

Yom Kippur Yizkor
October 8, 2011 Yom Kippur 5772
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This afternoon marks the climactic moment in a ritualized rehearsal that began ten days ago on Rosh HaShanah. The High Holy Days are replete with themes of life and death, of growth and decay, of mortality and eternity, of this world and the world to come. If Rosh HaShanah is a symbol of birth and renewal, Yom Kippur is a sober reflection upon our finitude and a meditation upon transcendence. If the theology of these days is sometimes jarring and dissonant to the modern ear, it is because the image of Divine retribution is an idea that we reject. Let me say it simply, the ancients conflated morality and mortality. They had great wisdom to offer about each and the explicit integration of the two served their world-view and enhanced the values of altruism, reciprocity, in-group loyalty, respect for authority, purity and sanctity,¹ but for most of us moderns, morality and mortality must be decoupled and viewed separately in order for us to fully engage with the primal themes of this day. Death is not a consequence of our moral behavior, but life itself is teeming with moral messages, mysteries and meanings.

Mussar literature teaches us humility by reminding us that none of us put ourselves on this planet. We are beholden to those who gave us individual life and to the cosmic circumstance that made life itself real. Contemplation of our mortality reminds us that that individual life is the most fragile and impermanent of gifts: we and everyone that we know will die. That means loss, mourning, grief and memory are an inescapable part of the human condition.

The High Holy Days are hard for those of us who have suffered a loss, but I don't think that they are hard because the liturgy reflects a theology that doesn't fit perfectly; they're hard because of the powerful presence of absence, because the underlying theme of mortality is confronted not simply on a theological or philosophical plane, but in the most concrete personal terms. The one that we love and cherish is both not here and palpably here. Like the poet, Robert Frost, each of us can declare, "I have been one acquainted with the night."² Each of us enters Yizkor with a sense of the singularity of our loss, but surrounded by a room full of others who also enter with a similar sense of the singularity, the

¹ These five values are taken from the Moral Foundations Theory posited by Dr. Jonathan Haidt and his collaborators. They are posited as the Five Moral Foundations that appear cross-culturally in many, if not most cultures and societies. This theory is articulated in a variety of publications of which Dr. Haidt is either author or co-author. The reader is referred to Haidt, Jonathan and Graham, Jesse, "When Morality Opposes Justice: Conservatives Have Moral Intuitions That Liberals May Not Recognize," published in *Social Justice Research*, vol. 20, # 1, 98-116, March 2007

² Frost, Robert, "Acquainted With The Night."

particularity of their loss, we also realize that we are connected to one another by virtue of a common and universal experience. The images and symbols of these days can be difficult, but I think that they are our friends not our enemy. They help us to contend with the abyss, to find the courage to enter it and to there discover that we have the capacity to move through and beyond disorientation and dislocation and to re-enter life and renew purpose, no matter how hard that is.

My thoughts today are conditioned by the grief that I've shared with my wife Irene and our family during the past fifteen months as we've grieved the loss of our son, Jesse.

Most of what I learned after Jesse's death was experiential and intuitive, but a great deal of what I felt was affirmed when I read an article by Ruth Davis Konigsberg, entitled, "New Ways to Think about Grief."³ Konigsberg writes about the psychological research that has challenged the theories of an iconic figure, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. Konigsberg writes that Kubler-Ross's five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, were adopted as gospel by an emergent death and dying movement. Konigsberg also provides convincing evidence that Kubler-Ross's theory is predicated upon a number of fallacious myths. I want to reference three of them.

The first of these false myths is that we grieve in stages. Researchers at Yale engaged in a study to test whether this is true and discovered that "most respondents accepted the death of a loved one from the very beginning. In addition, the emotional reaction of most participants was not the emotions of anger or depression, but a profound sense of yearning for the loved one."⁴ The latest research clearly indicates that grief is not "a series of steps that lead to a psychological finish line, but a grab bag of symptoms"⁵ that appear and disappear, and eventually simply lift.

The second false myth is that healing is dependent upon the expression of your darkest emotions. Kubler-Ross adamantly asserted that in order to successfully move through grief you must unearth and reveal your most raw, harshest feelings. Research demonstrates that the opposite is actually true. In one study, of 66 people who had suffered the recent loss of a spouse or a child, those who did not express negative emotions six months after their loss experienced less anxiety and depression and had fewer health complaints at 14 and 25 months than those who did.

³ Konigsberg, Ruth Davis, "New Ways to Think About Grief," in Time Magazine, Jan. 24, 2011. This article is adapted from Konigsberg's book, The Truth About Grief, 2011. Simon & Schuster Inc.

⁴ Konigsberg citing a Yale University study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association in 2007.

⁵ Konigsberg summarizing the comments of psychologist Janet Genevro

In fact, a second finding of the study “suggests that tamping down or avoiding those feelings, known as ‘repressive coping,’ actually has a protective function.”⁶

The last of Konigsberg’s false myths that I want to describe is the notion that grief never ends. Kubler-Ross wrote that despite going through the stages, “the reality is that you will grieve forever.” Evidence from a study conducted by George Bonanno, a professor at Columbia University’s Teachers College, who specializes in the psychology of loss and trauma, determined that in a sample of 205 elderly adults whose spouses had died, that nearly half “showed no signs of shock, despair, anxiety or intrusive thoughts six months after their loss.” Of course they thought about and missed their life partners, but at approximately the six-month mark, they had returned to normal functioning. Only about 15% of those who were studied continued to have problems after 18 months. “What we do know,” said Bonanno, “is that while loss is forever, acute grief is not.”⁷

The most important thing that I have learned is that we are extraordinarily resilient creatures. The bounce-back effect is not simple and it is seldom constant, but it is true that in adversity, we discover three things: reserves that we never knew that we possessed; the compassionate concern and care of friends and acquaintances that engenders feelings of love and gratitude; and, in the words of Psychologist Jonathan Haidt, “that trauma changes priorities and philosophies toward the present and toward other people.”

The way back from grief emerges, as the poet Maya Angelou has written, “slowly and always irregularly,”⁸ but it does emerge. I received the following poem from a colleague and teacher who knows of my penchant for poetry. I received it a second time from a friend whose husband I buried a month after Jesse’s death. For me it represents the most pertinent messages of this day. Each time I read it, it resonates within my soul. It’s written by a poet by the name of Ellen Bass:

The Thing Is

to love life, to love it even
when you have no stomach for it
and everything you’ve held dear
crumbles like burnt paper in your hands,
your throat filled with the silt of it.
When grief sits with you, its tropical heat
thickening the air, heavy as water

⁶ Konigsberg, referencing a study conducted by Dr. George Bonanno, of Columbia University Teacher’s College in 2007. The quote is taken from Bonanno’s study. Konigsberg goes on to reference other research that indicates that the same phenomenon seems to exist in relation to recovery after a wide range of traumatic events, from divorce to recovery after the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

⁷ Konigsberg, citing a second study by George Bonanno

⁸ Maya Angelou, “When Great Trees Die.”

more fit for gills than lungs;
when grief weights you like your own flesh
only more of it, an obesity of grief,
you think, *How can a body withstand this?*
Then you hold life like a face
between your palms, a plain face,
no charming smile, no violet eyes,
and you say, yes, I will take you
I will love you, again.⁹

This day demands that we re-discover the means by which we can echo the poet
and re-learn how to say “yes” to life.

⁹ Ellen Bass, “The Thing Is”