

"THE DASH"

Yom Kippur Yizkor 5768— Saturday, September 22, 2007

Congregation B'nai Jehudah — Overland Park, Kansas

Sermon by Rabbi Arthur P. Nemitoff

For many years now, I have used this hour of memorial to share words written by others. I have always been struck by the ability grief has to elicit profound and beautiful sentiments...sentiments that can help us cope with the loss of a loving presence.

From the time my grandparents died and I experienced cemeteries firsthand, I have found them to be fascinating places. Whenever I go to cities like Boston or New York, I love to wander around their historic cemeteries. Old headstones – those that go back 100 years or more – often have pithy verses that describe the life of the deceased in a few well-chosen words. While I find Rose Hill to be a soothing and peaceful place, a piece of me likes Sheffield Cemetery better, where my grandparents are buried. For even old Jewish headstones make for fascinating reading. But most graves today, virtually all at Rose Hill, are adorned with only the deceased names – perhaps English and Hebrew – and the dates of their lives. 1919 – dash – 1969, in my father's case.

For the longest time, that image has stayed with me: the date of birth – dash – and the date of death. About ten years ago, this feeling I had each time I looked upon such a headstone – this feeling that so much was missing between the birth date and the death date – found expression in the form of a poem that many of you may recognize, written by Linda Ellis, called "The Dash."

*"I read of a [man] who stood to speak
at the funeral of a friend.
He referred to the dates on her tombstone
from the beginning...to the end.*

*He noted that first came the date of her birth
and spoke of the following date with tears.
But he said what mattered most of all
was the dash between those years.*

*For that dash represents all the time
that she spent alive on earth.
And now only those who loved her
know what that little line is worth.*

*For it matters not how much we own;
the cars...the house...the cash.
What matters is how we live and love
and how we spend our dash.*

*So think about this long and hard.
Are there things you'd like to change?
For you never know how much time is left.
You could be at dash mid-range.*

*If we could just slow down enough
to consider what's true and real
and always try to understand
the way other people feel.*

*And be less quick to anger
and show appreciation more
and love the people in our lives
like we've never loved before.*

*If we treat each other with respect
and more often wear a smile...
remembering that this special dash
might only last a little while.*

*So when your eulogy is being read
with your life's actions to rehash,
would you be proud of the things they say
about how you spent your dash?"¹*

What my heart knew – but was never able to vocalize – was the importance of that little “dash” in between the birth date and the date of death upon the headstone of our loved ones' graves.

“The poem speaks about what matters most in life: not the length of our years but the significance of our days. It reminds us that no one knows for sure what tomorrow will be like, but we do know that certain values will endear us to others and enrich our lives.² As the poem puts it, “What matters is how we live and love and how we spend our dash.”

At this Yizkor hour, as we call to heart and mind the loved ones no longer with us, we focus on the “dash” of their lives. We recall the moments of joy, the struggles, the smiles, the tears, the hands held, the cheeks kissed, the lessons learned. Each and every one of these gives form and substance to the “dash” of our beloved dead.

We also are called, at this hour, to consider our own “dashes.” How will we be remembered? What will our dash contain? Will it be filled with tales of sorrow and pain? Or shall we be remembered for gifts of love and life we offered to those around us? Unlike those who have passed away, whose “dashes” are now etched in stone, we still can fill out our dash however we wish, as full or as empty as our heart desires.

Such a poignant lesson comes from this true story of a young woman who wandered into a homeless shelter in New York City:

“She came to our front door Tuesday morning, dressed in dirty rags, holding a little aluminum paint can in her arms.

From the second she stepped inside our shelter, she mystified us. Whatever she did, wherever she went, the paint can never left her hands.

When Kathy sat in the crisis shelter, the can sat in her arms. She took the can with her to the cafeteria that first morning she ate, and to bed with her that first night she slept.

When she stepped into the shower, the can was only a few feet away. When the tiny homeless girl dressed, the can rested alongside her feet.

“I’m sorry, this is mine,” she told our counselors, whenever we asked her about it. “This can belongs to me.”

“Do you want to tell me what’s in it, Kathy?” I’d ask her? “Um, not today,” she said “not today.”

When Kathy was sad, or angry or hurt – which happened a lot – she took her paint can to a quiet dorm room on the 3rd floor. Many times..., I’d pass by her room, and watch her rock gently back and forth, the can in her arms. Sometimes she’d talk to the paint can in low whispers.

I’ve been around troubled kids all my life...I’m used to seeing them carry stuffed animals... Every kid has something – needs something – to hold.

