

The sign hanging on the radio-station wall was an ominous directive both to the veteran reporters who wanted to maintain their careers and to the young wannabes eager to make it. The bespectacled Larry King was just starting out himself when he read those guiding words: “When in doubt, leave it out,” the sign cautioned. But an insatiably curious and courageous King ignored the “writing on the wall,” and proudly tells how throughout his career he always broke that rule. “If I felt like saying something, I said it,” King tells. “If I was curious about something, I asked the question. I was never afraid to say I don’t know.”

So at the age of 22, Larry King asked a question he’ll never forget. While interviewing a Catholic priest, King, the innocent Jewish *boychik* from Brooklyn, asked the celibate priest how many children he had. “The look on his face is something I still see in my nightmares,” King has jokingly said.

Nonetheless, his boss approved of his indomitable, almost childlike, inquisitiveness and King continued to greet his guests with an indefatigable salvo of questions. He had a soothing way about him that put his guests at ease and got them to open up. It was with his matter-of-fact style that in 1992 he got Ross Perot to make the unprecedented announcement on CNN that he would run for president.

After 46 years of asking questions and interviewing over 40,000 people, King has honed his gift of listening which he feels is the only way to learn. “I always knew that I never learned anything in my life while I was speaking.”

In fact, it was during a moment of “silence” that King learned the greatest lesson of his journalistic journey. It happened on Larry’s first day on the job as a radio announcer, a day he had dreamed about since he was a little boy. In his

