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YIZKOR YOM KIPPUR

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The story is told about a rabbi who was officiating at a funeral. When the service was over, the mourner stood riveted at the grave – seemingly unable to leave. The rabbi stood there patiently for a while – and then gently tried to encourage the man to return to the waiting car. The man refused – overwhelmed by his loss. “Rabbi, you don’t understand,” he lamented: “I loved my wife.” Some more moments elapsed – the mourner still huddled over the grave. The rabbi approached the mourner again: “I know that you loved your wife – but the service is over. Everyone else has gone.” Again, the mourner repeated: “Rabbi, you don’t understand. I loved my wife.” The mourner remained – fixed in place – growing ever more inconsolable. Considerably more time passed – until the rabbi decided to marshal all his persuasive abilities in a final attempt to gently prod the mourner to leave. “I see your distress,” the rabbi said, but before he could even finish his

sentence, the mourner interjected: “But rabbi, it seems that you still don’t really understand. I loved my wife – and once, I almost told her.”

Yizkor is that supremely intense moment of our Yom Kippur experience, when amid our prayers, fasting and introspection, we pause as our Jewish tradition mandates, to remember our loved ones who are no longer with us.

But truth be told, Yizkor is not only about our losses, as poignant, as searing as they may be. Yizkor is also about the here and now and making our lives really count.

The actor Robin Williams’s recent suicide death at age 63 sent shock waves through our society. Perhaps, you recall his extraordinary 1989 film, Dead Poet’s Society, where Williams plays maverick teacher John Keating and inspires his class of students at Welton Academy to maximize their dreams.

From the “getgo,” in the film, Robin Williams is not a conventional teacher.

On the first day of school, he takes his students out of their classroom into the main hallway of Welton Academy. There, he has them approach glass display cases filled with trophies, footballs and various team photos of an earlier era.

With that backdrop, Robin Williams addresses the students directly . . . “I would like you to step over here and peruse some of the faces from the past.

You (have) walked by them many times, (but) I don't think you've really looked at them. They're not that different from you, are they? Same haircuts. Full of hormones, just like you. Invincible, just like you feel. The world is their oyster. They believe they're destined for great things, just like many of you. Their eyes are full of hope, just like you. Did they wait until it was too late to make from their lives even one iota of what they were capable?"

And Robin Williams continues: "Because you see, gentlemen, these boys are now fertilizing daffodils. But if you listen real close, you can hear them whisper their legacy to you. Go in, lean in. Listen. Do you hear it? Carpe. Hear it? Carpe. Carpe diem. Seize the day, boys. Make your lives extraordinary."

Later in the film, Robin Williams introduces his students to poetry.

"We don't read and write poetry," he says, "because it's cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race. And the human race is filled with passion..."

Poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for."

And then with his students crowded around him, Robin Williams invokes

Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass:

“O me! O life! . . .of the questions of these recurring, of the endless trains of the faithless . . . of cities filled with the foolish; what good amid these, O me, O life?

Answer: that you are here; that life exists and identity... that the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.”

In one of those iconic film moments, Robin Williams then looks directly at his students – “What will your verse be?” he challenges them. “What will your verse be?”

Isn't that the Yizkor message that all of us should internalize and enact – a gift from Robin Williams that speaks to our hearts and our souls?

Most of us are pulled in a hundred different directions – Washington is especially noteworthy for that phenomenon – and we can all write the script. Everyone seems to have a claim on our time, and often, as a result, we miss or defer what is really compelling.

A poignant narrative – author unknown – underscores that truth:

“After 21 years of marriage, my wife wanted me to take another woman out to dinner and a movie. She said, ‘I love you, but I know this other woman loves you too, and she would love to spend some time with you.’”

The other woman that my wife wanted me to visit was my mother, who has been a widow for 19 years, but the demands of my work and my three children had made it possible to visit her only occasionally. That night I called to invite her to go out for dinner and a movie.

"What's wrong, are you well?" my mother asked. My mother is the type of woman who suspects that a late night call or a surprise invitation is a sign of bad news.

"I thought that it would be pleasant to spend some time with you," I responded, "just the two of us."

She thought about it a moment, and then said . . . "I would like that very much."

And so, a few days later, as I drove over to pick her up, I was a bit nervous.

When I arrived at her house, I noticed that she, too, seemed to be nervous about our date. She waited in the door with her coat on. She had curled her hair and was wearing the dress that she had worn to celebrate her last wedding anniversary. She smiled from a face that was as radiant as an angel's.

"I told my friends that I was going to go out with my son, and they were impressed," she said, as she got into the car. "They can't wait to hear about our meeting."

We went to a restaurant that, although not elegant, was very nice and cozy.

My mother took my arm as if she were the First Lady. After we sat down, I had to read the menu. Her eyes could only read large print. Half way through the entries, I lifted my eyes and saw Mom sitting there staring at me. A nostalgic smile was on her lips.

"It was I who used to have to read the menu when you were small," she said.

"Then it's time that you relax and let me return the favor," I responded.

During the dinner, we had an agreeable conversation - nothing extraordinary, but catching up on recent events of each other's life. We talked so much that we missed the movie.

As we arrived at her house later, she said, "I'll go out with you again, but only if you let me invite you." I agreed.

"How was your dinner date?" asked my wife when I got home.

"Very nice. Much more so that I could have imagined," I answered.

A few days later, my mother died of a massive heart attack. It happened so suddenly that I didn't have a chance to do anything for her. Sometime later, I

received an envelope with a copy of a restaurant receipt from the same place mother and I had dined. An attached note said: "I paid this bill in advance. I wasn't sure that I could be there; but nevertheless, I paid for two plates – one for you and the other for your wife. You will never know what that night meant for me. I love you, son."

And the author interpolates:

At that moment I understood the importance of saying, in time, "I LOVE YOU." And to give our loved ones the time they deserve."

What, then, is the lesson of Yizkor? Death - with its inevitability for all of us - should teach us about life.

Love, kindness, generosity of spirit, empathy - these are among the most powerful gifts we can offer each other.

Now, today, this year – what will your verse be?