

The Wheels of Life

This Yizkor moment is about our communication with those who once walked amongst us. Perhaps we feel a yearning to talk to them and sense their presence. Much of our usual day-to-day communication is not of this sacred quality. Too often we engage in idle chatter, gossip. Sometimes we're argumentative. Too often, our communication seems like a monologue: How are you? How are you doing?

We ask these questions to each other all the time. Usually in a perfunctory manner conveying the point, "I'm really not that interested in the answer."

For most of us, particularly of certain ages and stages, the honest answer would be, "Well, how much time do you have?" Because many of us are struggling, trying to figure out what is wrong, trying to recover, trying to feel as we once did, hoping to feel as good as that smile we plaster on our face which belies how we really feel.

Yes, it's true that we don't often stop and listen to the answers elicited from our own questions. We're in too much of a hurry, we have our own problems. Just consider, however, how important it can be to do what our most important prayer, the *sh'ma*, tells us to do:

Listen, Oh Israel, just listen.

And we need to have more patience and perspective. Because the fact is that as time goes on we often lose more than we gain. We lose physical abilities, retrieval of names and numbers. And of course, we lose beloved family and friends.

At Yizkor, we of course remember that growing list of precious human beings who have impacted our lives. We are, in fact, no stranger to grief. That we all share. What is also true is that just as no two personalities are alike, no two grief journeys are alike. There really is no smooth flowing five-step program from shock to anger to pain to ultimate acceptance. Grief is not all that predictable, it's not tidy, it's not bounded by time restrictions. A congregant came up to me totally bereft after a Yizkor service a few years ago, "I miss her so much," she managed to say, choking back tears. From the depth of her feeling, I assumed her loss was a recent one. "How long has it been?" I asked.

"Nineteen years and I still miss her as much as I did day one."

She needed to talk and needed me to listen. Not because she wanted me to do anything in particular. She simply wanted my ear. Mom's life made all the difference to her and she needed me to bear witness to this, needed me to really hear and know who was most vital to her at that moment.

People coming to the end of their lives need to be heard as well. In her very compelling book, *The Wheel of Life*, Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross introduced medical students, not only to the complexities of diagnosis, but to the gut-wrenching emotions of her dying patients:

"A sixteen year old girl named Linda agreed to answer medical student's questions about what it was like to be terminally ill. But all they could muster were questions about her blood count; her reaction to

chemotherapy and other clinical details. In a passionate fit of anger Linda lost patience. Fixing her unimpressed brown eyes on them, she answered the questions she always wanted her physician and specialist to ask her. 'What was it like to be sixteen and given only a few weeks to live? What was it like not to dream about the high school prom? Or even go on a date? Or not worry about growing up and choosing a profession? Or a husband? What helps you make it through each day?'

After nearly half an hour Linda tired and returned to her bed leaving the students to a stunned silence. For the first time most of them confronted fears about the possibility and inevitability of their own death. They couldn't help but think what it would be like if they were in Linda's place.

'Maybe only now you'll know how a dying patient feels, Dr. Kubler-Ross intoned. Maybe now you'll be able to treat them with the same compassion you would want for yourself.'

During my consultations, she continues, I sat on beds, held hands and talked for hours. There was, I learned, not a single dying human being who did not yearn for love or touch. Dying patients did not want safe distance from their doctors. They wanted real communication, they craved honesty. Even the most suicidally depressed patients could often be still convinced there was meaning left in their lives."

Dr. Kubler-Ross was intrigued by an African-American cleaning lady who clearly had a rapport with even the most critically ill patients. Each time she left the room there was a tangible difference in their

attitudes. What was her secret? From Chicago's south side she grew up amidst poverty and misery. One day her three year old son got sick with pneumonia, she took him to the emergency room but was turned away because she owed them money. Desperate, she walked to Cook County Hospital where they had to take indigent people. She was instructed to wait. After three hours of sitting she watched her little boy wheeze, gasp and die cradled in her arms. She now looked at Kubler-Ross and said, 'You see, death is not a stranger to me, but an old, old acquaintance. Now I'm not afraid of it anymore.

Sometimes when I walk into the room of these patients and they're petrified and have no one willing to talk to them, I just sit down. Sometimes I touch their hands and tell them not to worry that it's not so terrible.'

In her book Dr. Kubler-Ross talked about lecturing in Poland and visiting Maidanek, one of Hitler's notorious death factories where more than 300,000 thousand people were killed. "I walked around in disbelief, how can men and women do this to each other? Then I got to the barracks. On the walls people had carved their names, initials and drawings. I looked more closely and noticed that one image was repeated over and over again: butterflies.

Butterflies, they were everywhere. Each barracks I entered I saw butterflies. Why butterflies? Some years later I received a flash of clarity about this. Those prisoners were like my dying patients, very aware of what was going to happen. They knew that soon they would become butterflies. Once dead they would be out of this hellish place. Not tortured anymore. Not separated from their families. Not sent to gas chambers. None of their gruesome life mattered anymore. Soon they would leave their

bodies the way a butterfly leaves its cocoon. I realized that was the message they wanted to leave for future generations.”