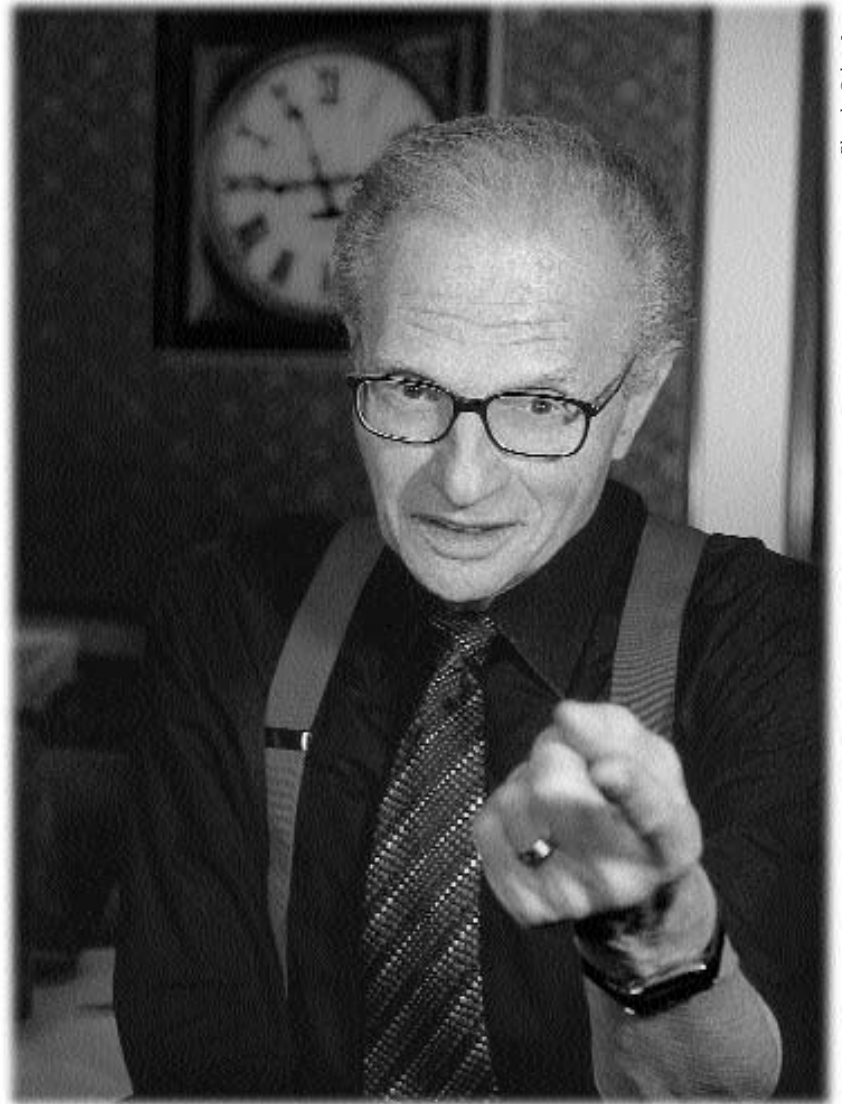


Photo by Gidon Levin

Larry King the lion king

by Aliza Davidovitz

dreams, however, he never imagined that he’d be gripped by fear when the mike he so longed for was open. When the “do or die” moment was finally before him, King froze and was simply not able to speak. He was certainly in “doubt,” but had “left all of it out!” The result was dead airtime on the radio. King’s boss stormed into his booth and said, “This is the communications business, so communicate!” So on May 1, 1957, at WAHR in Miami Beach, Florida, Larry King found his voice and has not stopped talking ever since. He told his listeners that it was his first time ever on the radio, that he was scared and that his boss had just screamed at him. Since that day King was never afraid again because he had learned to simply just be himself.

Ironically, it was by imitating others that a young Larry King nurtured his broadcasting dreams. As a child he would pretend to be Red Barber, the famous Dodger's announcer. Friends recall that at ball games, when Larry was only 10 years old, he would go to the back of the stands, roll up his score card

God to parents who just a year earlier had buried their first-born son, Irwin, when he died of appendicitis. Larry, then called by his Jewish name, Leibel (which means a "lion" in Yiddish) would go everywhere with his father. They were extremely close, and in Larry's eyes his father was nothing less than a god. One day, when little Larry,

was sitting around the dining room table as they did every evening, his father asked, "Leibel, how was Hebrew school today?" Larry replied, "Fine." All of sudden he felt a whack and says he flew across the room. His father had met someone who informed him that Larry had never made it to Hebrew school that day. "He just sat there, picked up his spoon and continued to eat his soup," King recounts. "He looked over at me and said, 'Never lie.'" Lesson number one!

Lesson number two was not as physical, but equally painful for King. His father had always cautioned him to never talk to strangers. So once, while sitting on the steps outside of his house when he was 7 years old, Larry made every effort to ignore the mafia-type guy who pulled up in a big black car. "Come here kid," the guy said. King froze. "Come here kid, I got something for you," he beckoned again. King got up and walked toward the car. The sinister character popped open his trunk and started scooping out bunches of comic books and throwing them at him saying, "I told my son the next time he disobeys me, I'm gonna give away all his comic books to the first kid I see." And Larry was the first kid he saw. "I went out of my mind," King says with a laugh. "I think it could have been my first orgasm." That night King's father walked into his room and asked him where he got his new collection. King told his father some guy gave them to him. But because he had disobeyed his father, the ill-fated comic books were once again plucked from loving little arms and thrown into the trash.

Even though King's memories of his father remained vivid, the absence of his father was extremely painfully for him and his family. They also suffered economic hardship. King, his mother, and younger brother, Martin, were forced to relocate to Bensonhurst and soon found themselves on government relief, the welfare of days' gone bye. But with that government assistance came regular visits by agency employees who came to inspect whether the family was living within its means and whether King's mother was buying Grade "A" meat.



Photo by Gideon Levin

and pretend it was a mike and that he was a sportscaster. While most of the young boys fantasized about being ball players, King aspired to be the announcer. "When I was 5 years old, I would lie in bed, look at the radio, and want to be on the radio," King was quoted as saying. "I don't know why I was magically attuned to it."

