



Yom Kippur 2008 – Memorial Service

“THINKING ABOUT MY OWN MORTALITY” by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer

It is the beginning of June and the end of a full week-end. We had a Shabbat program on Friday night, a bar mitzvah on Saturday. I had a wedding on Sunday morning followed by a congregation open house and the final session of KidSchool in the afternoon. That evening I wake in the middle of the night, as I sometimes do, with a thought that intrudes on my sleep.

I am thinking of Rabbi Sherwin Wine, the founder of Humanistic Judaism. He was my teacher, my friend and mentor. The first anniversary of his death is coming up soon, on July 21. Rabbi Wine had been traveling in Morocco at the time when a drunk driver plowed into the taxicab he was in on his way back from dinner. We're told that Rabbi Wine died instantly, as did the cab driver. Rabbi Wine's lifetime partner, Richard McMains, suffered multiple injuries and was medivaced home. He needed several surgeries to mend broken bones. Mending a broken heart is a different challenge altogether.

Rabbi Wine taught us about facing reality – with all its injustices, unfairness, pain and suffering. The universe is amoral, uncaring. As secular humanists, we have only ourselves to rely on. We do not rely on a remote supernatural deity to intervene in our lives.

Rabbi Wine also taught us about the ethics of words – about believing what we say and saying what we believe. This means talking the truth, sticking with facts, avoiding euphemisms or poetic metaphors that cover up ideas that are at odds with our principles and values.

And so, when I think about Rabbi Wine's death, I know that while it is true to say that he died, it is more accurate to say that he was killed, not that it makes any difference in the end. But his death was not peaceful, not a gradual letting go. It was, instead, a violent rupture. Dying is sometimes welcomed. Killing can never be.

Yet I want to distance myself from that word. It feels so harsh. It focuses me too much on how he died and not how he lived. How he guided us, taught us, goaded us with his insights, his passion. I want to get past the tragedy of his death and think about the triumph of his life. And that, I think, would have been his wish, too. I want to be able to say, with his approval, “Rabbi Wine died last year. He was seventy-nine years old. He was a great man.”

And then I had another thought and I knew why I had woken in the middle of the night with Rabbi Wine on my mind. Earlier that day, amidst that busy weekend, I had gone to New Jersey to officiate at a wedding. I made an arrangement with the couple for car service to bring me there and back.

The wedding was beautiful, the bride and groom were personal and loving, spontaneously tearful at special moments. For me there is a great sense of joy and not a little pride to facilitate these loving ceremonies.

But then only minutes later, on the way back to the city, this was all practically snatched away in an instant when the car I was riding in suddenly found itself in a three-car accident. It happened very quickly. My driver skillfully kept control of the car even though it ricocheted against at least one other car on one side and a stone wall on another. Fortunately nobody got hurt. Despite how fast it happened it also strangely felt like it was in slow motion to me. I braced myself for a terrible impact that didn't come. I somehow intuited that I would survive and for a brief second imagined I was on a scary ride at an amusement park which is not at all where I like to spend my free time.

During the few prior moments, when I wasn't sure how it would come out, I don't recall feeling scared but furious. I absolutely didn't want to die then. Not that way. I was far from ready to give up living. I had a lot more living to do. And I had absolutely no control over the situation.

I knew I had to call home to give Myrna an update. I didn't want to upset her about what could have been, but I had to let her know that I would likely be delayed. "I'm okay," I said, summarizing the good news and the bad news in one breath.

Then mundane needs kicked in. Here I was on a busy highway with cars speeding by. I had absolutely no idea where I was nor how I was going to get back to the city – not to mention get to a congregation open house on time that was scheduled for that afternoon. However, while the god of car accidents had obviously not been on duty, the god of off-duty yellow-cabs apparently was. One drove by and I flagged him down.

I was too busy the rest of the day to really think about what had almost happened. Or what could have happened. And so I woke in the middle of the night thinking about Rabbi Wine and I'm sure also about myself. And also, now, in my waking hours, about what surely happens to thousands of people who die every day, with no rhyme or reason, their lives suddenly cut short, by flood in Myanmar, by earthquake in China, by crazy accidents on the road. And it makes me think, too, of those whose deaths come from illness, sometimes too brief and we can't delay them, and sometimes, much too prolonged, and we can't hasten them.

It reminds me, of course, how precious life is. And how fragile it is. And how little control we have over its ending.

It reminds me to strive to make everyday the best day of our lives.

And it reminds me to be grateful everyday for the people who are in our lives.

Let us fill our lives with joy and love, with forgiveness and compassion, and, in the face of all the random unpredictability, with hope and optimism.