

Yom Kippur Day Sermon 2017 (5778)

Delivered by Cantor Scott Buckner

In my home, growing up, we loved to have lively discussions around the dinner table. The topics varied, but we always loved sharing humorous things we had read. Does anyone here remember Art Buchwald? He was always one of our favorite humorists and writers. He was best known for his long running column in *The Washington Post*. In 2006 he was given the news that he had total kidney failure. In order to continue to live, he was told, he must go on dialysis. Buchwald was a man who had lived life on his own terms. He decided he did not want to endure ongoing dialysis treatments several times a week. Instead, he refused treatments, choosing to die on his own terms. His family was upset and bewildered, but he proceeded to check himself into a hospice care unit. The doctors told him that without dialysis he would only live for about three weeks. But God had other plans. The function of his kidneys inexplicably returned, and he survived in hospice so long that he wrote a book about the experience. Buchwald wrote: "I'd been laying in the hospice two months with nothing better to do when I decided to start my column up again." People saw his regular column reappear in the *Washington Post* and they began asking questions. If he was really on his death bed, why was he writing his column again?

This experience leads to a question for this Yom Kippur. If you suddenly learned you were going to die tomorrow, what would you choose to do today? The Gates of Prayer, early Reform Machzor, observes in a meditation:

“For all things that seem foolish in the light of death, are really foolish in themselves”.

If in the light of death, we would choose to live differently, why continue in the same old ways?

The Mishna Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) says this a different way:

Rabbi Eliezer taught, “Repent one day before your death.”

His disciples asked him, “But does a man know on what day he will die?”

“That is exactly the point!” he replied. “Let a man repent today lest he die tomorrow, and in this way, he will live all his days in repentance.”

When the public learned of Buchwald’s decision to forgo dialysis and his impending death, he was invited to be a guest on numerous TV and radio talk shows. He wrote: “Chris Wallace interviewed me on Fox News Sunday. Chris maintained that becoming a hospice patient was a good career move for me. I enjoyed the interview because it gave me something to do besides watch Wheel of Fortune”. They say “people make plans and God laughs”. But in this unusual case, Buchwald’s plan to die peacefully in a few weeks in hospice care never materialized. When his body defied the odds, he seized the opportunity and made the best of it. He continued to enlighten and entertain the world with his wit, for many more months and managed to make dying a meaningful experience.

Our goal ought to be to live purposefully every day of our lives. Yom Kippur is a time to make our own assessment of how we are living. If an activity or attitude seems meaningless in the light of death, why continue with it at all?

Why does it often take a crisis for us to make the greatest changes in our lives?

Art Buchwald used much of the extra time he had been granted to write his final book “*Too Soon to Say Goodbye*”. Among other things, the book manages, with humor, to tell the story of his final months of life. He used the knowledge of his limited days left on earth as permission, and even more so as a mandate, to talk frankly, openly and freely about issues of life and death that most of us manage to avoid. Rabbi Eliezer’s statement, “Repent one day before your death”, is meant to remind us that our time on earth is limited and to make wise use of it. I doubt if Art Buchwald, who was Jewish, knew this verse of rabbinic wisdom from *Pirkei Avot*. In the book, which also tells the story of his early life, he recalls with regret causing his father pain by refusing to be *bar mitzvahed*. But as I read his book it became clear to me that he lived the way Rabbi Eliezer desired we should live. He was an example for us all, of living life to the fullest. When doctors told Buchwald that his kidneys were kaput, he could have wallowed in self-pity, but knowing that he had lived his dream of being a writer and reaching many people with his brand of wisdom, he wasn’t afraid to die. He was content in the knowledge that he lived a full and meaningful life. Can we imagine ourselves being able to face death in such a way? Yom Kippur provides a pause in our routine to contemplate just such a question. The *Unetane Tokef*, a central prayer in our High Holy Day liturgy, places our mortality in front of us.

*On Rosh Hashanah it is inscribed,
And on Yom Kippur it is sealed.
How many shall pass away and how many shall be born,
Who shall live and who shall die...."*

It's human nature to keep going the way we are, and maintain the status quo. It often takes a crisis to force us to change. The goal of Jewish religious practice and particularly the prayers and rituals of Yom Kippur is to take us out of our routines and provoke change now, not waiting for a crisis to occur. My colleague and inspiring author and teacher, Rabbi Debra Orenstein wrote an alternative *Unetaneh Tokef* that I think Art Buchwald would have appreciated:

"How shall we leave the material world behind, and how shall we be reborn in it?

Who shall live fully, and who shall die while still alive?

Who shall cut short their life with timewasters, and who shall lengthen their days?

Who shall perish by the fire of anger, and who by the flood of tears?

Who shall suffer the sword that cuts off relationships, and who shall be torn apart by beastly grudges?

Who shall hunger for meaning, and who shall thirst for revenge?

