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Who Tells Your Story

Sung: Let me tell you what I wish I'd known When I was young and dreamed of glory You have no control who lives who dies who tells your story...

On a windy day in New York City, NY Times reporter, Deborah Acosta, stumbled upon a kodachrome photo slide, a tiny, beautiful imagine of a propeller plane, lying on the sidewalk. A few steps further revealed another slide, and another and another. She followed the trail of slides to a trash can on the corner of 11th Ave and there discovered a large black garbage bag filled with yet more slides, letters and other personal effects. Intrigued by these discarded artifacts, Acosta set out to uncover the mystery behind these fragments of a life left behind on the sidewalk.

An envelope contained in the trash bag revealed the photographer to be Mariana Gasnell, a journalist who had worked for Newsweek and who had authored several books about flying and world travel. She had died at the age of 79 on March 23rd, 2012 – more than four years ago. Through more detective work, Acosta discovered that it was Gasnell's life partner of over 30 years, Jamie Fenwick, who had tossed the slides in the trash when downsizing a storage locker the two had shared, attempting to move on after the pain of losing her. Nevertheless, memories of Mariana Gasnell remained and, thanks to the discarded slides, her writings and letters, and through conversations with Fenwick and other friends and relations, Acosta was able to begin to piece together the chapters of Gasnell's story.

Mariana Gasnell was curious and passionate, she loved to travel, and she had an eye for appreciating the beautiful in the mundane. She hated to clean, hated injustice in the world. She was an adventurer, an explorer. She loved birds and elephants, tea and flea market treasures. She was a photographer, a writer, a journalist and a pilot. And, perhaps even more than all of these things, Mariana Gasnell was a person who could see the story inherent in everything; each moment, each experience, each interaction.

But could she have imagined this story, generated by her slides left on the sidewalk? Who, besides the fortune teller, crystal ball in hand, can see so far into the future to predict how the remnants of our lives and actions carry forward after we're gone? The answer: none of us. If we're honest with ourselves, we know that, ultimately, we have no control who tells our story once we've departed from this world. But, what we do dictate is how we narrate our lives as we live it. Mariana Gasnell lived her life fully, she dared and dreamed passionately, and what endured after her life ended was the story of a life well-lived.

As the authors of our own story, each day begins as a blank page, and, come what may, we must decide how to narrate each chapter, composing the mental memoir of our life. Do we acknowledge, appreciate and savor the blessings and gifts of each day? Or do they go unnoticed amidst the hustle and bustle of the mundane? Have we pursued opportunities presented to us, or have we stagnated, immobilized by fear and laziness? Can we enjoy and celebrate our accomplishments and the achievements of others? Or are they glossed over, instantly fading into the distance? Do challenges and setbacks, infirmity and loss, destroy us and derail us? Or do we find in these challenges the strength to rise above our limitations and reach new heights?

How we choose to live each moment, the joyous and the devastating, and subsequently, how we decide to reflect upon them, is up to us. And, though the memoir, as a genre, is generally regarded as non-fiction, we must acknowledge that it is still a literary construct. Every truth merely an interpretation, every fact only one person's perspective, every telling of a tale, an individual's experience. I'm not saying reality as we know it is a mental fabrication, (for that's another sermon all together) I'm merely suggesting that, we have the power to shape and mold each experience; each success, each failure, each choice and

twist of fate. We choose how we tell our story and these thematic decisions have the power to frame our past, inform our present, and influence our future.

Sung: who lives who dies who tells your story...

“Enter me, he says in parentheses. Don’t be shocked when your history book mentions me.” Enter Lin Manuel Miranda and his magnum opus, *Hamilton* – the ground-breaking, Tony award-winning musical that uses the vernacular of rap and Broadway to transform the life of Alexander Hamilton, the “ten-dollar Founding Father,” into the universal story of the immigrant experience and the birth of a new nation. Thanks to Miranda, Alexander Hamilton, his life and work, has been resurrected, reimagined and re-instated as one of the most influential figures in our collective American Story. And, through *Hamilton*, we learn that anything is possible. We are reminded that, even if we can’t control the circumstances of our life, can’t control the hand we are dealt, we have the agency to control the trajectory of our own narrative.

Against all odds, the young and verbally gifted Hamilton writes his way off the Caribbean island where he was born, earning passage on a New York bound ship and a scholarship to Kings College (now Columbia). Once in New York, he speaks out against slavery and rallies the American colonists to fight for their independence. Through sheer determination, he insinuates himself as one of the main players in the American revolutionary war and, after the Declaration of Independence is signed, he becomes secretary of treasury under America’s first president, George Washington. And, though he died at the relatively young age of 47, in the infamous duel against life-long “frenemy,” Aaron Burr, Alexander Hamilton accomplished more in his short life than most could in twice as many years.

Hamilton was a man who fervently believed in the power of words to create one’s own destiny and using one’s narrative, even the less flattering aspects, to impact the world. Lin Manuel Miranda shows us that Hamilton, the man, was not intimidated by adversity, he was not easily defeated, nor did not shy away from conflict. He also did not try to hide the skeletons in his closet, he owned his mistakes, admitted them publically, and tried to make

meaning out of his missteps. Hamilton's story, like each person's story, is inevitably an anthology of successes and failures, achievements and mistakes, victories, defeats, loves, losses, wounds and scars. How we tell the story of the things that happen to us shapes everything that comes after and determines the impact we leave on the world. Hamilton's incredible life story forces us to question the integrity of our own goals and aspirations, to reflect on how we're living out our days, and to wonder if our own story will one day be worth telling.

Sung: who lives who dies who tells your story...

