

Cherish the MOMENT

Brief encounters of the present kind

BY MARIA BEIDER, MSW



From left to right: Dr Geoffrey Baum, a”h, with his brother, Professor Michael Baum (the author’s uncles) at Michael’s 70th birthday party.

A FEW WEEKS AGO, MY DEAR UNCLE, DR GEOFFREY Baum, the patriarch of our family, succumbed to our contemporary, common enemy, Covid. While he is one of many thousands to have lost his life to this horrific virus, I was personally heartbroken – not just for myself, but for my mother and her siblings, who could not see him face-to-face for months, and for my aunt, his wife, who was also suffering from the virus at home and was unable to say goodbye to him personally either. My cousins, his children, were lucky enough, unlike many other recently be-

reaved people, to be allowed to visit him in the hospital ward and be with him for his last few waking hours. But was this really a privilege or a cruel twist of fate?

In order to understand the complexity of this question, allow me to share some

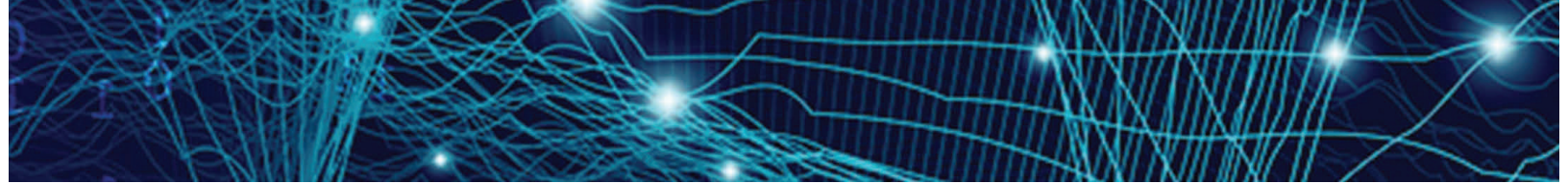
background. My uncle was described by every person I heard speak about him as being full of compassion for his fellow man, consistently radiating warmth, always smiling, kind, and fully present. This is exactly how I experienced him too. It was his ability to be present, which I particularly want to focus on.

He was a general medical practitioner for well over forty-five years and was remembered with such fondness by his patients, as being the kind of doctor who was fully present and concerned in healing the whole person, both body and mind. He was the quintessential traditional doctor, who would pay home visits, attending to his patients in the middle of the night.

Having retired over twenty years ago, his patients still asked how he was and kept in touch with him via his niece, who took over his medical practice. So herein lies the tragic irony. The ultimate caregiver, who was present for every human being he encountered in his many years on earth, was denied the care and presence of his loved ones on his death bed. Instead, my cousins, while sparing us some of the more painful traumatic details of their experience, did share that they were dressed in full personal protective equipment (PPE) and were barely recognisable to their father. Their love and care that was written all over their faces could barely be detected through the inhuman barriers of masks and visors.

Somehow, they managed to improvise given the difficult situation, by staging an almost theatrical scene (which my uncle himself suggested) – in sharing a last whiskey l’chaim with him. The big sweeping gesture of raising a toast was actually a very plausible way for him to engage with his children and

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feel their presence and love. He ingeniously afforded them a way to communicate through the masks by employing dramatic movement. He indicated that the whiskey was for kiddish and then they sang 'shalom aleichem' for him, again both symbolic, grand visual and auditory actions which he could recognise and hear through the muffling and disguise of the unforgiving PPE.

Another friend of mine, who had a similar hospital experience just a few days ago, lamented to me that the oxygen machine was so noisy that she was inaudible to her dying father.

Other Covid sufferers have not been fortunate enough to have a loved one pay them a visit during their last hours. Frightened, cut off, and alone, they have also had to contend with a lack of bedside manner, since doctors and nurses are overstretched, stressed out, and whose kind, compassionate faces are hidden beneath a layer of fabric and plastic, further dehumanising their experience. My heart also goes out to these self-sacrificing medics who are unable to display the concern they so wish to share.

These stories brought home for me just how priceless it is to be able to sit in the physical presence of another, to hear a loved one's voice and to behold his countenance.. There is a profound simplicity in being in the presence of another. This revelation was particularly poignant for me since being present is at the core of the therapeutic relationship.

Judaism recognises the value in human presence. One function of shiva, the seven-day mourning period that follows the death of a close relative, is to provide comfort by sitting with the mourner and just being present for them.

My cousins privately expressed to me how painful it was to leave the funeral and go back to a quiet house with no visitors to surround them in an embrace of nurturing containment and human warmth. The Zoom format was a bitter-sweet experience for them. While hundreds of people had the opportunity to gather virtually from all

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over the world (myself included) and recount stories and memories, and speak about my uncle's many virtues, the mourners, however, felt they were denied the up close and personal experience of real-life human contact. The Zoom shiva was not able to compensate. In fact, at times, it was awkward and mechanical as people tried to communicate and declared, "Can you hear me?" while others interjected, "You need to unmute yourself, dear."

In contrast, at a shiva it is customary to sit in silence until one is addressed by the mourner. This is somewhat of a tall order over Zoom. Moreover, the subtle nuances of body language, empathy, and social cues that reflect sensitivity, such as leaning in or nodding, are lost over a screen shared with another twenty-four little boxes (and that's just on one page)!

Human beings have a basic need to relate to others and connect and, in doing so, can create meaning and sense. The dialogue between two people is where mutual and constructive encounters (known as co-creation) can take place. One cannot do it in isolation.

Nelson Mandela, a man who experienced solitary confinement more than once, describes the wretchedness of solitude: "There is no end and no beginning; there is only one's mind, which can begin to play tricks. Was that a dream or did it really happen? One begins to question everything." What Mandela seems to convey is that the

presence of another is vital for one's sanity. Furthermore, it seems that the presence of the other confirms one's very own existence. This is somewhat reminiscent of Adam in the Garden of Eden, until Eve's late arrival.

Humans are dependent on one another and how much more so during times of grief. It seems clear that the mourning process is aided substantially by the presence of the attentive comforters.

If we cannot be physically present during this time of grief, we must make an extra effort to reach out privately and express empathy and compassion for our fellow friends, family, and neighbours who are mourning their loved ones in inhumane conditions and sometimes in isolation.

One of the last acts of caregiving my uncle demonstrated was to muster up the strength to sit up in his hospital bed and wave goodbye to a woman who was being removed from his ward because she was moving into a place of recovery. Right up until the very end, he was seeking to connect with the others even for a fleeting moment of mutuality. I imagine that the wave of his hand was loaded with meaning, albeit a poor substitute for what he had wanted to communicate to her.

My sincere hope for all of us is that we will take on this beautiful legacy of desiring to engage fully with the other and that, by being present and attentive, we will cherish many moments of mutuality in our encounters. ■