

## PERSONAL PRAYER, Douglas Starr

Two of my heroes recently weighed in on the question of mortality.

Last month Jimmy Carter announced at a press conference that he had an aggressive, probably incurable cancer. He expressed no regrets, but recalled that he'd had a wonderful life, with friends, faith and a gratifying existence. "I'm at ease," he said, "with whatever may come."

Oliver Sacks wrote that in facing his own mortality his thoughts rested not on the supernatural, but on the meaning of leading a, "good and worthwhile life." He came to see death as a kind of Shabbos – a final rest after a life of hard and meaningful work. A couple of weeks later he passed from this existence, having experienced, "the enormous privilege of being a sentient being on this beautiful planet."

Two of my other heroes died recently – my mother at 93 and, nine months later, my father at 95. Neither held a press conference or wrote essays in the *Times*. Neither was inclined to make weighty pronouncements. Once, when I asked them how they stayed chipper into their 90s, they both looked surprised. "We seem to be in denial about our age," they replied.

My father said, "Sometimes when I walk past the mirror, I think, 'Who is that old guy? He can't be me.'"

Where was the insight, the words of advice? But they had answered many times -- not by words but by example.

A few months before her death, while waiting in line with me at a sub shop, my mother burst out laughing. "What's funny?" I asked. "I just love you," she said, and she kept chuckling at the pleasure of being alive.

My father's passing was a more drawn out affair. In the last months of his life disability and dementia set in, robbing him of the ability to walk and form complete sentences. Gone was his wisecracking bravado. Yet he never lost his interest in engaging with others, in playfully getting under their skin. Even at the end, when all he had left was a twinkle in his eye, it was enough to send the ladies in the nursing home a-twitter.

My parents lived long, happy lives. They celebrated a 70-year marriage, loved and were loved in return. They embraced eccentricity. Their memory makes me smile.

Yet their example challenges me to grapple with my own restless spirit, with the worth of my exertions. Am I doing something meaningful, or merely keeping busy? Am I present for others? Am I present in life?

Those questions become ever-more pressing as I pass from middle age to what people used to call elderly. “Who is that guy?” Can he really be me?

This year, as Yizkor calls on us to take time out from our busy-ness, we remember those whom we loved and those we admired from afar. We continue to learn from them.

*Y’he ratzon milfanecha:* May it be your will that we be grateful for those who enriched our lives and continue to inspire us after they are gone.

May it be your will that we embrace things that matter and to learn to let go of those things that don’t.

May we stop looking back to see who might be gaining or ahead to see who we should catch.

*Y’he ratzon milfanecha:* May it be your will that we can be present in life, generous in love and have faith to be at ease with whatever may come.