandfather, an orthodox rabbi and scholar of the Kabbalah, saw life as a web of connection and knew that everyone belonged to him, and that he belonged to everyone. He taught her that blessing one another is what fills our emptiness, heals our loneliness, and connects us more deeply to life. Life has given us many more blessings than we have allowed ourselves to receive. *My Grandfather's Blessings* is about how we can recognize and receive our blessings and bless the life in others. Serving others heals us. Through our service we will discover our own wholeness and the way to restore hidden wholeness in the world.

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Customer Reviews

When doctor and author Rachel Naomi Remen (*Kitchen Table Wisdom*) was young, she was caught between two different views of life: that of her rabbi grandfather and that of her highly academic, research-oriented parents, who believed religion was the opiate of the masses. As Remen gravitated toward academics and serving the world as a medical doctor, her grandfather became an "island of mysticism in a vast sea of science." But over time, Remen discovered that two seemingly divergent paths could lead to the same destination, especially as she learned to blend her spiritual beliefs with her medical treatment. Remen uses the heart-rending stories of her patients to teach readers how to follow in her example, that is, combining a life of service with a life of receiving and giving blessings (a combination that avoids common problems such as burnout,

self-sacrifice, and navel gazing). Remen also includes personal stories of her grandfather, who showered the world with his mystical beliefs and wizened blessings. While this story-by-story structure is similar to the bestselling *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, it is still a tearful and satisfying formula.

--Gail Hudson --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

When she was four years old, Remen's grandfather brought her an unusual present: a paper cup of dirt, which he instructed her to water daily. She did, with increasing boredom, until she was astonished to find that a plant had sprouted. "My grandfather was a scholar of the Kabbalah, the mystical teachings of Judaism," Remen tells us. Through this exercise and others, he taught her that the "spark of God" exists, even in the most unpromising places. Through a series of unpretentious, affecting vignettes, the author of the bestseller *Kitchen Table Wisdom* encourages readers to recognize and celebrate the unexpected blessings in their own lives. Many of her recollections are linked to her experiences as a medical student and a physician working with cancer patients, but the most memorable ones relate to Remen's deep engagement with her grandfather, who died when she was seven. She gently illustrates her advice through simple yet powerful stories, such as that of a young woman whose husband helped her discover the real meaning of beauty years after her devastating mastectomy; of a widow who learned to cherish her husband's memory with love instead of with "a monument of pain"; and of a little boy who recognized that it's easier to love just a few toys than it is to love many. "Wisdom," Remen writes in this exceptional book, "lies in engaging the life you have been given as fully and courageously as possible and not letting go until you find the unknown blessing that is in everything." Author tour.

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After reading this, I had the great privilege of meeting Dr. Remen, and may I say that she is very much the person I hoped and knew she would be: deeply kind and compassionate and wise in a way I aspire to someday be. She writes to the heart of what it means to be human. The baby boy in the ER who somehow lived against all the odds--the power and mystery of life and of the will to live when in the presence of overwhelming love. "When it works," she titled the story, because sometimes the end of the story is not the one we would have chosen. But sometimes, oh sometimes, it does get to be what we had so hoped for. I was re-reading this book and its companion, *"Kitchen Table Wisdom,"* while very ill in the hospital. A nurse walked in, saw them in my room and exclaimed over how much she loved those books, too. I instantly knew I was in good

hands and that this was someone who cared deeply about her patients--and she did. Because that is the gift Dr. Remen offers her readers: a clear view of not just medicine but life, a chance to become the best in ourselves, a way forever forward. I am deeply grateful for these books and have given many copies away.

A wonderfully well written book. In "My Grandfather's Blessings," Rachel Remen uses stories of her rabbi grandfather, her patients and herself to illustrate ways in which grave illnesses, healing and dying can dramatically transform peoples' lives. She explores the spiritual aspect of every life, and helps the reader stop and recount their many blessings one page at a time. Some very touching stories throughout, brief and easy to read a little each day. I was very moved by many of the stories as I, like most people, have also been touched by terminal illness and loss in my life. Seems I could relate to almost every story in some way. Highly recommended if you need something to help soothe your soul.

