

YIZKOR SERMON 2017

Most of the time, when they include a picture of an author on the inside cover of a book, they use a picture from the time the book was published, and a young, vibrant, 40-something stares out at you with a deliberate expression of thoughtfulness or intensity, ready to convey the gravity of their book through the photograph above their bio. But when you pick up Grace Paley's collected short stories, or poems they placed the image of the venerable woman right there on the cover. The date of the photo does not match up with the time of the writing, and she stares at you with her resigned frizzy hair, intelligent features and playful eyes. You know she has something to say, just from her photograph, but she's not posing. The pictures are either candid or taken with her calmly standing. One has her in a garden, cardigan buttoned and hand casually in her pocket, as if you were meeting to go for a walk. You get the sense that what is in those pages is not there because she went to the Iowa Writer's Workshop, after growing up in bookstores and around the smell of boutique coffee, that the writing didn't come from a concerted effort, rather simply that she had lived some, and wanted to say a few things.

She described the first time she published. She had written a couple of stories and lent them to a friend, who insisted another friend read it. That friend happened to be a publisher for Doubleday and in Grace's living room read the stories out of a sense of obligation. But after reading them he said "Can you write more stories like these?" She said "Yes." And he said "I'll publish the book." No fanfare, no grueling years of bohemian waitressing to get her first break, just a friend at her living room table. And the book seemed to carry the same weight after it was published. It didn't make a splash; few publications reviewed it, albeit with positive reviews. It only slowly gained momentum, sleeping perhaps in the hearts and minds of intellectuals. Even today the name comes up with great warmth in literary circles, and surprise that others have read her. A well-known secret.

Grace did eventually find recognition, and taught writing at Sarah Lawrence College. It was at this time that she became an activist, a woman who rather than following a set path, simply followed what she felt was right. What is remarkable is how different people know her for different things. While many recognize her for her brilliant fiction writing, there are others who know her only as a feminist writer, or a Vietnam activist. It wasn't until the end of her life that all of these things seemed to come together. When she was 72 years old her short stories were collected from four volumes into one, and were a finalist for both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. And at the very end of her life she wrote up a series of poems that were collected into a book titled *Fidelity*. This collection of poems became her elegy, her ethical will, what she wanted to leave behind to a world that she lived in, for a time, and that she so dearly loved. Today, some people only know her as a poet.

This afternoon, as we both think about those who have left behind their legacy, and the legacy each of us would like to leave behind, I'd like to share some of the last words of Grace Paley.

The first poem connects to what we have often heard that looking back on our lives we will not wish that we had spent more time in the grueling drudgery of daily office work. But Grace in her playful way, takes this and places it on its head, pointing out that rather than work constantly chasing us, ready to overtake us whenever we let our guard down, that we chase after work, that

we are somehow married to the need to push forward, to move past. As Pablo Neruda, another poet, once said

“Vanity keeps prodding us
to lift ourselves skyward
or to make deep and useless
tunnels underground.”

That there is some shame we give to the notion of freedom, perhaps because we feel the need to be worthwhile. Grace, herself the last and late child of her parents, may have felt the need to justify her living, and so she drove herself into the frenzy of work. Here, she reminds us of what else there is, that is, freedom.

freedom has overtaken me I
had run ahead of it for years
along an interesting
but narrow road obeyed at least
half the rules imposed by
lovers children a house a
political position now out
of breath probably I'm stuck
freedom has hold of my jacket
won't let go I am alone

Grace Paley was well versed in Jewish culture. She described her early years as a “typical socialist Jewish”¹ childhood, one where conversations among family burned with a worldly passion, as in that generation Talmud study gave way to political debate and social action. She grew up keenly aware of the world and its problems, and in her stories and essays often wrote about a how the world's problems weighed on a Jewish heart. Having spent many of the years of her life as a passionate activist it would seem that she would leave the world feeling as if she had moved it ever so slightly closer to a place of compassion. And she does seem to feel that there has been some progress made, but at the same time writes with a touch of despair. As if channeling the book of *Kohelet*, Ecclesiastes, from our sacred tradition. *Dor holech, v'dor bah, v'ha'aretz l'olam omedet*. “One generation goes, another comes, But the earth remains the same forever.”²

She writes:

An Occasional Speech at the Interfaith Thanksgiving Gathering

anyone who gets to be
eighty years old says thank you
to the One in charge then im-
mediately begins to complain why
were these years such a historical
mess why was my happiness

¹ *Just As I Thought*, Grace Paley, p3

² Ecclesiastes 1:4

and willing gratitude interfered with
every single decade no sooner
were the normal spats with parents
lovers children ended than the
interfering greed of total strangers
probably eighty years old as well
and full of their own bloated thank-
fulness at unbelievable success in
the expropriation of what belonged
to other people and peoples not
to mention the economic degradation
leading to thanks engendering
profits in our own country and
in the innocent or colluding parts
of the world

I am sadly reminded
of the first couple of our American
thanksgivings thank you thank you
our first Americans together with
the Absolutely First Americans within a gener-
ation or half of the one the first Americans
proceeded to drive the Absolutely First
Americans from their villages rivers
fields over mountains and across the con-
tinent out out they cried almost at
the same time shouting thank you thanks
thank you

Finally, any search into a life well lived will reveal in it people, people, people. There is nothing more beautiful, more relatable, more impactful in our lives than the people in it. And so Grace calls to our hearts, calls to our minds the powerful way that people have been in her life, and the way she holds onto them after their death. Words she uses to keep her friends alive in some way, as her words keep her alive in a way, in this space here and now.

Sisters

My friends are dying
well we're old it's natural
one day we passed the experience of "older"
which began in late middle age
and came suddenly upon "old" then
all the little killing bugs and
baby tumors that had struggled
for years against the body's
brave immunities found their
level playing fields and victory

but this is not what I meant to
tell you I wanted to say that
my friends were dying but have now
become absent the word dead is correct
but inappropriate

I have not taken their names out of
conversation gossip political argument
my telephone book or card index in
whatever alphabetical or contextual
organizer I can stop any evening of
the lonesome week at Claiborne Bercovici
Vernarelli Deming and rest a moment
on their seriousness as artists workers
their excitement as political actors in the
streets of our cities or in their workplaces
the vigiling fasting praying in or out
of jail their lightheartedness which floated
above the year's despair
their courageous sometimes hilarious
disobediences before the state's official
servants their fidelity to the idea that
it is possible with only a little extra anguish
to live in this world

Shannah tovah.