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I CAN'T GO ON. I WILL GO ON.

Our attention turns at this point in the Yom Kippur service both to our loved ones who have died, but also to death itself. The prospect of course fills us with dread. Yet, most of us can acknowledge that there are fates worse than death. Excruciating pain, is one of them, so is loss of control. Sometimes, in fact, death can be welcome; a soul now at peace after departing its ravaged body.
Many people have told me over the years that they are, really, ready for death. A calmness pervades as they take the end of their mortal span.

On the other hand, death can be a devastating blow, an absolute shock. For example in the opening chapter of the Book of Ruth in the Hebrew Bible we read: there was famine in the land of Israel. Eli Melech, his wife Naomi and their boys went to the Land of Moab where they hoped food could be find.

Eli Melech, Naomi's husband, died and she was left with two sons each of whom married Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. Tragically the boys each died, so Naomi was left without her two sons and without her husband. Can you imagine? How do you go on? How do you even get up in the morning? Naomi had dreamed of having a full life, a big family, grandchildren. These dreams now lay shattered before her.

What exactly is she feeling? The Bible is characteristically silent, but then again perhaps the *Tanakh* is wise in its brevity. How can she feel anything but shock from these brutal shots to the solar plexus?

Silence prevails often, too often, in the presence of serious sickness or in the process of dying. A colleague reflects, "In my parents home, when I was a child, I never remember anyone speaking about sickness. No one in the family spoke about another's sickness. If someone spoke of how healthy a person looked, it would with the speed of a sneeze be counteracted by a *kaynain-hora*. Which literally means may the evil eye be negated. Sickness was either trivialized or repressed. It certainly was not discussed.

Today, of course, everybody talks about sickness and injuries. For some of us we need very little prompting for us to discuss our ailments, doctor's appointments, struggle with whether to have surgery, Medicare coverage, or lack thereof and so on. Conversing about these matters comes easily to most of us.

Walk into a hospital room and you'll hear lots of chatter. Family talking to each other, but interestingly enough, often the communication is not directed to the person lying in the bed even if they are fully conscious and cognizant. Every once in a while a daughter will go over to the bed in a voice akin to a scream and ask, "Do you want a drink of water or ice chips? Do you need anything?"

Need anything? Their needs are profound. One of my colleagues talked about his experience following a coronary infarct:

When you lie on a hospital gurney and look at the nurses, attendants and doctors, you are quickly transformed. The world looks different on your back. You experience unsuspected needs of dependency. All your possessions amount to pajamas, slippers and a robe. You are a fragile human being.

When you are ill or injured, what's worse than the loss of bodily function is the loss of personhood, the ability to control things, not only in the most ultimate sense but in a smaller sense. Maybe the person lying in bed wants to tell us of their wishes, not what they imagined they would be when they were living at a distance from this stricken circumstance Does he want to be intubated? Treated aggressively? Is she exhausted? Has all meaningful life been taken from them so that they have had enough of this life?

Is there fight left in them, is there still a reason to live? Or do they need words of reassurance that they will live on in your hearts, they will never be forgotten? Do they need to know that their soul will separate from their body and have an independent existence different from anything they will ever experience so that the essence of them is just moving to a different state of being?

Do they wish to be reassured that you will always be there by their side? Or do they need a little peace and quiet, a break from well-meaning relatives.

You may have read the poignant story of a woman who took superbly good care of her husband during his illness. She wrote movingly about giving him a sponge bath days before his death, massaging his body with moisturizers. She dressed him and combed his hair. "In fifty-two years of marriage," she writes, "I had never combed his hair."

"You look handsome," I say and mean it. As he tries to rise, he falls back into his chair. His eyes are closed. "He is dead," I think. The hospice nurse arrives, gives him morphine. The pain does not ease.
"You need to be hospitalized," she urges. "We can't manage at home anymore."
He ignores her. He wants to rise and walk but he can't. Most of all he wants to live.
"You are dying," the nurse coldly tells him.
Anger fills his eyes. He will not give in.
"You may not have much time," she continues. "Your wife is here, what do you want to say to her?"

I see something different in his eyes, a softening. Maybe finally an acceptance. He looks at me. I am shaken and silent. "Stuart," the nurse urges, "What do you want to say to your wife?"