Considering the circumstances of his life, indeed it would have taken magic for King's desire to be fulfilled. King, born Larry H. Zeiger on November 19, 1933 in Brooklyn, New York, was the son of Orthodox Jews who had emigrated from Russia. He recalls how his father had prayed for a boy and blessedly Larry was born. He was a gift from

aged 91/2, was coming home from the library lugging a pile of books, he saw a policeman coming down the stairs of his house. The police officer approached Larry, swept him up in his arms and broke the crushing news to him—his beloved father, who was only 43 years old, had suffered a fatal heart attack. Larry's hero was gone forever. "My father was a guiding force in my life," King says. "I took his death very badly because I took it as him leaving me. My father was my life."

King says he remembers everything about his father—his walk, his smell, and the sound of his voice. He says that although his father was usually very funny and fun to be around, there are two strict lessons he learned from him that he will never forget. One day while the family

After his father died it wasn't only the meat that didn't make the "A" grade. Larry's school grades slipped drastically. He also let slip away many of the Orthodox Jewish practices with which he had been raised. Furious that his father was taken from him, King also buried his belief in God. He has been an agnostic ever since. "Even though I'm a very forgiving person, if there is a God, I'd have a tough time forgiving Him," King shares.

The one thing King never abandoned was his dream to become a broadcaster. After he graduated from high school, he did all kinds of odd jobs to help out his family, but his ambitions were brewing inside of him. Everyone told him he was crazy and that he should pursue a job with a future. So while his friends went off to college, the obstinate dreamer was selling milk, delivering parcels and working in a mail room. But it just so happened that the mail room he was working at was in the same building as radio station WOR. King has told reporters how everyday he would ride up the elevator six or seven times to WOR and pretend that he was an announcer. One day he bumped into a CBS announcer and told him that he always wanted to be on radio and asked if he had any advice. The man advised him to go to Miami Beach where he was sure to find many opportunities.

Much to the surprise of everyone who knew him, at age 22, Larry packed his bags, left all that was familiar to him, and headed south. He knocked on door after door until finally opportunity knocked back. After passing a voice test at WAHR, he was hired—to sweep floors. He accepted the job with the proviso that when an on-air position opened up, he'd be the first to get the job. It did, and he got it. But five minutes before airtime his boss asked him what stage name he was going to use. His boss felt "Larry Zeiger" was too ethnic. Suddenly an advertisement in the newspaper for "King's Wholesale Liquor" caught his boss's eyes and he asked, "How about Larry King?" But even after 46 years of using that name, King says that it is just an "outerwear thing."

Although he did change his name legally, he says, "In my heart I'll always be Zeiger." He tells how thrilled he was when he saw the name Zeiger listed at Ellis Island and says that when his day comes, "Zeiger" will probably be on his tombstone too.

But in 1957, the nascent "Larry King" took the name his boss gave him and in

King's first time on TV was the second and last time he was ever nervous again throughout his career. In an interview with *Sun Valley*, he recounts the comedic events of his first night on TV:

"Two lawyers were debating. They were on the left and the right, and I was in the middle. But the producers had made a



Photo by Gregory Heisler

On Location at the famous Carnegie Deli in New York City.

turn made a name for himself. His show was a great hit. People loved his affable, funny, and non-threatening style. A consummate multi-tasker, the young radio personality was soon hired by WKAT and then WIOD to host a talk show from a houseboat used by ABC for their TV series, *Surfside 6*. He interviewed everyone from famous personalities to regular Joes and was equally captivated by whoever was sitting in front of him at the time. In addition, he began writing for major local newspapers.

With his career riding high, he relocated his mother from Brooklyn to Miami Beach. It was not long before King was given his own TV show at WLBW-TV called *Miami Undercover*. In 1964 he left to join WTVJ-TV.

major mistake. They gave me a swivel chair with no back. This was supposed to look hip. What happens, I turned to my left and I just kept swiveling. I could not stop the swivel; I would go to one and have to grab myself to stop. So I swiveled the entire show. I was also smoking at the same time. You smoked on television then all the time. So my reviews said, 'The swiveling, smoker! It could start a whole new concept!'"

