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When You Have More Than Five Minutes

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On August 12, 1985, a Japan Airlines jet crashed killing 520 people. Found in the wreckage was a tattered pocket calendar with seven pages of hurriedly scribbled notes written by Hirotsugu Kawaguchi to his family while the plane careened out of control for over 5 minutes: "I'm very sad because I am sure I won't make it. I don't know the reason…The plane is rolling around and descending rapidly." After hastily written instructions to his son and wife, he penned his 17th and last sentence: "I am grateful for the truly happy life I have enjoyed until now."

Thirty years ago, amid the somber holy day worship, Rabbi Mel Glazer spoke to his congregants about the explosion of the Space Shuttle Challenger eight months earlier on January 28, 1986. He called the sermon "Five Minutes to Live," because Challenger's seven astronauts had remained alive for the seven-minute 65,000-foot fall to the ocean. He asked, "Can you imagine knowing that in a few moments death is imminent? What would you think of if you were in such circumstances?"

Not quite three years later, the rabbi was returning from a family vacation on a flight to Chicago from Denver. The plane's tail engine exploded en route, crippling the controls, and for 40 minutes, the passengers prepared for a crash landing. The rabbi's wife, Aviva, fainted from the shock. He reached across the seats and gathered the hands of his daughter Avigail, 16, and son Jonathan, 9, trying to reassure them, but the plane burst into flames after it hit the ground in Sioux City, Iowa, killing 112 people, including the rabbi and his wife, both in their early 40s.

In the time before the World Trade Center Towers crumbled to the earth on 9/11, there were phone calls and messages left on answering machines, all the last things said to whoever was home and picked up the phone. Time was short and people said what mattered. There is no record among the collected messages of anyone calling to say, "I never liked you," or, "You hurt my feelings." No one

focused on past grievances. Amazingly, there is no record of anyone damning the terrorists, saying "I hate them." No one said anything unneeded, extraneous or small.

For example, 33-year-old Flight 93 attendant Ceecee Lyles, left an answering-machine message for her husband: "Please tell my children that I love them very much. I'm sorry, baby. I wish I could see your face again."

Thirty-one-year-old Melissa Harrington, a California-based trade consultant at a meeting in the towers, called her father to say she loved him. Minutes later she left a message on the answering machine as her new husband slept in their San Francisco home. "Sean, it's me," she said. "I just wanted to let you know I love you."

Capt. Walter Hynes of the New York Fire Department's Ladder 13 dialed home that morning as his rig left the firehouse at 85th Street and Lexington Avenue. He was on his way downtown, he said in his message, that things were bad. "I don't know if we'll make it out. I want to tell you that I love you and I love the kids."

Elizabeth Rivas' husband left for the World Trade Center that morning. In a laundry she heard the news but couldn't reach him by cell and rushed home. He had called at 9:02am and reached her young daughter. The child reported, "He say, mommy, he say he love you no matter what happens, he loves you." He never called again.

It is not my intention to depress all of you at this joyous holiday season. But there is a lesson to be learned from these examples of people facing their demise and wanting to say, "thank you," "I love you,""forgive me," and "goodbye."

The universal wish to leave instructions to progeny is one that is embodied in the centuries-old Jewish tradition of the ethical will, a text that is neither a will nor an ethical document. Rather, it is a lengthy letter that Jews have written to their survivors about what they hoped to teach by their lives at a moment when they were keenly aware of their mortality.

A comparable Christian document is the *lebenslauf* (German for "life path"), a feature of Moravian Church funerals, a reading of a short account of the deceased's life. Much like a memoir, it is shared with the members of the

congregation and funeral visitors. It includes a brief account of the deceased's faith, and it is meant to be an encouraging example to those left behind.

How would you like to be remembered? What remembrances would you like your name to conjure up? Which of your character traits would you want your progeny to embody? Which of your cherished values would you like your family and friends to treasure? These questions are not implausible. We will all have to answer them. And while the angel of death is not staring down at us, we have the luxury of time to consider what adds depth to our years and made life worth living.

Numerous collections abound with illustrations. For example, at age 70, Judah Ibn Tibbon (ca 1120—ca 1190), translator and physician who practiced medicine in 12th century Spain, wrote an extraordinarily overbearing and guilt producing 40-page ethical will to his son, Samuel (1165–1232):

> Listen to my precepts, neglect none of my injunctions . . . Know how I fed and clothed you, how I spent myself educating you and protecting you, how I sacrificed my sleep to make you wiser than your friends. For 12 years I have denied myself the usual pleasures and relaxations of men for your sake.

Nevertheless, the kid turned out OK—as translator, philosopher, and philosophical commentator on the Bible. He is most famous for his translation of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* from Arabic into Hebrew, but he translated other works by Maimonides, and produced the first Hebrew version of Aristotle.

