

We Only Get One Quarterⁱ
 A Sermon for Yom Kippur Yiskor 5777/2016
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Shanah Tovah

My father, of blessed memory, who so many of you knew as Pops, was an adventurer. Every weekend, it seemed, he would bundle me and my brothers into the car and take us on an adventure. One of our favorite places was State Line Lookout on Palisades Parkway in New Jersey. There was a snack shack there where we could each pick out a treat. But what I remember most vividly were the binocular viewers. Do you know the ones I mean? The large silver ones that swivel 360 degrees on a pole and have a red focusing knob marked “turn to clear vision”? If you know these viewers, you know that if you look through their eyepieces you can’t see a thing until you put in a quarter.

As soon as we parked, my brothers and I would race from the car to the viewers. My father would follow and hand each of us a quarter. We took turns, putting our quarter in the slot and aligning our eyes to the eyepieces before pressing the handle down to start the viewer. The viewer ticked out the seconds, adding to the pressure of making the most of our time as we scanned the horizon, trying to decide what to focus on as we turned the red knob to see clearly. We knew we each would get only one quarter and we wanted to make each second count.

My family didn’t have much money when my brothers and I were growing up. Maybe that was a good thing. Having only one quarter made every second feel precious. At the time, though, I didn’t appreciate just how precious every second is.

I stopped at State Line Lookout this summer, on a sort of pilgrimage to visit the places I had visited with my father as a kid. I peeked into the snack shack but what I really wanted to see were the binocular viewers. They were still there. They still cost a quarter to use. While the value of that quarter has diminished over the years, the value of a second has not.

Standing in front of that binocular viewer, standing where I had stood as a child with my father, who had passed away just months earlier, I realized that what was true for my brothers and me is really true about life, in general. We each only get one quarter. Every second is precious and it is up to us to make every second count.

Perhaps that is why the psalmist wrote millennia ago: *Teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom.*ⁱⁱ It is a fact of life that our days are limited. None of us knows which day will be our last. If we recognize that, remember that, feel the urgency of that, perhaps we would make more of the time we have.

Our ancient Rabbis taught that we should treat each day as our last. They did not intend to be morbid. Rather, they wanted to motivate us to focus on what is most important, to treasure every second since none of us knows how many seconds we have on this earth. That is why they included in our High Holy Day prayers the powerful words, *On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, who shall live and who shall die...*

Sometimes the only way to be shaken from our complacency, our busy-ness, our destructive or simply clueless habits is to face our own mortality, to realize that every second is precious *because* our time on this earth is limited.

In a way, these High Holy Days are our red “turn to clear vision” knob so prominent on the binocular viewer. These High Holy Days turn us to help clear our vision. That is what the Hebrew word *teshuvah*, repentance, really means, turning. We turn to see ourselves more clearly, to see who we are and who we can be; how we are with others and how we would like to be with them and they with us. We only get one quarter. It is up to us to make the seconds count.

My father understood this. Maybe it was because, as a young man, he had faced the very real possibility of his death on a Pacific Island during World War II. He was not yet 18 as his shipmates were being killed around him during a Japanese bombardment. Or maybe it was because, as a fireman, when he kissed my mother, brothers and me goodbye before leaving for his shift, he never knew if he would return safely to us. All I know is that for my father, a life worth living was always a life of giving. Giving thanks. Giving help.

At every meal my brothers and I would have to sit through his enthusiastic litany of thanksgiving, for the food, for our health, for the ability to live free from fear for our safety, free from rockets coming through the windows. As kids we didn’t appreciate his appreciation. We just wanted to eat. But as we got older, as he got older, we came to treasure how much he treasured all of us and everything in life. And how much he was always willing to help.

Whenever anyone needed anything, my father was there. A fellow firefighter, a neighbor, a family member, a friend, a beggar, another Jew half way around the world, it didn’t matter. Whether an extra pair of hands, a ride, a check, some food, if he could help, he would. “There is always room at the inn,” he would say if someone needed a place at the table or a place to stay.

Even in his later years, as Alzheimer’s narrowed his world, my father continued to fill his life with gratitude and generosity. He was always thankful, for seeing us, for the musicians who performed at Harmony Hall, where he lived his last years, for the caregivers who helped him, the food service workers, the nurses, the aides, the congregants who visited. Till the day he died, his first question to anyone he met was often, “How are you feeling?” And the second was, “Can I do anything for you?” Even when he was in a wheelchair, if he saw someone drop something, whether another resident or a staff member, he would try to pick it up even if he could no longer reach the floor.

We often think of our loved ones who have Alzheimer’s as diminished. And in many ways they are. It is a horrible disease that robs our loved ones of their memory and often their dignity. It can narrow their focus to what is most important to them, a visit, a smile, something sweet to eat.

That narrowed focus also helps us, who care for them. It helps us see more clearly what is most important. Their illness forces us to focus on making the most of the time we still have together.

That is true whatever medical challenges our aging parents, spouses or siblings face. I don’t wish such struggles on anyone. But I am thankful I had this time with my father. I got to take him on the kind of adventures he had taken my brothers and me on when we were young, though my husband David and I did the driving.

This summer my pilgrimage of memory took me to many of the places I had visited with my father in upstate New York, especially during the last summer he could still walk. He needed the assistance of a walker and sometimes a steady arm. I would help him in and out of our car,

folding and unfolding his walker, worrying whenever I let him out of my sight to go park the car. Somehow, we safely navigated every adventure. We visited Vanderbilt Mansion, where my father got to ride on their turn of the century elevator because he could no longer climb stairs. We took a Hudson River cruise out of Kingston and enjoyed tea at Harney and Son's tasting room in Millerton. He was so happy to be having these new adventures. Returning to these same places this summer I, too, was happy, comforted that the time we had had together was well spent.

