



Saying Kaddish at Christmas Dinner

BY DANIEL J. BRESSLER, MD, FACP

OUR STAFF, ALONG WITH their friends and family, met for a holiday dinner in early January of this year at an Italian place in Mission Hills not far from Scripps Mercy. It was the first time we had gathered socially since the pandemic lockdown began. There was a palpable sense of joy and relief that the world might be getting back to some kind of normal.

Once we were seated, and after orders had been taken but before dinner was served, I ceremoniously tapped on my wine glass to get everyone's attention. We then performed a pre-planned ritual

that allowed us to intermix our holiday celebration with some reflection as a way to both deepen and elevate the occasion.

Earlier that week, the staff and I had assembled a list of the patients that we had lost in 2020 and 2021. In the hush after the tapped glass and sitting in the deliberate privacy of a corner table, we began. Sensitive not to cross the boundaries of "privileged health information," we stage-whispered the first name of a patient (we, the staff, all knew who was being referred to but our guests did not) and then with that same whisper preceded to share memories about the person that had moved or touched us. We shared

vignettes about their quirks and their talents, their bugs and their features. We said nothing about their medical condition — we spoke only about their human condition.

The stories included: a cheerful raconteur's long devotion to his serious spouse, who forever complained that she didn't get his jokes; a widowed matriarch whose frail condition did not weaken her command and control of family matters for her grown children; a decorated but dissatisfied architect who was forever looking for an even grander award-winning project; an amateur clarinetist and musicologist who, in his day, had sat in with some of the great names in jazz; an intense yoga practitioner who was lovingly attended in her final days by a clutch of yoga friends; a laconic physician who could never bring himself to talk of his adored wife in the five years between her passing and his; an ex-nun who, after leaving the convent, became a New Age healer and spiritual guide with an international following; a devout and big-hearted Southern Baptist with the deepest hugs imaginable who returned to her Tennessee hometown for palliative treatment only to call monthly till the end to let us know that she "was doing just fine."

None were under 70. Most were in their 80s and a few in their 90s. In that sense, the deaths were not “tragic,” although each was sad, as a loss always is. We reviewed together a roll call of the dead that mixed that sadness with whimsy, and mixed grief with admiration. It was a spoken memorial to people we had cared for and who were now taken from us. It was, on this Christmastime dinner, a way of “saying Kaddish.”

Kaddish, or, more specifically, the Mourner’s Kaddish, is a prayer from the Jewish liturgy said for the recently deceased. It is recited at the funeral and is also said by family members every Sabbath for a year after a death in the family. It is a way of commemorating the deceased by saying their name in the context of a prayer which honors the holiness and greatness of God.

In a longstanding longitudinal primary care practice, such as mine, we lose patients every year. Even in the best of circumstances, we humans have unavoid-

able “expiration dates” as the defects of aging accumulate. In other regrettable circumstances, it is preventable trauma or infection that takes us down suddenly.

There is the special irony that the medical care team often gets to know patients best toward the end, when their medical needs intensify. The nurses and receptionist come to easily recognize the sound of their voice on the phone before they say their name. We learn better than ever the names of family members, pets, and pet peeves. And when the patient dies, all that connection-based knowledge is lost along with their life. Families grieve, of course, and one of my goals for the survivors is to help frame the death in a way that allows the grief to be as gentle and complete as possible. But we (the staff and I) grieve, too. With each death we lose someone we have taken into our circle of responsibility and into our hearts.

“Saying Kaddish” is for the commemoration of the dead, but as importantly for the benefit of the living. The grief

that comes to survivors from loss needs to be incorporated into an ongoing life. Although out of sight, it is emotionally damaging to simply put the deceased out of mind. How much healthier to recall them deliberately as a way to say goodbye again, gently. It elevates the way we hold their memories by intentionally calling out their uniqueness, their irreplaceable and essential qualities. This practice naturally produces a knowing nod to balance the lump in the throat.

And so, at a Christmas dinner, as 2021 became 2022, and as a horrible pandemic year became less horrible, we read the names and recalled the virtues of some people that we had had the privilege of caring for, and in so doing blessed their memory and helped to heal ourselves. **SDP**

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