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The Timekeeper's Son

William Breitbart, MD

Editorial

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Author for correspondence:
William Breitbart, M.D., Editor-in-Chief, Palliative & Supportive Care Chairman, Jimmie C. Holland Chair in Psychiatric Oncology Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center 641 Lexington Avenue, 7th Floor New York, NY 10022.
E-mail: breitbaw@mskcc.org

"Time after time, I tell myself that I'm
So lucky to be loving you
So lucky to be the one you run to see
In the evening, when the day is through"

–Jule Styne and Sammy Cahn, Time After Time (1947)

She was the keeper of time, and he was her son, a scientific chronicler of time. This is the story of an inevitable legacy. This is a story of time, life, love, and death; a story truer than the truth.

The Timekeeper

At 14, an age where the passage of time often is not a concern, a period of youth where time is not yet conceived of as a precious commodity rapidly and irreversibly streaming through one's clenched fists, she lived a carefree life, at the foot of the Carpathian Mountains with her family and school friends. Her mind was filled with dreams of a limitless and endless future. She was happy, at peace, content, and enjoying the simple moments of her uncomplicated life. Then the world and existence itself changed into a nightmarish dream of fear, uncertainty, threat of death, and the realization that time could come to an abrupt end. World War II, the Nazi invasion of Poland, the Holocaust, hiding, running and fighting as a partisan in the forest, concentration camp, refugee camp, marriage, emigration to the Lower East Side of New York City—this all occurred in a blur of time, punctuated by nights of terror and the realization that time may not be on her side.

At 23, she worked as a seamstress in the ABC Tie factory on West 17th street in Manhattan. She worked alongside a dozen young women who were fellow Holocaust survivors from the same small town she came from. Only young women, none of the older women had survived the camps. She gave birth to two boys and stopped working at the tie factory to raise them. They would become doctors, to heal the world. Once the boys were both in school, she allowed herself to have her own ambitions. She went to English classes at Seward Park High School and eventually got a high school diploma. Now there was no stopping her. She took the New York City Civil Service Examination. She passed. "You know, the mathematics part was very easy," she said with great pride. Her first job: Central Office Timekeeper providing direct administrative support to the Timekeeping Services Unit within the Payroll Management Department of the City of New York. She loved her job and she loved helping support her family. The job was easy for her, "just like mathematics."

At her retirement party, the Mayor of New York City dropped by to say a few words in honor of her tenure as Director of the Timekeepers Services Unit for the New York City government. "Rose, because of you, the City of New York has run like clockwork!" Forty years of keeping time, recording working hours, sick days, vacation days. "It all went so fast!" She confided in her sons that, even though her official age was 65, she had actually made herself two years older than she actually was when she arrived in the US. Her birth certificate was destroyed in the war, and she was advised to make herself older to be able to collect social security retirement benefits earlier. One of her girlfriends made herself 10 years older, and this disturbed her. "What's her hurry?" she joked.

When she was diagnosed with advanced cancer she never asked the oncologist, "How much time have I got, Doc?" She knew. She didn't need to ask. She was the head timekeeper, intimate with the nature and characteristics of time. When asked what she wanted written on her tombstone, she didn't include "Timekeeper." She wanted her tombstone to read "Grandmother, Mother, Daughter, Wife, Holocaust Survivor." She whispered in her eldest son's ear "It's not how much time you live, sweetheart, it's how you live with the time you're given."

The Son

At five, he realized death was real and inescapable. Life was finite, and time was a non-replenishable commodity. The Holocaust, with all its death, loss, suffering, and finality was living with his family in their apartment on the Lower East Side. It didn't have a room of its own, where you could perhaps contain it or hide it. It lived in every room, covered

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every wall, was present in every photograph and religious article saved from the ashes; his grandfather's talis, a yellow felt star that said "Jude." The stories. The stories of death and loss and lives unlived were constant chants, the background musical score to his childhood. "Why am I here?" his mother would ask him. "Why am I here and everyone else is dead?" He struggled to find an answer. He knew he needed to find the answer that would relieve his beloved mother's excruciating survivor's guilt. The answer came to him slowly, steadily and silently. No words needed to be spoken to direct him towards his life's purpose and mission: to ease the suffering in the world; the suffering that comes from a human being's confrontation with death. The suffering that lives in the liminal space, that nexus between life and death. The answer to the question, "How can a human being live in the face of death, with the knowledge of the proximity of death?"

At 26, upon graduating medical school, he set out on a path to become intimate with the experience of being human and facing mortality. In 1984, at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, he finally had placed himself at the nexus between life and death, breathing the same air of his patients who were confronting mortality in the most urgent of fashions. He immersed himself in clinical experiences, researched the emotional, psychological, and existential landscape of his patients; developed therapeutic interventions to ease the suffering, the end-of-life despair.

For 35 years, he was the chronicler of time. He examined time with his patients from every possible angle, trying to find an attitude towards time that would allow space for "Meaning" to still exist despite the closeness of death. Afterall, he was the Timekeeper's son.

Time

The "Timekeeper" and her "Son" were not so much the "keepers" or possessors of time. They, in fact, were chroniclers of time, monitors of time. They "kept" time in the sense of being the witnesses to the "times" of a person's life. The events, the milestones, the days working, the days off, vacations, holidays. Each of us needs our lives to be witnessed so that we have the sense that our lives have had "significance." Seneca (1997) taught us that life is long enough really, but the misuse and waste of time makes life shorter than it needs to be. As the Timekeeper's voice in my heart keeps whispering to me, "It's not how much time you live sweetheart, it's how you live with the time you're given." Words of spiritual wisdom and love from the Timekeeper to her son.

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