

**“MAKING THE GRADE”
Part Five
“THE CLASS PHOTO”**

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In his novel, *Ironweed*, author William Kennedy tells the story of Francis Phelan, a man who, having made some terrible mistakes in his early life, left his family and drifted from city to city living under bridges and in lonely alleyways. But after 20 years, he was now coming home.

Riding into town in the back of an old pickup truck, his eyes noticed the city's old cemeteries. The novel described Francis' long dead mother stirring in her grave as Francis went by, and his father, also in his grave, smiling toward his wife.

Are these people dead or alive? It's hard for the reader to know for sure. But, what **is** certain, is that in some way they **are** living on, at least for Francis Phelan. And as the novel unfolds, Francis struggles to come to terms with his past and to let go of his guilt, and that drama takes place in the presence of the people he had loved who were now dead.

By the climatic scene, when for the very first time in all those years, Francis returns to his old home to see his wife, we discover that, of all things, the dead have gone and set up bleachers in the backyard to watch this emotional reunion. Everyone from Francis's early life is there, the good ones and the bad ones, the failures and those who had become successes.

I. Overcoming Denial

Obviously, author William Kennedy can do what most of us cannot. He knows how to initiate a compelling conversation about death – someone else's, as well as our own. Perhaps this moment that you and I are sharing right now is one of the very rare times in all the year when we are able to speak candidly about the last taboo – death. But it's so important that we **do** speak of it because, for one thing, we need to remember that life is not forever, even though we spend most of our lives denying that.

One of America's great rabbis is a fellow named David Wolpe. Rabbi of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles, Wolpe is a young man who is in remission for Lymphoma which was diagnosed four years ago. In a recent article, he asks himself how one ought to approach one's life under such tentative conditions.

**“Do you live as if remission will go on forever?
Or do you allow the thought of death to be before
your eyes always, so as not to waste the precious
moment of life?”**

Let me stop the quote right here. How would **you** answer Rabbi Wolpe's question? Live life as if remission will go on forever or allow the thought of death to be before your eyes always? Here is how David Wolpe comes down on this choice:

“My answer I now know is:

Live as if you are fine, knowing that you are not.

...I pray with a new intensity – not that I will be promised a cure, but that I won't waste my waiting in fear. I owe it to my family, my community and to God not to be done before I really am done.”

II. At Its Essence, Every Life is Unfinished Business

I am well aware that, in one way or another, I have tried to bring this reality to your attention each year during this tender service. Since it is true that we cannot forever deny the fact of our mortality, it is also undeniable that at its essence, **Every Life is Unfinished Business...Every Life is Unfinished Business.** Think of it. Even Moses missed out on Tel Aviv!

Dr. Peter Gomes is the minister of Harvard's Memorial Church. Each year, it is his duty as the minister of that church, to deliver a sermon to the entering Freshman Class. And in one of

those sermons, Gomes did his best to broach this subject of death, almost certainly the most alien issue one could ever pose to those 17 or 18 year olds seated before you who are convinced of their invulnerable and are filled with ambition and raging hormones. He advised the First Year Class:

“Fortunately, life is more open-ended than college, and the time we are given, be it long or short, is time in which to begin and to carry on what others will finish. ...Only God has the chance to complete what He has begun, ...”

You see what this presupposes, don't you? That we each devote ourselves to something beyond the self-engrossed and trivial; that we engage in some cause, some plan, some project which just might outlive us and be worthy of another dear soul carrying it along into the future.

When Mozart was 31, he sat down at the pipe organ of the Strahov Monastery in Prague, and improvised on a theme presented to him by the Abbott. Present in the chapel on that occasion was a monk who also happened to be both a musician and a modest composer of sorts. Unbeknownst to anyone; the monk succeeded in jotting down the first 57 measures as the genius played them upon the organ. But then, having been interrupted by a fellow monk, he proceeded to lose the rest of Mozart's dazzling improvisation.

Three centuries later, Czech organist, Yeergy Ropeck, was asked to try his best to complete Mozart's composition. Well, Ropeck worked on it for many years and finally, in 2005 at age 83 and just before his own death, Ropeck's attempt was published under the title "Fantasy on Mozart's Theme."

