My Father's Blessing [1]

January 29, 2018 Writing and Faith [2]
Grief [3]

Essay by Sarah Birnbach

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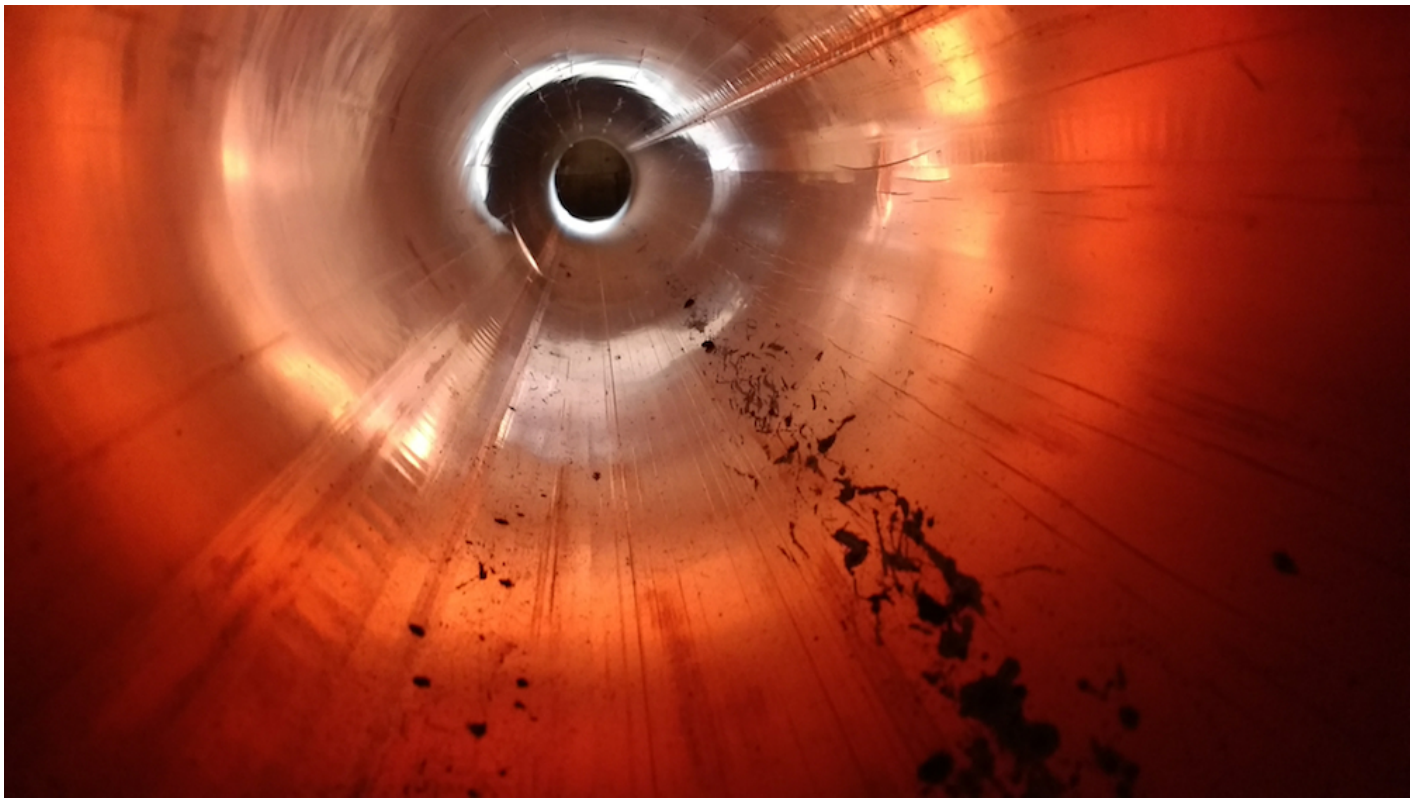

What happens to the soul after we die? My father believed, as generations before him, that the redemption of his soul would depend on the twice-daily recitation of the Mourner's Kaddish prayer for eleven months—an obligation traditionally performed by men in the Jewish faith. One problem: He had no sons to fulfill this commitment.

"I want you to hire a man to say Kaddish for me when I die," my father said, dropping into the seat next to me.

It was April 15, 1970. My 84-year-old paternal grandfather had died suddenly, and we'd buried him only the day before. My father's request reflected the traditional practice in families with no sons.

