

Rabbi Michael A. White

Temple Sinai of Roslyn

Yom Kippur/2017

Reverend Kate Braestrup is a chaplain with the National Parks Service. She regularly counsels stunned families broken in grief after some horrible, unforeseen tragedy. She writes that often such families are afraid to enter the funeral home. It's all so unbelievable to them. Like a bad dream. Reverend Braestrup's advice to such grieving families is this: "Walk fearlessly into the house of mourning. For grief is only love that has come up against its oldest challenge. And after all these mortal years, love knows how to handle it."

Rev. Braestrup's words are also Yizkor's wisdom. We gather because for all the tears and loneliness in their absence, Yizkor's promise is that love is the antidote to grief, and because love transcends death. Because we love them still.

We wish saying goodbye could be pain-free, uncomplicated, and easy closure. We want what we see in the movies: Overdone kisses, dramatic farewells accompanied by dramatic music. Then on to the next scene. No heartache, no unfinished business or jagged-edged memories. But grief and mourning are messy and complicated, because life is messy and complicated. And so today, we remember them in the fullness of their lives. We recall all the beauty and all the messiness. We recall the funny things and the painful things. We recall how they could infuriate us. The times of distance, and the times of hurt feelings and exposed anger. And the times of overwhelming joy—all the simchas and holidays and milestones.

How just hearing their voice could calm us and center us. How she held your hand. The way he held the sports pages every morning. The music that reminded you of early passion and youthful innocence. How love bound us together through all of life's peaks and valleys. How love does not end with death, not ever. How love gently guides us out of the fog of grief.

And so our tradition brings us here to Yiskor services. Because although we all often dwell with grief alone, we are not alone. And we don't have to go it alone. There is strength in sitting together with our fellow travelers in grief. Because there is strength in remembering, and weeping, together. In knowing that we've made it this far. Remembering how after the shiva was over, it was just so hard to get out of bed in the morning. And yet, we climb out of bed. Each day, we find the strength to face that day. The good days and the hard days. Each day, some with moments of emptiness and sorrow, many with life's normal and healthy distractions, and eventually, healing.

Paul Kalanithi's memoir [When Death Becomes Air](#) recounts his upbringing and training as a promising, gifted neurosurgeon. As he writes, he is diagnosed with cancer, and so his book then describes his battle, a battle that took his life at 37 years old. His wife Lucy wrote the epilogue, and it includes this passage:

"It was tragic, but he was not a tragedy. I expected to feel only empty and heartbroken after Paul died. It never occurred to me that you could love someone the same way after he was gone, that I would continue to feel such love and gratitude alongside the terrible sorrow....Paul is gone, and I miss him acutely nearly every moment, but I somehow feel I'm still taking part in the life we created together. ... Caring for our daughter, nurturing relationships with family, publishing this book, pursuing meaningful work, visiting Paul's grave, grieving and honoring him, persisting...my love goes on—lives on—in a way I'd never expected."

This is Yiskor's wisdom, that as the prayer states: Grief and love go hand-in-hand. That the pain which loss inflicts, is the measure of a love that is stronger than death. Dear God, we thank you for the gifts of their lives. We thank you for all our memories of the simple times and the grand times. We thank you for hearts that love and shatter and mend. *Baruch atah Adonai, Blessed are you, Eternal One*, we thank You for giving us life, for sustaining us through all of life's darkness and joy, and for the strength and courage to turn our mourning into life renewed. Amen.