

A Letter to Pop
Rabbi A. Brian Stoller
Rosh Hashanah Traditional Service 5776 / September 14, 2015

My grandfather, Louis Marks, passed away in April. He was 91 years old.

We called him Pop. I had a great relationship with him, especially when I was growing up.

He and my grandmother Lois were constant presences during my childhood. I had him for 41 years.

Over the last 20 years or so, though, I saw him less. I moved away from home, started my own life, and got busy.

Of course, we'd always have lunch when I'd go to Houston to visit. I'd see him at Thanksgiving. But not much more than that.

Over the last few years, Pop declined pretty quickly. His memory started to go. He couldn't travel or get around much anymore.

I called him every Friday morning to say hi. Our conversations were short, maybe a few minutes. He'd go: "Hey, hey, whatta ya say, Rabbi? Everything OK?"

And I'd tell him.

But the truth is, we hadn't had a real substantial conversation in years. He just wasn't up for it, and I guess, neither was I.

In April, about a week or so before I was going to leave for our Men's Israel trip, my mom called.

She said Pop wasn't doing well. He was sleeping most of the day. He wasn't really talking anymore.

She said she thought it would probably be any time now.

I handled the call matter-of-factly, but inside I cried a little.

I knew I wouldn't see my grandfather again. I knew I wouldn't have that last chance to sit with him and tell him how much I loved him, and what a wonderful grandfather he was.

I would have to be content knowing that he knew I loved him, that he meant so much to me, that he had been such a formative part of my life. And that would be it.

But I *wasn't* content.

I thought about all those funerals I've done as a rabbi – all those times sitting with the families, listening to them talk about their loved one.

They're such special moments.

Everyone sitting around the room, telling stories, talking about things they used to do together;

laughing about their quirks, crying as they share the tender memories.

And I remembered what I've thought so often in those moments: Why do we wait until our loved ones die to do this?

Why don't we sit around and tell the stories and tell them what they mean to us in the living years, when they can hear it?

* * *

So I sat on the couch and pulled out my computer. It was about 10:30 at night.

And I started typing.

Not carefully formulating my words; not trying to write a deep letter for the ages.

Just typing. In full stream of conscience. Barely pausing to lift my fingers from the keyboard.

A letter to Pop.

I told him what an incredible grandfather he'd been.

I told him how much I used to love the Sunday dinners at his house;

I thanked him for teaching us to love the Texas Longhorns, and that nothing is more important than our family.

I told him he was a model of how to be friendly and outgoing;

Of how to enjoy life, and not to worry too much about the rules.

I said he taught us not to be afraid to say what's on your mind, and never to be afraid to stand up for yourself.

I wrote about the funny things, the random things, and the serious things.

And before I knew it, I had typed a 5-page letter to my grandfather.

The next day, my parents and my brother went over to Pop's house where he lay in bed, and they read it to him.

And then the next day, he asked his caregiver to read it to him again.

And for the next week or so, he had that letter read to him every single day. Every single day for the rest of his life.

And then, he died. Peacefully. Of good old age.

I never saw my grandfather again, but I was at peace. I felt good because I'd said to him everything I wanted to say. And I did it while he could still hear it.

It meant the world to him. And it makes me tear up with joy to know that.

* * *

We'll talk during the High Holidays about how this is the time we're supposed to do *t'shuvah*.

But in the Talmud, the sages say we should do *t'shuvah* one day before we die.¹

One day before we die.

And, of course, because we never know when we're going to die, that means we're supposed to do *t'shuvah* every single day.

This is such an important teaching.

It's a reminder that life is fragile. We can never know for sure how long our parents, or children, or siblings, or other relatives or friends will be here.

Sadly, we all know that even someone who is young and healthy and vibrant can be gone in an instant.

We can assume nothing, and we should take nothing for granted.

Every day, we should say we're sorry for hurting their feelings, or not being there when they needed us.

Every day, we should thank them for their love, for teaching us about life, for giving us life.

Every day, we should laugh with them about the funny stories, and reminisce about the good times.

