

Living Legacy

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross was born in 1926 in Zurich, the smallest of triplets. She entered the world fragile, weighing only two pounds, and survived—a medical miracle for that time. Despite harsh resistance from her father, she yearned to be a doctor. She left her family at age 16 and volunteered during World War II in hospitals and the care of refugees.

Her life course changed in the aftermath of World War II, when Kübler-Ross volunteered for relief work and visited Majdanek, one of the Nazi death camps in war-ravaged Poland.

It was a hellish scene—boxcars full of baby shoes taken from murdered Jewish children. But inside the wooden barracks, etched into the walls by Holocaust victims, were numerous carvings of butterflies, a symbol of rebirth that became the central image in Kübler-Ross' life.

Kübler-Ross began pursuing her dreams to become a doctor and after graduating medical school in Zurich moved across the pond to Long Island. She was shocked to discover how American medical establishment treated terminally ill patients, she began holding seminars where doctors, nurses and medical students listened to the real-life concerns of dying patients.

In 1969, Kübler-Ross published *On Death and Dying*, a trail-blazing book that made her famous and helped launch the hospice movement in the United States.

Her argument was that patients often knew that they were dying, and preferred to have others acknowledge their situation rather than try to make them “feel better”: “The patient is in the process of losing everything and everybody he loves. If he is allowed to express his sorrow he will find a final acceptance much easier.” And she posited that the dying underwent five stages known all around the world today: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.

The “stage theory,” as it came to be known, quickly created a paradigm for how Americans die. It eventually created a paradigm, too, for how Americans grieve: Kübler-Ross suggested that families

went through the same stages as the patients. In conversation, in the community that can be created around death, companionship and connection may be the greatest of gifts.

Yet the end of Kübler-Ross's own life was a lonely one. In 1995, Kübler-Ross suffered a stroke that left her paralyzed on one side. She grew depressed. "For 15 hours a day, I sit in this same chair, totally dependent on someone else coming in here to make me a cup of tea," she told a reporter. She became known as "the death-and-dying lady who can't seem to manage her own death." "I always leave the television on," she said. "That way something is always moving." The interviewer noticed an English muffin hardening next to her on a plate. Kübler-Ross reflected that she got in the habit of saving food in case she got hungry later in the day. Her son Kenneth lived nearby and stopped in "from time to time." Yet she seemed as hauntingly alone as the patients she interviewed some thirty years earlier.¹

She noted,

I now know that the purpose of my life is more than these stages. I have been married, had kids, then grandkids, written books, and traveled. I have loved and lost, and I am so much more than five stages. And so are you....That's really what grief has taught me. That I can survive. I used to be afraid that if I experienced grief it would overcome me and I wouldn't be able to survive the flood of it, that if I actually felt it I wouldn't be able to get back up. It's taught me that I can feel it and it won't swallow me whole. But we come from a culture where we think people have to be strong. I'm a big believer in being vulnerable, open to grief. That is strength. You can't know joy unless you know profound sadness. They don't exist without each other.²

We sit together in grief. Strong in our vulnerability. We enter this space at the nexus of worlds. Looking backwards and forwards, holding on to what was, who was, and dreaming of what ought to be, who we ought to be. We hold all 5 stages in this space, facing both connection and loneliness, both love and loathing. We sit in the wisdom of how messy is grief, how complicated is life, and how complex it is to survive our loved ones. Like Orpheus, longing for the song that would bridge life and

¹ With gratitude to the moving work of Meghan O'Rourke in "Good Grief?"—*New Yorker Magazine*, February 1, 2010

² Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, *On Grief and Grieving* (Scribner, 2005), p. 216

death, we listen below and above, listening in love.

Writing nearly forty years before his own death, Walt Whitman offered the following reflection:

A song of myself:

*I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you...*

*I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,
I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags...*

*Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,
Missing me one place search another,
I stop somenwhere waiting for you.*

A song of myself.

For Whitman, our song is sung every day. In the way we speak, in the way we love. In the way we reach out a hand to the fallen, in the way we welcome the stranger. Our song carries through in how we remember, and how we are remembered. Our song is a legacy that carries on through life, and lives on beyond death.

For some, these are songs of beautiful melody and harmony, as we remember loved ones who brought only joy and hope into the world. We remember their compassion, we remember their selflessness, we remember their courage.

For others, these are songs blurred by dissonance. We remember their challenging personalities, we remember the stubbornness, the frustration, the weakness. We may remember loved ones whose essential songs, the callings of the soul, were masked by such tragedy and difficulty, that all we can hear are faint whispers wishing to be more, yearning to do more.

And all of this, the melodies of strength along with weakness, the joy and the pain, are a part of these remembered songs.

This is what it means to remember, to feel our loved ones with us again, to feel their song living on beyond death. Mere memory fails to do justice to this moment precisely because at Yizkor we bring them all back, bring all their songs back to life.