Larry's own success also had him spinning out of control. He was living beyond his means and borrowing money from "Peter to pay Paul." But one "friend" got impatient for King to repay the \$5,000 he owed and had him arrested. King was charged with grand larceny. Although the

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charges were dropped, the story hit all the newspapers and consequently he was dismissed from all of his jobs. Overnight, he was a King without a kingdom.

Even after all this time in the business, King reflects back on his success during the '60s and says that from a broadcast standpoint those were the most incredible years of his life. Anybody who was anyone passed through Miami in those days and King got to interview them all. He feels there has never been another election like the Nixon-Humphrey election, or the Kennedy election, or the '68 conventions in Chicago and Miami. And then there was the Kennedy assassination.

Being dismissed from his jobs was devastating for King, who went from being directly involved in the unfolding of history to being history. But true to the blessing of his Jewish name, Leibel, “the lion,” King remained strong and persevered. Indeed, he reigns as the “Lion King” in the media jungle. “I believe in myself and even when I’m knocked down, I get up,” King says. “I believe my survivor instincts are very ‘lionesque.’”

King left Miami and took all kinds of jobs. In 1975, after four years of lamenting the error of his ways and promising to never reverse course, WIOD rehired him. In 1976, he endured another painful setback when his mother passed away. Although she had seen some measure of her son’s fame, she never lived to see how far he would ultimately go. King says that he is also truly sorry that his father was never able to see what he has achieved throughout his life.

But life went on nonetheless and King eventually got himself back on TV and publishing articles again. On January

30, 1978, he debuted the *Larry King Show* where he introduced the concept of live phone-in guests on radio. It rendered its host into a national name. In 1983, King hosted a national TV show that was syndicated to 118 Stations.

King’s uniqueness and talent was soon spotted by the father of 24-hour cable news, Ted Turner. He brought King over to CNN in 1985, and *Larry King Live* was brought to life. With this first-of-a-kind call-in television show, which airs 9 p.m. (ET), King’s became the highest-rated talk show on the air.

CNN launched his fame far beyond the shores of America. He’s been called, “the most remarkable talk-show host on TV ever,” by *TV Guide* and “master of the mike” by *Time magazine*. In 1992, The National Association of Radio Talk Show Hosts named him, “Talk Show Host of the Year.” He’s also been described as the “Muhammad Ali of the broadcast interview.”

Night after night King continues to interview newsmakers and record breakers. He maintains to this day that Frank Sinatra was still his best guest ever and Robert Mitchum, who spent the whole interview giving one-word answers, was his worst. King was so desperate that he resorted to asking Mitchum what he had eaten for supper.

Somehow, King has even found time to author 14 books. His most recent is *Moon Over Manhattan*, his first fiction novel, which he co-authored with his friend, Thomas H. Cook. Post 9/11 they were inspired to write a lighthearted, comical, pro-New York book after witnessing the resilient spirit of New Yorkers.

Larry King’s hard work has been rewarded with numerous awards. But probably the ones most precious to him are his

two Peabody awards and his Emmy, seeing that he says those would be the only materialistic things he’d save if his house was on fire. King has been inducted into five of the nation’s leading broadcasting halls of fame and is the recipient of the prestigious Allen H. Neuharth Award for Excellence in Journalism. King also has won a News and Documentary Emmy Award for Outstanding Interview/Interviewer and 10 Cable ACE awards for Best Interviewer and for best Talk Show Series. Others awards which he also truly values include the Gracie Allen Award, the Unity Award by Lincoln University of Missouri; the Public Service Award by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, Harvard University’s Mahoney Award for increasing public awareness about neuroscience, and the March of Dimes’ Franklin Delano Roosevelt Award for his efforts on behalf of community volunteerism. He was also honored by the American Academy of Achievement for his life’s work in the broadcasting industry with the Golden Plate Award.