Author, Rachael Freed, writes, "From a legacy perspective, we tell our stories for ourselves and as a gift to future generations. Telling our stories is not an end in itself, but an attempt to release ourselves from them, to evolve and grow beyond them. We tell our stories *to transform* ourselves; to learn about our history and tell our experiences in order to transcend them; to use our stories to make a difference in our world; to broaden our perspective *to see* further [than normal]; *to act* beyond a story that may have imprisoned or enslaved us; *to live* more of our spiritual and earthly potential."

For some, this kind of story-telling comes easily. My mother, for instance, loves to tell the story of how she and my father met. She was a freshman in college and had contracted a very severe case of mononucleosis. She was laid up in the infirmary for several weeks and all of the boys she had been dating stopped calling. When she recovered, a new young man called her up, someone she didn't even remember ever having met and, having no one else to go out with, she accepted. On the evening of the date, a handsome young man showed up at the door, their eyes met and, as they say, the rest is history. Forty-nine years later, my parents are still quite happily married. In this story, if my mother hadn't fallen ill as a young college student, she probably would have never gone out with my dad. Instead of lamenting those other potential loves lost, my mother's story reveals that out of illness, vulnerability and loneliness came true, long-lasting love.

Hopefully, you yourself can conjure up similar *b'sheret* moments from the pages of your own story. Perhaps it was the cancelled flight out of town that delayed you at the airport long enough to meet the love of your life. The full-on fight with someone that opened you up to the vulnerability of real friendship. The job loss that created the opportunity to find a true calling and professional passion. Looking back at some of our most precious memories, the most significant experiences in life, notice how often we frame the narrative as the blessing that came out of disappointment – clichéd as it may seem – the silver lining of the storm cloud.

A more difficult look back, however, is when we are forced to reflect on the most painful parts of life, the darkest chapters of our story, the ones without a happy ending, and try to make meaning. In the second act of *Hamilton*, we watch as Eliza and Alexander struggle in their relationship; their marriage suffering due to the overwhelming professional demands placed on Alexander. There is infidelity, and mistrust and doubt creep in, creating a rift between the two. When their teenage son, Philip, is killed in a duel with a rival college student, the Hamiltons are completely destroyed.

“There are moments that the words don’t reach. There’s a suffering too terrible to name. You hold your child as tight as you can, and push away the unimaginable.”

The unimaginable pain, like that of losing a child has the potential to swallow us into the void and engulf us completely. And yet, instead of allowing this tragedy to define and destroy them, the Hamiltons transform their horrific loss into an opportunity for reconciliation, an opening for rekindled love and commitment, a chance for forgiveness and the glimmer of hope.

“There are moments that the words don’t reach. There’s a grace too powerful to name. She takes his hand. Forgiveness. Can you imagine?”

Out of the depths of the blackest darkness can come the seeds of light and blessing. Though nothing can ever justify the pain, the despair, the way we choose to face it can give us momentum. Though nothing can redeem the ache of unbearable loss, we can use it to connect to something beyond ourselves.

When we tell our story, can we redeem the irredeemable by imbuing it with meaning and purpose? Can we use the chapters of pain and loss to help ourselves and others face the challenges yet to come? The shattered dream, the broken heart, the failing health – can we nurture and transform these struggles into a story that opens a new door for us? The psalmist says, “God loves a broken heart” for in that brokenness we are forced to finally discover who we really are and what we really need in order to move forward, to continue living out our life’s story.

Sung: who lives who dies who tells your story...

On Rosh Hashana this is written; on Yom Kippur this is sealed:

How many will pass away from this world, how many will be born into it; who will live and who will die; who will reach the ripeness of age, who will be taken before their time...who will rest and who will wander; who will be tranquil and who will be troubled; who will be calm and who tormented; who will live in poverty and who in prosperity; who will be humbled and who exalted... ?

Unetane Tokef. These haunting words reverberate throughout our hearts and minds every High Holyday service, forcing us to admit that we have no control “who lives, who dies, who tells our story.” But each of us, metaphorical pen in hand, can control how we respond to life’s challenges, how we choose to live out our days and what messages we leave behind for those who come after us.

While it is entirely reasonable to think that, after we're gone, Lin Manuel Miranda will create a smash hit musical out of the events of our lives too, more plausible is that ultimately, the remnants of our life, the slides, the photos, and letters that tell our story, will end up in a garbage bag left on a busy street corner. And, whatever happens to our story when we're done living it, is ok if we, as we live, give meaning to the events that have transpired. If, day by day, we think about what we're writing on each page, how we shape each vignette, how we frame each chapter, in order to make sense of our lives. As the authors of our own destiny, we can make sense of who we really are and, as stewards of our stories, we gain the clarity to see who we need to become.

As we enter into these *Yamim Noraim*, these Days of Awe, let us be mindful of the Kodachrome slides, the songs of sadness and hope, and the sacred stories we leave scattered on the pages of our life. May we have the insight and awareness to use our life's stories to inform our present, shape the quality of our days, and determine the course of our future. Give us the strength, O God, to retell and reinterpret both our most wonderful *AND* our most painful moments, to imbue the days ahead with meaning and momentum, crafting stories that enrich our lives, that offer lessons to guide and nourish our children, and inspire those who come after them. May we accept that we have no control, "who lives, who dies, who tells our story," while simultaneously embracing our authorship and agency of our stories and how they are told today, in our lifetime. And let us make each day a page in the book of a life well-lived, a chapter in a story worth telling.

Sung: Will they tell your story? Who lives who dies who tells your story?

Will they tell your story?

Who lives who dies who tells your story?