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WRT Alternate Yizkor/Musical Meditation Service

About a year after my grandfather died, I got together with my dad and my grandma; we needed to decide what to write on his footstone. Standing at the counter of my family's kitchen, my dad asked, "What do you think it should say?" Without a moment of hesitation my grandma said, "He grabbed life with both hands." That wasn't at all what I thought she'd say. The Grandpa I knew would want to be remembered for his love of family. For all the ways he connected to my grandma and to his children and his grandchildren. So I very carefully mentioned that to her. But my grandma wouldn't be swayed. In fact, she was even more insistent. "Yes, he loved his family. But he grabbed life with both hands. That's what he always said about himself. That's what he would have wanted." She was so sure.

My grandma and I clearly hold different memories of my grandfather. I remember him as a loving grandpa. When we were younger and we'd fall down and get hurt, he would scold the sidewalk, saying "bad sidewalk." Then he would ask us where it hurt, take the hurt from that spot, and then together we would "throw the hurt away". Whether he was attending my band concert, my brother's little league baseball game, or just hearing about something we had accomplished, his face would break into the widest smile. I picture him telling long stories and cheesy jokes at the dinner table and making sure to list all the people who loved us before he put us to bed.

As I grew up, our conversations evolved. I remember a rare overnight when I was in high school, when I went by myself to stay at my grandparents' house in New Jersey. Though I intended to say a quick good night to my grandpa before I went to sleep, it turned into a long, open conversation between adults. He expressed regret about not having been home more often, and not spending more time with his kids. I will never forget this moment of vulnerability we shared, as I realized that grandpa had a whole life before I came around. That part of him

needed to be remembered, too. The idea that “he grabbed life with both hands” began to make sense.

As I hold these two perspectives, one of the grandpa I knew, and one of the husband my grandma knew, I begin to think about the question of legacy. Though we don’t get to decide what goes on our footstones, we do get to choose how we live our lives. If nothing else, Yizkor serves as a reminder that we get to make an impact *now*, the way our loved ones did for us.

“V’ahavta et Adonai elohecha, b’chol l’vavcha, uv’chol nafshe’cha, uv’chol m’odecha.”
Love your God, with all of your heart, with all of your soul, and with all of your might.

Many of us know this prayer well and we know that this verse is about love. I want to focus on the last part of this phrase- b’chol m’odecha. M’odecha is a hard word to translate into English. M’od means “very”, so when you add the suffix meaning “your”, it’s hard to figure. I suggest that rather than “with all your might”, we could translate this phrase “with all of your much-ness”. What does it mean to love with all of your “much-ness”? And what does it mean to live this way? I’m still struggling with these questions. But, what I do know is this: muchness can’t be encompassed by one person. A human life is too magnificent to be captured by one person’s memory alone. Think about all of the people who are walking around in this world with a piece of your loved ones’ muchness.

The parent you came to remember today was also someone’s sister. Your son was someone’s teacher. Your dear friend was someone’s daughter. Each of these people leaves behind a legacy that no footstone, no one person can capture. Almost like an impossibly large jigsaw puzzle, with many different sized-pieces. There are the people who knew them best, like their immediate family and close friends. Those people have the biggest pieces of the puzzle. Then there are the pieces that belong to colleagues, extended family and other friends- their pieces are large, too. But the pieces that are greatest in number and smallest in size are held by

all of the other acquaintances, coffee shop baristas, doormen, doctors, and anyone else who had an interaction with your loved one, big or small.

When your loved one died, you may have received condolence notes from people you never met, didn't know, or barely remembered. They, too held a piece of the puzzle. These letters are gifts. As is remembering in community, as we do at Yizkor today. It reminds us what a powerful experience it is to join others in assembling the pieces of a life well-lived.

Now, when I think back to my conversation with my grandma, I realize that we were both right. She held her puzzle piece, I held mine, and together we could see a bit more of the picture. While my grandpa didn't choose what his footstone would say, he **did** decide how he was remembered by the way he lived his life and the values he imparted to us. Because of this, each of his nine grandchildren have different pieces of his "much-ness" that we all carry with us. In fact, every person he ever met has a piece of it. His footprint is bigger than we will ever know.

Jackie Robinson famously said, "A life is not important except in the impact it has on other lives." As we remember our loved ones today, we can take comfort in knowing that countless people in the world are walking around with a piece of our loved one's "much-ness," and that we have the rest of our lives to distribute our own puzzle in which are embedded pieces of theirs, too. In so doing, the impact of our loved one's life will not only remain in this world, it will continue to ripple outward forever, reaching new shores long after they are gone.