

## DEATH AS INSPIRATION, KOL NIDREI, 5774

In *shtetl* days, and long before, when someone died, most often with generations gathered, [and seldom at what we'd call a ripe old age,]

no matter the circumstances, they were never left alone.

From the recital of Psalms to the ritual washing of the body to the burial itself, we as Jews would accompany our dead to their final resting place.

But it went far beyond the Jews...

Historically, from early Medieval times, in our desire to tap into death

as a life-force, we built churches & temples atop the tombs of the departed.

And the greater the life, the tighter our grip in death...

We still couldn't leave them alone.

When Galileo was exhumed in 1737 to transfer his tomb, several fingers, a tooth, some even say a vertebra were plucked as revered relics.

Descartes skull was stolen before he could be reburied in France.

Alexander the Great's mummy was regularly kissed by Roman emperors on their way to battle. Lest you think, "so not Jewish" ...Remember that Israel carried Joseph's bones out of Egypt to pave their way to freedom.

Others may have gone a bit too far...

The Victorians made lockets from the hair of dead loved ones;

The Romantics kept the hearts of their greatest poets as cherished vestige.

The widow of the writer/adventurer Sir Walter Raleigh kept his embalmed head, after he was executed, in a prized case in the living room.

Macabre—morose—meshug?...Maybe, not at all. Bess Lovejoy, author of the book Rest In Pieces puts the human preoccupation in perspective:

"Taken as signs of their times, displaying an intimacy with the dead,...its possible That ages past actually show a healthier relationship with death. Despite advances that have removed death as a constant presence in our lives, it remains inevitable, and many of us are ill-prepared when it comes." [NY Times, Op Ed, 10.28.12]

With the proverbial Book of Life still open before us,

our consideration this night is much more than metaphor...

What is this day's implicit [ironic] message?

HOW we deal with death: the reality that life is filled with loss,

that crazy things happen every day, far beyond our understanding—

certainly beyond our control, is the framework for how we deal with life.

Even more pointedly; the way we face the prospect of that earthly end

brings life perspective that may alter the outlook we bring to each new day.

Though most days we assume otherwise, we are not invincible. The burdens we carry, the brokenness we bear, can leave us with a sense of life-despair that is self-defeating. Yet that is not the sensibility these sacred days are meant to convey! “Repent one day before your death,”

R’ Joshua instructs his students.

Note—the day before!...Thus the students rightly reply:

“But how do you know what day *that* day will be?”

And the rabbi’s wise retort: “So make it today!”

But most of us don’t...WHY?

Because it’s easier to go through life denying death, thinking it has someone else’s name on it...

that the magical prayer we utter daily during our morning shower or before falling to sleep is our Heavenly protection, as if we’ve got God covered in some under the table pay-off racket.

Then we arrive at these *Yamim Nora’im*—literally “*Dreaded Days*”

This Atonement Day in particular, and our worst fears are confirmed.

*“B’Rosh Hashana Yikateyvun—On RH it is written;*

*U’v’Yom Tsom Kippur Yecheteymun—On YK it is sealed...*

*How many shall pass on, how many shall come to be.*

*Who shall live and who shall die.*

*Who is the fullness of years; who before her time?”*

Death happens, whether we like it or not, and seldom in accord with our schedules.

Psychiatrist Mark Epstein speaks the sentiment of where we all now stand:

“I like to say that if we are not suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, we are suffering from pre-traumatic stress disorder. There is no way to be alive without being conscious of the potential for disaster. One way or another, death, and its cousins—old age, illness, accidents, hang over us all. Nobody is immune. Our world is unstable and unpredictable, and operates to a great degree, and despite scientific advancement, outside our ability to control it.”

[N.Y. Times, Op-Ed, 8.4.13]

Like that warning label on the underside of the couch:

“Do not remover except under the penalty of federal law,”

Comes this counterintuitive life-warning label:

“CAUTION: Death’s immanence may be beneficial to your life.”

