

Living Like The High Priest: A Courageous Approach To Life

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A Vignette

My first encounter with death was at the bedside of my Grandpa Al. He and my Grandma Mary lived close to my parents growing up in Los Angeles, and I had the blessing of their loving presence in my life. As he aged, my grandfather became more rigid in his needs and outlook and it was becoming difficult for my grandmother to live with him. It was so painful for my grandmother, that when he moved into assisted living before her, she refused to visit him for a period of time. Imagine the hurt and confusion for both of them – that after 59 years, she was not there for her husband and he was struggling through his final days without his life companion.

As it got closer to the end, my mother and I made the trip down to see him. My grandmother also agreed to see him. The image of over 20 years ago of us all sitting around his hospital bed, him unconscious and on a breath machine, my hand in his, is still vivid and fresh in my mind.

Holding his other hand, my grandmother just broke down: “ I love you Albert. I love you. I love you. I have always loved you. You can let go.” In the moment of that release, her heart pouring open after so much time, I felt an electricity between his hand and mine. His eyes opened wide, he inhaled a deep breath, and he was gone. I will never forget feeling his presence leave, like closing a car door and driving away.

Yom Kippur and Our Avoidance of Death

The daily whisper of mortality grows to a roar on this holiest day. While we pray to be granted one more year, we look around the synagogue. Some who were here last year, for many years past, are no longer with us. The empty seat or the new occupant brings the shock of unpleasant

recognition: One day, each person knows, she or he will be that missing worshiper, as the prayer says: "Who will live and who will die..."

It is remarkable that the way we renew ourselves for the coming year is to encounter death. Our tradition asks us to wear white to represent the burial shrouds that we will one day be buried in. We do not eat or drink. We are freed of the body.

Most of us see little value in thinking about death very deeply. "There is too much life to live! My death will occur in its own time anyway. I will give it my attention when I am forced to. Until then, I'd rather dismiss it."

We labor under the delusion that life can be better served by removing death from view. We consider the pain of birth an occasion for celebration, but the suffering around death has little redeeming value. Grief is best left to the privacy of our homes.

We feel that the world would be improved if everything would go according to our moral views. Big fish should not eat small fish and a kind heart should not have to suffer like a criminal. An honorable world would have the lives of the unjust ending sooner than the righteous and children never dying before their parents.

But this is not the way things are. From a moral perspective, death makes no sense at all. It does not build upon our accomplishments nor does it give credit for good intentions. Death takes us all regardless of our past actions and reminds us constantly that we never have the upper hand. Its presence suggests that everything is fundamentally out of control.

The problem may not be with death but with our ideas about life. Sherlock Holmes used to say that if a clue did not fit the theory, throw away the theory, not the fact. But most of us do the opposite, we make every attempt to discard the fact of our death and make life meaningful on our own terms. We perpetuate the struggle with the facts of life because to acquiesce leaves us

with little hope and no meaning. Woody Allen might have articulated it best when he said, “I don’t mind dying. I just don’t want to be around when it happens.”

The experience of my grandfather’s death and my grandmother’s difficulty with being present showed me that the way he and they died was a reflection of how they lived. The reality of their relationship in those last years and their resistance to the entire death process mirrored their relationship to life – both the love and the pain.

As a rabbi, I have had the privilege to be with congregants and family members who are dying. I say privilege, because when death comes, all pretense and roles are stripped away, and we enter a space of authenticity where all that is truly important can emerge. In the book of Ecclesiastes it says that “it is better to go to a house of mourning than to a house of feasting, because in being there for others, our hearts can open.” (Ecc. 6:2) Being in the presence of people who are dying can help us understand experientially the way we limit ourselves, the way we hold ourselves back, the way we rest in safety at the expense of a greater freedom available to us all. Physical death is a metaphor for the death of all experience. Small deaths occur to us throughout the day. Each time our expectations are not realized, we experience loss. To investigate death and our relationship to ordinary transition and loss is to comprehend our confusion and ignorance of life.

