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Beautiful Death

A great Sage once asked his students: Tell me what are you watching when the sky turns from orange to rose, then to deep purple and finally to darkness?" That's obvious, said the students. "You are watching the sunset."

It's a striking phenomenon in nature — the way the colors blaze up, at the end of the day. Not only the colors of the sky, which take on vivid hues as the day comes to a close, but also the colors of the leaves, which burst into their most intense shades just as they prepare for death.

If life were fair, it would be the same way with human beings. We would become more beautiful, more loving and kind, the older we got, and our last days would be the loveliest days, leaving our survivors with sweet and vivid memories forever.

Some lives do indeed end this way: courage, dignity, unselfishness and tenderness are present at the deathbed; emotional wounds are healed; words of love and forgiveness are spoken. The dying person rises to his or her finest hour and . . . so do the people who gather around to say goodbye. Death comes without pain or fear, as quietly and gently as a sigh. The soul departs, as the *Talmud* says, "with a kiss from God." The departed go in beauty.

But life is not fair sometimes and, sadly more often than not, death comes in a way that is not gentle . . . and leaves in its wake painful and wrenching emotions (Rabbi Janet Marder, Yizkor Shemini Atzert 5766, Betham.org). Sometimes death comes suddenly -- without warning, without an opportunity to prepare, with no time to say goodbye.

Other times the life force lingers and lingers. Long after the goodbyes, there is still breath; and death, when it finally comes, brings relief. There is relief, too, when death ends great physical pain and suffering.

For some there is emotional and psychological trauma at the end of life. When there is unfinished business; hurts and betrayals for which we are angry; regrets and over which we feel guilty -- in all of these situations, death leaves behind additional stress, disturbance and pain. Indeed, every death is like every life -- unique and different.

We learn in *Pirkei Avot – The Ethics of Our Fathers*: "Two things one never knows in this world – when one is coming and when one is going" (4:2a). How then are we to go in beauty? And how then to remember the beauty of the lives we recall?

A story is told about Mayer Anshel Rothschild. From time to time the Emperor, Franz Joseph, would send visitors to the luxurious Rothschild palace. It was the most lavish and well-appointed palace in all of Austria and everyone wanted to see the inside.

During one visit, Rothschild showed his guest every inch of his home and the visitor was awed by the display of wealth. He showed him room after room, but,

when he passed a certain door, he continued walking. "I am sorry," said Rothschild. "This is the one room in the palace I cannot show you."

The visitor reported back to the Emperor and told him about all he saw . . . and about the room he could not see. This peaked the Emperor's curiosity. He asked the man why he suspected that room was off limits. "Perhaps that is where Rothschild keeps his magic money machine," he answered.

The Emperor did not know whether or not to believe the man so he sent a second government official to visit the palace. The second agent came back with the same report, as did the third and the fourth.

Finally, the Emperor decided to visit the palace himself and, when they reached the forbidden room, he demanded entry.

Rothschild took out his keys, opened the door, and invited the Emperor to enter. There, in the small room, was a simple pine box and some plain white cloth on the table. That was all that was there.

"What is this all about?" asked the Emperor.

"We Jews have strict rules about burial," explained Rothschild. "When a person dies, he must be buried in a very simple coffin. His body must be clothed in a plain white shroud. This is to maintain the equality of all God's creatures."

"But why is this here, in this room?" asked the Emperor, impressed but very confused.

Answered Rothschild "At the end of each day, I come to this room, and view the coffin and the shroud, and I am reminded that, even though I have great wealth and power and influence, in the highest echelons of Austrian society, I am still one of God's simple creatures, and that this is the end I will come to just like all of God's children (Yizkor Sermon, Rabbi Richard Plavin, Yom Kippur 5769).

Mayer Anshel Rothschild prepared for his death. And I am sure that entering that room each day helped him to live his life more fully. He focused on his humanity. He focused on using his time wisely in meaning and in beauty. You see, not only was he known as a great financier, but also, he was known as a generous philanthropist. He brought many Eastern European Jews to Palestine and to the West. Everyday he stood outside of his palace and personally distributed alms.

When he died, and was buried in that casket he regularly looked at, there was suffering and loss . . . and there was meaning and beauty.