Well, my point is that we are all given improvisations upon life, bequeathed to us and placed into our hands by those whose lives have so powerfully impacted our own years. We can only

pray that their influence upon us has been at worst benign, but at best unforgettable and loving. Nevertheless, here we sit, holding and embracing the “Unfinished Business” of our parents, spouses, siblings, partners, and friends. And now it all belongs to us, for good or ill, upon which to improvise our own future.

Life at its essence is “Unfinished Business.” If nothing else, ceaseless E-mails will assure **that** fact! Perhaps I will just hazard the caution that if you are living a life in which everything is supremely tidied up and neatly ordered, well then, dear friend, you may be going about it all wrong. Perhaps, dig in and dig more deeply. And **do not dare rest**, and certainly do not die, without leaving some intriguing loose ends to bequeath to those who will follow you.

I know that some of you come only to this service of all the High Holy Day Services. And, believe me, we are glad to see you. Some of you will dash out of here like race horses at the gate, as if

God Almighty had called you alone to heat up the Noodle Kugel!
Others of you have been here for the proceeding five messages in
the series: “MAKING THE GRADE.” To the benefit of the
newcomers, we have been likening our High Holy Days
to many of the predictable rites of academia, whether grade school
or college or even post grad.

Selichot – “ORIENTATION” (Eight of you may recall
that one!)

Rosh HaShanah Eve – “THE ENTRANCE EXAM”

Rosh HaShanah – “CALLING THE ROLL”

Kol Nidre Eve – “CONFERENCE NIGHT”

Yom Kippur Day (earlier today) – “STICKS AND STONES”

and finally now – “THE CLASS PHOTO”

Well, every one of us has endured class picture day. Selecting
just the right clothes to wear and inevitably choosing poorly, a fact
which will be so obvious for the rest of our lives whenever that

darned picture comes to light. Remember how we were cautioned: **Don't be late**, or you will be left out of the year book! The Class Photo – that would be the day when, if ever it would happen, you woke up with a giant Zit!

For us here at Congregation Temple Sinai, there is that Confirmation Class Picture Gallery just down the hall. I've seen you linger, more than once, to locate your Class Photo and to find your own 15 or 16 year old self, or your parents or even grandparents and sometimes even great grandparents.

I look at those pictures too, stopping at random moments to watch Temple Sinai's great history frozen, into a small framed slice of time. I wonder if you remember how Robin Williams, playing English professor, John Keating, in that wonderful movie "Dead Poet's Society," gathered his class around the trophy cases filled with footballs, trophies and team pictures? Remember what he said to his prep school students?

“Now I would like you to step forward over here

and peruse some of the faces from the past.

...They’re not that different from you, are they?

Invincible, just like you feel. The world is their oyster.

- They believe they’re destined for great things,
just like many of you.
- Their eyes are full of hope, just like you.
- Did they wait until it was too late to make from
their lives even one iota of what they were
capable? Because you see gentlemen,
these boys are now fertilizing daffodils.

But if you listen real close, you can hear them

whisper their legacy to you. Go on, lean in.

And the students cannot resist. They lean in close to the Class

Photos as Professor Keating whispers –

“Carpe: Hear it? Carpe Diem

Seize the day boys, make your lives extraordinary.”

And they stare in silence, wide-eyed at the faces in the Class

Photo.

III. Cherish Your Memories

All human beings are mortal.

(Now I want you to fill your name in) _____

is a human being.

Therefore, (fill in your name) is mortal.

- That syllogism was our first point - we are all mortals and, yet, we too-often deny the fact, and we should recognize it. That was this sermon’s first point.

- **And the - the second** point was the inevitability of unfinished business unless, God forbid, you are living too small. Do not live too tidy a life! Don't die before you are dead! Carpe Diem!

- **And finally**, how keenly we are aware, as we gather for this poignant service, that **memory can be painful**. The death of a dear one is a terrible wound, and to even attempt to sugar coat that fact, would be both unforgiveable and ingenuine.

And yet, don't you think that the recollection of our dear ones can also be restorative and comforting? As now we remember them, it is more their life than their death which we recall. Through memory, our precious loves live forever within us, and in the words of Laurence Binyon: "They shall grow **not** old, as we that are left grow old..."

Memory painful? Yes, of course, but even more, it is Memory which allows us **both to remember and to cherish what we once had and will never fully lose.**

“Memory will allow us to both remember **and** to cherish what we once had and will never fully lose.” Keep your eye carefully on that central fact and, if you do, you’ll pretty much succeed in “Making The Grade.”

Amen!