

Preface

Overcoming the Fear of Death

I am afraid to death of death. In my relatively short life, many of my friends, colleagues and students have already passed on, to what I don't know. I've faced the sudden death of others, the suicide of acquaintances, and the slow, tortured end from illness of those I love. Every day I plow through the hours in front of my home computer, at my office or in a supermarket aisle, distracting myself with life's banalities to combat my own subliminal fear of death. I absorb myself in the lives of my children. Intertwining my life with theirs connects me in some irrational way to their youth, pushing the angel of death farther from view. But suddenly—often without noticeable cause—I am ravaged by a primal panic. Everyone dies. I am going to die. The little whisper gets louder. I AM GOING TO DIE.

The escalating noise of this whisper is not odd because death is everywhere, inescapable in its grab for victims. It surrounds us.

According to statisticians, 56 million people die every year. That comes out to 153,000 deaths a day, 107 deaths per minute. The television news barks out death notices in astonishing number, day after day, wearing down our naïve optimism, shocking us with death's randomness. Death shows its face on every newspaper page. There is murder and manslaughter, death by starvation and natural disasters, obituaries of the famous and pictures of suicide bombers stealing the lives of the innocent. Closer to home, friends die of cancer, parents suffer aging, a neighbor loses a child. We wake up trying to quell the existential anguish of it all. We go to a funeral and can't help crying. Sometimes we are crying for ourselves. The death whisper returns: when will it be my turn? And then we go home and make a sandwich, pretending that the drama belongs to someone else. Not us.

Death was a constant shadow in my family's past, a shadow we saw but tried hard to ignore. The fear of it was intense, and over time it jelled into an even more intense stillness and silence. Ignoring death does not make it go away. It made our family woefully underprepared to have the kind of casual frankness with death that makes a person's last imprint one of celebration rather than confusion. I witnessed this close up when my beloved Zeide died. My grandfather died at ninety-five, throwing our family into instant turmoil. He was sick for over a year and in a rehabilitation facility. He was old by any standard except the early chapters of the book of Genesis where characters died at 950. Yet he did not purchase a plot or leave burial instructions. He offered no last words of consolation or wisdom. Out of fear, he did not speak of his death, so no one else did. He was such a monumental figure in my life, yet we never said goodbye.

I was born Jewish to a child survivor of the Holocaust. My mother was born in Poland and spent her young life before the war in Zakrzewek, a small village south of Lublin. My grandparents sensed danger, left the village and went into hiding. Not long after, all the Jews of

Zakrzewek were rounded up and murdered in one day by the Nazis. My grandparents were concentration camp survivors at Auschwitz, separated from each other and from my mother. My grandfather found my mother in an orphanage in Lublin after his liberation by the Americans, and eventually all three reunited after the war, but not until almost forty members of their—my—family were killed in gas chambers and random shootings. Jewish identity in my childhood home was encapsulated in the faded blue numbers tattooed on my grandparents' arms. Religion was not only something they lived but something they carried: an identity burden, something they couldn't scrub off or get rid of with ease.

I wanted to know what the numbers meant. I spoke with my grandparents about their story and studied the history of the Holocaust. The wholesale death of millions haunted me, not only because the Holocaust is paralyzing in its enormity and travesty but also because I wondered how any survivor could live a normal life. My grandparents moved in the world with grace and laughter. Zeide loved to tell jokes. He was a prankster. But my grandparents, understandably, were superstitious when it came to death. They could and did talk about the tragedy in our family but would never speak of their own deaths. There was something about articulating the language of dying that they believed would precipitate an earlier, untimely death. This fear closed off conversations that needed to happen and emotions that were never properly expressed.

Life can hold more joy but only to a point. It will, one day, be over. Its inevitability should make us fear death less, but instead we fear it more. My grandfather was so choked by its grip that it stymied necessary conversation.