But even with all that on his “golden” plate, there are still some interviews that King would really like to get, such as Prince Charles, Chelsea Clinton, Osama bin Laden, and the Pope, who has declined to be interviewed. He says that some questions he might have asked the Pope are what it was like to have lived under both Hitler and Stalin, or what influence Judaism had on the Pope’s life seeing that most of his childhood friends were Jews. But King says that if he could land an interview with God himself, he’d ask him one simple question, “Did you have a son?” King says with a mischievous smile.

One of King’s favorite questions is, “Will you marry me?” Indeed, he has tied the knot seven times, albeit

twice with the same woman. He has five children. He met his current wife, Shawn Southwick, in 1996 while shopping at Tiffany's in Los Angeles. King was immediately struck by the blonde beauty. Their relationship solidified and endured, but when it came time for the lavish wedding there was more than Shawn brewing in King's heart. King needed heart surgery immediately, so the couple got married in UCLA Hospital in September of 1997. The couple lives together with their two children in their 18 room mansion in Beverly Hills. When asked if this is going to be his last marriage, "Yes," King says. "I'm gonna be 70 years old, we have two kids together, where am I gonna go?"

Although King's wife is a religious Mormon with whom he often attends services, he has also remained close to his Jewish roots. He says that he goes to Temple every Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur out of respect to his parents. He says that culturally he really enjoys being Jewish and loves Jewish food and Jewish humor. Oddly enough, the one thing that he still maintains is not mixing milk and meat together. "I'll eat bacon," King says, "but bacon with a glass of milk—I'll faint."

Even though King goes to synagogue he is not sure that God is hearing him. King, in a book he co-authored with Rabbi Irwin Katsof entitled, *Powerful Prayers*, says the only thing he's ever prayed for was for the Dodger's to win a game. Though he just can't seem to find faith, King admittedly says that the many rabbis he's met in his life have affected him profoundly. What King especially likes about Judaism, which he does not find in other faiths, is that it forces people to continually question things—a fitting tradition for the curious King.

King says that Jerusalem is his favorite city in the world. He loves seeing street signs in Hebrew. "I loved the flavor of the city," King shares. "I felt like I had a home." In 1994, he received the Scopus Award from the American Friends of Hebrew University.

The veteran interviewer doesn't have great optimism about peace in the region.

King believes that although 90% of the people on both sides want peace, it's the extremist 10% that is ruining the future of the region. He disagrees with Golda Meir's famed words that there would be peace if the Palestinians learned to love their kids more than they hated Jews. "I've never

admits that he rarely ever holds a grudge, that he is loyal to a fault, even to the point of not being able to fire people. But one thing is certain, nobody walks all over King, unless of course it's on the Walk of Fame in Hollywood where he was honored with a "star" in 1997 for his life's work in



Photo by Gregory Heisler

met any mother who wanted to lose her son," King says. "No mother ever sent her kid off to war saying I hope you die."

As for King, the reason he doesn't want to die is because he is so curious. "If I died I wouldn't know who won the World Series, or who would be the next president," he says. "That would drive me nuts."

King says he never thought he would die until his first heart attack in 1987. Because of his heart problems, King started the Larry King Cardiac Foundation to help people who couldn't afford the costly procedure. In that, and in many other ways, King continues to prove that he has a very good heart.

That heart is most evidenced with the people around him. King himself

the broadcasting industry. King has also recently established a \$1 million journalism scholarship at George Washington University's School of Media and Affairs for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

King also has a funny side that not many people know about. He loves making people laugh. "It's such a kick to stand up in front of a crowd and make people laugh," he says. "It's like having a massive group of people saying I love you." He also thinks he's found the key to longevity explaining that all the comics he has known have lived very long lives.

Larry King, the boy from Brooklyn, interviewer par excellence—hopefully his father has forgiven him for talking to strangers!

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