

The longer someone is gone the further away you might feel from them. Their picture isn't quite as vivid in your mind, instead of millions of images you keep coming back to just a few glimpses of your person. This can make the passing of time feel scary. We want the pain and hurt to subside, but we don't want our memories to fade; Their scent of the pillow to diminish; The indent in the chair to fill in. We want to hold on.

This past May I lost a dear friend, classmate and colleague Rabbi Aaron Panken, in small plane crash. Not only was he my friend and has been since our year in Israel in 1986, and my son's really good friend's dad but he was the President of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion where he was just beginning to realize his vision for the future of the Reform Rabbinate. His passing was a public tragedy, but I know this doesn't compare to the loss for his family. His sister Rabbi Melinda Panken wrote this beautiful poem. For you, some of the details might be different. Maybe it is not charoset but hot sauce or jello mold, but I think you can take her words and make them your own.

For Aaron:

Your death was not a one time event,  
like a tornado or a bad first date  
that harden into memory the minute they're over.  
No, you die over and over, every day, in more ways than I can count.  
It happens when I expect it and especially when I don't.  
I lose you all over again when I eat a salad with tangy blue cheese dressing  
or a bowl of cold borscht,  
and when I notice the nubby knit of an argyle sweater vest,  
and when I hear the buzzing of a Cessna kissing the clouds beneath a blue  
sky,  
and when something makes me laugh and I think you would have laughed  
too.

I lose you again on birthdays and anniversaries,  
when your dependable, sweet call never comes, no matter how much I  
expect it.

I lose you at Passover, when your bowls and bowls of charoset from  
around the world  
are missing from the table,  
and now there will never be enough charoset on the table ever again.

I will lose you again and again, when your children get married,  
and my children become bar and bat mitzvah,  
and your grandchildren are born and you can't hold them, and love them,  
and make them laugh.

You are so absent now where you were always present,  
and your death isn't in the past.

It happens over and over again, every day,  
in ways both tiny and enormous.

You keep dying, and I keep grieving.

We can all relate to that feeling of it happening over and over again, every day. We don't mean for it to, but we are caught off guard- by the little things, as Melinda expresses so beautifully.

There is a new reality after our loved ones are gone. Their absence becomes a kind of presence. Something you can hold on to and hopefully, live with.

Our challenge is to replace the pain with memories that sustain us and connect us. Memories that make us smile and laugh. To tell the stories and look at pictures even if we start sobbing everytime we open the album. Some days, it just feels right to sit quietly and share our new stories with them, as if they were right here. Other days their absence consumes us. Our challenge is to feel their presence besides us in this new way.