Whether our loved ones lived to a ripe old age, as my father did, or whether their lives were tragically cut short, the time we had together never is enough. Most of us wish we could get just another few seconds, another minute, another hour, another day. There is always something more we wish we had done. I wish I had recorded the specific details of my father's naval adventures, which islands he was on, the names of the people he had met. There is always more we wish we could have experienced together, learned about.

But we only get one quarter.

There is another thing about the binocular viewers: they *only* take quarters. Nickels and dimes won't let you see through the eyepieces. Only whole quarters. That is true also about life. We can't nickel and dime our way through life, through our relationships, if we want our time on this earth to count. We have to be wholly, completely present to be able to clear our own vision, to be able to see our loved ones clearly in all their depth and complexity.

We live such distracted lives. We are so busy with the daily tasks of caring for our kids, our parents, our pets, ourselves. Social media makes it easier in some ways but also distracts us in other ways. It seems so much harder today to pay the kind of undivided attention that helps us see others clearly, see their needs, their wisdom, and the blessings within them.

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, best known as the author of *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, recounts the story of a doctor named Elizabeth who worked on an Indian reservation. Elizabeth had been treating an elderly woman. She ordered lab tests, arranged for social services to get the woman financial assistance, took care of her many complicated medical needs. Finally, at 96, the woman died.

As this doctor was closing the woman's chart, she received a call from a University of Arizona researcher studying traditional tribal medicine. He had tracked down one of the oldest medicine women in the country, one who contained an unbroken lineage of ancient medical traditions. She had died recently and her family could not answer his questions. They referred him to Elizabeth who had cared for this woman for so many years. Certainly she would have the information he sought.

The medicine woman was Elizabeth's elderly patient who had just died. Elizabeth had provided her attentive medical care. But Elizabeth never bothered to wholly see her patient or learn her story.

Elizabeth explains, "I had been so busy with my numbers and tests. What I would give for even one hour with her now, to ask her any of my unanswered questions, to have her perspective on suffering or loss or illness or death. Or simply to ask for her blessing."

Dr. Remen titled this story "You have to be present to win."ⁱⁱⁱ

Our ancient rabbis had their own kitchen table wisdom: in a society that worked from sunrise to sunset every day, they ordained that we gather around the table with family and friends on Shabbat in an unhurried manner so we can be totally present for each other.

We need to use a whole quarter. The seconds tick by so quickly. We need to be wholly present to win, to make the seconds we have count the most.

Five minutes here and carpooling there between errands and activities won't do it (even when we overhear interesting things from the back seat as our kids chat among themselves). Sitting around the kitchen table together with our tablets or cell phones on won't provide the kind of focus that allows us to see clearly the people around us, what is going on inside of them, what burdens or pain they are carrying, what riches of wisdom. It takes a whole quarter to be able to see.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy is that we may not know what we have missed until it is too late. Perhaps we can't realize what we have missed until we are forced by tradition and by our own hearts to take the time to reflect on the seconds we shared and realize there will always be more we wish we could have done together, learned from each other.

What I wouldn't give to have another few minutes with my father. But if we make the most of the time we do have, make the seconds we have count to the best of our abilities, if we try to see them clearly when we do have them with us, then, at least, the memories we *have* of them will sustain us and help us forgive ourselves for not always being able to stay focused enough to see as clearly as we may wish we had. Then, after the first flush of loss and mourning subsides, hopefully we will discover, as I did this summer, that time well spent transcends this world and the next. It comforts, sustains and guides those of us left behind when our loved ones move on to their side of eternity. That is the power of memory. And memory is built upon thousands of thousands of precious seconds shared.

My father will always be part of my life. Wherever I go, he will go with me. Whatever my adventures, I will remember the adventures we shared. That is true for all of us who have gathered here this morning to remember our loved ones. We will honor their memories in a few minutes by reciting Yizkor. We honor their memories when we light the yahrzeit candle on the anniversary of their death and on the holidays, when we come to services to recite Kaddish, and when we give charity in their name. We remember their wisdom and we remember time well spent together. They will be part of our lives as long we remember the seconds we shared with them.

So please join me in reciting the poem by **Sylvan Kamens** and **Rabbi Jack Reimer**, "We Remember Them." It can be found in our *Book of Remembrance* that you received as you entered, on **page 40**, or just join in the refrain, *we remember them*.

At the rising of the sun and at its going down

We remember them.

At the blowing of the wind and in the chill of winter

We remember them.

At the opening of the buds and in the rebirth of spring

We remember them.

At the blueness of the skies and in the warmth of summer

We remember them.

At the rustling of the leaves and in the beauty of autumn

We remember them.

At the beginning of the year and when it ends

We remember them.

As long as we live, they too will live, for they are now a part of us as

We remember them.

When we are weary and in need of strength

We remember them.

When we are lost and sick at heart

We remember them.

When we have joy we crave to share

We remember them.

When we have decisions that are difficult to make

We remember them.

When we have achievements that are based on theirs

We remember them.

As long as we live, they too will live, for they are now a part of us as

We remember them.

What is true about the binocular viewers at State Line Lookout is also true of life. We each only get one quarter. Every second is precious and it is up to us to make every second count.

If we use those seconds well, if we live to give thanks and give help, if we share the time we have with loved ones, if we share adventures together, then when our time runs out, we will leave behind for our own loved ones the kinds of memories that can carry them, comfort them, inspire them to make the most of their time here as well.

The time our loved ones spent here on this earth counted to us. May our memories of them inspire us to make the time we have count as well.

Shanah Tovah

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ⁱⁱ Psalms 90:12.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rachel Naomi Regen, "You Have to Be Present to Win," in *My Grandfather's Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge and Belonging*: 68-9.