

Last May, the night before my mother died in her own bedroom in her home in Princeton, NJ ... my three brothers and I sat in her living room looking around at her staggering Veblen-itude of possessions. "There's not a thing here I want," I said with some distain.

And then she died, and as I left her bedroom for the last time and came back out into the klieg lights that were now the living room ... I suddenly ... wanted EVERYTHING. Every piece of overwrought Judaica, every musty/clammy book, every *tchotchka* (that had been in her living room eternally). How childish I was not to have realized that I didn't want her *stuff* because *she* kept alive an entire **world** for us. A beautiful, astonishing, deeply reliable world ... a richly embedded world. For *us*, her aging children.

Eight years ago, after her stroke -- which ushered her abruptly into an old age that was sad and impotent, and regal, and persevering -- my brothers and I started joking about our new roles as indentured serfs in her duchy: endlessly battering her two large, unnecessary houses against decrepitude. "Why didn't the *queen* put herself in a nursing home?" we asked one another, "like *we* would have done."

But then -- again childishly, for the very first time and only after her death -- I bothered to imagine how awful it would have been to have driven down from Boston for years only to wheel her into some raw, perpetual noon of an impersonal hallway, or out to some restaurant absent of context. Instead, we enjoyed years of being sloppy dorm-mates in her many bedrooms, cooking big haphazard holiday meals in her kitchens that were falling into desuetude -- with no gratitude about how our "ceremony of innocence" was buoyed by a "centre that still held" (to quote Yeats) -- a centre that deeply and maternally *held* (and by maternally I mean, of course, invisibly).

In the months since her death we have spent many long weekends and weeks in her closets and basements and garages, in her boxes and files.... Had our parents not thrown out a single thing in 97 years? (In our dad's case, in 82 years?)

But as I plowed through decades'-worth of manila envelopes stuffed with cards and notes bearing old familiar names (of the now all dead) -- (my parents had a mid-century, deeply intact Jewish friendship-group in Trenton, NJ); as I came across my mother's notes for a class she was teaching on Zionism to her local Hadassah group in 1945; as I pored over the aerograms that my achingly young parents wrote to each other *daily* through 4 years of separation during WW2 (yearning and chaste and horny letters, and they: so so young.... no one I knew ... *just kids*); as I saw my mother's marginalia (in her so-familiar hand) in every annual Gala Book in the history of our local Hebrew Day School. ["Mr. and Mrs. Seymour Abrams should be solicited next year for \$50." (1958); "Naomi and Irving Kohlberg should be solicited for \$20,000." (2006) -- over a half-century of unbreached fidelity/devotion to this cause -- ; drafts from lean and gimlet-eyed speeches she gave; notes from the many boards she served on [the public library, the battered women's shelter] ... menus and guest lists from every *simcha* and holiday going back more than 75 years.... **I felt so proud of her life** ... which I definitively would not have felt ... had *she* not left us the evidence.

And then, a few days ago, walking down Beacon Street ... I saw my mother. She was a cloud with perhaps 20 seconds more to live, hurrying, and her mother was another cloud behind her, in even worse shape, making sweeping motions with her hands, pushing her somewhere ... safe and eternal and full of mothers, I thought. And of daughters. Grief *is* separation anxiety -- a regressive game of "peek-a-boo," but the grownup version where your mom actually *isn't* there. Grief is possessive.

May it be Thy will, God, as we feel greedy for those enormous rooms whose doors have now quietly shut ... as we put our hands out to those places where things WERE, to that tense shining dullness of space where our memories still quiver... as we become ever more conscious liminalists—living ourselves, that is, on that growingly-defiant little edge between life and not-life ... as our lives *fill* with holes and losses and absence and as You, God, nevertheless, steadfastly roll away Light before Darkness and Darkness before Light, and set Order amid the Greater Chaos, and the Greater Chaos always amid an Even Greater Order ... (as You are *our* centre that holds)

May it be Thy will that WE become the **centre that holds** for others: for our children, our charges, our friends, our siblings, our parents, our neighbors ... that WE keep alive entire *worlds* for them ... because others kept alive entire *worlds* for us.

May it be Thy will. May it be Thy will.

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