

Because Life Can Change in an Instant

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Yizkor is a testament to the many transitions in life, the enormous amount of change we have to experience, the many losses we must navigate. We know this. We steel ourselves knowing as we accumulate blessing, we concomitantly accumulate heartache.

But what we can never prepare for is the stunning fact that life can change in an instant. You're 'A' symptomatic and a CAT scan reveals advance stage cancer. The news hits you as if you are hit by a truck. You now find yourself sitting across the desk from an oncologist, barely able to believe that the treatment options she is outlining concern you.

Life changes fast.

Life changes in an instant.

You sit down to dinner

and life as you know it ends.

These are the opening words from Joan Didion's, *The Year of Magical Thinking*.

Here are a few excerpts:

“When my husband John did not respond, my first thought was that he had started to eat and choked. I remember trying to lift him far enough from the back of the chair to give him the Heimlich. I remember the fullness of his weight as he fell forward, first against the table, then to the floor. In the kitchen by the telephone I had taped a card with the New York-Presbyterian ambulance numbers. I had not taped the numbers by the telephone because I anticipated a moment like this. I had taped the numbers by the telephone in case someone in the building needed an ambulance.

Someone else.

I called one of the numbers. A dispatcher asked if he was breathing. I said *Just come*.

The distance from our building to the part of New York-Presbyterian that used to be New York Hospital is six crosstown blocks. I have no memory of sirens. I have no memory of traffic. When we arrived at the emergency entrance to the hospital, the gurney was already disappearing into the building.

They took me into the curtained cubicle where John lay, alone now. They asked if I wanted a priest. I said yes. A priest appeared and said the words. I thanked him. They gave me the silver clip in which John kept his driver’s license and credit cards. They gave me the cash that had been in his pocket. They gave me his watch. They gave me his cell phone. They gave me a plastic bag in which they said I would find his clothes. I thanked them.

I remember thinking that I needed to discuss this with John.

There was nothing I did not discuss with John.

After that first night I would not be alone for weeks, but I needed that first night to be alone.

I needed to be alone so that he could come back.

This was the beginning of my year of magical thinking.

It was deep into the summer, some months after the night when I needed to be alone so that he could come back, before I recognized that through the winter and spring there had been occasions on which I was incapable of thinking rationally. I was thinking as small children think, as if my thoughts or wishes had the power to reverse the narrative, change the outcome.

There had been, for example, the matter of the obituaries. I could not read them.

I had allowed other people to think he was dead.

I had allowed him to be buried alive.

It occurred to me that I was supposed to give John's clothes away. Many people had mentioned the necessity for giving the clothes away, usually in the well-intentioned but (as it turns out) misguided form of offering to help me do this.

I began. I cleared a shelf on which John had stacked sweatshirts, T-shirts, the clothes he wore when we walked in Central Park in the early morning.

I could not give away the rest of his shoes.

I stood there for a moment, then realized why: he would need shoes if he was to return.

A call came in the next morning. A man was asking if I would donate my husband's organs.

Many things went through my mind at this instant. The first word that went through my mind was "no."

The man on the telephone was still talking.

I kept thinking, how could he come back if they took his organs, how could he come back if he had no shoes?"

Some people who engage in magical thinking do so because they cannot believe that this precious person has lost his or her one life and that we have lost them.

Now you know why the grief process takes close to a year for our closest loved ones according to our tradition. We are in shock, in denial, we sometimes engage in magical thinking before we can find a way to struggle to our feet, to function in all the ways we have to, to be there for all those who still depend on us even when we don't feel very dependable.

But it is so hard for those of you who have had satisfying, loving relationships and lost your mate, your live-in partner. You're trying to walk again after an amputation. You have lost a body part, a soulmate and have to get up before you can get out, before you even can think of getting on with it.

You come home to darkness, to solitude. You have to learn to be a 'one' when you are used to being a 'two.' It can feel so strange, so terrifying. The good news is most people find the inner resources, the courage to soldier on. Most people find support from family, friends and clergy and are grateful to those who are really there in more than a perfunctory way. We never forget those people, those angels who don't overstep, who don't lecture about what we have to do well before we are ready, but who are there, who listen, who provide quiet strength.