Whose life shall be shaken to the very foundation, and who shall spread misery like a plague?

Who shall choke on their own words, and who shall cast stones and blame?

Who shall rest in the knowledge that they have made the best choices they could, and who shall vacillate, never choosing?

Who shall be at peace, though burdened, and who shall be tormented no matter how blessed?

Who shall be poor in attitude, and who rich in gratitude?

Who shall be brought low, so as to rise with humility?

Who shall be lifted high, so as to extend a hand and lift up another?"

Let's reflect back on one line of this beautiful contemporary *Unetane tokef*:

Who shall be at peace, though burdened, and who shall be tormented no matter how blessed?

Art Buchwald's remarkable life is even more compelling of an example for us when you consider the hardships he faced as a child, and then again later in life. He had to cope with an absent mother, who was taken from the family and spent 35 years in a mental hospital. His father put him in the Hebrew Orphan Asylum in New York City when the family business failed.

After this, Buchwald moved about between several foster homes. He was eventually reunited with his family but ran away from home at age 17 and joined the Marines. During his adult life, he dealt with severe depression and bipolar disorder. In his writing career, he was always transparent about his own struggles with mental illness, sharing freely to educate the public. This, in and of itself, was a great service to humanity, as he tried to address the shame with which society still approaches these serious illnesses, only adding to people's suffering. So, Art Buchwald was at peace at the end of his life, though burdened with his share of great difficulties as a child and again during periods of his adulthood. Let's delve a bit deeper into a possible reason he was able to face his end so peacefully.

Let's return to another line from Rabbi Orenstein's *Unetaneh Tokef*:

Who shall live fully, and who shall die while still alive?

Psychoanalyst Irving Yalom, is well known for examining our fear of dying. He described working with a young woman, who, after the death of a friend, became overwhelmed by the fear of her own mortality. She was nearly immobilized by panic and sought out Dr. Yalom's help. In the course of therapy the woman shared how she loved to paint. She frequently began to paint a canvas but never managed to finish a painting. She imagined herself as an artist but somehow never made it happen.

Dr. Yalom probed her history further to learn why this was the case. It turned out, she felt compelled to compete with her husband about who could earn more income. And this rivalry left her little, if any time for painting. She felt intensely that she was wasting her life. That self-denial led to her fear of dying. She would die, without really having lived - the life she imagined.

Who shall live fully, and who shall die while still alive?

Dr. Yalom believes that fear of death may indicate a deep seeded, hidden feeling of an unfulfilled life.

So, don't hold back. Live life to the fullest. The life you have imagined. Even in the darkest times, we can still change our course. There's so much that can bring meaning to our existence. There is always another life to touch, a person to encourage or inspire – a kindness to be shown, knowledge to be acquired and shared, a prayer to be said, thanking God for daily miracles. There's always nature to be appreciated, beauty to be contemplated, friendships to be made and kept. Life has more meaning when we are willing to invest in a vision, to discover and act upon the reason God put us here. Don't wait because you never know what tomorrow will bring.

Our sage Hillel said

Im lo 'akhshav, eimatai? If not now, when?

Art Buchwald, uncertain of where the next days or weeks would take him, was unfazed by the inevitable, lived life to the fullest, with frankness, dignity, and humor.

By now many of you have learned that I enjoy illustrating my sermons with a song. Phil Ochs, well known song writer and protest singer in the 60s and 70s wrote the following.

Singing:

There's no place, in this world, where I'll belong when I'm gone
And I won't know the right from the wrong when I'm gone
And you won't find me singin' on this song when I'm gone
So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here

And I won't feel the flowing of the time when I'm gone
All the pleasures, of love will not be mine when I'm gone
My pen won't pour out a lyric line when I'm gone
So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here

And I, won't, breathe, the bracing air when I'm gone
And I can't even worry 'bout my cares when I'm gone
Won't be asked to do my share when I'm gone
So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here

And I, won't be running from the rain when I'm gone
And I can't, even suffer from the pain when I'm gone
Can't say who's, to praise and who's to blame when I'm gone
So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here

Won't see, the golden, of the sun when I'm gone
And the evenings and the mornings will be one when I'm gone
Can't be singing louder than the guns when I'm gone
So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here

All my days, won't be dances of delight when I'm gone
And the sands, will be shifting from my sight when I'm gone
Can't add my name into the fight while I'm gone
So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here

And I, won't be laughing at the lies when I'm gone
And I can't, question how or when or why when I'm gone
Can't live proud enough to die when I'm gone
So I guess I'll have to do it while I'm here;

There's no place, in this world, where I'll belong when I'm gone
And I won't know, the right from the wrong when I'm gone
And you won't find me singin' on this song when I'm gone
So I guess I'll have to do it, I guess I'll have to do it
Guess I'll have to do it,,, while I'm here

G'mar Chatima Tova! May you be inscribed in the book of life.