

Rosh Hashana Talk, Sept. 2016

Hi, my name is Lisa Goldman. Some of you may have heard my story, but others of you have not. In about a month, I will, G-d willing, celebrate my 44th birthday. It was not a day many expected me to see. I was diagnosed, at age 41 with Stage IV lung cancer. Statistics told me that I had about a 15% chance of surviving 1 year, and a 1-2% chance of surviving 5 years.

I had taught a spin class less than a month before I was diagnosed. I was a fitness fanatic, a never-smoker, a non-drinker, an almost vegan of over 20 years. Yes, I got a swift and brutal education that lung cancer can strike young, healthy, never smokers, and it does so at a clip of tens of thousands of us per year.

I was shocked and I've had almost 3 years now to contemplate mortality. Rabbi Graff asked me to speak today because she'd read some of my public blog and surmised that some of my navel gazing might be pertinent to our discussion here today: What would you do if you realized your life might be cut short?

Some things are fairly obvious: tell the people you love, how much you care about them, and why. I have done that for some of the most significant people in my life, but not all - yet. Here is an example of the blog post I wrote for and about my father on Father's Day last year:

Here's how I knew this lung cancer thing was real. I was in the hospital. I'd had my biopsy and diagnosis the day before. Upon hearing the news, my parents had flown up and had been in my room all day, talking with me and my doctors, and when it came time for bed, my Mom jokingly offered my dad a Xanax. He turned her down, and then a few minutes later as he was heading out the door, he half-jokingly said, "Barb, maybe I will have one of those."

Ho. Lee. Crap.

You see, I've never seen my father take anything stronger than an aspirin in my life. He doesn't smoke, he doesn't drink, he doesn't curse, he doesn't gamble, and he doesn't joke about any of those things either. On top of that, he's about as level-headed and unflappable as they come. When he gets upset, he uses the word "unequivocal" a lot and does this thing with his fingers, sort of like an "ok" sign with the middle, ring and pinky fingers sharply pointed at you emphasizing his unequivocal point. That's it. If you get his three finger salute, you've gone a little too far. If he's joking about taking a Xanax? Now it's time to panic.

Sometimes I've bristled at his over-the-top wholesomeness and old-fashioned ways. He ran a very tight ship when I was growing up. He woke me up in the mornings belting out

Reveille on his pretend trumpet. He made me have a study schedule, allowing for only two 5 minute restroom breaks while doing my homework between school and dinner time. When I went to camp and later to college, I'd receive letters from him on his law firm letterhead, in outline format with line numbers for reference and footnotes. When it came time for me to rebel and establish my independence like any normal teenager, I did so by switching from his beloved Lotus Word Pro to Microsoft Word. You cannot imagine the amount of unequivocal triple finger pointing that earned me. I almost got disowned.

But, we made it through. Even in the midst of my wild Microsoft rebellion days, my Dad was my unshakable rock. Once, when I was about 15, I woke up to something tickling my arm. I went to groggily itch it and discovered a huge cockroach. I flung it off me, and it started flying around thrashing into things. I screamed like crazy. My Dad came barreling down the hall in his pajamas, wielding a baseball bat. When he discovered the cause of upset was a common beetle, he almost took the bat to me, but then he just laughed, swapped the bat for a wad of toilet paper and took that sucker down. That's love.

Unfortunately, he can't take down cancer for me with toilet paper, or even a baseball bat. Still, he's trying just the same.

We're not super talk-about-your-feelings type of people. So, I haven't said this to him directly. But, I want him to know now: I see you, Dad. I see you quietly visiting your mom

twice a day for decades, and I learn what family means. I see you forcing me to pick up all the softballs left in the outfield after practice, and I learn a little humility. I see you showing up to my tennis matches to root me on, and I learn about unconditional support. I see you running a business that not only affords your family a comfortable life, but stability for half a dozen employees and their families, and I learn about hard work and responsibility. I see you with your military history, and I learn about duty and honor. I see you keeping in touch with your childhood friends, your law colleagues, your college and army buddies, and I learn about loyalty and friendship. I see you driving the same broken down car for decades so that I don't have to pay off school loans, and I learn about values. And in this past year and a half? In this past year and a half, I see you burying yourself in your work, so you can think less about what it might mean that cancer took your father when you were only 27 and now it's threatening your only daughter, and I see love. I see you offering to help cover any medical expense I might need without the slightest hesitation, and I see love. I see you quietly staying home by yourself, while Mom comes to take care of me for weeks at a time, and I see love. I see you not complaining once about the burden this has put on you in so many ways, and I see what it means to be a parent: above all else, love.

I'm not very good at expressing it in person, Dad. But I see it all, and the sheer magnitude of it just crushes me with awe and gratitude. I spend my life trying to live up to the high standards you have always set for me. I hope to do you proud. Happy Father's Day, Dad. I love you.

So... Sharing your feelings with loved ones is almost always a worthwhile endeavor. Facing this diagnosis has made me more free with my “I love yous” and that has been a good thing. But, I hardly have all the answers. Almost 3 years into this process and I still haven’t said and done everything I’d like to do. I haven’t even organized my photos → something I panicked about in the hospital room just days after my diagnosis.

Here’s the problem. I cannot compose letters like that one to my father every day. Whoever said “live every day like it’s your last,” clearly never really had to -- it’s a terrible place to operate from.

When the oncologist gave me my diagnosis, I swiftly adopted a new identity. I left my previous identity as a mom, wife, fitness instructor, school volunteer, and crafter, completely behind. I became “Lisa the LC patient.” I immersed myself in the LC world: surviving treatments, managing side effects, researching, blogging, advocating, thinking about LC and my mortality in some form or another almost constantly.

At around the two year mark of living this way, I grew weary of living like this. I wanted to reclaim some of my previous self, but, letting go of LC as my primary identity felt terrifying. I knew exactly how much I had to lose, and how devastatingly quickly I could lose it. For a long time, it felt naive, stupid even, to re-engage in my pre-cancer life. I

didn't want to open myself up to that excruciating wake-up call again, and I wasn't sure how to avoid it except to constantly be prepared for the worst - to curtail living in order to be ready to die within weeks.

Most people have the luxury of avoiding thoughts about their mortality until it is very close. Even many cancer patients are able to cope by telling themselves that their cancer isn't real, isn't deadly. That's not me. I am acutely aware that everything I experience in life will forevermore be through the lens of having this diagnosis. BUT - I need more. About 8 months ago, I made the conscious decision to resume living. It finally dawned on me that it's not necessarily an either/or proposition, it's both/and. I can live both with the knowledge of my diagnosis, my mortality, and proceed with my life. I can be a diligent patient, advocate and blogger AND resume teaching, travelling, mothering, attempting art. And I have. Because, until I'm dead, I'm not.

I don't know how long I'll get to live here, but none of us do. What if I AM in the 2% that survives 5 or more years? What if my diagnosis wasn't a death sentence, but an invitation to live life the days I have left as fully as I can? I can live like I'm dying AND like I'm living. Because I am. We all are.

(Lisa also invites you to visit her blog: lisa.ericgoldman.org)