

2nd Day Rosh Hashana 5767

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Each person is precious, each soul is unique, and each individual can change the world. Our lives make an imprint in the world to later be examined and celebrated. But is this imprint only to be shared when we are gone? Should our life stories only be told after our soul leaves our bodies and our loved ones are left to pass our memory on to the next generation?

This spring my cousin, Maggie Zaas died of lung cancer at 79. There are memories that I have dancing through my mind of how she touched my life and the person she was. She was kind, compassionate and always left her door open when I visited California. She was like one of my girlfriends who I could go to coffee with and talk about life, boys and school, even with our 44 year difference. But then again, she could relate to anyone.

There are many stories I knew about Maggie. I knew she loved to travel, but her travels were never to the regular vacation spots, or cruises that most people would find exotic. No, exotic for Maggie was visiting headhunters in Borneo, sleeping in Bedouin tents in Morocco and climbing glaciers in Patagonia when she was 74!

She lived life to its fullest and embraced each moment with passion and she never let anything slow her down.

If this was where the story ended, then we might sit back and say, she had a wonderful and fulfilling life. However, this is not where the story ends. You see, I learned more about my cousin Maggie than I ever knew. Unfortunately for me though, it was after she was already gone.

Maggie was an activist who made her voice heard not only through protest itself, but rather through the acts of compassion for those speaking.

In the 1970s, Maggie was involved with a group of mothers opposed to the Vietnam war. One day when she went with the group to the Los Angeles Federal Building to peacefully protest, she encountered a group of scruffy looking veterans who had been there for days. Maggie took their clothes home, washed them and returned them to the veterans.

Maggie helped organize a police-citizen group, created an after-school program for kids, and provided meals to AIDS patients. And then in the 1992, she helped start New Directions, a non-profit organization which helps homeless and drug addicted military veterans rebuild their lives. And because of her commitment to helping build and create New Directions, over 700 veterans a year are able to reclaim their lives. It was touching to see at her funeral the rows and rows of men and women who stood in tribute to her and the work I never knew she did in life.

The Baal Shem Tov teaches us that there are three ways to mourn a loved one.

First, to weep. Our love and our loneliness runs deep and when we learn that our loved one is gone the emotions pour out of us like a flood washing over us through tears and memory. However, the Baal Shem Tov warns us to not weep too long for if we indulge ourselves in the luxury of grief we might deprive ourselves of courage and not be able to take the journey out of the shadows of death that have fallen upon us.

Second, we should be silent. Death presents us with the infinite sea of the life that is no longer there. We should embrace the moment and not say a word. Embrace the silence so that we might recapture the mystery of love; recall a moment shared; remember what someone said and to smile with the memory. The twinge of memory may pass by in only a moment and we should allow it to pass by in silence so we might appreciate it fully.

Finally, sing a song of praise to life, to sing L'Chayim, the song that was cut off when our loved one left us.

There is weeping, there is silence and there is song. And it is through each of these that memory lives on and that our beloved lives beyond death.

How often have we attended the funeral of a loved one or friend and as we listened to the eulogy we learned something new? It is true that we might not always know everything about a person, however, wouldn't we rather be known in life rather than in death? There are so many questions that I have for my cousin Maggie that I want to ask her now that I know more of her story, but that moment of being able to ask has passed.

At this moment of Yizkor memory each of us is in a different place in our mourning. Some of us are weeping fresh tears, some of us are comforted by the silence of memory and some of us are ready to sing for the one who we lost.

And as the sun slowly makes its arc toward evening, we are reminded that we have the ability to impart memory while we live. Our loved ones speak to us beyond the grave through their life stories and the pictures that adorn our walls and mantles. Yet, here we stand today as living memories. Here we are, living and able to open our lives for all to see and experience. Here we sing our songs of devotion to family and community. And here we sit in silence listening and embracing the moment.

It is not enough that we should be remembered in death, but rather that we should live today. It is through this moment of Yizkor memory that we are reminded to live in this moment and share it with others so that when our time comes for our soul to leave this place, no one should say, "I never knew this about her" or "I didn't know he accomplished so much..."

Life is to be lived and shared now, not in death. Life is to be celebrated and its song fill the sanctuary of our hearts, here and now. Life is to be experienced to the fullest of our physical ability. And life is the gift that should be preserved in memory for tomorrow.

We remember those who have gone before us; we weep that we cannot hold them, we silently hold on to their touch, and we sing out thanks for their gift shared with us, even if it was only for

a moment. May this power of memory then inspire us to go forth and share our life so that we are not only a passing memory but rather an active force in one another's lives.

Adonai natan – God has given us life

Adonai lakach – Eventually God will take our souls under the wings of Shechinah

But for this moment, may we be blessed in life.

Amen v' Amen

Adapted from: The Right Not To Remain Silent: Living Morally in a Complex World. Rabbi Jack Stern.