Timely Words--Thoughts for Parashat Emor

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Emor

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

People have made a wry play on the names of this and the previous two Torah portions: Aharei Mot Kedoshim Emor: After death…call them holy. This points to the practice of glorifying people after their deaths. Faults are ignored, virtues are magnified, eulogies turn ordinary people into saints.

But the phrase also has another meaning. When people have passed on, it seems that only then do we begin fully to appreciate their virtues. During their lifetimes, we took them for granted; or underestimated them; or didn't demonstrate the love and respect they deserved. After death, we start to relate their holiness, their goodness, their wisdom.

Some years ago, I gave a lecture to health care workers in a hospital in Baltimore on my book, "The Orphaned Adult." The talk included discussion of the mourning process and how we remember our parents once they are no longer with us. After my lecture, lively discussion ensued among the participants.

One of them, a Catholic nun, related a story about when her mother was growing older and frailer. Instead of waiting to eulogize her at a funeral, the family called together relatives and friends to a party to celebrate the mother's life…while she was alive! They shared memories, expressed love and appreciation, and all in an environment that was happy and uplifting. The nun told us how happy her mother was to feel the love, hear the kind words, and sense that her life had had so much positive impact. Why wait for a funeral to express our love? Why not celebrate

the lives of our loved ones while they are alive and when our words can validate their lives?

I have often thought that eulogies come too late. All the nice words of praise and appreciation come after the person has died. If the deceased person had heard these same words while still alive, it would have been a source of ineffable happiness.

When I was in college, a friend of mine had a cousin who was killed in a gang war in the Bronx. At the Shiva home, family members reminisced about the dead young man: yes, he was tough, but he had a good heart; he got mixed up with the wrong people, but he had so much good in him; he was respectful to his parents and kind to friends and neighbors. Everyone seemed to find something good to say about him. My friend stood up and said with great emotion: if he had heard these things from you while he was still alive, maybe he would still be alive! All I ever heard you say about him was that he was a no-good hoodlum, a bad person, a violent person. There was a great hush in the room. Indeed, that young man's self-image and self-esteem might have been very different if he had heard loving words of praise during his lifetime.

Sometimes people go through life without ever knowing how much others love them, admire them, see virtue in them. I have been at many funerals where mourners have said: I wish I would have told him how much I loved him; I wish I would have done more for her; I wish I had let him/her know how much I cared.

Why don't we realize how powerful words of praise can be and how painful words of condemnation and ridicule can be? Words of sincere appreciation can change a human life. A loving hug, a pat on the back, a smile, a genuine compliment--these things can give joy and meaning to those we love, respect and admire.

We ought not wait for eulogies at funerals to express our feelings. We ought to live as loving, thoughtful and sharing human beings who honestly cherish and value our family and friends--and who let them know how much they mean to us.