I so want to read this book again! It is for sure one of my favorite books ever! Reading it is like stepping into a parallel dimension of assurance, goodness, and light. This is the book I would recommend to anyone with questions about traditional Judaism. Rachel Naomi Remen, a cancer physician, recounts her weekly childhood visits to her grandfather's house. Though she was raised in a secular Jewish home, Dr. Remen's grandfather was an orthodox rabbi; and each erev shabbat she would visit his home and enter his world of Torah stories, lessons, and blessings. Herself a master storyteller, Dr. Remen draws you into each of these visits so completely that you feel like you are there, and a recipient of "her grandfather's blessings."

This book was gifted to me by a client and I will be forever grateful for the gift. As a professional coach of business and life, I often struggle, even to myself, to adequately explain what I do and why it is effective. I fully embrace and honor the mechanics of coaching, but I've always known that there is a serendipitous factor which goes beyond logic. Now, I 'get' the explanation in my heart - I have the unique and incredible career of being able to bless others through my work with my focus and my presence. An excerpt demonstrates: (page 90) "As we sit together,....I know that something will emerge from our conversation over time that is a part of a larger coherent pattern that neither of us can fully see at this moment." And, while that factor is vital to my work, it isn't exclusive to coaches or any other helping industry - it is the glue that holds all of us humans together as we journey through life. Remen uses the word 'blessing' as a synonym for the word 'love.' Yet, 'blessing' seems

to me to go beyond 'love,' to be the highest order of love, the top of the pinnacle. This is an easy read in terms of layout - short chapters filled with human interest stories. It is also a powerful and attitude changing book - read it only if you are longing for hope and to know yourself better.

I suggest you grab a handful of Magic Markers as you prepare to settle in with Rachel Naomi Remen's *My Grandfather's Blessings*, because you're about to engage in some abundant underlining and heavy annotation as Remen's nonpareil book spills over, page after page, with unequivocal truth and laser insights. Some of the most arresting passages for me, by chapters: "Blessings"--delineating the author's relationship with her grandfather and how it was through his eyes she learned to see herself, enabling her to transcend the unrealistic academic expectations of her parents and those perverse "two points." I lean upon the proverb "Give me a child until [she's] seven, and you may have [her] the rest of [her] life." To the ineffable good fortune of "Neshume-le," her grandfather was there at the time of her emotional hard-wiring with his agape' love of unqualified acceptance. "Wrestling with the Angel"--focusing on the ironic ability of an enemy to convey blessing, at the heart of which is the ancient narrative of a youthful Jacob at the River Jabbok, full of fear's desperation and resolution, being touched and injured as he seeks his adversary's benediction. I love Remen's comment about wondering if her grandfather "had left me with this story as a compass" to navigate her own tough crossing with Crohn's disease. We can all compile lengthy lists of personal enemies--metastatic cancer, fractured spines, heart disease--the law of entropy pounding on our mortal bodies, what St. Paul calls these "tents of clay," all wasting away. Hemingway was right when he noted how we're all broken and how some of us become "strong in the broken places." So much personal ministry resides in the full-throttle experience of infirmity, where the truest empathy can be born and nurtured. "Owning"--portraying the little boy enamored of his two toy cars, then being inundated by the plethora of Hot Wheels gathered by Rachel and her friends via the gas promotion, resulting in the kid's indifference toward his new, vast collection, until he explains to Remen that "I don't know how to love this many cars." It is such an apt commentary on the affluence and acquisitiveness of American culture, where the mantra is "more, more, more...and a little more." Too much overwhelms and paralyzes. I like the lady who has the garage sale, to cut all her "things" in half. No doubt she was discovering how true wealth comes in the name of contentment, measured not by the abundance of "what we have," but by "what we can do without." "You Have to Be Present to Win"--where, with all her medical acumen, a Dr. Elizabeth treats a ninety-year-old Indian woman, lengthening her life by several years as she prescribes protocols for the old lady's diabetes and infections and heart failure, learning only after her death

