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“They Know”

It is a conversation I’ve had many times with many people in my life as a rabbi – most recently just a couple weeks ago.

She sat weeping in my office following the death of her beloved father. “I never really showed him how much he meant to me,” she uttered barely audibly, “how much I am going to miss him... how much I miss him already. He gave me everything, and I never really showed him that I understood that. But I did understand. I do understand. And now it’s too late.”

Such a common regret we sometimes experience after the death of a loved one or a cherished friend – the fear that our feeble attempts to show our gratitude to someone precious to us left them without the reciprocation they should have taken with them to the grave. It takes the awful grief of missing them and compounds it with the unbearable grief of feeling as if we’ve failed them.

This torment is described poignantly by the one-time Poet Laureate of the United States, Billy Collins, in his poem, *The Lanyard*:

The other day I was ricocheting slowly
off the blue walls of this room,
moving as if underwater from typewriter to piano,
from bookshelf to an envelope lying on the floor,
when I found myself in the L section of the dictionary
where my eyes fell upon the word lanyard.

No cookie nibbled by a French novelist
could send one into the past more suddenly—
a past where I sat at a workbench at a camp

by a deep Adirondack lake
learning how to braid long thin plastic strips
into a lanyard, a gift for my mother.

I had never seen anyone use a lanyard
or wear one, if that's what you did with them,
but that did not keep me from crossing
strand over strand again and again
until I had made a boxy
red and white lanyard for my mother.

She gave me life and milk from her breasts,
and I gave her a lanyard.

She nursed me in many a sick room,
lifted spoons of medicine to my lips,
laid cold face-cloths on my forehead,
and then led me out into the airy light

and taught me to walk and swim,
and I, in turn, presented her with a lanyard.
Here are thousands of meals, she said,
and here is clothing and a good education.
And here is your lanyard, I replied,
which I made with a little help from a counselor.

Here is a breathing body and a beating heart,
strong legs, bones and teeth,
and two clear eyes to read the world, she whispered,
and here, I said, is the lanyard I made at camp.
And here, I wish to say to her now,
is a smaller gift—not the worn truth

that you can never repay your mother,
but the rueful admission that when she took
the two-tone lanyard from my hand,
I was as sure as a boy could be
that this useless, worthless thing I wove
out of boredom would be enough to make us even.

Blessed as I am to have both of my parents, I will admit still to feeling often like Billy Collins – as if I’ve met the limitless kindnesses they have done for me with so much less. And if this were only something we feel when we lose our parents, that would be painful enough, but every loss of someone dear to us carries this potential additional dagger. It so often feels as if we’ve responded to their life-changing gifts with something ordinary – and then they’re gone.

But when I get to feeling this way about my own losses of people of all ages who truly changed me, I often think back on Collins’ poem – on the futility he expressed about ever being able to repay your mother. And then I think about my life as a father, and I know, very deeply in my heart, that Collins is wrong.

This past summer, Allison and I finally decided to replace the worn carpeting in our bedroom. This meant moving out all of the furniture and everything that had collected upon it. In clearing off my nightstand, I came upon a couple of very early paintings created by my daughter Eliana when she was just a little girl. They were literally pictures of nothing – at least to the observer’s eye. They appeared to be just the painted doodles of a young girl, but with the word “Daddy” scribbled at the top.

I have boxes of these artistic masterpieces – made by all of my children. Each one likely required even less effort and possibly less intention than would a lanyard. But however much Eliana’s paintings did or didn’t mean to her, they were made for me, and I never throw them away. Each captures its own moment of playful imagination – a moment in which I was there in mind and heart. And I have no doubt that they are as precious to me as was to my child whatever act of love or protection or nurturing I may have performed as a father on that day. And I’m here to tell you – Eliana’s painted doodles did make us even.

We don’t repay the love we receive from our dear ones in some tit-for-tat manner. That’s not the way love works. Sometimes we repay the love with challenge, such that the one who loves us is made to grow. Sometimes we repay the love just by giving love to someone else – by being more loving or giving, because we were shown how and never forgot. But make no mistake – when those who have influenced us depart this Earth, they know we were changed by them, and nothing else must be done or said. They know that it was, in some small but meaningful way, because of them that we became a little bit more of what they dreamed for us... just as they became in new ways because of us. As the American historian and journalist Theodore White once pointed out, two humans are like a block of pure gold pressed against a block of steel, exchanging molecules with each other: “When people are pressed close, they (re)act the same way... part of you enters them; part of them enters you.” No debt must be repaid or even explained. Both are forever changed. And when one departs this life, he knows this... she knows this.

Might we be comforted by this deep truth at this hour of *Yizkor*, when we call to mind those for whom we would give anything if we could show them just one more time how important they were... and are... and will always be?

Perhaps we still can show them. Speaking on the 20th anniversary of his father's death, Rabbi Charles Middleburgh, the Director of Jewish Studies at Leo Baeck College in London, wrote the following: "In the immediate aftermath of my father's death I thought about him every day, and the thoughts caused me pain and grief. As the years went by I continued to think of him regularly, though the pain and grief came to be replaced with laughter, with understanding, and a real sense of communion with the man who, together with my mother, gave me life.

"Today I think of him less often, but when I do really *think* of him, as opposed to gazing at his picture, smiling, and moving on to something else, I remember a real human being, not a concocted one built from fantasies, imagination, and loss; and because he is real I know exactly what he was, what he stood for, the values he embodied. I cannot *be* my father, I would not wish to be, but he remains alive in my heart through the honor I pay him by striving to be the man he brought me up to be.

"I don't always succeed, but he gives me the impetus to try every day of my life. And that, for me, is what *Yizkor* is all about."

Indeed, that is what *Yizkor* is all about – pulling ourselves up from the depths of our heartbreak by remembering that we changed each other for blessing... they are still changing us... and that's forever. They and we are forever, for our tradition teaches that our souls are undimmed by the body's death. As Cantor Kates will sing in a moment, "*V'yitz'ror bitz'ror hachayim et nishmatam*" – our loved ones' souls are bound to everlasting life... to our lives, and those whose lives we will change with their blessing.

This, we know... and so do they. Jewish folklore speaks of an angel of losses named *Yodea*. The word means, "they know." They did, and they do. Let us remember them for blessing.