"You can pay someone to say it for me for the full eleven months. Don't worry about the money; just take it from my estate. You can find the man who oversees the services in any synagogue, or you can go to an old age home to find a man to say the prayer for me twice daily."

My father was a vibrant, active, 46-year-old man in excellent physical health. I didn't want to hear him talking about his death. And hiring a Kaddish felt wrong—repulsive, actually. I didn't want to be discounted because of my gender. But

my dad had never asked me for anything. Looking into his sad eyes, I put my feelings aside.

"Okay, Dad. I promise." What else could I say to my grief-stricken father? What else could a loving daughter do?

"Thank you. Good. No more worrying." With that, he returned to the low stool on which mourners traditionally sit to symbolize having been brought low by grief.

At the time, it was understandable that my father assumed I would hire a Kaddish. After all, he'd been raised by an Orthodox father. Adopting the traditional beliefs of my grandfather, my dad believed that women could not say Kaddish because they were not counted as part of the ten-person quorum required to recite the prayer. His daughters had received no religious training. He belonged to a traditional synagogue where women were not full participants. Considering that in 1970 a woman couldn't get a credit card in her own name—and she could be fired from her job if she became pregnant—how could he have thought otherwise?

It never would have occurred to him that one of his three daughters might undertake this obligation.

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More than twenty years later, in December 1993, the false but nevertheless comforting illusion that my parents would live forever was shattered. My father telephoned to give me the news.

"I've been diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma." It seemed like an eternity before he continued. "The good news is that it's a slow-growing cancer. The bad news is that it's not curable."

He spoke as if he were delivering a weather report—cloudy skies are on the horizon.

"The…prognosis…Dad?"

"Without treatment, we're looking at possibly as long as seven years."

Knowing he wouldn't want to hear me cry, I squeaked out, "Thanks for telling me, Dad. It's a lot to absorb. How about I call you back?"

We got off the phone not a second too soon. I burst into tears.

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I imagined his death, whispering in my ear. I realized my promise was no longer hypothetical, and I saw my choice about hiring a Kaddish through a clearer lens.

I didn't want a stand-in for my grief. I could not bear the thought of having a stranger show God the respect for my father that the reciting of the Kaddish represents. I was not only a daughter; I would be a mourner. I refused to allow my gender to absolve me of my responsibility. I wanted to be the one to demonstrate to God that my father's soul was worthy of His positive judgment.

But doing something so contrary to my father's wishes was foreign to me. I'd always been the obedient firstborn. I needed his blessing, but anxiety about approaching him with such a radical idea became my daily burden.

I developed a mental list of justifications: A woman's traditional "exemption" from time-bound rituals, such as prayer services, did not mean "exclusion." The word *exemption* left open the possibility that women could fulfill these obligations if they chose to do so.

I belonged to an egalitarian synagogue. My children were old enough to stay by themselves while I went to synagogue. I knew enough Hebrew to get by. My job afforded me flexibility. My list of arguments went on and on.

Still, fears consumed me. *What if he holds tight to his belief that gender is more important than having his own child pray for his soul? What if he insists I hire a Kaddish? What will I do?*

And what if my father is wrong? If there is a Paradise, as he believes, will God send his soul to that eternal place based on a stranger's prayers? And if not, then what will happen to his soul?

Sleep evaded me. The thought of my father's soul not going to Paradise, after he'd led a life worthy of God's blessing, tormented me. I felt a constant burning pain in my stomach.

What if my father is right? What if God views gender as my father does?

If so, that view of the Almighty was one I could not accept. I didn't believe God would discount my prayers because of my gender. Nor could I accept the idea that a stranger's voice could carry the same love, commitment, and passion as mine. I had listened to men in synagogue who rushed through the prayers with lightning speed and monotone voices. Wouldn't God realize that prayers said for remuneration were like tarnished silver? My voice would glisten like freshly polished silver, shining with my love and intention.

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It took four years to muster the courage to tell my father that I wanted to say Kaddish for him. I scheduled a visit to coincide with his seventy-second birthday. When he was lying across the couch in his study, watching his beloved golf on television, I seized the opportunity for private time with him. Standing in the doorway, listening to the whispering voices of the announcers, I fought the urge to leave.

