

VIEWPOINT

Dealing with Grief, a Rabbi Finds A Nobility in the Human Spirit

(Editor's note: Steven Carr Reuben, rabbi of the Kehillat Israel Reconstructionist congregation in Pacific Palisades, writes a weekly Torah commentary. The following essay was composed on June 16 and is especially relevant following last Wednesday's tragedy at the Santa Monica Farmers Market. In recent weeks, Rabbi Reuben also participated in the Palisades filming of a video to help grieving parents. See Lifestyle story, page 11.)

By STEVEN CARR REUBEN
Special to the Palisadian-Post

When people ask me what I like best about being a rabbi, I usually find myself talking more about funerals than weddings or baby namings, because the opportunity I constantly have as a rabbi to be there for others at the time of their greatest emotional need is a rare privilege. I truly believe that every one of us has similar needs and dreams in life. We each want to feel that what we do matters in the lives of others, that we have the ability to make a difference in the world by what we do and say and that ultimately through touching the lives of others we know that who we are really matters as well.

But this past week has been different. It has been one of the worst rabbi weeks of my life. First was the call from a member of my congregation whose brother Sean had been struggling for nearly 20 years with the double curse of bipolar disease and addictions. After nearly a lifetime of wrestling with his own inner demons and conquering them time and again, in a moment of depression he succumbed to the screaming inner need for relief, and the combination of drugs he ingested to dull the pain stopped his heart instead.

Then I watched in horror along with much of the world as a small private plane plunged from the sky out of control and crashed into an apartment building in the Fairfax neighborhood. My horror turned to personal shock and grief as I discovered that the pilot was a man whose wedding I had performed a number of years ago, and his passenger was his niece Jessica Kaplan, the 24-year-old daughter of Josh and Renee, who were congregants I have known and been close to for many years. Jessie was a young girl I had watched grow up, a remarkable talent burning with the intensity of a brilliant mind, extraordinary writing ability and charismatic charm.

So the past week was filled with alternating conversations and visits to Sean's family in preparation for his funeral on Thursday, and Josh and Renee in anticipation of Jessie's memorial service on Friday. The pain and loss and grief was relentless, and I have rarely felt as impotent in the face of unspeakable sorrow.

There is a kind of instant intimacy in death. People say things they otherwise might be too reserved or cautious or "proper" to utter. The anger and rage, the grief and loss, the numbness and disbelief of it all evokes some of the deepest reflection on the meaning of life itself, the futility of loving in the face of certain loss and grief, and the ultimate terror of facing a parent's worst nightmare.

What do you say to a family who has struggled day in and day out for nearly two decades to rescue their son from the nightmare of his own body chemistry which attacked him over and over again



Rabbi Steven Carr Reuben and actress Naomi Watts converse before taping a segment of a video to aid grieving parents. (See Lifestyle feature, page 11.)

Rich Schmitt/Staff Photographer

until it finally destroyed him? What can you say to a parent who doesn't even have enough of her child left to bury? I have been a rabbi for 27 years and I still haven't found the right words to say, the magic formula that will take away the pain, soften the sorrow or erase the grief.

But what I did witness once again, as I have so many times in the past when faced with unspeakable family sorrow, is the almost astonishing grace of the human spirit and the unquenchable longing for love and hope and faith. To watch the hundreds of individuals of all ages who opened their hearts and arms to these families to hold them, to cry with them, catch them as they fell, cradle them in their love, or simply sit with them in the profound silence of their loss was to see the human spirit at its most noble, compassionate and vulnerable.