In such moments we can understand the way God works at the time of tragedy. You can even feel God working within you, giving you the strength and will to go on, providing some solid footing so you won't fall through the floor boards.

Listen to four of the most powerful words in our liturgy, words that end our Shabbat services from the *Adon Olam*, "God is with me, I have no fear." These words remind us that we are not alone. The Lord is my Shepherd, guiding us through the valley of the shadow of death, assuring us that we'll get through and that we'll find the light, we will return to life. God can be also a great source of wisdom. We're all familiar with the serenity prayer authored by philosopher Reinhold Niebuhr:

God grant me the serenity to accept the things

I cannot change,

the courage to change the things I can,

and the wisdom to know the difference.

Listen to that prayer carefully: the courage to change the things I can. Yes, you can change what is eating you up alive, filling you with guilt, dividing your family. God can give you the courage but you must find the will. The prayer reminds us there is still time to change what must be changed. Still time.

Even if you have to accept what cannot be changed, there is something you can do. Lisa Bonchek Adams had a double mastectomy. Some years later the cancer had returned and had metastasized to her bones, becoming stage 4 breast cancer.

Throughout her illness Lisa continued to tweet and blog, chronicling her journey, guiding others on how to face death, determined to teach people to avoid using the cliché, the metaphor, the simplistic and just be present and thoughtful. At her memorial service her husband told the story that two days after her funeral two boxes had arrived at their home. She had ordered birthday presents for her youngest child two days before she died.

There is always something you can do in the face of death. You can become an inspiration. You can be a blessing.

Tullia Forlani Kidde wrote the following letter fourteen years after she was told she had one year to live:

“I remember how I stood in bewilderment, unable to grasp the reality of what was happening. I kept repeating to myself, “this was supposed to be a beginning.” Gradually my answer came, I had to look to myself for help. I needed to listen to my inner voice—to the wisdom within, which was always there, and which I had dismissed, doubted and overruled. I became my own project, my own immediate goal. I had lived my life outwardly, but now there was a world to discover within myself; a world which didn’t require people, books and external aid. I learned to listen to the silence. Slowly my focus changed, my anguish lessened, my acceptance of my condition grew. I didn’t need to learn how to die with dignity but to live for today. I taught myself to appreciate the smallest things that were available to me, taking nothing for granted. I learned to forgive myself and others and to say thank you more often. I was alive. I was grateful.

For some, however, feeling optimistic gets harder as we age. We feel less productive. We feel less needed. Our fears mount as do our infirmaries. When we’re dealt a shocking diagnosis, we struggle to stay positive as we fight with everything at our disposal, using the weapons of medicine, surgery, spiritual support, family love and fierce personal determination.

Life teaches us that we cannot control what cards we are dealt. We can control, however, how we respond to those cards. Our teacher in this area is Viktor Frankl, psychoanalyst and Auschwitz survivor. Frankl writes:

“We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.

And there were always choices to make. Every day, every hour, offered the opportunity to make a decision, a decision which determined whether you would or would not submit to those powers which threatened to rob you of your very self, your inner freedom and dignity to become molded into the form of the typical inmate.

The way in which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, gives him ample opportunity—even under the most difficult circumstances—to add a deeper meaning to his life.

In the struggle we attain a level of nobility, we become teachers to our children and theirs about what is really important and why. In the very beginning of the Torah we read of course that Adam and Eve had two children, Cain and Abel, Cain killed Abel and fled becoming an exile and an outlaw. As far as we know his parents never saw him again. Adam and Eve's heart clearly was broken, effectively losing two children but they responded to that loss by having a third child and several sons and daughters after that.

There have been many others who have lost their families in the Holocaust, came to America, had the courage to remarry and begin new families while carrying in their hearts the memories of whatever happened to their first families. Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel said the Torah teaches us not only how to begin, but much harder, how to begin again after so much has been taken from you.

In 1909 Henrietta Szold learned that the man she loved and hoped to marry had abruptly gone off and married a woman he had just met. She channeled her unrequited love into founding *Hadassah*, the woman Zionist organization who saved countless numbers of lives in Nazi occupied Europe and founded one of the world's leading medical centers in Jerusalem. When she died she was buried on a mount of olives in Jerusalem, her gravestone reading: "Mother of thousands."