What most of us regard as a dreaded fear—embracing life’s end,

can be the ultimate teacher in helping us learn what it means to be alive.  
WHAT is life? ...All depends on whom you ask.

A recent feature piece in *Bostonia* [my BU Alumni magazine]

Polled a panel of academics, each sharing a unique response.

The biologist viewed life through the lens of chemical/physiological processes giving rise to living cells about 4 billion years ago.

The astrophysicist, describing human beings as “walking bags of salt water with organic molecules inside,” understood the universe as chemical systems which all store and extract energy to stay alive.

The neuropsychologist suggested a life-death continuum whose hard line will be blurred with advances in cryogenics and cloning.

Only the philosopher, with Aristotle as his muse,

Approached the question by considering what it is that keeps us alive.

IF we are more than the sum of our elements, something even more significant than science is required. Aristotle called that animating life-energy: *Psyche*—the breath of life; What some would call “soul.” For Aristotle, inseparable from the body in life, yet still transcending the temporal, even when we die, a life-force lives on.

These days summon us to CHOOSE LIFE,

Even at times when that choice seems *not* to be an option.

Yet, when death’s inevitability looms large,  
we can still face it as life’s ultimate teacher.

It all depends on how we respond...

In her watershed work *On Death & Dying*, Swiss psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross outlined a 5-staged model of grief that brought the conversation, back then, out of the closet, and eventually normalized our post-mortem mourning response. Problem is, in radically altering the ways we react to loss, she constructed a model which has, for better or worse, become the “mourning stages standard.”

DENIAL—ANGER—BARGAINING—DEPRESSION—ACCEPTANCE...

Yet Kubler-Ross’ five pronged process can be misleading,

because one person’s stage can be another’s passing phase.

And since mourning has no time-table,

her presumed progression does not govern our grief.

Dr. Erica Brown, Scholar-in-Residence for UJA-Federation in D.C.,

Author of the powerfully poignant new book, *Happier Endings*,

takes even greater issue with Kubler-Ross’ classic formulation.

“My problem with her ladder of loss is that it is missing its most important rung. The last, most potent stage within the framework of loss is not “Acceptance,” It is INSPIRATION...I humbly believe Kubler-Ross missed something in her categorization that may be the key to the fine art of “dying well” ...” [[Happier Endings](#), pgs 6-7]

In Brown’s reframing, it is our acknowledgement of how unprepared we are to deal with death that opens up the possibility of this final transformative phase; [And] What remains as a result is the enduring gift of a love stronger than death. Consider three very different responses along the life journey, each bringing us the “Inspiration” of facing death yet still “choosing life.”

### ***INSPIRATION I...April 15, 2013***

I was walking into the doctor’s office waiting room as I saw everyone glued to a TV newscast in the corner. It was just before 4PM, and reports coming in were still sketchy. What they knew was that 2 blasts had gone off, one right near the finish line of the Boston Marathon. And what they saw was a horror: body parts strewn onto the street—human carnage, shattered windows sending broken glass flying all over Copley Square; spectators running every which way—runners down or stopped in their tracks. “Chaos,” the older gentleman next to me in the waiting room whispered. But much as those two Chechnyan brothers who turned out to be backpacking terrorists had hoped—it wasn’t.

Marathon volunteers sprang into action, becoming runners themselves, Shuttling the injured to a constant stream of ambulances, or nearby hospitals. Mass General’s trauma head, Dr. Peter Fagenholz said that several amputations were necessary, reporting 18 in critical condition with a total of almost 170 treated....The city—physically—was torn apart. So what does Boston do?...Facing death, senseless acts of terror, Boston bands together—they reach...resolutely, for life. Boston Police—State Police—the FBI—the US Military; The cooperation to catch the killers is unprecedented. And though, a few days in, as Gov. Duval Patrick urges residents to stay inside, Boston Commons and the downtown district looking like a ghost town, [never mind that the Sox postponed their day game] as the manhunt zooms in on Franklin Street in Watertown, the nation watches SWAT teams move from door to door, finally cornering the surviving suspect in a backyard boat.