For the afflicted death can be relief from torment. Death is a transition where there is no pain, no body to be trapped in. This fact is painful for the survivor, but peaceful for the dying.

There is so much to be feared in life. There is nothing to fear in death. But truth be told we the living don't want to let go. This poem is entitled The Hug:

Yesterday

for the first time

since I was a child

I held my mother.

I held her to me

as the nurse changed

her bed sheet.

I remembered how

as a child

she held me in her arms—

the tears I cried then

extinguished

by her warm body.

Yesterday

the roles were reversed.

When I held her

I didn't want to let go.

She in turn

was scared

because this time

she didn't think

she would get out alive.

She was tired

and I was selfish.

She wanted to slip away

into death

while I

wanted to hold her here.

Now her breathing

was shallow

and I held her

for the last time

knowing finally

that I had to simply

let her go.

It is so true that the most important lessons for life can come from the dying. Jeffy was a very sick boy who had only a few weeks to live. He refused any more chemo. "I don't understand you grown-ups. Why do you have to make us children so sick to get us well?" All he wanted was to go home. Jeffy had a brand new bicycle that had been hanging on two hooks inside the garage for three years. The dream of

his life was to be able once in his lifetime to ride around the block on his bicycle. But because of his illness he had never been able to ride. Now Jeffy asked his father to take it down. With tears in his eyes he asked dad to put the training wheels on the bike. Can you appreciate how much humility it takes for a nine year old boy to ask for training wheels? When his father finished putting on them on, Jeffy had one problem. His parents wanted to lift him on the bicycle and hold him as if he were two years old, which would have cheated him out of the greatest victory of his life. The parents held each other back and learned the hard way how painful and difficult it is to allow a vulnerable, terminally ill child the victory to risk falling, hurting and bleeding. So Jeffy rode off.

After what seemed like an eternity he came back. He was the proudest young man you have ever seen. When his brother Dougey came home, Jeffy asked to see him upstairs without grown-ups. A while later Dougey came back down but he refused to tell his parents what he and his brother talked about. Dougey promised to keep it a secret until after his birthday in two weeks. In the meantime Jeffy died the week before Dougey had his birthday when he shared what had been the big secret.

In the bedroom Jeffy enjoyed the pleasure of personally giving his brother his most beloved bicycle. It was not yet his birthday but Jeffy suspected that by then he would be dead. Therefore he wanted to give it to him now. But only under one condition: Dougy would never use those damn training wheels.

In his tragically short life Jeffy felt a real sense of accomplishment. He was able to control something in the end of his life—to show generosity, be a producer of joy not just of heartache. He became a generator of positive memories for his heartbroken family.

To control something at the end of life. This is just about our greatest concern. Moses himself, who had the closest relationship with God of any human being in history, could not control the end of his life.

But we try. Oh, do we try! As we make up our wills, we also think carefully about advanced directives and health care proxies as, of course, we should. We play the unthinkable scenarios through the tape recorder of our minds and think about what we want to do in Scenario A, B, C or D. We do so knowing there is no real way to predict how we will feel or what we will want at that fateful crossroad. Will we ask for surgery, will we opt for resuscitation?

I find it impossible to project for myself. Tell me what is my prognosis –do I have a real shot at any quality of life? Do I still have control of the one organ we pray will not fail us—our brain? Do I have any basis for hope at all?

I was not at all surprised to read a study which showed patients who have hospice care but continue to be treated actively have some of the best results. You can't know for sure how much you want to fight on if your pain is unbearable. Agony often prevents us from embracing Moses' guiding dictum, "I set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life!"

We more often will choose life when we can look forward to the prospect of another day.

Rarely, in fact, can we control the quantity of our years, but we can strive to attain a nobility no matter how long this world is ours to share. We can realize that giving to another provides more satisfaction than getting stuff, we can be healed by healing relationships, by making peace with there is strife. We can feel immense satisfaction by establishing a warm, personal interactive relationship with God, not the God who some see as omnipotent and all-controlling, but a loving presence ready to embrace and be embraced.

That God is not all-controlling. Therefore, God doesn't usually control the life and death of each individual. Death is not punishment dictated from above. Life and death can happen with unsettling randomness or sometimes follow an inevitable course born of our own mortality.

In my judgment God should not be seen not as avenger, but as a guide to the next world. The Lord is my shepherd, the gentle authority who brings us to green pastures and allows us to drink still waters when we thirst. That same gentle authority is with us as we inevitably walk through the valley of the shadow of death. When we hear those words, we know there is something beyond this, something bigger than us, there for us as a soothing presence, who won't end all affliction to be sure, who won't even prevent death, but will be there with us when we try to keep our heads above water, confident that we won't fall through the floor boards, that we will survive and see light again, feel life again, so each of us can declare the last words of the *Adon Olam*: God is with me, I shall not fear, words that remind us as we walk through our mortal span, we can find love and connection again. We will smile again and carry on as they would want us to.