Fast forward to modern times, Avraham Kreizman came to Palestine in 1921 from Chicago and died in the 1948 War of Independence. Three days before his death, he wrote to his wife and two young daughters:

> I know, when I die, for you, I shall continue to live. No one will take me from your faithful and tender heart…And when it comes to pass that a new settlement is built here, come and plant poppies in this place; they grow so beautifully here and thrive so well! And let this be the place of my grave…And perhaps you will err and your

> flowers will not be planted on my grave but on that of one of my comrades nearby. Well…another wife will think of her husband as she plants flowers on mine. No one will be overlooked. Because we lie close to each other in this spot and there is no space here to divide a man and his friends…

An old friend of mine, Jewish humorist, Sam Levinson, author of "You Don't Have to Be In Who's Who To Know What's What" left poignant ethical will:

> I leave you…everything I had in my lifetime: a good family, respect for learning, compassion for my fellowman, and some four-letter words for all occasions: words like 'help,' 'give,' 'care,' 'feel,' and 'love.'
>
> Love…is easier to recommend than to define. I can tell you only that like those who came before you, you will surely know when love ain't; you will also know when mercy ain't and brotherhood ain't.
>
> The millennium will come when all the `aint's' shall have become `ises' and all the `ises' shall be for all, even for those you don't like.
>
> I should have liked to see whether your generation will bring more love and peace to the world than ours did. I not only hope you will. I pray that you will.

Of course, there are people who leave a written legacy, even if it was not intended as an ethical will. Nevertheless, I would include these messages intended to speak across time in this genre of literature. Every now and then, a terminally ill individual provides a reminder, by way of a poignant life's-lessons-learned document, that one day you and I will not be here. *Tuesday's with Morey* (Albom, 1997), for example, records discussions between beloved Brandeis University professor Morrie Schwartz, dying from Lou Gherig's Disease,and his student Mitch Albom. The resulting bestseller reflects Schwartz' rich philosophical musing:

• Once you know how to die, you know how to live.

• Dying is one thing to be sad about, living unhappily is another.

The year 2008 provided additional examples of articulate people confronting mortality. Randolph Frederick (Randy) Pausch (pronounced: powsh) died on July 25, 2008 at age 47—11 months after his diagnosis of terminal cancer. Knowing that he had only a short time to live and move his wife and three children, ages 6, 3, and 2 closer to family and create lasting memories for them, he embarked on a high-speed race against the clock to, as he put it, "get 30 years of parenting into three months . . . trying to put myself in a bottle that would one day wash up on the beach for my children." In September 2008, he tied up loose ends, said his good-byes, and agreed to give a lecture as part of Carnegie-Mellon's retiring professors' tradition of delivering "last lectures." His 90 minutes of humor-filled life-experience examples of how to make the most of life and make dreams come true was heard by about 400 students and colleagues, and subsequently was viewed by millions of others on the Internet:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ji5_MqicxSo

An abbreviated version appeared on Oprah—

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ncoSRKoU6GQ

The Last Lecture (Pausch, R. & Zaslow, J. 2008) was expanded into a best-selling book. Pausch, a cross between showman Jerry Seinfeld and earnest Jimmy Stewart, commented that after he got his PhD, his mother relished introducing him by saying, "This is my son. He's a doctor, but not the kind that helps people." Of course, his mother was wrong. Thousands of strangers found his upbeat lecture laced with inspiring life-changing humor and pithy aphorisms including:

• If you don't get your dream—you still learn a lot in the process.

• Experience is what you get when you don't get what you want.

• People who care will push you. It's only when they no longer care that you will not be pushed.

• Brick walls are in your life for a reason—they let us prove how badly we want our dream.

• You can spend your time in life complaining or playing the game hard.

Pressed for time, Schwartz and Pausch struggled to teach others about living well and dying well. The public's voyeuristic interest is the very human response of wanting to observe another's struggle with death and the wish to leave a lasting legacy because we all want to know what words will someday be spoken about our life, death, and legacy.

Actor Paul Newman died in 2008. Although he fought a protracted battle with terminal cancer, he did not write a book about dying or his legacy; he certainly could have done so with grace. Instead, his lifetime of accomplishments speaks louder than any lecture or string of aphorisms could. In 1982, Newman stuck his image on a bottle of salad dressing and started a business that was dedicated to giving all of its profits to charity, including 11 Hole in the Wall Camps around the world where children with life-threatening illnesses attend free of charge. He personally supervised the distribution of $250 million of profits to many causes, and once quipped that "the embarrassing thing is that my salad dressing is out grossing my films." His entrepreneurial skills have so outpaced his acting career that to the younger generation, Newman isn't Butch Cassidy or Cool Hand Luke or Fast Eddie Felson but the king of popcorn, salsa, and spaghetti sauce. When pressed to talk about his acting career, he responded, "We don't need to talk about the acting, let's talk about the good stuff that I'm doing for kids." Had Newman published a book that reflected on the legacy he hoped to leave, it would have included these two comments:

• I'm not a professional philanthropist, and I'm not running for sainthood. I just happen to think that in life we need to be a little like the farmer who puts back into the soil what he takes out.

• The concept that a person who has a lot holds his hand out to someone who has less, or someone who isn't hurting holds his hand out to someone who is, is simply a human trait that has nothing to do with celebrity.

