

“ INFORMATION PLEASE ”

Yom Kippur Yizkor 5770— Monday, September 28, 2009

Congregation B'nai Jehudah — Overland Park, Kansas

Sermon by Rabbi Arthur P. Nemitoff

Often, I have used this hour of memorial to share words written by others. Not long ago, I came across a touching story told many years ago by Paul Villard, in Reader's Digest. With apologies to Mr. Villard for some minor editing, this is what he wrote:

“When I was quite young, my [parents] had one of the first telephones in our neighborhood. I remember well the polished, old case fastened to the wall. The shiny receiver hung on the side of the box. I...listen[ed] with fascination when my mother used to talk to it. Then I discovered that somewhere inside the wonderful device lived an amazing person - her name was “Information Please” - and there was nothing she did not know. “Information Please” could supply anybody's number and the correct time.

My first personal experience with this genie-in-the-bottle came one day while my mother was visiting a neighbor. Amusing myself at the tool bench in the basement, I whacked my finger with a hammer. The pain was terrible, but there didn't seem to be any reason in crying because there was no one home to give sympathy. [As I walked upstairs, I saw the]...telephone! Quickly, I ran for the footstool...[and] climbing up, I unhooked the receiver in the parlor and held it to my ear. “Information Please,” I said into the mouthpiece just above my head. A click or two and a small clear voice spoke into my ear.

“Information.”

“I hurt my finger...” I wailed into the phone. The tears came readily enough now that I had an audience.

“Isn't your mother home?” came the question.

“Nobody's home but me,” I blubbered.

“Are you bleeding?” the voice asked.

“No,” I replied. “I hit my finger with the hammer and it hurts.”

“Can you open your icebox?” she asked. I said I could. “Then chip off a little piece of ice and hold it to your finger,” said the voice.

After that, I called “Information Please” for everything. I asked her for help with my geography and she told me where Philadelphia was. She helped me with my math. She told me my pet chipmunk, that I had caught in the park just the day before, would eat fruit and nuts.

Then, there was the time Petey, our pet canary, died. I called “Information Please” and told her the sad story. She listened, then said the usual things grown ups say to soothe a child. But I was [not to be] consoled. I asked her, “Why is it that birds should sing so beautifully and bring joy to all families, only to end up as a heap of feathers on the bottom of a cage?” She must have sensed my deep concern, for she said quietly, “Paul, always remember that there are other worlds to sing in.” Somehow I felt better.

Another day I was on the telephone. “Information Please.” “Information,” said the now familiar voice. “How do you spell fix?” I asked...

When I was nine years old, we moved across the country to Boston. I missed my friend very much. “Information Please” belonged in that old wooden box back home and I somehow never thought of trying the...new phone that sat on the table in the hall.

As I grew into my teens, the memories of those childhood conversations never really

left me. Often, in moments of doubt and perplexity I would recall the serene sense of security I had then. I appreciated now how patient, understanding, and kind she was to have spent her time on a little boy.

A few years later, on my way west to college, my plane put down in Seattle... I spent 15 minutes or so on the phone with my sister, who lived there now. Then, without thinking what I was doing, I dialed my hometown operator and said, "Information Please." Miraculously, I heard the small, clear voice I knew so well.

"Information."

I hadn't planned this, but I heard myself saying, "Could you please tell me how to spell 'fix'?"

There was a long pause. Then came the soft spoken answer, "I guess your finger must have healed by now."

I laughed, "So it's really still you," I said. "I wonder if you have any idea how much you meant to me during that time."

"I wonder," she said, "if you know how much your calls meant to me. I never had any children and I used to look forward to your calls."

I told her how often I had thought of her over the years and I asked if I could call her again when I came back to visit my sister.

"Please do," she said. "Just ask for Sally."

Three months later I was back in Seattle. A different voice answered, "Information." I asked for Sally.

"Are you a friend?" she said.

"Yes, [my name is Paul,] a very old friend," I answered.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this," she said. "Sally had been working part time the last few years because she was sick. She died five weeks ago." Before I could hang up she said, "Wait a minute. Did you say your name was Paul?"

"Yes."

"Well, Sally left a message for you. She wrote it down in case you called. Let me read it to you. The note said, "Tell him I still say there are other worlds to sing in. He'll know what I mean."¹

I thanked her and hung up. I knew what Sally meant."

* * *

"There are other worlds to sing in."

Often in life, we assume that the most direct route is the best. However, as we all have discovered in life, the best route – the most scenic, the most enjoyable, the most meaningful – is much more circuitous.

So, too, it is in human relationships. How we most significantly influence another is often through the little acts, the casual interactions, the accidental encounters. These moments "sing" in ways the most intentional of deeds can barely reach.

In other words, "never underestimate the impression one's life may make on others, in ways we may not be aware of."²

And that is why all of us are here at this hour. Our loved ones, who no longer sit by our sides, touched us, influenced us, loved us in ways that do not disappear with their deaths. Rather, they stay with us to comfort and support and inspire us as we continue on our journeys without them.

As Sally taught her young caller, Paul, "there are other worlds to sing in." Those, who have gone before us, continue to sing. They may not be present. But their presence is surely felt. In our moments of doubt and despair, we need only to listen for their songs. If we open our hearts to those memories, then we can be wrapped in the security and serenity we knew when they were with us. Often, they – like Sally – will offer us the answers we seek...and the comfort we need...if we are but able to listen.

That, my friends, is the secret to healthy grief. When we are consumed in our angst and turmoil, it is hard to hear anything. We cannot hear the voices of family and friends calling to us. Sometimes, there is such chaos,

we cannot even hear our own voice. And then, sadly, the song of our loved one is drowned out, as well. The goal is to recognize that they are not truly gone. Yes, it hurts. Yes, we are – at times – angry, regretful, and surely, questioning. But, if we can keep our souls open for the sound of their song, it assures us they are with us and that song brings soothing solace to our suffering and our sadness. How? By reminding us of what they offered in life, lessons of love and companionship that permitted our own lives

to be richer. We offer our loved ones a final but long-lasting gift when we are able to hear their song, for – like I imagine Paul did in his own life – he (and we) keep those songs and their messages alive as we continue on our own life journeys.

Committing to listening to songs sung in other worlds, we praise God's name and ask the Holy One to help us in this task, as we turn in our prayerbooks to page 492, and we rise for Kaddish.

¹ Paul Villard, "Information Please," Reader's Digest, 1966.

² Rabbi Gerald Zelizer, Yizkor Sermon 2008/5769; <http://www.neveshalom.net/yizkor.htm>