

“ANNNGH, ANNNGH, ANNNGH, EVACUATE, EVAUCATE!!” I jumped out of bed before I knew why, our house was filled with smoke and this alarm was rousing my bewildered family. The oven I had set to self-clean overnight (always the last step in kashering our kitchen for Passover) was pouring out smoke.

I had gone to bed hoping for a dream, for images of my father - instead I got smoke. One of the hardest parts of these seven-and-a-half months is how few memories I have of my father from my youth, from my father as a father, not a grandfather. I work hard to sift through the cobwebs and grab hold of memories. If I had to choose, of course, the smell of ashtrays would not have been one for which I searched - but then again, my father had been a smoker: three packs a day until he gave them up when I was eleven. But we don't get to choose our memories do we? The good and the bad memories come back, as do the empty spaces. My mind can celebrate the wise and witty man who moved his life (and his communities) forward, but I linger on the cigarettes and absences.

The oven episode was comforting in an odd way: there is a long Landis family tradition of marking major holidays with the death or disability of a major appliance. The smoke was a reminder that this year's seders fit into a larger story - and stories move forward. My story is now punctuated by daily saying kaddish - that remarkable obligation that is both a gift and a chore.

I would like to report on a few moments along my journey:

When I got up from shiva I wondered how anyone could really know how poorer a place the world, my world, was without Donald Landis? Yet as I stood to recite kaddish, I noted others standing - other loved ones had been lost. Indeed those of us with fresh wounds were joined by those with more calloused scars who stood to mark yarzheits. As the weeks and months have gone by, sadly, others with fresh wounds have joined us and I note rougher skin around my heart. Further, the cosmic void of Donald Landis, my particular loss - something no one can share - has evolved into a more generic loss: of my father, of a father, a parent - into a more simple, universal loss that is easily - and importantly - shared.

Next, I would like to report that at about the three month mark - just as this journey of meaning was becoming a chore - I had a visceral feeling of my father's movement. Of course, we say, "May his memory go higher." However, my father had no belief in the soul or the afterlife and I believe the soul suffuses light, not up or down, but bright or dull, dawning or dusking. So it was with great interest that I noted how directional my prayers were: I felt that

my prayers were indeed inflating or elevating him. A commitment or desire to lift him up got me to minyan in those early middle days.

Finally - no, not finally because I have months and years to go in this journey - I have recently noted how my father has become an "avoteinu." In the mournful, anxious weeks leading up to Pesah - my father has joined those who have gone before, those whose God we ask to remember us kindly on their behalf. His entire life, my father yearned and worked to glean meaning from prayer and now he has become one.

As much as minyan has moved my pain along a timeline, it also compresses time. When I say the "shema" I am transported back not only to his tucking me into bed with these words, but also to the moment when my oldest sister and I cried these words at his head as our Dad died. I have noticed that as I pray now, my left hand holding a siddur, my right hand moves on its own to massage my tzitzit or stroke the back of a chair. As my mind is searching, my fingers conjure sense memories of loss: stroking my father's bearded face, peeling bandages off his corpse with the hevrah kaddisha, caressing his casket before I eulogized him.

And by the way: no one ever talks about how a simple pine box retains its smell of the trees from which it came, of the Maine woods.

So, yes, I have moved on from those raw days and note healing in my heart but they are not gone. He died a good death: at a ripe age, having lived a life of meaning, doing good and working hard to undo any harm he had done. With his wife of 56 years at his side, he lived to see his children grow and meet and marvel at his grandchildren. So there is no great tragedy in this death, but to quote a favorite line of his from "Death of a Salesman," "Attention must be paid . . . Attention must be paid to such a person." I thank you my community and friends, I thank my family and I thank God for place and space to pay attention.