He does speak to me. But he says the words so softly and so quickly I can barely hear and I certainly can't remember what he said. Then he becomes unconscious and swiftly the ambulance arrives carrying him to Calvary Hospital where he dies soon after, peacefully. .
We were married fifty-two years.
What reasonable person could ask for more? And yet, if I had one wish, I would add just five more minutes.

Five more minutes. Just five minutes. Of course it's easy to have regrets when someone dies about what wasn't said, the anger we may have, the apology we didn't give. But the way I look at it and the way I view this *yizkor* hour is that the conversation continues, we <u>can</u> talk to them and hear them even though they don't walk among us. Communication doesn't end with physical death. We carry a piece of them, some of their *neshama* with us as a receptor for our deepest thoughts and feelings.

So ask yourself: what is it <u>they</u> would want from you now? My answer: they would want you to learn from the relationship, to be inspired by it, to be instructed by their wisdom. They silently urge us—don't leave thoughts unexpressed with love ones, they ask us to heal the rifts, to get off our high horse and admit there are two sides to every argument, that you can be stubborn too.

So at this tender moment we strain to feel their influence. Mom, Dad, I hear you. You can continue to be proud of me. By my acts of caring and kindness I will reflect your values. You will live on beyond your mortal span. I can assure you that your best efforts to teach by example were not in vain. And if your parents came up short? Can you forgive them their shortcomings? Can you understand them a bit better now? And find a way to reflect the best that was in them?

Ultimately, then, what can death teach us at this hour? Death teaches us how precious life is, health is. And how fragile it all is, how quickly everything can change.

As it did for Brooke and Peggy, after his terrible bike accident which made Brooke a quadriplegic, *New York Magazine* chronicles their struggles with monumental physical issues, depression, panic attacks and, of course, loss of control. One day Brooke had had enough. He announces that he wants to turn off all the machines, everything. He wants to be disconnected from all the tubes and hoses that were keeping him alive. He was ready to die. His wife Peggy and attendant Jaycee did what he asked. They turned off the ventilator and disconnected it from the trach, they turned off the oxygen. They showed Brooke that everything was disconnected.

Brooke sat back in his wheelchair, closed his eyes. He sat there waiting to die, feeling an incredible sense of calm.

Two minutes passed, he opened his eyes, saw Peggy and Jaycee sitting on stools watching him. "Is this a dream?" he asked, "I didn't die? "

To Brooke it was a kind of miracle. "I knew what his medical condition is," Peggy said later, "the reason he didn't die was that he was not then fully vent-dependent. If for some reason Brooke would have become unconscious she would have revived him, Peggy said, because she didn't believe he really wanted to die, she thinks what he really wanted was to believe that he had a measure of control, he could ask to end his life and be heard.

We all yearn for some control when we are sick, while dying and even after death. A congregant calls me concerned. The emotions following the death of her parent just overwhelm her even during the busy work day. She can't stop the tears and has to run out of the room.

"I'm not that kind of person," she says. "I'm usually more together. Since my father died three months I never know how I'm going to feel each day. Some days I wake and I say to myself, 'Great, I feel good, it's not going to happen today and it does."

I ask her if she is able to get her work done, able to be an effective mother. Yes she is functioning well; she is going to grief group. She is getting spiritual help. I tell her she is grieving in a very normal, healthy way. There is a reason that grief begins with intense *shiva*, goes to *sheloshim,* the thirty days which we are not expected to go to parties or socialize very much because you can't bring yourself to do so and a full eleven months grieving ones' parent. Grief can have real physiological and neurological effects upon you.

In my judgment there is nothing wrong with her and everything right with the relationship. She continues to have pain is a direct consequence of the loss that she is experiencing, even after death. During the grief, the assault of feelings does not disappear and can ebb and flow for a long time. Yet, for almost everybody, the intense pain will soften and over the course of a year's time we learn that we can overcome the shock and pain, we can handle what our minds and bodies throw at us, we can function even with intense feelings, in short, we can learn to live with loss.

We can become wiser because of what we have gained in the relationship, what we've learned on the grief journey dealing with the loss of their physical presence.

