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## ESSAYS/PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

# It's beautiful

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She was a 14 year old girl when World War II broke out. Frightened, she worked as a forced laborer in a rock quarry just outside of Turka, near the river Stry, at the foot of the Carpathian Mountains. It was home to her parents and her two older brothers. It was beautiful. But her life was now full of pain, suffering, fear, and dread. One day she fell ill, and despite the fear that not appearing for work would result in severe punishment, she reluctantly stayed home. That was the day all the workers in the quarry were taken by train to the death camp. As her son, I heard that story often, growing up on the Lower East Side of New York City. “Chance.” “Freedom.”

My mother and her parents were hidden by a Polish gentile family, in a hole beneath the kitchen stove of the farmhouse barn. They hid there for 18 months until my father broke into the farmhouse with his fellow partisan fighters, looking for food. My mother chose to go with my father and hide in the woods to better survive the Nazi occupation. A year later they returned to find her parents alive. “Choice.”

Surviving the Holocaust together, my parents married after the war in a displaced persons camp outside of Munich, called “Fahrenvalt.” Years later, at my maternal grandfather’s gravestone unveiling ceremony, Mr. Rechelbach, a fellow survivor of that camp, who became a successful kosher butcher in New York City, told me the story of their wedding night. “Your mother lived in the women’s barracks, and your father lived in the men’s barracks, and so on their wedding night your parents had no place to sleep together. My wife and I gave them our bed for their wedding night bed. So you see Velvel, you owe me more than you can imagine!” He broke out in a sweet smile and deep laugh, caressing my face with his broad hands that were missing several digits from butchering mishaps over the years. My life

was a “Gift,” perhaps a gift from Mr. Rechelbach, but more likely from that source of shared Jewish suffering, love and the value of hospitality. “Love.” “Hospitality.”

In 1949, she came to New York City, with my father, to make a life. When I was born years later, my grandmother Esther wrote in Yiddish in her diary, “This is why we survived.” Every morning, during breakfast, my mother would ask me, “Why am I here?” What she meant was “Why am I here and others are not?” I ask myself that very same question every day of my life. My mother gave me this gift of “Responsibility.”

She attempted to avert my gaze, not wanting to spoil my state of innocence. With her hands and her body, my mother tried to shield from my vision other children my age, in wheelchairs, deformed by palsy and paralysis. As a survivor of the Holocaust, she had seen too much. She did not yet want her 4-year-old son, born in the New World, to view pain, sickness, or suffering. But I was compelled to look at the faces and the eyes. My legacy was not merely one of loss, death, and suffering. My legacy was to be revealed to me, through the life of my Mother Rusza, as much more; a legacy of transcending suffering and loss through care and love and the value of “Compassion.”

Rusza, Reisel, Rose. My mother went by many names. Her birth certificate was lost. Her home of origin destroyed. She was a displaced person. But she never asked “Who am I?” She knew who she was: Rose, daughter of Itzhak Moshe the Kohane. Her gravestone further declares “Here lays Rose Breitbart—a Holocaust Survivor.” “Identity.”

The legacy of the Holocaust remained alive and lived with us in our two bedroom apartment on Grand Street. The Holocaust didn’t have its own room; it lived in every room, and on the walls, and in the drawers; in pictures, and in documents in files. In prayer books and tefilin saved from the flames of war. Now the apartment had to be cleared out for sale. Even the Holocaust had to vacate the premises.

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Everything is temporary. We all must die. "Life is Finite."

The unfolding and ultimate story is all too familiar, routine, and inevitable. But it was Rose's story. My mother's and father's and brother's story. Our family's story. My mother, survived so much. She survived the war, hiding, the forest, the camps, displacement, starting a new life in New York City, caring for her parents and grieving their deaths, caring for my father and grieving his death, losing her pride and joy, her grandson, Ross to epilepsy and grieving him, surviving ovarian cancer, with the help of her beloved Dr. Sabbatini at Sloan-Kettering. But it was that Merkle cell cancer, that ridiculous Merkle cell cancer; that started as a little blemish on her elbow and was removed years ago. That killer Merkle cell cancer returned years later to take her life, to end a journey of survival and transcendence. "Care transcends death."

Just as I had cared for my father during a long battle with prostate cancer, I was there to care for my mother. During 8 years of ovarian cancer treatment and then 4 years of battling Merkle cell cancer, I was there to fulfill my responsibility to care for my mother. I had help. My wife Rachel was the daughter my mother never had. My brother and his wife Beth visited her weekly. She was never alone. Just as she was kept safe and nurtured by that Polish gentile family at age 14, my mother received constant and compassionate care and companionship during her last years from Sophie, a Polish Catholic woman who was her aide. Life repeats itself over and over until we learn the lessons we must. "Love saves our lives."

On the day before she died, I visited my mother. She was bed bound and very weak and cachectic. She had just completed stereotactic radiation therapy to treat two small lesions in her brain. She had declined rapidly. I had cancelled a trip to lecture in Rome the week before, anticipating the worst. But she seemed to be rallying. I struggled a bit with the decision to cancel the Rome trip. But the choice was the right one. I was guided by the wisdom of one of the Ten Commandments; perhaps the one that means the most to me: Honor thy Father and Mother. Life is a constant matter of "Choice"

My mother and I had already gone over everything in preparation for her death. The will, the papers, the finances, the cash hidden under the towels in the linen closet. Everything except what she wanted written on her gravestone. "Mom, you had so many identities in this life, you played so many roles: wife, mother, grandmother. What order do you want these listed on your gravestone?" She was not shocked or upset by the question. She had in fact already thought about it and was glad I asked. This was important to her. "First I am a grandmother!"