And as the capture is caught on TV for all to see,  
the real victory scene is in watching the residents of Watertown,  
Pouring into the streets, American flags in hand...  
And with each passing armored vehicle, or fire truck, or police cruiser,  
bursts of applause and cheers erupt...Impromptu block-parties spring up,  
as neighborhoods feed anyone in uniform.  
Folks meet one another in the street, and just hug;  
so grateful to have their streets back—thankful for the life they share.

The Marathon bombings sought to destroy the Patriot's Day spirit,  
Yet their hateful terror resulted in just the reverse,  
Spanning a series of emotional moments over the next week or so,  
when, in memory of the four victims,  
little 8-year old Martin's smile flashing on the giant screen at Fenway,  
David Ortiz of the Red Sox took back Beantown  
with a most fitting expletive exclamation! "This is our...town!"  
And the life-spirit lingers...4 months later,  
As Gabe and I sat near the Pesky Pole in right field for a Sox game in late July,  
Everyone was wearing hats & jerseys with the slogan turned spiritual truth:  
*BOSTON STRONG*. When, between innings, I ran over to the Fenway gift shop,  
the clerk saw my disappointment that they were all sold out.  
"I so wanted to wear Boston Strong back in New York."  
His response said more than he knew:

"Listen bud, we wear the words right here [pronounced *hee-yah*]."

Inspiration in the face of death, by reaching out to hold one another up;  
by seeing beyond the hate to all that makes us humanly connected.

Journalist Charles McGrath who, like me, grew up watching the  
Marathon, reflects on the core of that life-strength:

"Boston's is a toughness born, in part from a history of neighborhood  
clannishness, class resentment and an attitude that people here take  
care of their own, because you can't trust anyone else to!...But the  
Marathon was our antidote to that kind of isolation, linking the city, its  
neighborhoods and suburbs together like beads on a single string."

[New York Times, 4.21.13]

Our Inspiration comes from an 8-year old boy, inexplicably killed,  
His life cut terribly short, but his heart still reminding us why we're here...  
As the sign Martin Richard painted in school read just the week before:  
"No more hurting people." His life spirit lives on in that hope.

***INSPIRATION II...January 4, 2013...5:12 in the afternoon***

My mother died the way she lived, almost without giving it a second thought.  
And with a pledge to tomorrow that was as unwarranted,  
As it was unwavering.  
Having had more than her share of life-tsoris:  
A marriage to my dad, a man she deeply loved,  
but could not quite figure out how to live with, ending in divorce after just over 20  
years, compelling her—a 45 year-old woman who didn't even have a driver's license,  
to claim her independence, never mind having to earn a living to pay rent...  
All the while, right around that time, becoming the primary caretaker  
for her aging parents who lived half an hour away.  
Reason to feel a heaviness of heart might have weighed her down...  
But Leona Sirkman was resilient, almost joyous,  
Delighting in what she had—the grandkids up the street she so loved,  
And the 4 far-away ones in Larchmont...  
Singing in 2 choral societies to entertain the elderly.  
And, despite battling melanoma over the course of 5 years, undaunted,  
Still meeting her girlfriends at the all-you-can-eat salad bar  
at Wendy's every Wednesday...If you tried to call her after 9AM, too late;  
Mom was already out and about on her daily errands.  
Even with the health concerns of post-cancer treatment this past year,  
Mom was here to celebrate my D.D. last May, and was looking forward to what I  
promised would be an 85<sup>th</sup> birthday trip for her to Hawaii,  
As I often joked, "Ma, that's Honolulu, one way..."  
So when my sister called the day after our mother's 81<sup>st</sup> birthday,  
"Mom wasn't right, so I took her to Mass General.  
They've been doing tests all day...Jeff, you won't believe it."  
"What?"  
"She has brain tumors...malignant."  
"Seriously?...After all this!?" ...My sister Rhonda explained the diagnosis  
and the surgeon's suggestions. "Where's Mom?"  
"They put her in a room. She's right here..."  
"Mom, it's me, your favorite son." That laugh was her all right.  
"So Mom, what do you want to do?"  
"Well Jeffrey, it's like this: If I want to live, I have to let them try and operate.  
What other choice do I have?"