We don't strive to live forever. We simply want to live as long as our life has some quality and some meaning. We want one more thing—not to lose control. We don't want to lose our mental faculties, we don't want to be bedridden, desperate for more morphine, being told it's not time yet for pain relief.

Ancient Jewish tradition didn't quite grasp or countenance our need for control. God gives and God takes life we are taught. But as early as the sixteenth century, an Ashkenazic commentator to the *Shulchan Aruch*, Rabbi Moses Isserles taught that we do not need to prolong the end of life against our will. If there are impediments to death such as salt on the tongue, an early form of saline IV, or a woodchopper keeping the soul from leaving the body, you can remove those impediments to death. So in our tradition perhaps it is true, only God can give and take life, but we can see to it that technology or other means of keeping people alive too long, will not stand in the way of the peace some of us so desperately seek.

And yes, so many of us fill out advance directives, yet we know it is hard to fathom what we will want when we face the moment of excruciating decisions. It is so important at that moment that you have a loving, non-judgmental advocate who can make that decision when you cannot or can help when you look up with pleading eyes and need your loved one's brain and gut to really be present.

This is important:

And when you decide to terminate treatment, you are not failing. There is no need to take a poll, no need to please your oncologist. No one can really put themselves inside the body of a loved one as much as we love them. We cannot be them; we cannot fully understand or relate. A beautiful young man named David Puskaric wrote a poem called "The Year of Despair":

My family and friends say they want me to fight

In my opinion what gives them the right?

I see death as an end to my suffering and pain.

But why can't friends and family see the same gain?

Every one of us has to learn to let go of our precious loved ones at some point in our life and theirs. Immortality is beyond our grasp. We never get enough time with them and we never accomplish everything we hope we would. Once again, the Torah is an excellent teacher here. The first page of Genesis describes God as creating a perfect world, where everything fits together in complete harmony. God saw all that was made and found it very good. The last page of Deuteronomy ends with Moses fated to die without entering the Promised Land. Between the first pages The Books of Moses and the last we see life in all its messiness, unfairness and unpredictability, a life that both can tantalize us with dreams and break our hearts. But the Torah teaches an important lesson. We may not reach the Promised Land, but we can make it possible for our loved ones to reach the Promised Land. We can leave their lives better because we lived. We can make the world better because we were here.

Our mortality should concentrate the mind. And one more biblical tale, the Jonah story gives us another lesson, an extra dessert added to those gems provided by our own Joe Diamond.

When Jonah is swallowed up by the big fish he somehow escapes annihilation and has another chance. Many of us are almost swallowed up by life. We go through something that almost does us in, brings us to our knees. Yet, like Jonah, we rally, we stumble to our feet, resolved. Jonah didn't have to be reminded why he was saved, he knew what he had to do.

I believe all of us have a mission. We were not put on this earth in a happenstance sort of way just to go through our life, taking it as it comes. There is something we must do, some mission, some healing, some helping. We have to find out why we were created before it is too late and respond. A renowned sage, "Repent one day before you die." His disciple said, "Rabbi, that is preposterous, how do we know when we are going to die?" "That's precisely the point. Treat each day as if it might be your last."

Because, as we know, life can turn quickly. Life can change in an instant. So don't obsess over small, trivial or the wrong things. Be grateful, be mindful and use that gratitude to make a difference in someone else's life.

One young man who spoke eloquently about the meaning of life was named Mark Rakowski. He was a football player at Colgate University who developed leukemia soon after graduation. He was unable to receive his diploma in the stadium because it would have been unwise to expose him to that crowd with his low white count due to chemo. So the award was given to him in the locker room before the game. This is what he told the players:

When I was playing football, I always thought I gave everything I had during every play. But now that I am not playing anymore I know that I did not. Now that I finished playing, I would give anything to play again. Some day you will feel the same way. So don't leave anything in here today; leave it all out there on the field.

We only have one life. It can change in an instant, so live it as fully as you can. Live it as if every day is a blessing, because every day is.

Know that when our time on earth is over, our soul will live on in immortality and hopefully we will leave behind the most precious gift we can leave behind: the gift of a good name. But while there is still time, remember to accept the things that you cannot change, but to find the will to change the things you can. Go all out to be the very best version of yourself, to be the legacy your loved ones will celebrate. And in Mark Rakowski's words, "leave it all on the field."

Amen.