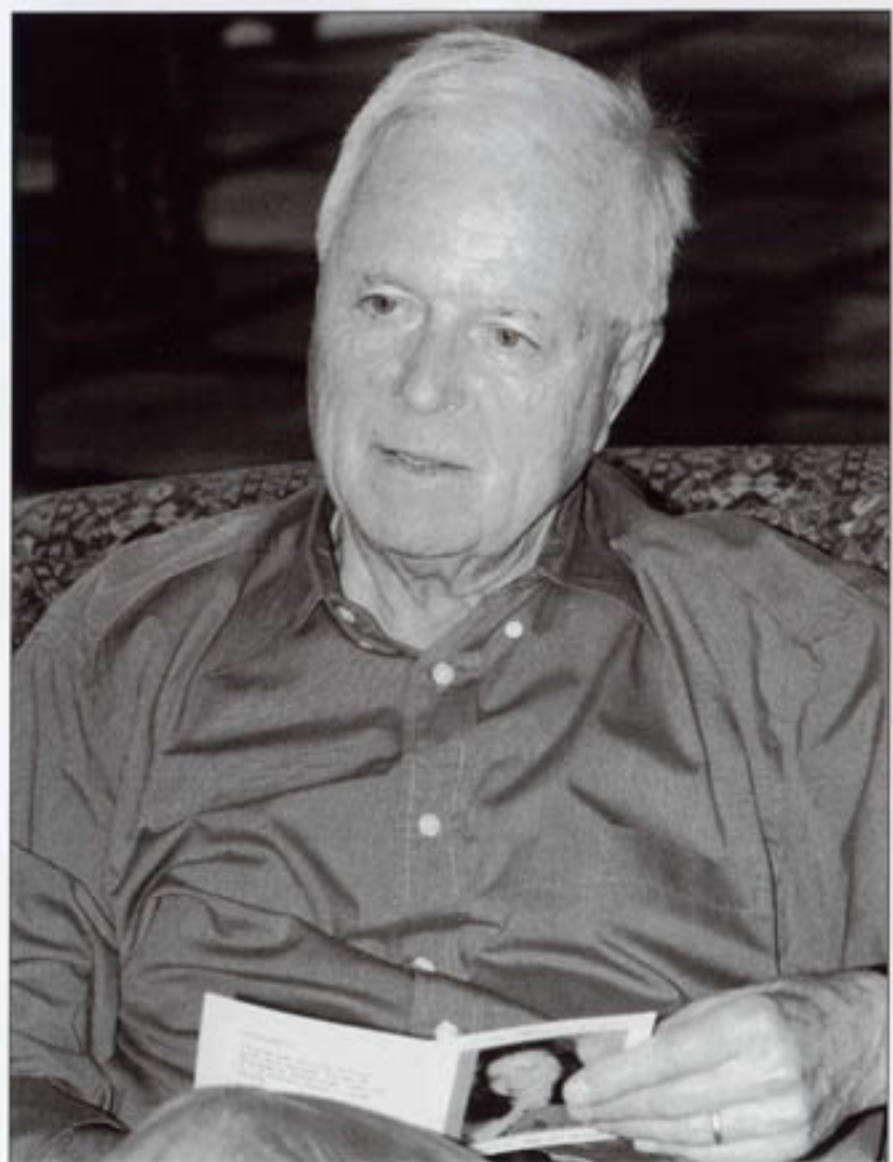
I saw once again that the real meaning of life isn't in the sacred texts or philosophy books or brilliant novels, it's in the living. Living on the edge, living with the uncertainties, living with the deepest questions of our souls, living with the searching for the meaning itself, living not the answers but the questions themselves, one day at a time, one minute at a time, one breath at a time.

Today's Torah portion contains the famous ancient "priestly blessing" that has been used for thousands of years to bless both individuals and the community. I have recited these words thousands of times over the years over every baby, at every bar or bat mitzvah, at every wedding, at community gatherings and special occasions both public and private. They represent the prayers of every one of us that God may bless us and keep us safe from harm, grant us spiritual, emotional, and physical wholeness and abundance and bring us peace.

I spoke these words even in the face of this week's sorrows and realized that these ancient words of blessing reflect our desire to have God's "face" shine upon us and be the source of our blessings. Yet Jewish tradition has always taught that there are at least 70 faces to God. As I

stood in profound gratitude for every loving soul who shared their own pain and sorrow and love with these grieving fam-

ilies this week, I realized once again the simple truth that it was in their faces that I truly discovered the many faces of God.



Former L.A. Mayor Richard Riordan holds a photo of Erika Whitmore Godwin, while he listens to Erika's mother, Susan, talk about her daughter's death. Riordan, who has lost two children, and other parents filmed parts of a video this month to help newly grieving parents. (See Lifestyle feature story, page 11.)

Rich Schmitt/Staff Photographer