Time and time again, I have learned that there can be beauty within the pain and suffering of death. Even with those whose lives were cut tragically short, it can be so, if they have lived their lives fully and with meaning and purpose. One such loss this year was the death of Seattle-based author and editor, Jane Catherine Lotter. Miss Lotter had a weekly humor column in the *Seattle Times* called, "Jane Explains," as well as a recently published, and well-received, comic novel, *The Bette Davis Club*. She died of endometrial cancer on July 18th at the age of 60, survived by her husband, a 19-year-old-son and 23-year-old daughter. She became known to many only after she passed away when her death notice went viral over the internet. Here is why:

"One of the 'few advantages' of dying from . . . cancer . . . is that you have time to write your own obituary," she quipped with characteristic humor. "The other

advantages are no longer bothering with sunscreen and no longer worrying about your cholesterol."

All kidding aside, after relating her biography and thanking the physicians and family who lovingly cared for her, she wrote: "I was given the gift of life, and now I have to give it back. This is hard. But I was a lucky woman, who led a lucky existence, and for this I am grateful.

I first got sick in January 2010. When the cancer recurred last year and was terminal, I decided to be joyful about having had a full life, rather than sad about having to die. Amazingly, this outlook worked for me. (Well, you know, most of the time.) Meditation and the study of Buddhist philosophy also helped me accept what I could not change. At any rate, I am at peace.

And on that upbeat note, I take my mortal leave of this rollicking, revolving world -- this sun, that moon, that walk around Green Lake, that stroll through the Pike Place Market, the memory of a child's hand in mine.

My beloved Bob, Tessa, and Riley. My beloved friends and family. How precious you all have been to me. Knowing and loving each one of you was the success story of my life. Metaphorically speaking, we will meet again, joyfully, on the other side. Beautiful day, happy to have been here. Love, Jane/Mom."

What was remarkable about Jane Lotter was, that in the face of tragedy, she was a realist. She knew she could not change her lot in life, so, rather than being angry or bitter or sad or filled with self-pity, she grasped hold of the moment and determined to squeeze every last bit out of it that she could.

She made a conscious choice to see the glass half-full; to be thankful for the wonderful life she had lived; to see the joy in all of it; to bequeath all of that good to her family; and to leave this place in peace.

Her gifts to her loved ones, and to us, are those of acceptance and gratitude; happiness and humor; equanimity and love. In the end, she didn't define success in terms of her career achievements, but rather as having known and loved the people closest to her -- her husband and children, her extended family and dear friends. I am certain that the way she chose to prepare for her death brought grace to those she loved, even in their pain.

Like you, I did not know Ms. Lotter personally; we experienced her death from afar. Yet, although we don't know directly the feelings of her mourners, we sense, in the legacy she left behind, and in the great attention now paid her, that, despite the wrenching pain her early demise caused, in her death, there was, and is, beauty.

As your rabbi, I have been blessed to honor and to pay tribute to many who have lived life with equal purpose and meaning. People who are open and real. People who live life with wisdom. People who make everyday count and celebrate them with gratitude and joy. People who let go of the little stuff and focus on the big picture. People who forgive and are forgiving. People who live life to its fullest.

These people, your loved ones, have taught all of us to aspire to live our lives with beauty, with meaning, with purpose; we can only hope that, in so doing, when our time comes that we will be prepared for death so that, in our passing, our families will find a measure of comfort and grace amidst their pain.

In a few minutes we will turn to our memorial prayers. As we do, let us remember the beauty in the lives of those we recall. Let us grasp hold of their wisdom, of the lessons of their lives. Let us find solace and strength, meaning and purpose as we remember them.

A great Sage once asked his students: Tell me what are you watching when you see the sky turn from orange to rose, then to deep purple and finally to darkness?" That is obvious, said the students. "You are watching the sunset." "No," said the sage. "You are wrong. You are not watching the sun set. You are watching the world turn."

The world has turned; time has taken from us the ones we love. They have breathed their last and been gathered to their people in a story that is painful and beautiful and as old as the world. Let us hold them close in memory now; let us keep them in our hearts. Amen.