

Death of a Grandfather, 1950

Larry and I came into the sitting room in Beth Israel Hospital to find the family assembled, the children and the grandchildren and all their husbands and wives. Like us, they had come to be present as my grandfather's life came to an end. Death had approached this good man as a quick and violent assault against which there was no defense, the battle begun and ended within a few hours.

I sat down and tried to distance myself a little bit from the ascending volume of the family chatter that was inevitable in such circumstances. I tried to tell myself that it wasn't sad. My grandfather had reached the full biblical limit of 80 years, strong, alert, and capable to the end, mercifully spared the deterioration that causes so much suffering.

Thinking about it, so many years later, a phrase keeps coming into my head "whom God hath joined, let no man put asunder". Abe and Eva were being put asunder. After 57 years, the marriage that had inspired all the loving couples in that room was coming to a close. Eva without Abe was inconceivable.

A nurse came into the room and suggested to me that I should go to the sickroom to say goodbye to my grandfather. I followed and she left me standing just inside the doorway, motionless and speechless, transfixed by what I was seeing and hearing. My grandmother was bending over the bed, sobbing, talking Yiddish, pleading with him not to leave her. Grief filled the room in a way that I found unbearable, and although she was unaware of my presence, I felt like an intruder and left the room to rejoin the others.

After awhile my grandmother came into the sitting room, relatively composed, seeking assurance that the hospital rabbi would be there when death occurred. I was confused. I couldn't understand how she felt such a need for a man that she had never met before, and for the words that he would utter and she probably would not understand.

Suddenly I did understand. The ritual that he would perform could not banish grief, but it could put it in its place. By implication it carried the message of universal reality. Life and death come to all of us. "Grass withers and flowers fade" and we all share that reality wherever and whenever we are. Time and space are only ours for a little bit. We borrow tiny pieces of eternity from the vastness of our own earth and the universe above us, and we fit ourselves into a little slot of time, hopefully finding happiness, and leaving bits and pieces of ourselves to enrich the lives of those we love, those who come after us. In accepting reality we find a measure of peace. Ritual meets that human need and provides some comfort, perhaps the only comfort.