

One day two young were fish swimming along and they met an older fish swimming the other way. The older fish nodded at them and said, "Morning, boys, how's the water?" The two young fish swam on for a bit, and then one of them looked over at the other and said, "I don't want to appear stupid or anything, but what the heck is water?"

It isn't only those young fish that miss what is all around them. Just as that older fish gently reminded the younger ones to pay attention to what sustained them, so Yom Kippur challenges us to be more aware. We are in the middle of living, but often – like those young fish – we are so busy that we forget what it really means to *live*. Like a wise old fish, this day asks, "Afternoon. How's life?" In response to a workplace shooting a year ago Arianna Huffington wrote a commentary on being so wrapped up in living that we can't really see what the heck is life. She said:

It's easy to let ourselves get consumed by our work. It's easy to use work to let ourselves forget the things and the people that truly sustain us. It's easy to let technology wrap us in a perpetually harried, stressed-out existence. It's easy, in effect, to miss our lives even while we're living them. Until we're no longer living them.¹

At *Yizkor*, strangely enough, it is the contemplation of death that reminds us what it really means to be alive. As Huffington observed, it is easy to focus on the things that – in the long run and at the end of our days – may not really matter all that much. All of us, eventually, have to confront death. And, when we do, it is hard to avoid the question: "What is life all about anyways?"

Imagine that you are at a party, meeting someone for the first time. You get through the pleasantries – "I'm so-and-so." "Why are you here?" And then comes the question that helps you get a real sense of that person – "What do you do?" In answering most of us share where we work, or the career we choose or how we *schlep* our kids hither and yon. "What do I do?" These days we Instagram everyone what we are doing: "I'm at a new job."

¹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/arianna-huffington/are-you-living-your-eulogy-or-your-resume_b_3936937.html

"Look how proud I am of my kids – off to Kindergarten or off to college." "I'm on vacation. See how happy I am." "I've checked in at this restaurant or that baseball game."

When someone dies, however, most people's lives are measured in a different way. It's not how many awards they received or how big was their portfolio; it's not how many concerts they attended, what famous person they met or that they had an incredible wardrobe. When I speak with families before a funeral, I occasionally hear about the pride the person took in their work. Some will say, "She always liked to look good" or "He loved to travel." Rarely, though, is that the focus. What people spend most of their time recalling – what gets them animated when talking about their loved one – is sharing what that person was passionate about, how much they gave to others, what made them laugh and wonder and cry. It's things like:

"Every time I had a dance performance or game, my mom was there."

Or:

"My dad worked hard, and I'm grateful for all he provided. But what I really loved were the times we went to football games together."

Or:

"My wife loved cooking for family and friends. It felt like love was in every spoonful."

Or:

"He died too young – and I'm still angry – but boy, how he made me laugh. I'm crying that he's gone, but thinking of him just makes me smile."

Or:

"She wasn't the best dancer, but I still feel good when I think of her out on the dance floor."

Or:

"His long illness was horrible. But even in dying he taught me about courage ... or faith ... or love ... or being wise."

My own father died when I was 12 – just nine months before I became a Bar Mitzvah. I have many memories, but among those that stand in clearest relief for me is of picnic we were at the summer before he was gone. Every year the organization he was involved with, the Lions Club, sponsored an outing for children who were deaf, blind or both. I remember my father

asking me to take the arm of one of those children, helping them up on a pony for a ride and, later in the day, putting on life preservers so we could go for a boat ride and feel the spray of the water on our faces. What I remember the most, however, is my father's tears. I never asked him why he was crying, but I suspect I knew even then. Why is life sometimes so hard? Do I appreciate the blessings that are mine? Do I give back enough? Maybe he cried for other reasons, but through the years I am still inspired by what he gave, how he allowed himself to feel and what he taught me – without telling me in words – about helping others and showing me that strong men can shed tears.

In a eulogy a different truth about what matters in our lives comes out – and it's not how many deadlines we met, how many friends we had on Facebook, the size of our home or whether we visited every country on our "bucket list." What others remember is when we were there for them – or when we failed to show up. What lives beyond us is our sense of excitement, or how we gave back to make the world a little better. Through death we gain insight into a different metric on our lives - and it's not anything we put on our resumes or Facebook wall.

"How's the water?" is a question that pushes us to consider where we are in our lives, what we are doing, how we spend our time. "How's the water?" challenges us to pay attention to all that is around us – and ask that big question about really living: "How *am* I doing? What is there about my life that I want remembered?" As we recall those who are gone we would do well to consider two questions: "If I were gone, what would I want others to say about me? And if I heard my eulogy, would what is said be what I hope they would say?" Over the years I have delivered hundreds of eulogies. Often, after a funeral, I remind those who are mourning, "People write their own eulogies. I just tell them." What *would* we want told?

In our prayers we say that the gates will soon be closed, the Book will soon be sealed. In truth, the gates of repentance are – as our rabbis teach – always open. *Yizkor* is not just about dying, therefore, it's about living.

In Jewish thought death is not only an end. It is also a beginning. The Israeli

poet Yehuda Amichai once wrote a poem about life and death that touches on this truth. He wrote:

Patuach sagur patuach. Open closed open.
Before we are born,
Everything is open in the universe without us.
For as long as we live,
Everything is closed within us.
And when we die,
Everything is open again.
Open closed open.
That's all we are.

"As long as we live, everything is closed within us." In this Amichai suggests that too often we close our selves off from what matters, focusing on our resume more than our eulogy. At this time of sacred memory we are challenged to consider how we really want to live. It's not too late. Tell the people who matter to you that they do. Challenge those who are hurting themselves or hurt you – not to berate or belittle them, but with the intent of making things better. Forgive those who have slighted you. Don't say, "someday" you will do what is important to you, for that "someday" may not come. This life is the water in which we swim.

"When we die, everything is open again." Erin William Hyman, who died this year at the age of 42 (by coincidence – the same age of my father) is the one who introduced me to this poem. I never met her other than through her obituary, but her thoughts touched me – a complete stranger – and serve as a reminder that we are more than our lives, more than memory, more than what we are swimming in right now. She said:

I love this piece of poetry and I think about it all the time – the way before our existence we are part of the limitless pulse of energy, and how we are returned to it after the short parenthesis that is our individual bounded life. In this vision, death is like a new breath, a universal exhale, a release back into the all.²

"How's the water?" is the question that remembering reminds us to ask. At this sacred moment it is not a question about dying. It's about living. As our traditions teach: "the righteous are called living even when dead."³

² http://www.jewishjournal.com/obituaries/article/erin_williams_hyman_1972_2014

³ Babylonian Talmud, Berachot 18a