Zeide was no philosopher, mind you. He was a tailor and a dry cleaner, but I wish, between hemming pants, he had read what the French writer Michel de Montaigne once wrote: "To begin

depriving death of its greatest advantage over us let us deprive death of its strangeness, let us frequent it, let us get used to it. . . . A man who has learned how to die has unlearned how to be a slave.”¹ Learn how to die, unlearn death’s strangeness, become its master. It is not death that has a profound stranglehold over us but the fear of death.

That fear is amplified by everything uncertain that death carries with it: the anxious anticipation of not being here, not growing old, not doing what we always wanted to do, not being with those we love, not watching our children grow up and have children of their own. We don’t know when we will die, how we will die or how our deaths will affect those around us. But Montaigne was on to something. When we “frequent it” and dissect death’s terrors, we find ourselves able to approach our slavish fear of death, invite death into our lives and discuss it, thereby also inviting spiritual growth. We begin to understand, precisely because we cannot live forever, that we have much living and loving to do now. Over time, we can learn to make death our teacher, a teacher of empyrean truths.

For the past several years, I have made death my teacher. In my calmer moments, when the question does not rattle me to the core, I have stepped back and asked myself: is there a better way to die?

Yes there is.

I know this not because I’ve been blessed with prophecy or an advanced degree in the subject. (Disclaimer: I have not died and come back. That would be an instant bestseller.) I know this because I have been on a personal quest to understand the role that death plays in our lives. My search was jump-started one day in September 2009. On that day, my cousin Alyssa died at age forty. It was unexpected and traumatic. The silence that surrounded death in my family was suddenly broken for the worst possible reason; we were staring at it in

front of us with wide, gaping mouths, not knowing what to do or say. I performed my first and only funeral two days later, documented the haunting experience in my journal and decided that it was time to end the family's silence and begin the journey to understanding.

As a Jewish educator for twenty-five years, I needed to understand death not only for myself but for all of those with whom I work closely who also recognize the terror of death and the role it plays in shutting them down and opening them up. I regularly travel with adults through the range of life experiences that percolate major questions and spiritual insights. Confronting the deaths of those we love and facing our own mortality are among the most poignant and frightening steps on life's journey. I began my search with a set of questions, both concrete and abstract. What happens to our bodies after we die? Is there an afterlife? Can an unexpected and sudden death still be beautiful? Does my fear of death contribute in some positive way to my life? In other words, can I leverage the terror and get something out of it? Is there a better way to die, and can we learn it? I wanted to vanquish my fear of death, like some exotic sword-slayer in a medieval thriller, and found an unintended present with my search, the gift of inspiration. I met ordinary people with extraordinary emotional stamina who overcame their fears and left the most important legacy one can leave behind, a better death. Sometimes even a beautiful death.

Studying death exposed me to many different spiritual traditions, philosophical debates, medical practices and cultural beliefs that surround death and the dying. I devoured philosophical and spiritual treatises, ancient mystical texts and psychological and sociological studies. I read numerous books about funeral homes and undertakers-in-training, and I skimmed cemetery and hospice manuals. I learned about the chemistry of cremation, the intricacies of Japanese burial ceremonies and even performed a ritual bath on a dead woman. Most importantly, I interviewed dozens of remarkable people who made

themselves vulnerable through our conversations about the most fragile of human experiences, many of them in tears as we spoke.

Here's some of what I learned: the grim reaper is not always grim; our last days *can* be the most loving time of life; last words have remarkable staying power; and learning about the mechanics of how we *do* death can make the prospect less daunting. The more prepared we are for the logistics of death, the less those who profit from death (the so-called death industry) can exploit us. The more open we are about our own deaths, the more prepared our survivors will be to face their own ultimate truths one day. The more emotionally generous we are with words, affection and regrets, the easier it will be to control the fear. We *can* achieve happier endings.