“Mom, you could just enjoy whatever time is yours...and...”

“What, and sit around waiting? No, Jeffrey, I want to live.

Let the doctors try; I’m not afraid...”

“OK Mom....If that’s what you want to do....I love you.

See you tomorrow at Mass General.”

“Love you too honey. Drive careful...”

My mother was so cautious in life. She taught me, as a kid, to stay clear of stray dogs and be wary of strangers. She was apprehensive of new technology and was never one to take undue risk...

But she was fearless in death.

Because she would not live, to her, what could be a highly compromised existence...knowing how full her days were with people/places she loved, given the option, grateful alone at the possibility, Leona Sirkman chose life.

...Mom never opened her eyes again;

Never fully regained brain function or consciousness.

The body withered, days in Neuro ICU...her face sunken, as we sat around her and told stories of a life gone-by...

Mom had already left us...Yet, we knew, lying there amidst the medical machinery as any hope of life faded from view, she never for a moment stopped loving us...

So as we, her kids & grandkids gathered, finally watched her breathe her last— indomitable spirit, she was still choosing life....

### ***INSPIRATION III...***

I have never met anyone to whom time matters more than my wife.

On our third date, after having hung out in her backyard pool, in her sitting room, our lips locked pretty passionately, her eyes suddenly popped open with a question:

“How long before we can have babies?”

Flabbergasted, but appreciating what her fast-track trajectory meant for our relationship, I suggested it would be a while, and we both broke into laughter.

Susan was 16 ½ and I 17 at the time.

Fast forward 38+ years together later, and we calculate by a different clock.

Truth is, time takes on added significance when we are reminded we are mortal, And there’s no reminder quite like cancer.

Confronting life-threatening illness can weigh heavily on many.

For some, it is paralyzing, impeding life's forward progress.

The days pass and you wake up to each new morning frozen by the unchanging reality: it's still there.

Others get so wrapped up in the medical management of disease that life itself becomes secondary.

Some face the very thought of it with disbelief,

as famed author William Saroyan once commented: "Everybody's got to die, but I always believed an exception would be made in my case."

So we cope by running the other way, as if we can....

Still others face the prospect of sickness with fear.

The uncertainty of what the future holds, of not being here to watch generations unfold, of meeting our final end before they, or we, are ready.

We tremble at the thought. It's a devastating blow. We dwell...in the dying.

Then there are uniquely inspired souls, who face their illness, even the possibility of dying, by emphatically living.

They refuse to let treatments, or the accompanying ill-effects, limit them.

And with a determination to greet each new day and fill it with purpose, disease becomes secondary.

Fearlessly facing life, choosing it over death,

No moment is meaningless, and no encounter insignificant.

Mark Twain once mused: "The fear of death follows from the fear of life.

A man who lives fully is prepared to die at any time."

"The capacity to live in the present and maximize it softens the scare of not existing at all. If we really feared death," Dr. Erica Brown intuits, "we would make sure to get it all in quickly before time runs out. The gift of death is that we don't know when it is, so we spend each day in exceptional states of love, generosity and sanctity because time matters so much." [Happier Endings, Dr. Erica Brown, pg. 161]

The life-expectancy calculator [originated, as you might guess,

by life-insurance brokers] is an easy-to-download app which, in exchange for inputting answers to all kinds of personal questions...

[My favorite: Of the 10 items on the stress list, \_\_\_\_\_ of them happened to me in the past 12 months?.....I was 9 out of 10...OY]

As you input your answers the calculator generates your life-span projection.