Growing older gives us a wisdom that can be a source of courage and strength, which can set a great example for our kids and theirs. Famed neurologist Dr. Oliver Sacks shared some of his profound wisdom towards the end of his life, "My father who lived to ninety-four often said that the 80's had been one of the most enjoyable decades of his life. He felt, as I begin to feel, not a shrinking but an enlargement of mental life and perspective, as he was able to see triumphs and tragedies, booms and busts, revolutions and wars, great achievements and deep ambiguities too. He had seen grand theories rise, only to be toppled by stubborn facts. Sachs continues: " I do not think of old age as an ever grimmer time that one must somehow endure and make the best of, but as a time of leisure and freedom, freed from the urgencies of earlier days, free to explore whatever I wish and bind the thoughts and feelings of a lifetime together."

My generation is on the way out and each death I have felt as an abruption, a tearing away of a part of oneself. There will be no one like us when we are gone, but then there is no one like anyone else ever. When people die, they cannot be replaced. They leave holes that cannot be filled, for it is fate—the genetic and neural fate—of every human being to be a unique individual, to find his own path, to live his own life, to die his own death.

I cannot pretend I am without fear. But my predominant feeling is one of gratitude. I have loved and been loved; I have been given much and been given something in return. Above all, I have been a sentient being, a thinking animal on this beautiful planet and that in itself has been an enormous privilege and adventure.”

Of course, there are those in our orbit who have been denied this privilege.

Yuri Grossman, the son of Israeli novelist, David Grossman, was killed on August 12, 2006 after his tank was hit by a Hezbollah missile in Lebanon. At 20 to 3 in the morning the family’s doorbell rang, the person said through the intercom that he was from the army. “I went down to open the door and I thought to myself—‘That’s it. Life’s over.’ Five hours later when my wife, Michal and I went into our daughter, Ruthie’s room, to wake her and tell her the terrible news, Ruthie cried for a very long time and then, somewhat surprisingly said, ‘But we will live, right? We will trek like before? I do want to continue singing in the choir, I do want to laugh, I want to learn to play guitar.’ We hugged her and told her, ‘Yes. We will live.’

And we will derive our strength from Yuri. He had enough for all of us. Vitality, warmth and love radiated from him strongly. And that will shine on us even if the star that made it has been extinguished. Our son, our love, it was a great honor to live with you. Thank you for every moment that you were ours.”

Yuri’s father David would do anything to take away his daughter’s pain at that moment. We who have lived a full life would love to spare our children and grandchildren the inevitable pain of death. Label Fein’s daughter Nomi died young of cancer. Some years later Label wrote a note to Nomi’s daughter, his granddaughter, Liat, in hopes of providing help and guidance:

Liat, I think of my daughter, and of you, her daughter, whom I want so much to comfort. I want for you, my love, flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone, to be whole. The emptiness cannot be wished away, nor is there reason to try. But we need to guard against the swelling of the emptiness, its displacement of the other truths in our lives. You are the daughter of a mother who died just 500 days after you were born. Her death is a sorry fact of your life—but not, I pray, the defining fact. There is much, much more to her story than the tragedy of her death—and all that is yours, too. For my own sake and for yours, I wish for you—the grace, the elegance of mind and the loveliness of spirit, the rich capacity for love and friendship, the heightened sense of empathy, the eagerness to celebrate that characterized your mother.

*More even than that, I wish for you to be Liat, your own person, a compassionate child of a
compassionate mother, who belonged to a compassionate family and tradition.*

*Liat, more even than you and your father and the rest of us, your mother was miserably cheated. She
didn't get to see how the story unfolds, much less how it ends. But she knew, better than most, the
underlying truth: The story never ends. All that changes is who gets to write it. It's your turn now; write
it your own way. Write it well.*

These young people were so robbed of the privilege of life. So those of us who have achieved maturity
should look at our lives with its many pains and travails, and feel the blessing of it all. We hope we can
leave that perspective to the next generation, that we can be a source of nobility and be so remembered
one day.

But right now we yearn to feel their presence once more, to derive strength from our loved ones who
once gave so much of themselves to us.

In their memory we can resolve:

To manifest values as they did.

To care about others as they did.

Maximize our years on earth as they did.

To live—vitality and fully as they did.

The poet brings us to conclusion:

We are at this moment

alone together,

an individual in community,

present to each other,

we are each other's comfort.

Alone together

we are each other's consolation.

Alone we are mortal,

together immortal.

A community does not die.

The kaddish requires community.

A kaddish must be answered.

A kaddish calls for response.

We rise to give that response. We rise to manifest the resolve and courage that is kaddish.

Amen.