Every day, we should try to clear the air, so it never becomes so thick and dark that we can no longer breathe.

* * *

¹ Shabbat 153a

A poem:

Have I neglected to tell you
I appreciate the sacrifices
of your time for my time,
of your needs for my needs,
of your freedom for my demands?

Have I neglected to tell you
You have been
my anchor,
my sounding board,
even my scapegoat?

You have loved me
even when I frustrated you,
even I when I disappointed you,
even when I angered you.

From your example I have learned
to care,
to commit,
to grow.

You provided me the foundation upon which to build my life.
Have I neglected to tell you how much I love you?
I want to tell you today.²

Because I might not be able to tomorrow.

* * *

I know it's not easy.

I know our relationships are complicated. Not all of them are as simple and easy as the one I had with my grandfather.

There are longstanding issues, going back to childhood.

There are resentments and anger.

A lot of times, the reason we don't say these things to each other every day is because it's too painful, too complicated; there's too much baggage – and trying to talk about it would open too many old wounds.

² From: *A Confession for Our Time*, Congregation Emanu El, Houston, TX

Stilted conversation is about all we can manage.

If we're able just to get together for dinner or a holiday once a year, we feel like we're doing pretty well.

I get that.

And yet...

We've only got this one life. And when it's over, it's over.

Sure, there may be some kind of afterlife. I happen to believe there is.

But as far as we on this earth are concerned, our window to make amends, and to say what we have to say, and to heal the rift or celebrate our relationship is a short one.

Death is so final.

And once they die, the window shuts, and the opportunity for healing, or reconciliation, or gratitude, or saying I love you one more time is lost...

and whatever we have to say will have to wait until the World to Come.

That's a heavy burden to carry.

Far easier, I think, to do it now. To find that emotional courage – even when it's awkward, even when we're afraid – and just say it now.

Because we might not be able to tomorrow.

* * *

So here's what I am asking all of us to do.

All of us – including me, and the cantor, and the choir. Everyone in this sanctuary today.

During these 10 days between now and Yom Kippur, I'm asking you to write a letter to someone you care about:

Your mother or father, your child, your spouse, your brother or sister, your grandparent, your friend.

Sit down at your computer, or with a pen and paper, and just write.

Don't worry about how it sounds. Don't worry about spelling or grammar.

Just open your heart, and let it pour out on to the page.

Tell them what they mean to you. Tell them what you love about your relationship. Tell them what saddens you, or what's hard, about your relationship.

Tell them what you want to be better this year between you.

Say whatever you have to say.

Who knows, maybe after you write you'll decide not to send it, or to revise it, or delete it and start over.

That's OK.

The important thing is to do it –

To break the pattern of stilted conversation, or being in the same room together without ever actually saying a word to each other, or simply taking for granted that they know how we feel about them.

Do *t'shuvah* one day before you die.

Say it today, so they can hear it, in the living years.

Because you may not be able to tomorrow.

“The Living Years”
Mike & the Mechanics

Every generation
Blames the one before
And all of their frustrations
Come beating on your door
I know that I'm a prisoner
To all my father held so dear
I know that I'm a hostage
To all his hopes and fears
I just wish I could have told him in the living years

Crumpled bits of paper
Filled with imperfect thought
Stilted conversations
I'm afraid that's all we've got
You say you just don't see it
He says it's perfect sense
You just can't get agreement in this present tense
We all talk a different language, talking in defense

*Say it loud, say it clear
You can listen as well as you hear
It's too late when we die
To admit we don't see eye to eye*

So we open up a quarrel
Between the present and the past
We only sacrifice the future
It's the bitterness that lasts
So don't yield to the fortunes
You sometimes see as fate
It may have a new perspective on a different day
And if you don't give up, and don't give in, you may just be okay

Say it loud...

I wasn't there that morning
When my Father passed away
I didn't get to tell him
All the things I had to say
I think I caught his spirit
Later that same year
I'm sure I heard his echo

In my baby's new born tears
I just wish I could have told him in the living years

Say it loud...