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A COVID-19 Obituary

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Editorial

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I read obituaries. I read obituaries every day. I have read obituaries every day since I was 11 years old. I wake up in the morning, and before I start my day I go to the front door, open it, and retrieve the New York Times that has been delivered to my home. I retreat to the bathroom and I open the paper to read the obituaries. Before I dress. Before my coffee. Before breakfast. I read obituaries. I check the ages of those who have died. 98, 102, and 89, perhaps there is hope. 62, 49, and 34, looks like it will be a bad day. I read the causes and circumstances of death. Died in his sleep of natural causes — a sigh of relief. I notice so many more musicians and artists and drummers for obscure rock groups of the 60s seem to die and get featured obituaries than doctors, psychiatrists, psychologists, and palliative care clinicians. Perhaps it's a biased sample — those people who get that special obituary for noteworthy deaths with that special picture when they were younger in their prime. Why do I read obituaries so compulsively? Well, the answer is of course multi-layered. On the most accessible level, I am fascinated by the stories of peoples lives. The narratives of lives lived in all their variety, length, scope, and focus. They are dramas that have the potential to aid us all in the search for who we want to become and examples to measure ourselves against. As the Talmud taught us, "What is truer than the truth? The story." However, on a perhaps deeper level, reading obituaries, for me, is an inquiry in how to create an attitude and a perspective to death. It is a re-confirmation, each day, that death is real, an inevitable part of life, and that, in fact, we live with death every moment. In creating the story of our life, we create a story of a life lived and a death that is ever present and can occur at any moment. It is a reminder that death is at the essence of life, reconfirms life, and that death punctuates life. Reading obituaries allows me to maintain a sense of mortality salience as I live each moment of life. Death is always present in our lives. It is a constant. But now, in the Age of the COVID-19 pandemic, death is even more constantly present. In fact, there are more deaths each day, and more deaths this past year, that at any time in our recent history. It is January 22, 2021, 1 year since the start of this global pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic "Numbers" are unfathomable: 100 million COVID-19 cases worldwide and 2.1 million deaths globally. In the United States alone, we have almost 24 million COVID-19 cases and more than 420,000 deaths. This excess mortality due to COVID-19 has resulted in more obituaries being printed in our newspapers than at any time in the recent past. And so I am reading more obituaries; more COVID-19 obituaries.

A COVID-19 Obituary

Several days ago, January 11, 2021, I read a COVID-19 obituary that hit a powerful, personal chord that evoked my own family legacy and opened my heart and mind to the awe and drama of the times we now live in, the echoes of past traumatic times our ancestors have faced, the sheer awe of life, and the challenges we all face in creating our own unique lives of meaning and purpose.

The Obituary appeared in the New York Times, in a special section on obituaries for "Those we have lost" to the COVID-19 pandemic (Barry Goldsmith, 2021). The Obituary was for Barry Goldsmith who had just died in December of COVID-19. He was not a drummer for an obscure 60s rock group, but rather an architect by profession. There were those two pictures: one recent one in his 80s and the other one when he was young in the prime of his youthful adulthood. He looked like he could have been a relative. Actually, he looked like he could have been a younger version of me. His story read like the story of my parents, or my relatives, or the parents of my childhood classmates. The picture of him in his 20s looked eerily like it could have been me; long haired, ethnically Jewish, East Village hippie, Vietnam War protester. Barry Goldsmith wasn't born a "Barry Goldsmith." He was born Dov Baer Goldschmidt in 1938, in Iwje, Poland. On New Year's Eve 1942, as word spread of the impending liquidation of the Jewish Ghetto in Iwje by the Nazis, his father Tsvi Hirsch picked him up in his arms, and with Dov Baer crying, they fled into the forest to hide. The same forest where my 14-year-old mother and 17-year-old father fled for refuge and safety. Like my family, everyone left behind in the Goldschmidt family perished. Dov Baer and his father hid in the forest until the end of the war. After the war, father and son joined tens of thousands of Holocaust survivors in a refugee camp outside Castel Gandolfo in Italy. In

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1950, they sailed to New York City and settled in Brooklyn where Dov became "Barry Goldsmith." Barry assimilated quickly and successfully, becoming and ivy league educated architect, who by 30 was in charge of projects that would reshape the Manhattan skyline. He was a young man, on the ascent, going places. Then the pressure, and the unprocessed trauma of a childhood spent in the midst of the Holocaust all caught up with him. It was the late 60s and early 70s; marijuana, the counter-culture. One day in 1972 he just left- "dropped out," leaving a wife and child behind. He went on a spiritual journey, trying to "find himself." Communes, ashrams, finally Taos, New Mexico, making Native American drums and cobbling sandals. The simple life. But still no spiritual peace. In late 1973, an old friend from Brooklyn sought him out in New Mexico and began to talk to him about a mystical form of Orthodox Judaism. After days spent talking, Barry Goldsmith returned to Brooklyn and found peace in Orthodox Jewish religion. He led a quiet life, working for the City of New York in building preservation. He retired. He died of COVID-19 infection while visiting his daughter who had moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico. Barry (Dov Baer) Goldsmith was buried in Har HaMenuchot cemetery in Jerusalem, beside the grave of the man who had carried him into the woods and saved his life so many years before.

I read obituaries. I read obituaries every day. I will be reading more obituaries during the COVID-19 pandemic. I will continue to read obituaries every day until that day when my own obituary is published.

Reference

Barry Goldsmith RC (2021) Who escaped, dropped out and came back, dies at 82. Those we've lost- COVID-19 obituaries, *New York Times*, January 11.

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