

Yizkor 5764

Yizkor was the hardest of all the services to prepare for this year. I am not sure why. My guess is, as time passes and my list of losses grows along with yours – Yizkor becomes less theoretical, less in my head and more in my heart, my soul, my guts.

For whatever the reason, this year, I found myself casting around for what to say, a bit confused, a bit unclear – not my norm.

What has emerged from my confusion is a more complex picture of the web of life and death, love and loss, human suffering and redemption and lots of fragments, like a ship broken at sea, its pieces rising and falling in the swell of the ocean, some pieces recognizable others not, flotsam and jetsam, mixed in with the foam, born by the current to who knows where...

The renowned American poet Billy Collins expresses well the complex array of feelings and connections between life and death in his signature poem – “Picnic, Lightning”:

Picnic, Lightning

“My very photogenic mother died in a freak accident (picnic, lightning) when I was three.”
Lolita

It is possible to be struck by a meteor or a single-engine plane
while reading in a chair at home. Safes drop from rooftops
and flatten the odd pedestrian
mostly within the panels of the comics, but still, we know it is possible,
as well as the flash of summer lightning, the thermos toppling over,
spilling out on the grass.

And we know the message
can be delivered from within. The heart, no valentine,
decides to quit after lunch,
the power shut off like a switch,
or a tiny dark ship is unmoored into the flow of the body’s rivers,
the brain a monastery,
defenseless on the shore.

This is what I think about
when I shovel compost
into a wheelbarrow,
and when I fill the long flower boxes, then press into rows
the limp roots of red impatiens – ?

the instant hand of Death
always ready to burst forth
from the sleeve of his voluminous cloak.

Then the soil is full of marvels,
bits of leaf like flakes off a fresco,
red-brown pine needles, a beetle quick
to burrow back under the loam.
Then the wheelbarrow is a wilder blue,
the clouds a brighter white,

and all I hear is the rasp of the steel edge against a round stone,
the small plants singing
with lifted faces, and the click
of the sundial
as one hour sweeps into the next.

It is possible to be struck by lightening, or squashed by a falling safe, or killed by cancer, or by a drunk driver, or, or, or, or....

And, there are as many ways to live, as there are to die...

Death is something we all face. In that sense, it is the great equalizer – the worm makes no distinction. How we face it, how we experience it, who we lose and when, that makes it all so complex, so hard and always, always very personal.

For a colleague of mine, Yiskori s like having ice cream with her grandmother long gone.... It's a lovely picture, but I know she has not lost a parent yet, or a sibling, or God forbid, a child,

Am I making sense? I am not sure...

Things happen...

I'm on my way to a wedding... haven't worn this suit for a while...reached in the pocket of my jacket...what do I find? The notes from a funeral from a number of years ago...

I knew this man, I cared for him...for a moment, I picture him healthy, then not so good, then cold in a hospital bed...the family flashes before me... what pain, it hurts.... I can remember the quality of the light at the graveside, hear the earth hit the coffin...broken sobs... And then, I've arrived at the beautiful winery, a person, I think he works there, is telling me where to park...

As I walk over to where the huppah is, I happen to look down at my shoes...there is mud splattered on them..."Oh" I think, "I last wore these when I went down to Colma for another funeral....it's always foggy there, the grass is always wet, a little dirt from the grave always gets on your shoes, but you don't notice it...."

I try to rub it off... I can't.

The huppah looks beautiful, it's a beautiful day...the bride is always beautiful...life goes on.

Life goes on and we carry our losses along with us. We say, zikhronam l'brkha, "May they be remembered for a blessing."

And, sometimes they can be remembered for a blessing...sometimes, but not always.

Lightening can strike and it does in more than one way; sometimes life can be more painful to us than death, some times, well...

It's just not that simple, crisp or clean.

It is, after all, about death and life we are talking.