

Yom Kippur Yizkor 5780  
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This is my 33<sup>rd</sup> *Yizkor* on this bimah. But in a profound way, it is also my first. Because I buried my father one year ago yesterday, this is the first time I have felt what so many of you feel. I have learned much this past year of sorrow and moving on....

**Helplessness:** Now I understand the psalmist when he said, "*Nah-ah-vay-tee shachotee ad m'od*--I am bent and bowed low." (ps 38:6)

Just before the funeral service began, the rabbi walked my family into the chapel the way I have walked so many families into facing death for so many years. I understood how the rabbi felt; I did not understand how I felt. We were ushered into the front row. I sat, Betsy to my side, Aaron and Hannah too, I could do nothing, nothing but hang my head in my hands, bent over, and weep. I did not want to be there. I did not want to believe that we were about to begin my father's funeral, my dad. We were going to bury him and there was nothing, nothing I could do to stop it.

He did not look like himself in the casket, but maybe he did. We put suits and ties or dresses on the dead. We put makeup on the dead. All to make them look less dead, and I wanted him to be less dead, but he would never, ever be less dead, only more dead. The rabbi uttered his first words but I did not, could not, look up. My head on my knees, I was, as the Bible puts it, "brought low." Only then did I understand how each of you felt at that very moment when I was with you to bury your loved one--surreal, empty. I was there, but not, and there was nothing, nothing I could do.

We tore our black ribbons and said the words: *Baruch Dayan HaEmmet*—Blessed is the righteous judge. The starkest of admissions that the time of death is not ours to decide. It really is in God's hands. Life ends, and we cannot change that. Not with love, not with strength, not with science, not with faith, not with anything. Death wins, always. And if that person you loved so deeply is mortal, then you too shall someday surely die. We really are only human.... To be at peace with our helplessness, and I am not yet, is the most terrible and liberating of lessons.

**Money:** I spend more now, which is no small thing for the son of a guy who washed and reused paper plates. I want to enjoy my family and my life more than I ever have before because I know, only memories matter after that call comes to Aaron and Hannah the way it came to me a year ago. I want to live a beautiful life so that beauty is what remains within them when I am gone. We are helpless in death but we are not helpless in life.

**An Ocean of Grief:** Grief is surprising...not at first, when you are prepared for it to pick you up and slam you against the rocky shore; but later, in a month, or two, or ten. I am fine, I am out to dinner with friends and casually take a crust of bread to soak up the last drops of sauce—wiping my plate spotlessly clean. Hmm, just like my dad, I think to myself while Betsy and our friends keep chattering. He would have loved this sauce, this bread. I am fine. I want to cry. I am fine. I want to cry. “I really miss my dad,” I say to Betsy fighting back tears. She nods. She knows. Her dad is dead too. I want to go home. Instead, I push it all back in....

We lose so much to death. Half our memory is gone with the death of the only person on earth who shared that incredible trip, the pizza from that little place down that alley in Rome, the babies’ first stumbles across the room, that old white Ford we took cross country when we were young and had no money. We lose so much love to death and if that love was real and deep, the grief is real and deep. Grief is not a race to be won or an ill to be cured. To deny grief its due is to deny the love we have for those we have no longer. Do not fight grief when it comes. Float with it...then, stand again.

**Wanting people to know and not wanting them to know.** Once I removed that torn, black ribbon, you could not tell by looking at me. You still cannot tell by looking at me. Sometimes, I wish you could. I wish you could know when I am missing my dad. It would help you treat me with an extra measure of kindness that would be so welcome. But at the same time, I don’t want you to know that sometimes, because grief knows no boundaries, when I am with you I am really with my dad, far away, far within myself. We who mourn walk in a fog sometimes. We wear a mask of normalcy and it is that mask you are talking to, not us. We are sometimes elsewhere because of our grief. That is the truth that we want you to know and the truth we also hide.

**Prayer:** Prayer helps. The rabbis knew what they were doing when they commanded us to say the Mourner’s Kaddish every day for 11 months. I said it every morning for my dad and then spent a moment looking at one of my favorite pictures of him—his arm around me, smiling. The picture was taken before the dementia, when he knew who I was and knew he loved me and knew I loved him, and did not know that his brain would die a slow and terrible death of which he would be mostly and strangely unaware.

“Where are you dad, where are you dad, where are you dad?” I wondered each time I visited him in the nursing home as he stared silently into the distance. “Where are you dad?” I wept so many times in that elevator on the way down from his floor. Shuddering a little—I did my best to finish and wipe my face before the doors opened into the lobby.

Many days Kaddish, those words that we are commanded to say, those words that we do not want to say, was the only thing that helped me. When we are sad and see mostly darkness within, when we are bent low, Kaddish commands us to stand up anyway; to stand up and say: “*Yitgadal, v’yitkadiash, smema rabba*—Magnified and sanctified may His great name be in the world that He created as He wills.” “As He wills,” not you.

You are so sad Steve, but now you must stand up and affirm and remember and say out loud how glorious life is. The world pulses with life, your father loved life, you love life, affirm that now, even though you are bowed with grief, stand up and affirm the greatness and the goodness and the supreme power of God who determined long ago that neither you nor anyone can conquer death, therefore strive to really live while you are alive. “*Yitgadal, v’yitkadash, shemay rabba*—Magnified and sanctified may His great name be....” Those words, that truth that must be said out loud and standing whether I felt like it or not, whether in that moment I believed it or not, rescued me so many mornings....