Some sites even provide an added feature: a personal mortality stop-watch

to start the countdown as soon as you click "OK." [Brown, pg. 151]

Of course, it is not OK...depressing, if not morose, on many counts.

Yet for a person in the throes of chronic/terminal illness,  
alongside the morning alarm, the mortality clock flashes...  
Today of all days we are well aware, that clock ticks for us all.

Yet it's all a matter of how you tell time....

For those of you who've been there, or who are there;

Or those caregivers close by, you understand:

It is not about counting the days, but approaching our time with an  
intentionality of presence that makes each day count.

Why is it that when someone on the street, could be an acquaintance, a congregant,  
even a perfect stranger, asks a question, my wife does not simply answer,  
she takes the time to have a conversation, to thoughtfully, with her whole being,  
respond?... Same reason, if she's not shepherding a friend through a family  
conundrum, or advising a fellow traveler in treatment, Susan is more often than not,  
knitting. Not merely a hobby, mind you; some pleasant way to pass the time.  
Susan's response to treatment, approaching three years ago when it started,  
Was to do something that kept her hands busy and somehow helped others.

Thus Neckandy—her homespun start-up was born:

Especially designed handcrafted scarves, in willy-nilly, beautiful blends  
in exchange for your donation to MSK of \$150. [or more if you'd like]

Specifically earmarked to help fund the liaison her oncologist, Dr. David Kelsen,  
has forged with the Weitzman Institute in Israel.

No—this is not a YK Tsedakah solicitation. [Though, if you're interested, shoot her an email]

Susan's got a good half-dozen on back-order...

But when her craft creations had generated over \$10,000., gaining her an invite to a  
special donors-reception back in May, it was beyond gratifying.

Unfortunately, treatment persists—third time around...

Fortunately, with current chemo effective, things are heading in the right direction.

Either way—there's no denying, it's a tough road.

Yet, because Susan fills her time, as she always has,

with determined devotion to helping others...to being a life-force for good to be  
reckoned with; because she is no less demanding of those closest to be better,  
to do right, to reach higher...than she was when we were in high school...

With outreaching honesty and fervent sincerity of heart,

My wife, I call her Dolly, affirms her life purpose and,  
inspires us with her impassioned presence every day.

Just being with her, time matters more....

DEATH...an Inspiration?... Heschel once said that in the presence of death there is but “*silence & awe.*” [Moral Grandeur, pg.366]

*Silence*, because words fail in the face of life-loss. Any Rabbi or Cantor who tries to explain when someone dies falls inevitably short.

What we must offer is the reverence of acknowledging there are no words...

Just being there, presence, is what matters most...

And *Awe*, because, as the Sages taught:

“Life and death are separated by a very thin veil.”

The line between this world and the next, between what we experience as our earthly existence and the soul’s flight to what may await, that veil is paper thin.

On a night like tonight, when generations mystically merge and we are but little lower than the angels, the veil seems virtually transparent....

Yes, Death, even the horrendous loss we may have gone through;

Even the tragic taking of lives before their time, or the saga of protracted illness...

Death can be an inspiration...

The Latin source reveals the secret: *In-Spirarie—To take in breath!*

For what is it that transcends the end, as Aristotle suggested,

*P’suche*—the breath of life...The breath that comes from Beyond,

From a “breathing in of life” that connects our most elemental act,

every moment—every day, every breath, to the Creator Herself....

Holy One—Breath of all Life, Hope beyond all we know & see...

In this hour when life & death hangs in the balance,

grant us strength to hold one another up in the face of loss;

empower our resolve to transcend illness by reaching beyond it to help others;

give us the courage to embrace the life we are given,

filling it with such love, such endlessly caring heart,

such spirited celebration of the everyday, such inspiration,

that even in the face of death, we will still be choosing life....

With hopes for a sacred seal in the Book of Life for us all...

*Ken Yehi Ratson...So May it Be God’s Will:*

AMEN

