

Fire and Rain

Yizkor 5779

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In a hilltop garden, a telephone booth looks out over the Pacific Ocean. Wind dances the blades and leaves in the Japanese town of Otsuchi. The white, glass-paned, single-person phone booth holds a disconnected rotary phone, its cables neatly coiled. It never rings with incoming calls; outgoing messages don't travel through cords. It isn't connected to any other phone in the world. Instead, the booth is a meditation on relationships, life, and death, and it has become a pilgrimage site of sorts for residents untangling grief that remains knotted in their stomachs.

When an earthquake and tsunami struck Japan in 2011, 30-foot swells swallowed up houses and obliterated coastal communities. Otsuchi is one of those towns that lost almost everything to the waves and quake. The century-old community was virtually obliterated in 30 minutes. About 10 percent of the town's 16,000 residents died in the disaster.¹

A resident named Itaru Sasaki had started building the phone booth in his garden the year before, as a place to reflect over his cousin's death. Gazing out at the rubble of his town, his own grief was subsumed by the storm of loss all around him. He decided to finish the booth with the fragments of the world that once stood there, and let it be a place for all. He saw so many standing alone, suffering souls seeking connection. "Because my thoughts couldn't be relayed over a regular phone line," Sasaki said, "I wanted them to be carried on the wind."² Today, tens of thousands of people from around the world pilgrimage to the booth. They stand alone within the glass panes, gazing out onto the same waters that levelled Otsuchi. Now, they hope the waters will help them find solace, as they speak to those lost to the storms of the world. Speaking hope and love and fear. Yearning to keep memory alive.

In heartbreak, we gather. In loss, we seek space to reflect across a sea of both destruction and delight. In love, we yearn to feel the hand, hold the gaze, just one more moment.

We see a room filled with grief, and know we are not alone in the storms of mourning. We know we sit beside those who face the absence of partners and parents, children and friends, siblings and soulmates. We feel in the very air a library of lives, of hopes both fulfilled and shattered, dreams both realized and dashed, love that lives eternal or has faded. Or never was.

The poet Stuart Kestenbaum wrote,

The light snow started late last night

¹ <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/three-years-after-japans-tsunami>

² <https://www.citylab.com/life/2017/01/otsuchi-wind-phone-japanese-mourners/512681/>

and continued all night long while I slept,
and could hear it occasionally enter my sleep,
where I dreamed my brother was alive again
and possessing the beauty of youth,
aware that he would be leaving again shortly
and that is the lesson of the snow falling
and of the seeds of death that are in everything that is born:
we are here for a moment of a story that is longer than all of us
and few of us remember,
the wind is blowing out of someplace we don't know,
and each moment contains rhythms within rhythms,
and if you discover some old piece of your own writing,
or an old photograph,
you may not remember that it was you
and even if it was once you,
it's not you now,
not this moment that the synapses fire
and your hands move to cover your face in a gesture
of grief and remembrance.

For all of us who have loved and lost, we know no one else really understands our grief. As each relationship is unique, so too is each path of mourning. We may share the same category of loss, and yet its meaning is distinct. We in this room may even mourn the same person, yet it pains us differently. And were I to witness myself at this time last year, my grief today would not be shared even with my former self. We pilgrimage alone to a booth of memory, feeling absence together.

In Yizkor, we mourn together, alone. We mourn alone, together. And we reach for the words, the scraps of writing, the photograph that reminds us in mourning, alone though we may feel, together we also exist. We see the gaping holes that have not, nor cannot be filled; and yet we see the profound ways presence is known in the smell of fabric, the aroma of coffee, the feel of the pages of a book turning. Worlds have fallen apart, and yet the remnants linger.

For Cynthia Dokas, her sunglasses are her portal to grief:

I purchased my first pair of black sunglasses in the fall of 1990, when my mother deteriorated from being my articulate, vibrant, closest friend to someone who did not even recognize me or know my name. In September, Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, a rare brain-eating disorder of unknown origin, had arrived without warning and quickly took her life. In the weeks that followed, the tornado that had engulfed my family grew darker and more violent. It continued to pummel my brother, sister, and me, and slammed us to the ground for a second time. When I looked up, depression and despair had swept away my father. Six weeks after my mother died, he took his own life in our home. At twenty-four years old, my life as I knew it was over, and the seasons had not even changed.