**Reaching Out Helps:** I am on sabbatical holed up in my sister’s empty Palm Springs house for the entire month of May trying to write the first draft of my next book. The working title is: *The Beauty of What Remains; What Death Teaches Us About Life*. For hours each day, I think of nothing but death. I keep the house cold and dark. I write and I pace each day for ten hours until it is cool enough outside to take a walk and find some dinner. Most nights I walk around the Mesquite golf course where I walked with my dad a thousand times over all the years I visited him and mom at their condo just off Highway 111. As I walk, I wonder out loud, “Where are you dad? Where are you?” I look up, and there on the back patio of a golf course condo I see a painted sign with the lyrics to *You Are My Sunshine*.

My dad often sang that song when he, mom and the five of us kids were in the blue Chevy wagon on our way to Sunday dinner. My dad was tough on me as a kid. Demanding, sometimes harsh, frightening even.

But those Sunday drives when he would sing that song, somehow I knew he really loved us. Just as I was missing him so much, those words appeared on that painted sign, on a stranger’s patio, on the path I had walked with him so often.

Dad sang it in the nursing home too, when the only thing he could remember any more was a handful of lyrics from long ago. “Dad, dad—*You are my Sunshine, my only...*” “*Sunshine...*” he would whisper.

I text my three sisters and my brother a picture of the painted sign. “Walking Mesquite golf course missing dad so much and saw this sign.” Sherry texts back a sketch of my dad, “I couldn’t sleep last night and drew this.” Greg texts back the lyrics to Dad’s favorite Hank Williams’ song:

*The silence of a falling star*

*Lights up a purple sky*

*And as I wonder where you are*

*I'm so lonesome I could cry*

“You guys are all making me cry now,” Marilyn responds. Somehow knowing they miss Dad too helps me. It means I am not alone. I am not the only one who loved him or who remembers him or who cares about him and is grateful to him and who must accept the decree. Do not dwell alone in your grief. Reaching out really helps.

**It gets better and it doesn’t.** Many years ago I read a book written by two women both of whom suffered the death of a child. In it, they shared what helped and what didn’t. What stuck with me was their advice that the most honest and helpful thing to say to someone whose child dies is: “It won’t always hurt so much.” I used to think what they meant was that eventually, grief gets better; the ache diminishes. Now what I think they meant was not that it won’t always hurt so much, but that it won’t always hurt so often. It will always hurt this much when we miss our loved ones. I am through telling people it won’t always hurt so much. Now I merely promise that it won’t always hurt so often. That is the truth. The other is a lie.

**The duality of memory:** You want to remember all the time, and you want to forget. He is all you want to think about but you do not want to think about him at all. She is all you want to talk about but you do not want talk about her at all because it hurts so much.

In order to bring my father back to life, I merely have to remember all those simple things that he loved: A slice from a perfect avocado. A sunny day. Hank Williams and Johnny Cash. A joke—the dirtier, the better. Watching *All in the Family* in his vibrating Naugahyde chair, peeling an orange into a perfect spiral before handing out slices to each one of his five children as if we were a nest of hungry birds.

There is also a world of memories that, try as I may, I can only sort of forget. Harsh memories of discipline and anger, anxiety and fear repressed and banished to the basement of my subconscious are constantly pounding on that basement ceiling with a broomstick, reverberating in ways mysterious and dark in the core of my conscious life, animating my own flaws, dysfunction and vulnerabilities.

My Dad didn't know or care about sports or hobbies or new gadgets like other dads. But he could back up a semi and operate a crane. He taught me to love nature, fishing, pancakes, corned beef hash, and Mom's soups. Mostly Dad taught me to enjoy a moment during that moment. So many times when he was eating something delicious and plenty of it, or when we were walking in the sunshine somewhere beautiful, he would just look around and ask rhetorically, "Are we livin'?"

He was simple and wise, harsh and generous, crude and hilarious, frightening and kind. And when I remember him, he is all of those things again.

That is the secret truth of memory; it is exquisite, and it hurts—like being caressed and spat on at the same time.

### **The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm**

We've all recited it at a funeral, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." Now, as my year of mourning ends, I find new meaning in one of its verses. "Yea, though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I shall fear no evil, for You are with me." First, the poet reminds us that we can and we will walk through the dark valley that is death and grief. We do not stay in darkness forever. With time, with Kaddish, with reaching out, and reaching in, we find a way back into the light.

For what is a shadow really, but proof of light. A shadow can only exist because of some brighter light that although partially obstructed by a mountain, a tree, or our grief, somehow, nevertheless still shines.

Memory is that light, illuminating and reminding me of so many things about my dad; reminding each of us who mourn of a love still present, still warm and aglow even when skies are gray. If we remember, nothing can ever take our sunshine away.

For how else can we hold on to the people we love, to the past that defines us, the offenses that wound us, or the laughter and the love that warm us? How else can we hold on to anything in a world whose centrifuge of speed and stress tries to whirl us all apart? What else can I do when I miss my dad so much? What can any of us do who grieve today? Nothing, other than to walk that dark valley, then light a yahrzeit candle, hold it in our hands for a moment to feel its warmth, pause in its glow, and embrace this blessing, this curse, this imperfect gift, this burden, this holy vessel--Yizkor.

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