

Who Tells Your Story

“Let me tell you what I wish I had known, when I was young and dreamed of glory. You have no control. Who lives who dies who tells your story?” -Lin Manuel Miranda from Hamilton

Three of my four grandparents died in their late nineties. Honestly, we didn't really know exactly how old they were because they themselves didn't know. There was no record of their births. For my mother's parents, it seemed like the family just picked dates close to the Jewish holidays to celebrate their birthdays. As I grew up, I watched them age. I was with them shortly before they died. What I realized just recently is that I formed an unconscious expectation that the people closest to me would live well into their nineties.

Who lives who dies, who tells your story?

My first experience of death was when our cat died. I was probably about 11 years old. Misty was a grey cat who appeared on our doorstep during the summertime when we stayed with my

grandparents at their home in New Jersey. This furry guy kept hanging around until my mother broke down and let us adopt him. The only pets we had until then were little turtles. I'm pretty sure that when each turtle died my mom just flushed them down the toilet and ran to the pet store to replace it with a new one before we even noticed. That way we could avoid the topic of death altogether. Talking about death with anyone, especially children, can be really hard. Misty the cat was a different story. We begged our parents to let us keep him and we had him for about 5 years. I loved cuddling with him and hearing his loud purring. He was so soft and sweet. When he got sick, we kept him alive for a while with different medications. But when he started losing weight and crying because he was in pain, we really had no choice but to let the vet euthanize him. I'm actually tearing up just thinking about it. My first experience with the death of a beloved. He left a big whole in our hearts...

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I think the scariest part about death is the unknown. On Yom Kippur we face this truth, together, with our community. We are encouraged to approach the reality of death. In our prayers, while some of us are fasting, some wearing white and some wearing a kittel, a burial garment. And every year, as I look out into the congregation, I am reminded of who is missing, who is with us in spirit, in our hearts. Life is precious. One reason that's true is that it doesn't last forever. Today, we look at our stories, to imagine how we may be remembered.

When you're gone who remembers your name, who keeps your flame, who tells your story?

Carlos Castaneda wrote, "When you need an answer, look over your left shoulder and ask your death."

Living with the unknown is a decentering experience. I now understand that better than ever. With a cancer diagnosis, if you run a fever of 100.5 or higher, get to the emergency room. If you have any tightness in your chest, call your doctor immediately. If

you find yourself short of breath you have to go to the hospital. If you start shivering, make sure you get medical attention as soon as possible. Everything can change in just a moment. And when is it enough already? Who's writing this chapter of our lives? Who lives who dies, who tells your story?

The Torah portion that discusses the death of Sarah is called in Hebrew Haye Sarah, "the life of Sarah." Abraham's death and his son Ishmael's death are also mentioned in this one section of the Bible. The deaths of the first patriarch, the first matriarch, and the patriarch's son are all found in this Torah portion. Yet it bears the title "life," not "death." Commenting on this paradox, Rav Amiel writes: "One should note that davka the Torah portions that speak of the death of righteous individuals are named using some form of the word "life", e.g. "The Life of Sarah," "Jacob lived." This reminds us of the words of our ancient sages, "The righteous are called living even after their death" (Talmud Berakhot 18a). Rav Amiel's comment underscores how, even after we die the righteous deeds, we perform live on in the hearts and minds of

those whose lives we touch. Jewish tradition bids us to confront our mortality in an open, honest manner.

I don't think I will want to be remembered by the last few months or maybe even years of my life. I'd rather be remembered by my kind acts, my love for my family and commitment to social justice.

I had the pleasure of visiting with a 96 year old man at Aegis a few months ago. He told me he was ready to die. I asked him how he wants to be remembered by those who love him. He said he doesn't want them to think about how during this last part of his life he has to walk with a cane, but he wants them to remember that he was a great athlete when he was in his younger years. He ran marathons. He told me it was important to him that they realize how much he loves them. He said that he would like them to remember his values and the choices he made to live a life of meaning. I asked him if he would consider either writing these important desires down or having someone record them for him. This way his surviving family would be guided by his desires concerning how they might remember him. I explained that for

hundreds of years, Jewish parents have passed down their wisdom and values to their children by recording end-of-life documents called tz'va'ot- “ethical wills.” He and his daughter came to services on Rosh HaShanah and I gave them some more information about this sacred practice. In *Ethical Wills: A Modern Jewish Treasury*, author Jack Reimer describes how it might feel to receive an ethical will as “sort of like reading a love letter from the beyond. There is a sense of being a voyeur, eavesdropping on an intimate conversation.” Reimer writes that it is a privilege to be given an ethical will, A loved one took the time to craft their own personal Torah, their story.

Instead of the trips to the emergency room after a fall, or the last few days in a hospital bed, we can choose to help craft our stories, that will survive after our bodies die.

Who lives who dies, who tells your story...

Two years ago, Aryeh and I joined a Buddhist trip to Vietnam and Cambodia. Unfortunately, Aryeh and a majority of the other travelers came down with a respiratory infection, so by the time we reached the city of Hue, there were only 6 of us feeling well enough to participate in the planned outing. One of our last visits of the day was at the Thien Mu Pagoda. Our small group climbed up the uneven steps and walked over to the small temple area. As we were walking, our tour leader an ordained teacher in the Zen tradition of the Vietnamese Master, Thich Nhat Hanh, explained that we would stop at a small room that housed the baby blue car from the famous picture in Life magazine, of the first Vietnamese monk Thích Quảng Đức who burned himself to death in protest against the Vietnamese government's repression of Buddhism. This monk stepped out of the baby blue automobile onto a busy intersection and sat calmly in the lotus position while a colleague poured gasoline over his head. Holding onto his prayer beads, the Buddhist monk said in Vietnamese, "Homage to

Buddha”). Then he lit a match and placed it against his gasoline soaked robe. He went up in flames.

What we didn’t know until we arrived at the room, is that there is also a picture of the monk’s heart. It is the only part of his body that survived intact. Today, the “Burning Monk” photograph of Thich Quang Duc’s death has become a universal symbol of rebellion and the fight against injustice. It was an act of defiance against a corrupt government that had already killed nine of its own people.

I have respect for this monk’s action, which lead to the beginning of a national movement. What I find most amazing is that his body burned, yet his heart remained, it wouldn’t burn.

“And when you’re gone who remembers your name, who keeps your flame, who tells your story?”