For those who are willing to learn, the death offers powerful lessons of how to live with vitality and passion. Two lessons from death that have huge impact in how we live is our relationship to suffering and our ability to listen and be present for others.

Understanding Suffering

When we commit ourselves to learning about life, we begin to accept responsibility for the role we play in our conflicts and reactions. To understand and transcend our suffering is one of the purposes of a spiritual journey. We rarely appreciate the lessons suffering can impart because

we spend so much time trying to avoid the pain. The little deaths that touch our lives – the ending of a relationship, a fading dream, a lost hope, the daily disappointments – all take their toll in mental anguish. These small deaths are wake up calls to pay attention. If we learn how to pay attention on a regular basis, then, when physical death does arrive, we will be ready to fully explore our relationship to it.

One way that we try to avoid our suffering is to blame it on the content of our lives: on events, persons, scenarios. These circumstances become the focus for our wrath. “If only it had not rained today.” “If only we had a bigger house.” “If only I had another job.” But the content actually has nothing to do with the source of our anxiety. The content is simply the unfolding of events that are usually beyond our control. Sometimes those events are pleasant, sometimes unpleasant.

Morris Shapiro’s condition worsened, and his family was eager to get him “the best.”

Miraculously, by pulling every string they had and calling in every single chit, they beat the odds and got him into Massachusetts General Hospital, which, at the time, admitted few Jews and had only the best Harvard Medical School doctors on staff. But lo and behold, as soon as he was strong enough, Morris insisted that he be transferred to Beth Israel. Friends shlepped to Mass Gen to visit him, only to learn that he was now at Beth Israel.

“Morris! What gives?” one friend, Sid, asked, “You were in the best cardiology unit in the country! Why did you leave? Was it the doctors?”

“The doctors?” Morris replied, “no – can’t complain.”

“The nursing staff, then?” Sid asked, “were the nurses uncaring?”

“No, no, can’t complain,” Morris answered.

“The room? The bed? Maybe the food was lousy?” Sid inquired, trying to make sense of this strange decision.

“No – can’t complain,” Morris sighed.

“Then what? Why did you leave Mass General to come here to BI?!” Sid pleaded.

“Here – here I can complain!”

Taking responsibility for our suffering does not mean blaming ourselves. The way to begin is to look at our relationship to what we see as the cause of our suffering. How are we relating to the problem – our illness, our broken leg, our lost love? When we take responsibility for this relationship, we assume accountability for the one component of life that we can affect: our responses. So, how can we be present with our pain without reacting so that we might understand it?

Harvard University conducted a study with a group of meditation students in the 1980's. The study was to determine the effects of pain on meditation students after a prolonged period of silent practice. This particular style of meditation emphasized cultivating a moment-to-moment awareness of the mind and body process. Before and after an intensive three-month retreat, each student was given a test by submerging his or her hand in ice water for a few minutes and reporting both the physical pain and the mental suffering associated with the cold. There was a significant difference between the scores before and after the retreat. Although the value reported for the physical pain stayed about the same before and after the retreat, the mental reaction to the pain decreased significantly. In other words, they were still feeling the same physical discomfort, but were suffering less.

The prolonged meditation course gave them the psychic space to accommodate the pain with little reaction. Through meditation they learned to understand and accommodate their reactivity. In facing their fear directly, they diminished their mental suffering significantly.

As we align ourselves with what life actually offers as opposed to how we wish it to be, the meaning of suffering begins to evolve. This becomes apparent in many dying people as they move from self-inflicted punishment to an understanding of the impersonal causes of their suffering. Many of them learn an enormous amount about this whole process in a very short period of time because death refuses to let them compromise. They are forced to understand

their suffering because they are unable to bargain their way out of it. There is simply nowhere to go.

A question that death poses is, What lies beyond? Not beyond life, but beyond our suffering? Beyond change? Is there a truth that does not rely on unstable conditions for its contentment? Are we part of enduring connections that can open us to joy when we awaken to them?