Studying death through speaking to the dying and their survivors also made me question Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, the physician and writer, whose five stages of grief radically altered the way we think about death and loss. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance have become such an axiomatic understanding of loss that we may, as a result, limit our fullest and most warming experience of death. I am no longer convinced that these stages truly capture what is taking place during the period when one's death or the death of someone we love is imminent. Many therapists have questioned Kübler-Ross's stages, believing that the word "stage" may be misleading. Not everyone experiences all five stages, nor do these stages occur in a linear fashion, with people waiting for one stage to stop and the next to begin. My problem with this ladder of loss is that it is missing its most important rung. The last, most potent stage or development within the framework of loss is not acceptance. It is inspiration. I humbly believe Kübler-Ross missed something in her categorization that may be the key to the fine art of dying well, if we can ever truly call it that.

I turned Kübler-Ross's list into a different and abbreviated outline in my own mind. Denial is undoubtedly the first stage, bold and

tenacious. Then, in my new death outline, anger, bargaining and depression become subsumed under denial as different manifestations of the unwillingness to accept death. They are all—anger, bargaining and depression—mechanisms of denial. They represent different fields of the battleground, the fight against a truth that cannot be broken. Kübler-Ross's acceptance turned into resignation in my new scheme. There is a moment when the fight ends and the resignation begins.

"Acceptance" is a little too positive to describe this stage. It gives the impression of being welcome, and death is rarely welcome. If we define "acceptance" as consent or receiving something with approval or favor, then "acceptance" becomes too cheery for what most who grieve experience. "Resignation" seems the semantically more appropriate word. We submit to the inevitability of our fate, aggressively, passively or unresistingly. We tell ourselves: This is real. It will not go away. It is a new fact of our existence, which is one of the only old facts of human existence. In happier endings, the observation "This is real" is twinned with the maturing understanding "I am unprepared." And this confession is critical to achieving the next stage: "I *need* to be prepared."

Once someone is able to utter these words—"I need to be prepared"—a flood of change takes place that enables us to face death without fear. This is the stage I call "inspiration," a stage that never appeared in Kübler-Ross's framework but appeared in virtually every conversation I had with a person or family who managed to do death better. The intentional decision to become better prepared for death gives the dying permission to love more fully, to say the words they've wanted to say for a lifetime, to repair and heal troubled relationships, and to entertain a range of ethereal and spiritual thoughts and actions often previously closed off, sealed or masked by the pragmata of everyday anxieties. It gives the family the chance to reach out to the dying

with an emotional range previously unknown or unexperienced. By not acknowledging that the stage of inspiration exists, many never believe that it is possible; they retain the stubborn belief that acceptance alone is the last station. In so doing, they deny themselves the beautiful closure that only the enlightened ever achieve but that is a possibility for almost everyone.

A successful businessman in his fifties mourned the fact that no one was able to say “Dad’s dying” after three stressful weeks in the hospital and three additional weeks at home. “It happened so fast,” his son lamented to me one morning over coffee. Stuck in the quicksand of denial, the family did not realize that when a nurse wheeled Dad out to a family dinner and he addressed his wife and each son that he was actually saying goodbye. How tender that dinner could have been had they opened their eyes and seen what was really going on. “He was saying goodbye, and none of us realized until long after it happened.” Inspiration is not a stage of grief. It is an admission of possibility. It is the last gift we give the living.

My exploration of death began with questions I thought had no answers. It ended—as much as any such journey can ever end—with answers that were personally transformative. And because I know that you find this hard to believe, I have to introduce you to my teachers, each of whom is worth a thousand books on death. Good teachers are those who die well and show us how with their very lives. My teachers dot the pages that follow. First let me introduce you to Rose. Rose was Connie’s mother.

Not long after her mother died, Connie and I met on a sparkling San Francisco afternoon outside the museum she once directed. She took me on a tour, and toward the end of our walk, we spoke about her mother.

"I'm so sorry to hear about her death," I said, expressing my deepest condolences.

Connie beamed. "Don't be sorry. My mother had the most beautiful death."