that this stoical Indian was to be a subject for one author's study of "the great medicine women who had received the lineage and kept alive the ancient ways of healing." Remen's summary cuts to the truth: "I wonder if too great a scientific objectivity can make you blind." We live in a time that exalts all the technology and speed and knowledge at our fingertips, a time that deifies all things quantifiable. Our error too often is that we desire to pronounce and pontificate when we should be inclining ourselves to listen and learn. "Getting It Right"--where Remen's grandfather, an Orthodox Jewish rabbi, probes the "eight levels of charity," as declared by the scholarly Maimonides, culminating in its highest, crystallized form: an unbegrudging heart that gives freely and anonymously, without knowing the beneficiary and without need or expectation of thanks, to a recipient who does not know his benefactor. I've often wondered when the tipping point comes, when the getting finally gets trumped by the giving, when the higher joy belongs to the giver. No doubt it is God our Father, the ultimate and eternal Gift-Giver, who practices this principle best. "Bearing Witness"--where a panel of psychologists convene to provide dream interpretations based on Jungian theory, only to be asked for an analysis of a recurrent dream involving one who was "stripped of all human dignity and worth through Nazi atrocities." At one point, Carl Jung's grandson, one of the panelists, prompts the audience: "Would you all please rise? We will stand together in a moment of silence in response to this dream." We too often miss the need for silence--or the need for "presence in silence." We testify to the significance of moments not so much with our words as with our simply being there. I've had countless friends refuse to attend funerals or make visits to hospice with the excuse they wouldn't know what to say. What to say? Say nothing, I tell them. Just be there. Your presence transcends any words. Your silence is its own profound language. "Wisdom"--when "Neshume-le" discovers the essence of light in the lighting of the menorah, and how it symbolizes the spirit of God as He indwells and illumines our lives. I appreciate the gentle progression of her grandfather's teaching, the day-by-patient-day lighting of the eight candles until the room at dusk is effulgent, and his explanation that we all "kindle and strengthen the light in one another." But what I like best in this vignette is how an older, wiser, more sophisticated woman remembers herself at six being shaped by the man who knew and loved her best and expresses her absolute faith in all he taught her: how "there is a place in everyone that can carry light. This is true. My grandfather said so." What formative power a caring adult wields. "Pearls of Wisdom"--examining how "the oyster wraps the grain of sand in thin translucent layers until, over time, it has created something of great value in the place where it was most vulnerable to pain," an essay on how wisdom can emerge from hurt. We cringe in our humanity--our "flesh"--when St. Paul, who suffered and suffered, tells us to "count it as joy" as we face adversity. How impossibly tough is

that? Only in the spirit can pain lift us to the heights of wisdom. "The Presence of God"--as Remen touches on the sole point of religious questioning she ever had with her grandfather's explication of Judaism: the law regarding the construct of a "minyan"--the need for at least ten "men" to assemble before official prayer can take place and for God to be immanent in the room with them. "Why only men? Isn't God present when ten women gather together?" she wants to know. His answer is rote theology: "It has always been ten men, since the beginning." A couple years later, when Remen is seven and her grandfather's health has degenerated to the point of impending death, he awakens one day from a nap, gazes deeply upon his granddaughter, and makes the most sacred of statements to her...about her: "You are a minyan, all by yourself, Neshume-le." What a line, bubbling over with love's infinite encouragement--never mind some stodgy orthodoxy--the perfect subtext for a relationship every grandparent yearns to emulate. And there are more, many more scenes in *My Grandfather's Blessings* that touch and pique the reader, a broad compendium of vignettes full of a doctor's perspicacity and a patient's compassion. You come away from her essays knowing that Salinger's arch protagonist was right when Holden Caulfield notes how you could judge a book by whether you wished the author were a great friend you could call up at home. That's an easy, happy notion: Rachel Naomi Remen on speed-dial...J. Michael

Thompsonmazais@aol.com October 15, 2013

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