Listening From the Heart

Opening to our enduring connections with others is critical to experience contentment beyond pleasure and pain. We are always in relationship, regardless of whether we are with people or alone. The greatest gift we can offer each other is the gift of our understanding. Each of us in our hearts seeks to be understood. Understanding requires the total participation of the mind and heart of the listener. There can be no evaluation or judgment, just listening with caring attention.

Being with people who are dying shows us how we can learn to listen more effectively. When people die, they often reach out for somebody to make the journey with them. Most people prefer companionship to isolation. To be with a person who is dying requires listening beyond our usual means. It means crossing from our territory into his or hers and being with him in his aloneness.

I have heard that in the Thai language, the word for understanding can be literally translated as “entering the heart.” In Hebrew, the word is “Binah” which shares the root “beyn” – meaning between. So understanding might be allowing our heart to be large enough transcend our self-interests so that we can inhabit the space between one other, allowing the other to be himself. In order to do this, we are willing to be vulnerable and to let their pain affect us. We don’t try to take it away because we are listening without reacting.

Usually, we listen from our own agenda. No matter what the occasion, we judge and evaluate what the person is saying in relationship to our own opinions, to our own standards and measurement. We listen through the screen of our own intentions, waiting for the person to stop speaking so we can assert our own point. Our motivation is often to persuade rather than understand. So we may hear little of what is said, and understand even less. In dismissing a person's words, we dismiss the person.

Listening to people who are dying takes us to the edge of our own fears, because when we open our hearts to someone, we open ourselves to their death. Because of our own discomfort, we sometimes find ourselves responding with a cliché or saying something completely inappropriate.

We may feel totally inadequate to help our dying loved one. The truth is that we are inadequate at stemming the tide of a terminal illness. We do not need to force an answer to a problem that has no solution. We feel uncomfortable with not saying anything in the face of so much pain, so we endeavor to make death palatable by offering trite responses that frequently cause more difficulty than they solve. "It's God's will." "You need to get on with your life." "He's in a better place." To the dying and the bereaved these phrases can be confirmation that we are uninterested in them as individuals and the experience they are having. Such comments are cues that there is no listening going on at all. They are attempts to move away from our feelings of deficiency and the vulnerability of our own mortality. The more open and honest we are in facing our reactions, the less likely we are to rush in to fix situation without discovering what the person actually wants.

The most difficult part of listening is learning to leave the other person alone. We try to apply our standards universally to resolve problems, but listening is not about problem solving. It is about the gift of our attention. Listening bestows on each individual her own uniqueness; free from our demands it fully acknowledges that person's worth by validating her. When we demand something from someone, we are requesting her to change or be altered. Listening

does not demand anything; it allows everything to be just as it is. When a person is not pressured by the opinions of the listener, he no longer evaluates himself on external criteria and is therefore free to look within, and find his own solutions.

While we can see that the imperative of listening with an open heart is essential to support others in this final passage in their lives, I hope that it is clear that this kind of listening is essential in all relationships throughout our lives if we we want to grow in our own understanding and our level of connection and intimacy with others. Listening with an open heart requires allowing ourselves to be vulnerable to our own pain and fear, because another's experience will inevitably trigger our own. When we are able to do this in all of our relationships, we find that we not only gain deeper insight into our own experiences, but experience deeper and more authentic connections with those around us. As my teacher, Cantor Shula Kalir Merton says, "It is the most effective, the most clear, most direct blueprint for living life successfully."

The High Priest and Risking Our Lives

The Torah describes the central event on Yom Kippur as the High Priest entering the Holy of Holies to become of channel of compassion and forgiveness from God to the people. The experience of entering the experience of God so deeply always had the possibility of death because the High Priest could just become so reabsorbed in the Infinite Presence that he would not return. Because of this possibility, there was a rope tied around his foot so he could be pulled out if the experience took his life. He was so connected to his role and purpose, that each year, he would risk his life to renew his relationship with God for himself and the people. What are we willing to risk for a meaningful life?