When I crawled out of the wreckage of my first life, there was little left: no home, no parents, just my siblings and me. My face was pale and expressionless, and my eyes were swollen shut. When I could finally open them, I had to survive in a world that had continued on without my parents. I did not know anyone my age who had lost both a mother and a father. I ached for someone who knew to tell me that I would be all right. I struggled to hear my mother's words of inspiration, that "most things are correctable, so never give up" and "this too shall pass." But this was not correctable, and this would not pass. I had lived through the end of the world before I had even experienced truly living in it.

I hoped that if I looked composed and confident, then maybe I could be. I immersed myself in my third year of law school; it was a remnant of my old life that offered structure where I now had none. I was calm and measured because I had to parent myself. My new definitions of "bad" and "heartache" were unimaginable to most twenty-year olds. In every crowd, I still searched for my parents. I still have my black sunglasses.³

So often the world around us seeks to spin us away from grief. With the best of intentions, we are given, or create for ourselves, a "proper roadmap" of mourning. We are reminded when it is time to move on. When it is time to clear away the clothing. When it is time to file the paperwork, get rid of the toothbrush, brew less coffee.

But for many, mourning cannot be measured. Steps of consolation cannot be rushed. And in death, we are forever changed.

This reality is as old as human history. Centuries ago, Moses Maimonides, the great medieval Jewish scholar and physician, had a beloved brother who was a successful international trader and who had supported the entire extended family. He died in a shipwreck, on a business trip. Here is how Maimonides described that loss and its aftermath:

The greatest misfortune that has befallen me during my entire life, worse than anything else, was the demise of my brother, who drowned in the Indian sea...About eight years have since passed, but I am still mourning and unable to accept consolation. And how should I console myself? He grew up on my knees, he was my brother, he was my student; my joy in life was to look at him. Now, all joy has gone. He has passed away and left me disturbed in my mind in a foreign country. Whenever I see his handwriting on one of his letters, my heart turns upside down and my grief awakens again.⁴

Dr. Daniel Wegner has spent decades researching what he calls "transactive memory"—that is, memory that we hold outside of ourselves. On the most mundane of levels, we feel his research in our cell phones—we have thousands of phone numbers and email addresses at our finger tips, yet

³ <https://optionb.org/stories/i-had-lived-through-the-end-of-the-world-before-i-had-even-experienced-truly-living-in-it-s19dd98iz>

⁴ Y. Sheilat, *Iggerot ha-Rambam Volume I* (Jerusalem: Ma'aliyot, 1987) 1.311; see S. D. Goitein's *Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders*, (Princeton, 1973) p. 207

only a rare few actually stay in our brainspace. On a more meaningful level, with people we know well or with whom we have significant relationships, we create an “implicit joint memory system—a transactive memory system—which is based on an understanding about who is best suited to remember what kind of things.”⁵ The parent with the mouthwatering brisket recipes, the friend with an aptitude for fashion, the partner who somehow remembers where we left our keys and what outfit we wore at our nephew’s wedding 15 years ago. In a very real way, we come to rely upon, and even exist, in spaces beyond ourselves. Our relationships are, in a very real sense, woven into our sense of self. And we are a part of the people we love.

All of that makes death so devastating. What Wegner’s study adds to our understanding of loss is that in death, a part of us—literally—also dies. Because we loved that person, that person was part of our external memory system; their experiences were our experiences and ours theirs. With the loss of a loved one, the shared memory bank has broken. All those things mundane and momentous—how we navigate this world, how we relate to other people, how we recall the past, and how we dream about the future—all that and so much more that was them, but was also us—all that is lost when a loved one dies. They and only they knew certain things about us and our history, things nobody else knew. Wegner explains that it is this loss of our “self” in losing a loved one that is, at least in some part, a source of the depression and dysfunction many of us experience upon the death of a loved one. We are no longer wholly ourselves. In Wegner’s words, it is a feeling “akin to losing part of one’s own mind.”

This is the very reason Yizkor is so necessary. In this active engagement with memory, we feel the absences in our being, the holes in our world, that will never be filled. We bear witness to the ways that we are forever changed without these sacred people beside us.

And there is a deeper dimension as well. If it is that when our loved one dies, a piece of us dies with them, then it means that the converse is also true: an aspect of our loved one still lives within us today. In memory, we bear their spirit beyond death.

In this way, none of us sit here alone. Together, through memory, we live the very real presence of our loved ones. Together, through memory, we touch the tapestry not only of what was, but what also continues.

Phillip Roth wrote, “To be alive...is to be made of memory—... if a man’s not made of memory, he’s made of nothing.”⁶ We sit in a building built by others, hearing melodies written by those who came before us, engaged in a tradition shaped by ancient ancestors. Our daily activities and behaviors are echoes of eras no longer. When the world falls apart, we are lifted and buoyed by relationship. With death, we lose the tethers that kept us afloat amidst the flood. With grief, we lose

⁵ As quoted in Malcom Gladwell’s *The Tipping Point*, p. 123.

