

Yizkor talk at Mishkan Shalom, September 23, 2015

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When I was 16, my friend Barak took me out for lunch as a birthday present. He drove the car; he paid the bill. But what really made the outing feel adult was the question he posed afterward, as we wandered through a nearby park: “If you don’t believe in God, then what *do* you believe in?”

Anything I could think to say sounded feeble: *I believe in newspapers? In algebra? In Passover Seders where my cousins dare each other to swallow a whole spoonful of horseradish?* I quickly changed the subject.

But I thought of Barak’s question this winter and spring, when we fell through the cracks of ordinary time and found ourselves stumbling through concurrent family health crises.

On a Friday in the middle of January, my mother, Judy, entered St. Joseph’s Hospital in Denver to learn that her cancer, four years silent, had returned and spread to several new places. Three weeks later, on a Friday in early February, Anndee’s father, Stan, entered Bryn Mawr Hospital in severe pain from what we soon learned was pancreatitis.

On a Thursday in April, Stan took his final breath in Bryn Mawr Hospital’s ICU. Exactly three weeks later, on the last Thursday of that same month, Judy drew her final breath in her home in Denver.

It was still cold for most of that time. Snowstorms and bitter icy winds here in Philadelphia. Snowstorms and thaws and then more storms hitting Denver. We

traveled—between Mt. Airy and Bryn Mawr, between Philadelphia and Denver.

We talked—with family members, friends, colleagues, oncologists, nephrologists, ICU nurses, dialysis techs, palliative care specialists, and hospice staff.

We talked with each other—mostly by phone—but when we were able to be in the same city, late at night. Updates, reports, plans for pick-ups and drop-offs and who could get the groceries.

During the months when both Stan and Judy were failing, a lot of people asked what they could do to help. Some followed up with, “Your family is in my prayers.” Was prayer the default button, the last-gasp strategy when the bag of tangible tricks was empty?

I found myself qualifying sentences with holy parentheticals: “Maybe we’ll all go to Denver for Passover, God willing,” or “What about CPR if his heart, God forbid, stops working?” Where were these phrases coming from? I don’t believe in a God who sits atop a throne micromanaging our destinies.

And yet, my words stemmed from somewhere: from a desire to make meaning of this simultaneous chaos, to lay a narrative over our ragged days. From the moment my mother-in-law learned her cancer was back and my dad entered the ER, the uncertainty was the hardest part: Would he get an infection? Would draining her lung fluid help her shaggy breathing? What would tomorrow bring?

Four days before my father died, I walked across the campus of Drexel University and heard the carillon chime six o’clock. But then the bells began to sound the title song from *Cabaret*, one of my parents’ favorite musicals: “Start by

admitting/from cradle to tomb/isn't that long a stay/Life is a cabaret, old chum/  
only a cabaret.”

Did that mean my dad would survive to see another Broadway show? Or was the song signaling his final bow?

I'm a pragmatist; I figure this life is it, and we'd better use our finite minutes well. But in the face of grief and longing, I reached for the flimsiest straws. One dusky night, as I drove home from the hospital, a deer and her faun darted across a quiet, curving road. *Let him live*, I whispered as they vanished into the trees.

Ice turned to mud. Early, brave crocuses pushed their way through cold ground. Tree limbs fell during thunderstorms in Philadelphia. Tree limbs fell from the weight of spring snow in Denver. We buried Stan and Judy 23 days apart in two different cities. We cried and laughed and told stories. We plated cookies, washed coffee cups, readied the house for more visitors.

Warm summer months loosened our shoulders and relaxed our traveling schedules, but also revealed all of our brokenness. Stan was not grilling salmon at the shore, Judy no longer sitting at her loom or answering her phone. Anndee took to reciting the Kaddish on the back deck in the mornings. My time is at night, right when I would have been talking with my mom about our respective days.

Now the rains have returned, and the air is cooler. We eat sweet challahwith raisins that are buried, like memories, popping up at odd times. I miss Stan's gruff voice and the way he would show up at our house with four bags of groceries, not because we'd asked him, but because he saw these beautiful berries in the store and who doesn't need another bottle of olive oil? I miss my

mom. I miss talking with her, the way her voice would be parched in the evenings. I miss her eyes and her soft hands.

Do fear and loss make us irrational? Or is it that hard times rip away the veils that usually separate the factual from the mysterious, this bricks-and-mortar life from the one we can't predict or control?

All I know is that this winter and spring made a believer out of me.

I believe in the friend who drove 150 miles to bring us eight quarts of homemade chili, and the ones who showed up to play Rummi-Kub with Judy when she could no longer walk to the coffee shop.

I believe that everything is connected to everything else, and that this applies both to the body's moist pipelines and the earth itself. I believe the important question isn't "Why must we die?" but "How must we live?" and that the answer should animate our days.

It took me almost forty years, my friend, but here you go: I believe in love, which lashes us to each other and keeps pulsing even after death, the backbeat of our trampled, aching hearts.

<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/wont-you-celebrate-me>

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