I took a deep breath and stepped into the room, careful not to block the television. "Dad, I want to talk to you about something serious."

He looked at my face and immediately turned off the television set. "What's up, sweetie?"

"I want you to release me from the promise I made to hire a Kaddish. I want to say Kaddish for you when you die."

It was out! I inhaled deeply, as if I had come to the surface after a deep dive in the swimming pool. As I let the air slip slowly from my nostrils, my muscles began to relax.

"*I* am the best one to say the Kaddish—not a stranger," I said. "It's not an obligation of gender. It's an obligation of descent, and if you believe that reciting the prayer will bring calm to your soul, then I can do that better than any stranger can."

Dad's knitted eyebrows and direct gaze made me wonder if he was shocked at my forthrightness or just deep in thought. I took another breath and looked toward the window and back again, struggling to maintain my slowly evaporating confidence.

"As your child, God would smile more on my efforts than He would on the prayers of a total stranger." I spoke with all the passion I could convey.

My father wore his poker face. I couldn't tell if my words were making an impression on him or not, so I tried one more approach. "You know Judaism emphasizes performing *mitzvot*—deeds—rather than just espousing beliefs. I want to show my gratitude for all you have done for me in my life and for all you've given to others. I want to demonstrate my love in actions, not just in words."

My self-proclaimed traditional father simply said, "I'll have to think about it. Is there anything else you wanted to say?"

"No, Dad. That's all."

"Okay then."

As he reached for the remote control, I kissed the top of his head. I knew my father well enough to know there was nothing more I could do in that moment. He was a man of simple pleasures and minimal needs. The few things he wanted or needed, he provided himself. Family was more important to him than material possessions. But the deceased cannot say Kaddish for themselves.

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I don't know whether my father ever really reconciled his beliefs with my belief in the equality of women within Judaism or the importance of progeny over strangers. But on the Thanksgiving weekend in the year before his death, when our entire family congregated at my youngest sister's to celebrate, he ushered us all into the cozy family room.

He talked about the living will he'd just revised and where the copies were kept. Then came the emotional bombshell, without the slightest change in his tone.

"I want a promise from each of you to take no 'heroic measures.' I don't want to be kept alive on machines or anything else that will compromise the quality of my life. I don't want there to be any arguing or hesitation when it comes time for that decision. Will you promise me?"

My sisters and I agreed without hesitation. But looking at my mother's and sisters' faces, I saw tears well up in their eyes, and I felt tearful, too. Making the commitment was one thing. Imagining the day and time when that decision would have to be executed was another.

After he finished his remarks, I lingered as the rest of the family adjourned to the kitchen.

"Dad, did you ever think about my reciting Kaddish for you?"

"Yes," he said, nodding his head. "As a matter of fact, I've thought about it quite a bit."

Silence.

I craned my neck, awaiting the words that didn't come. "And…."

"And what?" He raised his eyebrows and tilted his head, as if he were oblivious to my meaning.

"Does that mean you're giving me your blessing, Dad?"

"I don't think you need my blessing, but if you feel like you do, then you have it."

I wrapped my arms around his neck with a tight hug. "Oh, Daddy…thank you. So much. This will be my final gift to you."

As my father and I got up to join the others, with his arm wrapped around my shoulder, it didn't occur to me to ask why he'd changed his mind or if, in fact, he had.

I regret not having asked if the strength of my faith convinced my father, a man of faith. Maybe he just acquiesced as he typically did to avoid conflict. I imagine he struggled between adhering to the traditional values of his father and accepting the more modern, feminist ideals of his daughter. I will never know.

What I do know is that after my father died I recited the Mourner's Kaddish twice daily in synagogue for eleven months. I am comforted by my faith that God has blessed my father and his eternal soul.

Art Information

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 After three successful careers spanning four decades, Sarah Birnbach has embarked on an encore career as a writer. Five chapters of her recently completed memoir *A Daughter’s Final Gift*, which traces the year after her father’s death, have won awards in the Soul-Making Keats Literary Competition, a program of the National League of American Pen Women, as well as in *Talking Writing*. Her story “Climbing Back Up” recently won third prize in the nonfiction category from the Women's National Book Association. In 2011, Sarah became the first certified journal therapist in the United States, helping individuals to further their mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

For more information, see Sarah Birnbach’s website [4] or follow her on Twitter @sarah_birnbach [5].

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