Clarissa Pinkola Estes recounts the legend of La Loba from northern Mexico:

There is an old woman who lives in a hidden place that everyone knows but few have ever seen.... The sole work of La Loba [the Wolf Woman], is the collecting of bones. She is known to collect and preserve especially that which is in danger of being lost creatures: the deer, the rattlesnake, the crow.

She creeps and crawls and sifts throughout the mountains and dry river beds, looking for bones, and when she has assembled an entire skeleton, when the last bone is in place...she sits by the fire and thinks about what song she will sing.³

In silence, the beat of her heart drums a rhythm of love. And from this rises a song to her lips. And so the legend goes, her song brings an echo of life back to the bones.

Our own ancestors carry a similar story. When the Israelites stood in their first moments of redemption, we learn of the haste that inspired the matzah, the bread of affliction we eat each Passover. Before his death, Joseph asked of his children, “When God delivers you [from Egypt], carry my bones up from here.” And so, even in their urgency to rush towards the future, the Israelites dutifully carry *atzmot Yosef*, the bones of Joseph, through all their desert wanderings. The early rabbis imagined, however, that they did more than gather and carry Joseph’s bones; in carrying *atzmot Yosef*, the bones of Joseph, they also carried *atzmut Yosef*, the essence of Joseph.

His memory, his experiences as both slave and sultan, as prisoner and president, his gift as a visionary and dream interpreter. We come here in *Yizkor* to vow to our loved ones: you live no more, but I carry your essence. I carry your love. When I live, I feel your essence, I feel your rhythm and it lives within me. When I look out at the messy and beautiful and painful and joyous landscape of your life, I can still feel the rhythm. In the beat of my own heart, I may sing over your essence, and feel an echo of life in return. This is our task, to gather these pieces of our loved ones, to place them

³ *Women Who Run With the Wolves*

together, to carry them. And in turn, they will be the lifeline that carries us through our grief. In this way, the legacy of one life sings into the life of another.

Parents, partners, siblings, children—we recall one or more loved ones, their stories all marked by a beginning and an end. The task of Yizkor is fundamentally different than the eulogies delivered upon their death, the grief-filled words spoken at graveside. This service is as much about we the living as it is about the dead. It is here, in the Yizkor service, that we ask the question of how each one of us relates to the song of the loved ones whom we recall. Their Torah has concluded, but it continues to teach. We revisit their stories, as with the Torah, relating to them differently at every Yizkor service. With the passage of time, our perspective changes. We become different people and so our memories of our loved ones will inevitably change as well. Yizkor is not only an evolving experience, but it is meant to be empowering. We are granted the opportunity to learn anew from the lives of our loved ones, their grace, their struggles, and yes, even their shortcomings. Their humanity, no different than our own, was marked by imperfections. Each year our focus may change, a different aspect of our loved one emerges, a different melody reclaimed.

Born in Chicago in 1911, Lawrence Fogelberg enlisted in the Army during World War II. While Kübler-Ross volunteered in hospitals, Fogelberg dedicated his service to raising the spirits of fellow servicemen. He played in the military orchestra, and then went on to lead it. Following the war, the band leader and composer was recruited to conduct at a number of high schools for the rest of his career.

With his wife and three children, Fogelberg turned from the darkness of war to filling spaces with songs of hope and joy. His youngest son, Dan, recounts how when he was only four years old his father would let him run up in front of the school band and wave his baton. Dan believed he was actually the one moving all the musicians to play, only to one day look behind him to find his father standing behind him. But it imprinted a memory of the role his father would play in his life; the source of magic and empowerment, always quietly the inspiration behind him.

By 1981, Dan had become an acclaimed singer/songwriter in the folk movement. His father was ailing, and Dan found himself reflecting on the legacy of his father. He recalls sitting down with his guitar, and the memories and feelings simply rising to the surface. The things said and unsaid, the way his father's song had inspired his own. And in a single day, Dan crafted a tribute to his father,

one that ultimately called to the hearts of millions and rose to the top of the Billboard charts. Prophetically, his father Lawrence heard the melody and words only months before his own death. And in a final gift, Dan Fogelberg left his father with the understanding of his own living legacy, woven through music and the lives he touched.⁴

*I thank you for the music and your stories of the road
I thank you for the freedom when it came my time to go
I thank you for the kindness and the times when you got tough
And papa, I don't think I said I love you near enough*

*The leader of the band is tired and his eyes are growing old
But his blood runs through my instrument and his song is in my soul
My life has been a poor attempt to imitate the man
I'm just a living legacy to the leader of the band
I am a living legacy to the leader of the band*

We sit together in grief. Strong in our vulnerability. We enter this space at the nexus of worlds. Looking backwards and forwards, holding on to what was, who was, and dreaming of what ought to be, who we ought to be. We gather the pieces, the essence of our loved ones, and sing over them the melody of their legacy. We sit in the wisdom of how messy is grief, how complicated is life, and how complex it is to survive our loved ones. We hold the echoes and the reactions, the continuity and the response. Of all they were, and all they weren't.

We are their living legacies.

⁴<http://performingsongwriter.com/dan-fogelberg-interview-songs/>