The writing of ethical wills is not popular today not only because most people do not know of this time-honored tradition, but also because an ethical will forces the writer to think carefully about what qualities and characteristics he thinks those who come after him should value—not simple task.

People have asked me if I have written an ethical will. Every time a teach an ethical will workshop, I scribble some notes on scraps of paper and throw them into my ethical will file in the hope that someday I will sort them out and finally write that document. The closest I have come was an address at the undergraduate commencement of USF in 2013 when I was awarded an honorary doctorate. I told the students that I was a bit nervous about what I could say that would have lasting meaning to all of them, something that made me mindful of Mark Twain's comment at the sight of a large, intimidating audience. Twain said: "Homer's dead, Shakespeare's dead, and I myself am not feeling at all well."

I offered that true satisfaction in life is accomplished by being immersed in community that offers something bigger than we, because giving to others enriches life—giving leads to receiving. Doing a kind righteous deed is not necessarily fun; often its greatest reward is the opportunity to do yet another good deed. Such an unintended consequence was expressed by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel who called kind and charitable acts the "ineffable delight of sacred deeds," which he defined in this way:

> . . . be sure that every deed counts, that every word has power, and that we can all do our share to redeem the world in spite of all absurdities and all frustrations and all disappointments. . . And above all, remember. . . to build life as if it were a work of art (In an interview with NYT journalist Carl Stern).

I further told the students that this is an added challenge, especially when nobody is grading or watching you! And since I was a rabbi delivering a commencement address at a leading Jesuit University, I felt a responsibility to urge the students to consider not only the life of the mind but also the life of the spirit. I urged them to explore their faith as a source of strength for both the victories and the challenges they would face—the loss of a loved one, the commitment and sanctification of their relationships with their life partners, the birth of a child, the challenges of building careers—moments of exultation and moments of despair. To do so, I suggested that they should not be a stranger to their faith. I said, "Even if you are not a regular worshipper, establish a

relationship with a clergyperson, figure out what it means to have a spiritual practice, be grateful for what you have, because as sacred Scripture notes, 'We do not live by bread alone' (Deut 8:3; Luke 4:4)." I concluded, "You have mastered the care and feeding of your bodies and minds; now give careful thought to the nourishment of your souls."

An ethical will need not follow a set formula. It can be a commencement address, as I have indicated. A prime example of a commencement speech that could be considered an ethical will is the memorable 92-word commencement address entitled "My Uncle Terwilliger on The Art of Eating Popovers" by Theodor Geisel (1977)—aka Dr Seuss:

> My uncle ordered popovers
> from the restaurant's bill of fare.
> And, when they were served,
> he regarded them
> with a penetrating stare.
> Then he spoke great Words of Wisdom
> as he sat there on that chair:
> "To eat these things,"
> said my uncle,
> "you must exercise great care.
> You may swallow down what's solid
> BUT
> you must spit out the air!"
>
> And
> as you partake of the world's bill of fare,
> that's darned good advice to follow.
> Do a lot of spitting out the hot air.
> And be careful what you swallow.

Indeed, a poem could be considered an ethical will or a lasting legacy of love. Consider "Those Winter Sundays" by Robert Hayden:

> Sundays too my father got up early
> and put his clothes on in the blueblack cold,

then with cracked hands that ached
from labor in the weekday weather made
banked fires blaze. No one ever thanked him.

I'd wake and hear the cold splintering, breaking.
When the rooms were warm, he'd call,
and slowly I would rise and dress,
fearing the chronic angers of that house,

Speaking indifferently to him,
who had driven out the cold
and polished my good shoes as well.
What did I know, what did I know
of love's austere and lonely offices?

Yes, when thinking about your ethical will, you need not feel overwhelmed by some huge document. Be mindful of the KISS principle—keep it simple stupid! And so I conclude my remarks with an 18 line poem written by William S. Bernstein sprinkled with Yiddish that I will translate. It is a work that I consider to be a quintessential ethical will and a key takeaway summarizing tonight's remarks:

When I was young and fancy free
My folks had no fine clothes for me--
All I got was words:
Got tzu danken (Thank God)
Got vet geben (God will give)
Zal mir nor leben un zein gezundt (You should live and be healthy)

When I was wont to travel far,
They didn't provide for me a car--
All I got was words:
Gay gezundt (Go in health)
Faar Pameelech (Take it easy)
Hob a glickleche ryzeh (Have a successful journey)

I wanted to increase my knowledge.

But they couldn't send me to college--
All I got was words:
Hob saichel (Have good sense)
Zei nisht kein nahr (Don't be a fool)
Tayreh iz de besteh scharre (Sacred learning is the best commodity)

The years have flown, the world has turned.
Things I have forgotten, things I've learned--
Yet I remember:
Zog dem emes (Speak the truth)
Gib t'sdokah (Give charity)
Hob rachmones (Have pity)
Zei a mentch (Be a mensch—a decent human being)
All I got was words.

Thank you!

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