But a paint can? I could feel alarm bells ringing in my head.

Early [one] morning, I decided to “accidentally” run into her again. “Would you like to join me for breakfast?” I asked. “That would be great,” she said.

For a few minutes we sat in a corner of our cafeteria, talking quietly over the din of 150 ravenous homeless kids. Then I took a deep breath, and plunged into it....

"Kathy, that's a really nice can. What's in it?"

For a long time, Kathy didn't answer. She rocked back and forth, her hair swaying across her shoulders. Then she looked over at me, tears in her eyes.

"It's my mother," she said.

"Oh," I said. "What do you mean it's your mother?" I asked.

"It's my mother's ashes," she said.

"I went and got them from the funeral home. See, I even asked them to put a label right here on the side. It has her name on it."

Kathy held the can up before my eyes. A little label on the side chronicled all that remained of her mother: date of birth, [dash,] date of death, name. That was it. Then Kathy pulled the can close, and hugged it.

"I never really knew my mother...," Kathy told me. "I mean, she threw me in the garbage two days after I was born." (We checked Kathy's story. Sure enough the year Kathy was born, the New York newspapers ran a story, saying that the police had found a little infant girl in a dumpster ... and yes, it was two days after Kathy was born.)

"I ended up living in a lot of foster homes, mad at my mother," Kathy said. "But then, I decided I was going to try to find her. I got lucky – someone knew where she was living. I went to her house."

"She wasn't there...," she said. "My mother was in the hospital. She had AIDS. She was dying."

"I went to the hospital, and I got to meet her the day before she died. My mother told me she loved me...," Kathy said crying. "She told me she loved me."

...I reached out and hugged Kathy, and she cried in my arms for a long, long time. It was tough getting my arms around her, because she just wouldn't put the paint can down. But she didn't seem to mind. I know I didn't...³

For Kathy, the "dash" of her mother's life consisted of one small gesture, being told, "I love you." But even that was enough for Kathy. She kept her "dash" with her...in her aluminum paint can.

You and I – prayerfully – are luckier. Our memories of parents, spouses, siblings, children, friends are enough to fill many scrapbooks and our hearts. We hold onto the "dashes" of our loved ones lives as precious mementos of the time we shared with them. These thoughts fill us with joy...and yet...on birthdays, anniversaries, at this time of Yizkor...these same memories bring tears to our eyes and sorrow to our hearts.

The pain of our loved ones' passing is not diminished by the quantity nor the quality of the "dash," for all of our "dashes" are far too short and – truth be told – far too imperfect. But it is ours to live out. As Kathy's tale and the poem remind us – "What matters is how we live and love and how we spend our dash."

The challenge of this Yizkor is to look both backwards and forwards. May we hold on dearly to the "dash" of our loved one's lives. Sustained and sup-

ported, may we fill the days allotted to **us** with meaning and memory. May **our** “dashes” be vibrant and joyful and filled with shared moments, so that when the dates of our own birth and passing are etched in stone, our “dashes” will be remembered with love.

There are many ways we can preserve our lives and their meanings for those who come after us. First and foremost, it is in building memories...in being present for moments when we talk or laugh or cry or just be quiet next to one another. But it is also by using those resources we are so fortunate to have available. My uncle, who is well and vibrant at 91, just wrote 194 pages about his life experiences, and put them on a computer disk to give to his family. In the newspaper a few weeks ago, in the Faith section, was an article about a new

website, www.footsteps.tv, a type of virtual depository for whatever memories someone wants to leave to those who remain. Upon one’s death, the person’s loved ones are informed and they can access the written and audio or video messages the deceased had created. All of these are analogous to a headstone epitaph, an ethical will, or a life memoir. Perhaps these are our future “dashes.”

But today, now, we thank God for the “dashes” our loved ones left to **us**. Whether their gifts were written on paper, a simple spoken “I love you,” or just written upon our hearts, they are our legacy. Committing to emulate their lives, enlarging their lives with our own, we praise God’s name and ask the Holy One for comfort, as we turn in our prayerbooks to page 492, and we rise for Kaddish.

¹ Ellis, Linda; “The Dash;” 1996; found on the internet - <http://www.lindaslyrics.com>

² Goldberg, Rabbi Edwin; “Living Out the Dash;” The American Rabbi; High Holy Days 2001; p. 78

³ Covenant House Report, New York, NY, 1990; found on the internet - <http://www.methodmarketing.com/catholics4.html>