That's odd, I thought. Such a response in the face of consolation was quite rare. *There must be a story here*. Connie told me that in a month she was going on a trip with her four sisters to spread her mother's ashes on a ski slope. There was a lot to say, and she would tell me all about it when she got back.

Rosemarie—or Rose, as she was called—died in her early eighties in Idaho. She had lupus for thirty years and eventually died of related complications. Connie swore you'd never know about her mother's chronic condition because her mother made it a practice not to complain about being ill. Rose lived her life full of spirit, and she also died that way.

I wondered what it meant to die full of spirit. Connie explained. Rose's husband, Connie's father, had committed suicide when Connie was only fifteen; both of Rose's parents died before she was ten, leaving her an orphan. Rose was on intimate terms with death. Suffering was the measure of her life. Rose wanted to undo this upbringing of pain in raising her own five daughters. There must be a better way to do death, she reckoned. So Rose talked about death casually and often, to the point where the family joke involved the neighborhood funeral home, Metcalf's.

"So, Mother, when are you going to Metcalf's?"

"Is it time to go to Metcalf's?"

Rose had a host of illnesses. As she aged into more severe pain, Rose was told that she would have to undergo dialysis. She had always had a very close relationship with her doctors; Rose knew her options and was not in denial about what lay ahead. Rose did not want the hospital life associated with dialysis and decided instead to soldier

through her pain until the end. Connie told me about an incident, which happened several months in advance of Rose's death, that most illustrated her mother's attitude toward her health. Rose had traveled from Idaho each month to see a world specialist in San Francisco as her condition worsened. The doctor casually asked her if anything had happened to her in the intervening month, and Rose said that nothing unusual had occurred. "What do you mean, Mother?" Connie interrupted forcefully. "Did you forget that you were diagnosed with breast cancer since we were last here?"

Rose had not forgotten about the cancer. She just would not let it get in her way. She pushed it away with dignity. In her view, every day presented another chance to live, so why should she dwell on dying? She was not going to carry her cancer around, lugging it about like a heavy suitcase, a conversation-stopper. She was determined that sickness would neither define nor limit her. Rose knew herself well enough to know that she needed to retain control of the decision-making that so often imperceptibly slips through the fingers of the dying. To that end, years before sickness ate away at her, Rose held what Connie called a tag sale in her house. She told the girls to label everything in the house they wanted and explained which sister would be the executor of her will and why. She divided up the better jewelry and organized her papers and set out her burial wishes. In Connie's words:

It was the best gift she gave us. Nothing made my mother happier than when we were all around her and all got along. She made all these plans not because she was a controlling person but because she didn't want us to fight about what she left. She saw too many families broken apart because of fighting over an inheritance and she wanted us to know what she wanted. None of us was going to second-guess what she wanted, as so many people do. And that was her last and best gift because it worked.

What Connie described touched a deep emotional chord with me. Having gone through too many death scenes where I watched families torn apart by financial issues that really amounted to sibling rivalry and envy—arguing over small items or certain that a parent or a spouse wanted to be buried one way and not another—it became obvious that survivors don't want to betray the desires of the deceased but often have no idea what those desires are. When survivors are left to second-guess, every possibility spells out unhappiness in a different way, and the living suffer the displeasure more than the dead. Rose prepared her family because she did not want her death to be a source of family infighting.

For months, Connie and her sisters took turns staying beside their mother. Connie never minded cleaning and bathing Rose or changing her clothing and taking her to the bathroom. She thought it was moving to tend to her mother's most basic needs. When Rose protested, Connie replied that Rose had done all of this and more when she was a baby, and it was Connie's turn now. "She said she didn't want me to see her this way, but I think she was really touched that we took care of her." Connie made me realize that the most salient reason we don't take care of those who are dying may be to protect ourselves from the reality of our own deaths. It's not fair to the dying. They need us, and we are not there because we do not want to look in that mirror. They need us to have more courage than that. Connie could take care of her mother because her mother taught her not to be afraid of death.

