



Shemini Atzeret
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When You Are a Duck and It is Raining Outside — a Yizkor Sermon
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Growing up, Ann Patchett dreamed of becoming one thing, and one thing only, a writer. “I wrote and read and read and wrote,” she observes in the current edition of *The New Yorker*. She didn’t like sports. She didn’t like clubs. She didn’t like socializing. She liked books, reading them and learning how to write them. She fulfilled her dream. Her many books, like *Bel Canto* and *The Dutch House*, have become both critical and commercial successes.

Yet for all her acclaim as a writer, her father Frank never believed in her as a writer, and told her so, explicitly, painfully, and repeatedly.

You have to be athletic. You have to learn to play tennis. You have to learn to play volleyball. But Dad, I don’t like tennis. I don’t like volleyball. I don’t like sports. No matter. Her father would take her and her sister Heather, at 6:00 a.m., to the big parking lot opposite the supermarket Ralphs so that they could hit balls against the brick wall.

You can’t make a living as a writer, he would tell her. When she was in high school, he warned: “*Someday you’ll get divorced. You’ll have a couple of kids to support. You’re not going to be able to do that writing. You can’t be so selfish.*”

He would tell her to become a dental hygienist. But Dad I don’t want to be a dental hygienist.

He would tell her to get a job on a cruise ship. But Dad I don’t want to work on a cruise ship.

He would tell her to join a sorority. But Dad I don’t want to join a sorority.

When their father told Ann Patchett's sister Heather what to do, Heather listened. He told her: Become a lawyer. She did. But not Ann. Ann captures what it was like to get unneeded and unheeded advice from her father:

When he gave me advice I held the phone away from my ear. You are a duck, I would tell myself. This is rain.

What do we do when *we* are the ducks, and it is raining? When somebody who loves *us* does not totally get us, perhaps because they have their own issues that block them from seeing us? What do we do with all that complexity when they have passed away? They are not here to make it better. We cannot have an Elul conversation and mend what needs mending.

When I meet with a family who has lost a loved one, the greatest compliment they can pay that loved one is: *they were non-judgmental*. They saw me for who I am. They loved me for who I am. They celebrated me for who I am—and not the person they wanted me to be. And the greatest critique is if the loved one *were judgmental*. Families will say things like: their loved one had very definite ideas, had very exacting standards, demanded a lot from themselves and from others, could be highly critical.

The non-judgmental loved one leaves love. The judgmental loved one leaves residue.

What do we do with that residue? We get a helpful insight from the very name of this day. Today is *shmini atzeret*. *Atzeret* means lingering. *Shmini* means 8th. It is an 8th day of lingering. Sukkot is over, but there is an 8th day to linger, to reflect, to marinate. We are still processing the thoughts and emotions of the holiday season. It is on just this day of lingering that we recite Yizkor in order to linger with our loved ones whom we have loved and lost. Their lives are over, but still we linger with *the meaning* of their lives and what they mean even today for our own lives. Very often we still have work to do in thinking that through.

That was the case for Ann Patchett. Her father Frank has passed away. She has work to do. In making her peace with her father, in loving him for who he was, she offers us three helpful moves. Her first move is to **start with the good**. That was also a powerful teaching of the Hasidic master Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav. When encountering a challenging person, start with the good. Ann Patchett finds plenty of good in her father.

Her father did have a love of books, and this love of books bonded father and daughter. They would read and discuss *The Red Badge of Courage*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Anna Karenina* together. And it wasn't just books that bonded them.

Her father was a Los Angeles police captain. She summons a memory from her childhood:

When my father came home from work, a gun holstered on the back of his belt beneath his suit jacket, I stood on his shoes so we could dance, my father singing and swaying us back and forth, "Embrace me, my sweet embraceable you." Dear God, how I loved him. How he loved me!

When we start with the good, usually there is some good we can find. As we now recite Yizkor for our own complicated loved ones, what do you see when you start with the good?

Yet for all his good, what does Ann Patchett do with the fact that the one thing she wanted to do and to be—a writer—her father simply could not see? That leads to her second move.

Try to understand the bad, try to frame the bad, by putting it in a context. Why couldn't her father see her? After all, he did love her, so why could he not fully see her? She sees her father as shaped by the worlds he lived in: Catholicism, the Navy and the police department. All are worlds of hierarchy where, as she puts it, "Captains gave orders and sailors went to sea." Since he followed *his* orders, why shouldn't his two daughters follow *their* orders?

She also focuses on how his impoverished childhood scarred and shaped him. He had memories of his father pounding the pavement, looking for a job in Los Angeles, with a wife and seven children at home to support. He had one sandwich in his pocket all day long as he looked for that job. He had memories, his own memories, of getting out of the Navy, taking a job in a liquor store, and not having a home to sleep in. He slept on a porch somewhere. He wanted to spare his daughter from the poverty that he, and his father, knew only too well. That's why he was skeptical of her literary dreams.

By seeing the world from his point of view--his deep comfort with hierarchy, the ways in which poverty seared his soul--she begins to understand why he is blocked from seeing her literary dreams. It still hurts, but she can at least understand it.

As we now recite Yizkor for our own complicated loved ones, can we reframe the hard parts so that we can at least understand what moved them to act as they did? Despite our pain, can we summon a modicum of empathy?

And Ann Patchett's third move is to **find a way to grow from the bad, despite the pain of it all**. This Ann Patchett manages to do in a way that proves to be a deep blessing to her.

It turns out that having someone who believed in my failure more than in my success kept me alert. It made me fierce. Without ever meaning to, my father taught me at an early age to give up on the idea of approval. I wish I could bottle that freedom now and give it to every young writer I meet, with an extra bottle for the women.

It is the frictions that make us grow. As we recite Yizkor, how did we grow from the hard parts of the people we remember today?

Ann Patchett's marvelous essay about her father is a gift to us on this day of lingering as we are about to linger with our loved ones by reciting Yizkor. Start with the good. Frame the bad. Grow from it. They are gone. But we are not done.

To love is to interpret and reinterpret, to love is to keep working on it, in life and in death.
Please rise.