Some years ago the telephone company had an idea for growing their business. They went to legendary Alabama football coach Bear Bryant and offered him a substantial contract to film a television commercial for the phone company in which all he had to do was speak three words. He was asked to look into the camera and growl, "Call your mama!" Coach Bryant agreed to the offer but on the day of the shoot something unexpected happened. Everything was set up. The lights were in place, the cameras were rolling, but when he was supposed to speak, he did not growl.
Instead his eyes welled up with tears and in a choking voice the intimidating football coach said, "Call your mama: I wish I could call mine."

A colleague tells of counseling a young woman who had a falling out with her parents, hadn't spoken with them for several years. The rabbi asks, "If you were to get a phone call saying that they had died, would you go to the funeral?"
"Yes I suppose I would."
"Why?" the rabbi asks.
"I guess I owe them that. They're my parents and because I'm afraid I'd feel guilty for the rest of my life if I didn't. I would go because I would need a sense of closure."
The rabbi said, "I understand. Why not go to them now when you both can have a sense of closure?"

Do it while <u>you</u> still can.

I may have shared with you once the story of a strange assignment that a teacher gave the students in a math class. The kids were cranky and restless so she asked them to list the names of the other students in the room on two sheets of paper leaving a space beneath each name. Then the teacher told them to think of the nicest thing they could say about each classmates and write it down. The following Monday she gave each student their list. Before long the entire class was smiling with the compliments.

Several years later the teacher learned that one of her students Mark Eckland was killed in Viet Nam. She attended the military funeral then gathered with their friends at Eckland's home.

Mark's parents approached the teacher. "I want to show you something," his father said taking a wallet out of his pocket. "They found this on Mark when he was killed. We thought you might recognize it." Opening the billfold he carefully removed two worn pieces of notebook paper that obviously had been taped, folded and refolded many times. The teacher knew without looking that the papers were the ones containing all the good things that each of Mark's classmates had said about him.
"Thanks so much for doing that," Mark's mother said. "As you can see Mark treasured it."

We treasure the good things that people say about us or do for us. As a child growing up in the Bronx the last four digits of Terry Noble's phone number was 7-4-0-1. When Terry got a social security number the last four digits were 7-4-0-1. Years later when he found himself a volunteer in a kibbutz in Israel he now called himself Tuvia Ariel. There he worked with a carpenter named Shimon whom he respected. Tuvia learned that the carpenter was one of the few who escaped Auschwitz alive joining a Polish brigade within the British army. He was sent to Palestine where he deserted to join the Palmach and help Israel win her independence in 1948.

Tuvia could not believe when he spotted the number tattooed on this carpenter's arm, the last four digits the same 7-4-0-1. Tuvia's life had always been a struggle. Once when he was working machinery on the kibbutz his leg was sucked into the grinder and he had to self-amputate. Years later he was able to get an artificial limb and with hard work not only learned to walk but he got into tourism school and became a tour guide.

Towards the beginning of his career when he was low man on the totem pole he was assigned to pick up tourists at the airport and bring them to the office where an experienced guide would take over.
One day he picked up an American who was ostensibly wealthy. Tuvia could not bring himself to be friendly with this guy who seemed to have all the advantages in life. Halfway from Lod to Jerusalem the tourist yelled, "What's with you? You think I'm just a superficial, materialistic American tourist don't you? You have no idea where I've come from, see?" He yanked up the sleeve of his shirt and showed Tuvia the number tattooed on his arm. Tuvia turned and looked and almost went into shock. "I lost my whole family," the man was saying. "A brother in front of me, a brother in back of me." Tuvia could barely speak. After the driver collected himself, he blurted out, "Sir, is your brother's name Shimon?" The tourist's red face turned ashen white in disbelief.

"I'm not taking you to Jerusalem, sir." Tuvia made an abrupt U-turn and drove an hour and half to the kibbutz in Afula. He ran to Shimon, the carpenter and said, "Was your brother's name Reuven?" His face turned equally white.

Tuvia returned to the taxi, told his American tourist, "Come. I'm taking you to your brother." He led him to the carpenter's shed, but did not want to infringe on the privacy of the moment.