One of Connie's cousins who believed in contacting spirits in the afterlife set her up with a spirit reader about a month after Rose passed away. The woman knew nothing about Connie's life or Rose's death, but she told her that her mother thanked her for taking care of her at the end. This reassured Connie that Rose's dignity had not been compromised. Then, with a laugh, Connie brushed off the spirit reader.

She went back for a second visit, and everything the spirit reader said was just plain wrong. "But that first message, it really sounded like something my mom would say."

Rose was a stickler in the personal care department. The sisters knew the end was near when Rose came home from her final visit to the hospital and scheduled and then canceled a manicure and an in-home hairdressing appointment for the next day. Rose told Connie that she was just wasn't up to it.

"That's when I knew," Connie said.

Connie described with great tenderness the moment her mother died. Mike, Rose's second husband of thirty-five years, insisted on being with Rose constantly. The day of the canceled appointments, Mike went to take a shower while Connie hovered near her mother. Rose lay on the couch sleeping. "Suddenly her breathing changed dramatically, and I screamed out for Mike. We were both there the moment she passed away. It was incredible." The family was already en route, and when one of her other sisters arrived, the three of them moved the body to Rose's own bed. Connie's voice lowered slightly when she shared what this moment was like for her.

My mother weighed so little in those last weeks. She had also lost inches of her height over the years. We each positioned ourselves to move her, and I was responsible for holding up her middle. She was probably four foot eight and not even ninety pounds, but when we moved her, she was so heavy, so very heavy. And that's when I knew that her spirit left her. Her spirit made her light, and when her spirit left, her body was just so unexpectedly heavy. I remember thinking that.

Soon, all the family had gathered around Rose in her bedroom. They sat on the bed, all of the sisters together, and told stories about their mother. They even put lipstick on Rose because that was what they felt she would have done in front of her girls. Connie recalled that little flourish with fondness and then described what it meant to have everyone together: "It was what she would have wanted, what she most loved: her girls all around her, talking with each other and just being together."

Rose left very specific burial instructions and nothing to chance. She wanted her body to be cremated, and she wanted Mike and each of the girls to take a packet of her ashes and throw them on a ski slope in Sun Valley, Idaho. She was even specific about the slope. "My mother was a great skier, and she skied even when her bones were brittle and always breaking. We just could not get that crazy woman to stop. She wanted us to spread her ashes over one run, Christian's Gold. And she wanted that run and not any other because she didn't like all the slopes."

The night before going to the ski slope, the sisters held a dinner party for about twenty of Rose's close friends. They toasted her and celebrated her life through stories. They praised Rose for creating real closure with her friends and with Mike. Months after Rose's death, Mike called Connie to ask her to repeat a conversation between Rose and Mike that Connie had witnessed. "Connie, did Rose really say that there should be another Mrs. Fishman? Did you really hear that?" Mike wanted to make sure he understood Rose correctly. She wanted life to go on for everyone. She wanted Mike to have as much love without her as they knew together in their marriage—none of the cessation W. H. Auden depicts in "Funeral Blues" where all the clocks are asked to stop, where time itself pauses in the face of loss. Life would go on. Life must go on. Rose demanded that it should.

Connie wondered how the dispersal of ashes was going to work. She also was not sure it was legal. I was pretty curious myself. I had certainly heard of people who wanted to be cremated and buried at sea. And I knew of someone whose ashes were stuffed into a champagne bottle at a military funeral. Yet for all the odd stories I collected over the years, I never heard of someone who loved skiing so much that she wanted to spend her eternal life on a ski slope. It seemed a little cold for my taste.

Connie explained that her mother hated cemeteries. Because Rose had lost her parents so young, visiting gravesites probably was an onerous and regular part of Rose's young life. Maybe she didn't want that memory for her daughters or maybe she just didn't want that kind of eternal company. Cemeteries are lonely and quiet, flat and eerie. Rose had a point. Why not "live" among happy people having fun in a gorgeous place with an expansive view where death seems so far away?