The rest of the order required some thought. "Then I am a mother, and then a daughter." I thought to myself, "Okay, where was my father in all of this?" They were married for almost 60 years when he died. My mother continued, "then I am a wife and a sister and an aunt." "That's the order; please make sure it's written like that." I wouldn't have guessed that was the order. I was glad I asked. Perhaps I did not know my mother as well as I thought I did. How can you know anyone completely? "Identity."

It was while cleaning out her bedside night table that I found the two poems. They were very carefully handwritten in black fountain pen ink, on parchment paper, and discretely folded and placed in her pink leather bound date book. One of the poems was Rudyard Kipling's poem "If." That's the one whose first line reads, "If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs. . ." It was a poem of facing and overcoming adversity and difficult times. I understood why she might have been drawn to that poem and why she kept it. "Courage."

But the second poem. The second poem was a surprise and a revelation! I unfolded it delicately, so as not to tear the yellowed parchment paper. There it was. Short, simple, astounding. A poem by Frederick S. Perls. It was untitled, and I am certain my mother had no idea that she had carefully written, in her European schooled distinctive penmanship, the "Gestalt Prayer," written by Fritz Perls in 1969 for his Esalen based gestalt therapy group retreats. I read it quietly to myself in disbelief. "Faith."

I do my thing and you do your thing.  
I am not in this world to live up to your expectations,  
And you are not in this world to live up to mine.  
You are you, and I am I,  
And if by chance we find each other,  
It's beautiful

What did this mean about my mother? What was it about this poem that struck such a profound and intimate chord in my mother's spirit? Why would she carefully write it down, in her own hand, on special paper, and keep it by her bedside, hidden, for 43 years? My imagination ran wild. Did my mother struggle with some significant relationship in her life? With her marriage to my father? There were never any signs of real discord in their marriage that my brother or I had ever noticed. I was a teenager at the time, caught up in a battle for independence from my parents and my mother in particular. Was she struggling with my quest for a separate identity and the nature of our very close and adoring relationship? How well did I really know my mother? Did she actually think about the

big existential questions in life, and struggle with them the way I do?

Now that may sound like a naïve question to be asking about a woman who lived through all that my mother had lived through, but I had my reasons for doubting that the answer was obvious. Fifteen years after the Gestalt Prayer was written, and apparently hungrily written down by my mother like the scraps of food she would devour for "dinner" in that hole she hid in as a teenager during the war, I had a memorable conversation with my parents about the meaning of life. Like all major discussions in our family, this one took place around our kitchen table. I was at a crossroads in my life. I needed wisdom and guidance. I needed to know what to do next, but more importantly I needed a basis for making the choices that were facing me. Should I stay at Memorial Sloan-Kettering and commit to an academic career as a clinician scientist? Should I marry Rachel? How was I going to create a life of meaning, identity, and direction? I sat at the kitchen table. I looked at my middle-aged parents and asked, "Mom. Dad. You lived such eventful lives! You survived the war, and the camps. You landed on the shores of Manhattan without a penny; only the clothes on your back. You spoke no English. You managed to survive and build a life together, raise a family, send two sons to college, medical school. You must have learned something along the way. Some wisdom; something to help guide me. The meaning of life. What's important in life? What is it all about? Please give me some idea of what you have learned from all the suffering, the striving, the life lived!" They were silent, motionless. Then they were amused. A half-swallowed chuckle. My mother looked at me with an expression that telegraphed the pure truth of what she was about to say, in a thick Eastern European Jewish accent. "To tell you the truth dahling, your father and I...well, we really don't think about such things.... We just live." "Being There."

A natural existentialist. That's what my mother was. It was beautiful. And if perhaps she did, in fact, struggle from time to time with the big existential questions, and questions of love, and connection and relationships and transcendence, well, that was also beautiful.

I sat at her bedside and stroked her hair as she lay dying. I remembered doing the very same thing for my father, in that very same bed 8 years earlier. In the minutes before my father died, I noticed that he had not shaven for about 2 weeks. He would not have wanted to die with an unshaven face. I carefully cleaned his face with a moist warm towel, applied shaving cream and shaved his face clean. He took his last breath. I called my mother into the room to tell her it was over. Now, I was combing my mother's chemo-thinned hair, and hummed her favorite Yiddish lullaby. Caring for my father and now for my mother as they died, and being with them up until the point where I could accompany them no further was the least I could do to repay the gift of life that they gave me. As I write this, I think of my son Sam. I think of how he loved his Grandma Rose, and how he spoke so eloquently at her funeral. I remember him at the cemetery, shoveling dirt onto her casket. He was taking his responsibilities as a young adult so seriously. He was burying his grandmother. He was assuring she had a proper grave. He remembered her saying to him at his grandfather's funeral, "At least Zeide has a proper grave. So many in our family died and have no graves, no headstones." My son Sam. Can anyone ever love him as much as I do? Can I ever be loved as much as he loves me? I hope that when I am dying, in my bed, Sam will be there to hold my hand, and caress my hair and trim my beard and be with me until I am at the threshold of a beyond that only I can continue to travel and I must leave him behind.

"And if by chance, someday, we find each other, it's beautiful."