How did he know that these guys were brothers? When he looked at the number tattooed on the tourist's arms the last four digits were 7-4-0-2. One number higher than the carpenter's.

Look at what we can do for each other. Look how we can bring meaning to life, spread love, enhance dignity, really make a difference.

Our congregant and friend Jeff Parness who runs the amazing *New York Says Thank You* wrote to me this past year about the opening of Annie's House, an adapted ski lodge built to teach disabled kids and wounded warriors how to ski, in honor of Annie Nelson who had died on 9-11. "On a Friday Annie's House was packed with kids and wheelchairs from four states who came to ski. One of them was a fifteen year old girl named Hannah, a brilliant young woman who was imprisoned in her body and wheelchair with cerebral palsy. On Friday she watched the other kids in wheelchairs learn how to ski, but she did not participate. On Friday night she and her dad went back to her hotel room where she proceeded to write the following letter to the deceased Annie:

Dear Annie,
Let me start off by saying that this is weird, as I have never written a letter to a dead person before. I like to say "dead" instead of "passed away" because I think it's ridiculous that our society tries to sweeten or soften death, the most hard and bitter thing in this world. I hope you don't mind. In case you're not watching me write this, I'll ask your mom if she can leave this on your grave.

People say very nice things about you. My dad told me your story. It's very sad. You must've been scared. I would give you my life if I could. I'm suicidal and depressed. It's frankly quite hard to keep living most of the time. At least I know you wouldn't waste the gift I was given. Oh, well. I wrote you this poem. I hope you like it.

One last word.
One last glance.
One last thought,
What was yours?
Did you pray?
Did you cry?
Did you wait with tearful eyes?
Where you end,
Your legacy lives.
The love of others carries on,
The work you couldn't do.
So therefore rest your weary eyes,
Forsake the dark.
Bathe in light,
Your work has come full circle.

Those who love you will always strive to be the person you tried to be, myself included. In your short life, you changed many people's worlds for the better. Take care, Annie.
Hannah Papenfuss

Believe it or not, the next day one of the adaptive skiers who had just learned to ski, a young boy from Pennsylvania with CP and Autism, convinced Hannah to try skiing. We could not get her off the bi-ski and we all watched as her father saw his daughter become re-born.

What does that teach us? That our small span on earth is a phenomenal gift. Let us maximize our blessings while there is still time.

A chief resident in neurological surgery at Stamford University discovered masses matting the lungs and deforming the spine. But this was not someone else's pathology. Those x-rays were his. What should he do now? If only I knew how many years or months I had left. Tell me three months I would just spend time with family. Tell me a year; I would have a different plan. Give me ten years I'd get back to treating diseases.
I began to realize that coming face to face with my own mortality in a sense had changed nothing and everything at the same time. Before my cancer was diagnosed I knew that someday I would die but I didn't know when. After the diagnosis I knew that someday I would die but I didn't know when. But my awareness intensified mightily. I wanted to live; I simply wanted to know how best to do so in the time I had left.

The reason that I believe doctors should not give patients specific prognosis so they cannot dictate how we live, savage dreams, or dash hopes. Based on today's therapies, I might die within three years or I might make it ten.

Faced with mortality scientific knowledge can only provide an ounce of certainty: yes, you will die. The exact time will remain elusive.

I remember the moment my own overwhelming uneasiness yielded. Seven words from Samuel Beckett, a writer whom I studied as an undergraduate years ago, suddenly popped into my head. A seemingly impassible sea of uncertainty parted, his words meant everything to me: "I can't go on. I will go on."

For some reason I kept repeating that phrase over and over, "I can't go on. I will go on." The phrase got me through the worst. Now I am almost exactly eight months from my diagnosis. My strength has recovered substantially. I am gradually returning to work. Every morning at five thirty as the alarm clock goes off and my body awakens, as my wife sleeps next to me, I think again to myself, I can't go on. Soon after I'm in my scrubs heading to the Operating Room alive: I will go on.

And that's what we can say to each other. When it seems like we can't go on, we will go on.
We will live as fully and intensely as we possibly can. We will care, we will give, we will forgive, we will repent, we will make a difference.
In short, we can and we will continue to choose life.
Amen.