

Unfinished Business

Yom Kippur Yizkor 5767 — Monday, October 2, 2006

Congregation B'nai Jehudah — Overland Park, Kansas

Sermon by Rabbi Arthur P. Nemitoff

As I have for many years, I take this hour of memorial to read words written by others. I am constantly touched by the ability others possess to elicit profound and beautiful sentiments... sentiments that can help us cope with the loss of a loving presence. I have saved these writings throughout the years and offer one or two of them to you at this hour of Yizkor, of remembrance. I pray they lend comfort, but also instruction, as we struggle with our own life journeys, filling them — as much as possible — with meaning and memory.

Today, I share two passages: one by Ann Wells; and a second by an anonymous author. While I have interpreted and weaved their words together for this service, the images and message are theirs.

Ann Wells writes:

"My brother-in-law opened the bottom drawer of my sister's bureau and lifted out a tissue-wrapped package.

["What is it?," I asked. "A slip?"]

"This," he said, "is not a slip. This is lingerie." He discarded the tissue and handed me the slip. It was exquisite: silk, handmade, and trimmed with a cobweb of lace. The price tag with an astronomical figure on it was still attached.

"Jan bought this the first time we went to New York, at least eight or nine years ago[, he said]. She never wore it. She was saving it for a special occasion. Well, I guess this is the occasion."

He took the slip from me and put it on the bed with the other clothes we were taking to the [funeral home]. His hands lingered on the soft material for a moment, then he slammed the drawer shut and turned to me.

"Don't ever save anything for a special occasion. Every day you're alive is a special occasion."

I remembered those words through the funeral and the days that followed when I helped him and my niece attend to all the sad chores that follow an unexpected death. I thought about them on the plane returning to California from the Midwestern town where my sister's family lives. I thought about all the things that she hadn't seen or heard or done. I thought about the things that she had done without realizing that they were special.

I'm still thinking about [my brother-in-law's] words, and they've changed my life. I'm reading more and dusting less. I'm sitting on the deck and admiring the view without fussing about the weeds in the garden. I'm spending more time with my family and friends and less time in committee meetings.

Whenever possible, life should be a pattern of experience to savor, not endure. I'm trying to recognize these moments now and cherish them.

I'm not "saving" anything: we use our good china and crystal for every special event — like losing a pound, getting the sink unstopped, the first camellia blossom...

I'm not saving my good perfume for special parties; clerks in hardware stores and tellers in banks have noses that function as well as my party-going friends.

"Someday" and "one of these days" are losing their grip on my vocabulary. If it's worth seeing or hearing or doing, I want to see and hear and do it now.

I'm not sure what my sister would have done had she known that she wouldn't be here for the tomorrow we all take for granted. I think she would have called family members and a few close friends. She might have called a few former friends to apologize and mend fences for past squabbles...I'm guessing — I'll never know.

It's those little things left undone that would make me angry if I knew that my hours were limited. Angry because I put off seeing good friends whom I was going to get in touch with — someday. Angry because I hadn't written certain letters that I intended to write — one of these days. Angry and sorry that I didn't tell my husband and daughter often enough how much I truly love them.

I'm trying very hard not to put off, hold back, or save anything that would add laughter and luster to our lives.

And every morning when I open my eyes, I tell myself that [life] is special."¹

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Yes, my friends, life is special. And all too often, we spend our hours "holding back," "saving for a rainy day," "taking care of business first," "waiting 'til we have the time." And when we stand at the open grave, our hearts ache, for we realize just how hollow those words really are. Our minds recall the lingerie bought and never worn, the trips planned but never taken, the promises

made but never fulfilled. We remember the regrets. We evoke memories of what we didn't do, what we could have done, what we should have done. We are like Jan's husband, angry that the opportunities promised us in life are — all at once — no more.

I think of my own loved ones. And I know that even the great healer of time does not salve the pain of these losses. Although my father is dead some 37 years, I can still remember the moments I ignored his offers for attention and adventure, in favor of some adolescent distraction. Even now, I think, "Why didn't I spend more time? Why couldn't I have been more present?"

Sadly, the answer is we cannot. For each of us gathered here today, there is but one truth. We cannot make up those losses with those who have departed this earth. And so today, at this moment of Yizkor, of remembrance, I urge us not to beat our breasts for what was not done, for what we never deemed to be a "special enough" time. Instead, let us learn from our pain and our loss. Let us grow more human from our regrets.

Recently, I discovered a book had slipped behind my desk. It was, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, written by Mitch Albom. As you know, the book recounts conversations between a former professor and his student, as the professor is in the process of dying. I reread the book when I "rediscovered" it and it remains remarkably poignant. One of the messages that Morrie, the dying professor offers is the same as Ann Wells'. Life is special. And life is limited. What we do with our days is more important than filling our days.

To illustrate this point, consider the following scenario:

"Imagine there is a bank that credits your account each morning with \$86,400. It carries over no balance from

day to day. Every evening, it deletes whatever part of the balance you failed to use during the day. What would you do? [If you were like most reasonable people, you would] draw out every cent, of course[, and use it each and every day.]

Well, [my friends,] each of us has such a bank. Its name is TIME. Every morning, it credits us with 86,400 seconds. Every night it writes off, as lost, whatever of our time we have failed to invest to good purpose. It carries over no balance. It allows no overdraft. Each day it opens a new account for us. Each night it burns the remains of that day. If we fail to use the day's deposits, the loss is ours. There is no going back. [But there is more.] We must live in the present [only] on today's deposits. There is no drawing against "tomorrow."²

This account is ever so precious to us, and yet — at times — we squander our inheritance. We fail to wear the lingerie. We fail to watch that soccer game. We fail to sit in our loved one's arms. We fail to call to say, "I love you." In our

rush to get through life, we fail to experience the value of life.

My friends, let us treasure every moment that we have! And may we treasure it more because we share it with ones who are special...with people special enough to **spend** our time.

On this Yizkor afternoon, we are grateful that God has permitted us to use a portion of our accounts with those who are no more. Perhaps we invested a lifetime with them. Perhaps we were able to spend but little with them. But may the memories that filled those seconds and minutes and days and months and years sustain us as we look to the future. And may we, in this new year, commit ourselves to valuing the time we have, spending it on those who matter, and investing in meaningful moments of memories which will endure for ever.

Let us turn to page 492, and in ancient Jewish tradition, we praise God for our lives and for the lives of those whom we remember now. Together, we recite kaddish.

¹AnnWells; "What Are We Waiting For?"; The American Rabbi; Vol. 20, No. 3; December, 1987; p. 22-23

²Anonymous, from the Internet.