



Yom Kippur 2007 – Memorial Service

“A EULOGY FOR RABBI SHERWIN T. WINE” by Rabbi Peter H. Schweitzer

As all the therapists in the room know, and I assume most everybody else, our dream world can be rich with meaning. It's a way we have of carrying on a conversation with ourselves while we sleep, often working out difficult, even scary issues that we may be too anxious or frightened to deal with while we're awake. I used to have a rather rich dream life, which coincided nicely during an interminable period of analysis, but more recently there's been a fairly lengthy drought. So when I do have a dream that I recall I am as much startled by its occurrence as by its content.

About a month ago I had one of these rare experiences. I dreamt about Rabbi Sherwin Wine, my teacher, my mentor, my friend, in some ways, my father-figure. He had walked into the room looking fit and hearty, just like I knew him. Only I also knew he was dead and we would have to break the news to him. He wouldn't be able to stay with us and he would have to leave and he might not want to depart so willingly.

Now Rabbi Wine taught us to face reality head on. Life, he told us, is often unfair and unjust and even cruel. And in my dream we needed to tell him the worst truth ever. We can't reverse your death. I keep needing to tell myself that horrible truth too. We can't reverse his death.

Rabbi Wine hated the classic Jewish posture of victimization. He couldn't stand building our Jewish identity on the mountain of our suffering. For him, this just amounted to unproductive moaning and groaning. He had equally little patience, by the way, for incessant whining about how our parents may have ruined our lives. Instead, he taught us to take charge. To set goals and go after them. To focus on our positive strengths and achievements – our resilience, our ability to re-invent ourselves, our life-sustaining humor, our strength, our courage.

Yet when we face how he died – at the hands of a reckless drunk driver – how do we not see Rabbi Wine as a victim, and, in turn, ourselves too, now victims, as well, to this unanticipated, unprepared for, unacceptable death that was foisted upon us so horrifically. All true, he might agree, if we let this weigh us down. But if we dedicate ourselves to moving forward, to building anew, then we can defeat this victimhood with our own affirmation of life.

I knew Rabbi Wine for some fifteen years, and had known of him even longer than that. We hit it off early, but as I related at our summer memorial, I resisted for years his desire for me to put aside my job as a social worker to take on this position as rabbi of The City Congregation. It was a great moment for him when I finally succumbed to his entreaties a little over a year ago.

We saw each other two or three times a year. Occasionally, out of the blue, he'd call me up, often with a request that was hard to say no to. Because of this sporadic contact, the loss is different than when it is with someone you see on a regular basis. Then, you miss the constant presence, you feel the absence much more keenly. With Rabbi Wine, I will miss that next visit, that next conference, that next conversation. I will miss the way he could take complicated issues and summarize them with clarity. And I will miss him personally, and just having the privilege to share time with him.

Rabbi Wine once wrote that words can inspire us, but they cannot transform our lives. Rather, he taught, we learn from people, from the living example of living teachers. Loving heroes enter our lives and guide us by what they do, not by what they say. Each of us is a moral actor, teaching by what we do. Our actions will move others long after our words are forgotten.

Rabbi Wine was one of those heroes who taught by his example. He was also the exception to his own message. His words not only inspired us, but they did transform our lives. And they won't be forgotten, I hope, for a long time.

I heard from some of you how you regretted never having heard Rabbi Wine speak. Because of our modern technology, you still have that chance. Rabbi Wine never took up an interest in email, and he preferred writing long-hand with a fountain pen than using a computer, but he knew early on that his lectures were worth recording and videotaping. They are available in abundance, with link on our website. You can still travel the world of ideas and places and historic events with him. Recently I watched his last major lecture given at Harvard earlier in the year. It was eerie, but it was also strangely comforting.

Now I told you at the outset about my dream. What I also know is that dreams are complex and multi-layered and characters in them are often stand-ins for others. I also realized that my thoughts were about my own father who, I remarked earlier, has aged considerably in the recent year or so. Now, nearing 87, with diminishing capacities, he has occasionally expressed the view that death might be preferable to life. In fact, the day before I had the dream he communicated this message rather clearly.

I, on the other hand, want to hold on. I want to preserve our connection as long as we can. I want to have more time. I want to keep my father in life, with quality and care. And I wish I could restore Rabbi Wine to life, for quality and care.

One loss inevitably stirs up another or at least the fear of another. We can't undo what is. But we can cherish all the moments that we have. Let us make the most of them each day and not put them off until some other day that may never come.

Zekher tzadikim livracha. May the memory of good people be for a blessing.