While Connie did not have trouble coming to terms with her mother's last request, she was stuck on the logistics. "I mean, really, how were we going to divide up her ashes and get them in a few different pouches? I just couldn't figure it out." But this detail, in the end, was not complicated. The funeral home that cremated Rose placed the ashes in individual white pouches, and Mike distributed them to each of the girls and took one for himself. Connie described the scene with a note of bemusement: "So there we were in the car, driving to the mountain in our ski gear and our boots, and we each had a piece of my mother with us. It was just so very odd. And again, her ashes felt really, really heavy. I guess I expected them to be light."

It was a cold, sunny day when they set out for the mountaintop, just the kind of day that was perfect for skiing, even—apparently—if you were no longer alive. Up on the top of the slope, they each interpreted Rose's last wish differently. One sister went to the side of the slope and placed the ashes in the crux of a tree. One put them

nearer to the bottom so that Rose could metaphorically finish the run. Another felt that her mother's ashes should be on the top of the slope looking down in anticipation of the run. Connie skied over to a clump of trees and scattered the ashes into the wind and the trees. Another sister spread them out as she slowly skied down the trail. This last choice had some unintended consequences for Connie:

As I was skiing down the mountain having thrown out my mother's ashes, I realized that I was actually skiing on my mother's ashes because now I knew what they looked like. They were the ashes my sister let go of on the slope. For a minute I thought, *I am actually skiing on my mother.*

Connie paused, understanding that this strange coincidence was unusual by any standards, and then added, "It felt great. Really great." She and the family had honored her mother's last request in every detail. It offered potent solace.

When we all got to the bottom and exchanged stories about where we put our ashes and what we felt, we all shared the same exact feeling: a huge weight had been lifted. We had done exactly what she wanted. And I knew that once her physical body was no longer with us in any way, that her spirit was there, all spirit. And it's with me every day. It's with me now. I talk to her all the time . . .

What Connie was describing was not the absence of her mother but the enduring gift of her mother's presence.

It was then that I realized—with the clarity that comes when an abstract idea manifests itself concretely—that in my quest for a better death, people really could have a happier ending, a beautiful death, despite illness, despite suffering, even with incalculable losses. Rose

had vanquished her fear and taught her daughters not to be afraid of death, and now she was teaching me as well. Death is life's only certainty, and death was going to come. Rose knew it, so why deny it? Rose talked openly about it with her doctors and her family, made tough decisions about it and spelled out all requests related to it in detail. She divided up her material possessions and gave them away in her lifetime because she didn't want her death to be associated with arguments, resentment or envy. She generously gave permission for others to continue without her. She said whatever she needed to say. She spent her last days eating French fries and ice cream instead of hooked up to dialysis. She taught her daughters to embrace death so that they could live fully.

Ultimately, Rose gave her family a happy ending because she was able to confront her death without fear. In Connie's words, "Losing her body made me understand how much she will always live within me. Always." If Rose's soul lives on in Connie, then Rose only died in one sense of the word. Her ending was, in some of the most critical ways, not an ending at all. Connie still holds her mother close.

Rose also taught me that a happier ending has two vantage points: the first from the person who is dying and the second from those left behind. Learning how to overcome the fear of death requires moving in and out of these viewpoints almost seamlessly. The dying who overcome fear learn to die better, and those who watch them die learn to die better as well.

Thank you, Rose. I didn't really believe in a beautiful death until Connie introduced us. Thank you for becoming a student of death so that you could become my teacher.

In the late summer of 1827, the Hasidic master Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Przysucha was ailing and close to death. His wife stood

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beside him, awash in bitter tears. Finally, he turned to her in irritation and demanded silence. Rabbi Bunim could not understand why his wife was crying, waiting as he had for this moment. With one sentence he explained: "My whole life was only that I should learn to die."