⁶ Phillip Roth, *Patrimony*, p. 124

the balm that eased the burns of anguish and despair. In memory, we realize we are not alone. And in memory, we see how profoundly we have lost.

In the words of Mary Oliver:

The time

*I thought I could not
go any closer to grief
without dying*

I went closer

*and I did not die.
Surely God had His hand in this,*

*as well as friends,
Still, I was bent,
and my laughter,
as the poet said,*

was nowhere to be found.

*Then said my friend Daniel
(brave even among lions),
“It’s not the weight you carry*

*but how you carry it—
books, bricks, grief—
it’s all in the way
you embrace it, balance it, carry it*

*when you cannot, and would not,
put it down.”*

*So I went practicing.
Have you noticed?*

*Have you heard the laughter
that comes, now and again,
out of my startled mouth?*

How I linger

*to admire, admire, admire
the things of this world
that are kind, and maybe*

*also troubled—
roses in the wind,
the sea geese on the steep wave,
a love
to which there is no reply?*

This is our task in Yizkor. Grief does not disappear. When the storms have ravaged our lives, what is broken cannot be undone. But we learn to carry it. Alone, and then together. We feel contours of our loss, the small and profound ways the world is diminished and we are changed. In the unconscious act of reaching to call the person who can no longer pick up, in seeing his face in the crowd, in feeling her hand against your neck, our grief reminds us our loved ones linger. In the gaping holes, we see the pieces of us that lived in them; in memory, we see the pieces of them that live on in us.

In fires, in floods, in quakes, in disease. We are not, nor will ever be, immune to ways it all may fall apart. But today, we are given a gift. A space. Alone. Together. To hold our grief in new ways. To let the tears fall. And also find laughter. To feel both absence and presence in both the great joys and painful struggles.

Born in 1948 in Boston, James grew up the son of a physician and opera singer. By the time he was four, his father's medical career ignited. They moved to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and his father became a professor of medicine and eventually dean of the University of North Carolina School of Medicine. At his mother's prompting James took up cello at an early age, and started composing music as a child. Hoping that James would keep his head in the books, his parents put him in a preparatory boarding school when he was 13. He started faltering in the high-pressure academic environment of school. When James started applying to colleges, he descended into a deep depression. His grades collapsed, he slept 20 hours a day, and he felt part of "A life that he was unable to lead." At the age of 17 he committed himself to the McLean Hospital.

While there, James found not only a path through his depression, but found belonging as well. He formed a close friendship with Susan. With her, he shared the storms of his life and mind; with her, James recalls realizing he was not alone in a world that so often darkens. A year later, he left McLean, and decided to follow his heart's passion for music, moving to New York City to make his mark.

But reality rarely mirrors dream. He formed a band that faltered and broke up in mere months. He damaged his vocal chords and required throat surgery. And as depression washed over him again, James turned to heroin to escape the storms. His father reentered his life, nursing him for six months in recovery. James then moved to London to try and create a new chapter of life. His friends worked passionately to connect him with anyone and everyone in the music scene in London. His talent was quickly recognized, and soon James found himself recording with the

Beatles. It was during this incredible moment he received word that Susan had succumbed to her depression, and killed herself back in New York City.⁷

James Taylor looked back on the storms of his life. The drugs and depression, the failures and fear. And through each chapter, he saw friendship, love, as the only element that expanded possibility. It was Susan, who pulled him through his hospitalization. His father who saved him from heroin. His friends who pulled him up when the start of his music career failed. And so he wrote a song as tribute to the love that carries us through our most trying of times. It is that same love that makes absence felt most poignantly in the peaks and valleys of life, for in those moments we cling most dearly to those we love.

We may walk to the top of the hillside, and gaze out over the Pacific. In those waters we see both death and life. Within a lone telephone booth, we are reminded that no electrical signal links us to what came before. But the wind may carry voice and soul. If we listen, we may hear the whispers of presence that was there all along. And through the panes of the booth see other pilgrims of grief, each climbing this same hill.

*I've seen fire and I've seen rain
I've seen sunny days that I thought would never end
I've seen lonely times when I could not find a friend
But I always thought that I'd see you again*

And I will.

And I do.

⁷ [White, Timothy](#), and [Mitchell Glazer](#). *Long Ago and Far Away: James Taylor — His Life and Music*. New York: Omnibus Press, 5th edition 2011, p. 141.