

Tonight I will talk about story. I'll start with my own. When I was eight years old, three things happened. The first was that my grandmother died. The second was that I realized I was going to die. The third was that I discovered a pipe where I could talk to God.

1. My grandmother died

One month, my grandmother Miriam was full of vitality, the next month colon cancer had taken her life. I don't really know if I ever got over the loss of this grandmother or my grandparents in general. When I learn that someone my age has a grandparent who is alive and well, I can't help but be jealous. I tell them how lucky they are. I tell them, ask your grandparent for their story.

During my senior year of college, I had the opportunity to spend an entire semester researching this grandmother Miriam and her mother, my great-grandmother Emily, both from North Minneapolis. I never would have envisioned how meaningful it was to delve so deeply into my own family's history. I was surprised by the extent that certain values and mental patterning could be passed on through the generations. I was also surprised by the role Judaism played in their lives. As far as I understood, my grandparents on both sides of my family were completely secular and even largely skeptical about religion. They held more ties to the local Unitarian Church than any synagogue and they celebrated Christmas. Sure, my grandfather was pretty into gefilte fish, but he also found it pretty strange that I was having a Bat Mitzvah.

In college, I grew less connected to Judaism than ever before. Judaism seemed like something I could take or leave, much like I envisioned it was for my grandparents. What I did not realize was the extent that their Jewish background affected virtually every aspect of their

lives, from their occupations and housing, to their social networks, to their values and politics. My family was thoroughly Jewish, even if I was the first member in three generations to grow up going to Hebrew school.

Placing my family and other family's history within the larger story of American Jews has transformed my understanding of what it means to be Jewish. I have been struck again and again by what a unique time and place we are to have so much freedom in regard to our identity as Jews. Unlike most of our ancestors, unlike many Jews across the world today, we get to choose whether we want to identify as Jewish. Some of us here who weren't born Jewish choose to participate in Judaism with Jewish spouses or family members. Others choose to become Jewish through conversion. There is a lightness to these choices. Judaism can be melded into our secular lifestyles and anti-Semitism can often be relegated to the dustier corner of our brain. So can Israel, that is when things are relatively peaceful.

These days recent events have forced us to reexamine our understanding of modern day anti-Semitism and our relationship as American Jews to Israel. Having just gone on the Shir Tikvah trip, I feel a deep tie to Israel that is similar to my own family background. I see more clearly now that, whether we consider ourselves a practicing Jew, or simply someone with a Jewish cultural background, Israel is part of our Jewish DNA. We can feel deeply disconnected from choices made by the Israeli government, but we must continue to care. We must continue to engage in whatever way we can. In the time since I began to develop a much deeper understanding of Jewish history and Israel, I have become no more observant as a Jew. Yet I no longer feel this lightness. Judaism, Israel, is embedded in me.

2. I realized I was going to die.

Some months after my grandmother died, I went to see the new version of the Parent Trap in theaters. That night, as I replayed the final kissing scene in my head, it suddenly dawned on me that I was going to die. There's nothing quite comparable to the first recognition that human life is finite. I had of course been familiar with the concept of death but, when I truly understood it, I was wracked by a fear more terrible than anything I had ever experienced. I would wake up in the middle of the night sobbing and my parents would have to hold me, comfort me. I remember feeling jealous of some of my Christian friends who seemed to have an easy trust in an afterlife. Why didn't they make us believe in heaven at Shir Tikvah?

This fear of death provoked anxiety that may seem atypical of a young child, but it also led me to take life very seriously. In my journals and in conversations with others, I engaged with profound questions. What is this thing called life? What am I doing with it? From then on, I've been driven by a desire not to approach life superficially, not to take living for granted. I have engaged deeply with my own life and have also found myself fascinated by the ways other people live their lives.

As part of the family research I did in college, I had the opportunity to conduct several oral history interviews. I immediately saw great importance in living history—the history of people alive today—and have not stopped conducting oral histories since. I work mainly with families, collecting oral history interviews of the grandparent in the family, and I am hoping to start a project with a group of Holocaust survivors in St. Paul. This work has been incredibly meaningful for me and for each person involved. In the same way that someone might turn toward religion, I've realized that people delve into their family history as a way of asking, who am I? How have my ancestors shaped who I am today? What was their life about? What is my life about? I believe there are no greater questions we could be asking ourselves.

3. I found a pipe to God.

That same summer that I was eight years old, I found a rusty pipe sticking out of the beach at my family's cabin which I used twice a day to talk to God. I don't know if I ever actually believed I was talking to God. The God that I learned about at Shir Tikvah was nebulous. Adonai did not really seem like an old man in the sky, but Adonai did not really seem like a mother earth figure either. Adonai did not really seem like a person, even if Adonai was represented that way in torah stories and siddurs. Most people I knew didn't really seem to believe in God. It was not long before I forgot about the pipe, but I am still finding different ways to engage with God. Through my writing, through nature, through the people all around me. I'm still asking questions.

I believe that spirituality is about questions. Before our trip to Israel, Rabbi Lutz warned our tour guide Noam that this group would have lots of questions. Noam never could have envisioned how many thousands of questions we would throw his way over the course of our 10-day trip. We came home and we're still asking. We read the news and we're still asking. Not asking can be easier, simpler. Asking can be difficult, it means being brave, it means allowing for shifts in understanding.

I believe too that spirituality is about opening to the moment. When there is another person with you in that moment, it's about opening to them as they are right then, not the story you tell about them. Often times we see our family in terms of our relationship—as mom, dad, grandma. But recently, my friend Will told his mom that he wanted to have a relationship with her as a person, not just as a mom. His mom said, that's not important, you can ask me later. He

said. Why wait? Why is there anything more beautiful? Vibrating within Will's mom, within each person is a story waiting, begging to be heard.

So I urge you, whether or not you find yourselves having conversations with God, whether or not you believe in God, ask someone else how they experience God. If they don't believe in God, ask them how they have created their blueprint for living. If your grandparents are still alive, go talk to your grandparents. If your parents are still alive, go talk to your parents. To uncles, aunts, brothers, sisters, cousins, friends. To the guy waiting with you at the doctors office. The mail woman. The kid talking to strange objects in the sand.

Memory is subjective. I'll be honest with you, I'm not exactly sure if my grandmother's death, my own understanding of death, and my discovery of the pipe to God all occurred when I was eight years old. But it's not about what happens in our lives, it's about how we draw meaning from it. By drawing a connection among these three events, I have made meaning in my own life. Before someone sits down for an interview with me, they invariably feel nervous that they won't be able to remember everything. But, once they begin talking, each person realizes that it's not about what they remember, but about having they opportunity to tell their story. To ask someone to tell their story is to simultaneously give and receive a true gift.

So let's keep asking each other: Who are we? Who are the people who proceeded me? What does it mean to be a Jew living out of the Diaspora? How can we work toward a more sustainable and just future? What does it mean to be happy? To live well? Let's keep looking for possibilities for ourselves in other people's lives. Let's keep looking for the voices that aren't being heard, the stories that aren't being told. Let's keep looking to expand our understanding of what it means to be alive.