

"Your Unfinished Business"
Inaugural Speech of the "Between the Masses"
Guest Speaker Series
By Chaplain Barry E. Pitegoff, BCC
at St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church
Brooklyn Heights, New York City
Sunday, October 6, 2019

Introduction of Speaker: Barry Pitegoff received his BCC or Board Certified Chaplain credential on May 8, 2019 at his first appearance before his Board, NAJC, which stands for Neshama (the) Association of Jewish Chaplains. It is no small feat to pass your board certification at your first appearance. Since then, Barry has served on two panels themselves interviewing and certifying future candidates for certification.

Barry transformed from the world of thousands of hours of volunteer chaplaincy at hospitals, hospices, and prisons, to being a Board Certified Chaplain over six years. That journey included earning a second master's degree, studying at two years' of hospital internships, and 2,000 hours of employment before sitting for the Boards.

During the 30 years that Barry was also a volunteer chaplain, his main primary worldly career was Vice President of Tourism Research for the state of Florida, the largest industry in the state with the largest tourism. Before that, Barry was at

Publishers Clearing House on Long Island designing advertising research models and statistical analysis tests

Barry presently serves (the technical words are "is employed") at two Catholic-rooted hospitals in what he calls "Lower Upper State" New York.

Barry describes himself as the rare breed of a "bounce-back." A nice Jewish kid, he grew up in New York City, then after his first Master's Degree, he relocated to what he calls "G-D's second promised homeland to the Jewish people" - - the State of Florida - - and then came back to New York - - vertically, he adds. We're glad he did.

Meet Barry Pitegoff.

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Good Morning. It is a blessing to be your kickoff speaker for the "Between the Masses" speaker series.

The role of today's professional Board Certified Chaplain is simply to be there for you, and to be simple is to be difficult and challenging. We had a saying in statistics, in math, and in engineering, which I still use all the time. It is, "The solution, when determined, will be elegant ... or simple." The solution to the proof should be in six steps, not sixteen. I truly feel that life

is simple, we make it complex and complicated. Life is simple, we make it complex and complicated.

The philosopher Kierkegaard wrote, "The tragedy of life is that it must be lived going forward but can only be understood looking backwards." This is one of my favorite quotes.

As a professional chaplain, I help you to look backwards, to make meaning out of your life, listen to your angst, listen to your stories, celebrate your joys, soften your sorrows, transform your thoughts into prayers, so, together, the speed bumps on your journey will be just a little softer, whether you are my patient, or my patient's friend, or my patients family. As a Professional Chaplain, my greatest honor is to do this across all faiths and with those who currently profess no faith. Surely, something helps to give meaning to their lives. Tell me more about that..

I mentioned at the outset that I am a trends person. What do I see as the three great trends affecting what you do ... and what I do ... today? One: we, and I mean all of us, Americans, and foreigners, Christians and people brought up in all the other faiths, are becoming what we refer to as "unchurched." Even we Jewish theologians describe the world as "unchurched." "Un-synagogued" just does not have the resonance. Pews are emptier, membership declines, we buy the rituals on the cafeteria

plan. Want to get married? Hire an officiant for that. Want to be buried? Hire an officiant for that.

Two, we have a national epidemic of loneliness. I refer you to studies published by Cigna research and the National Health Service of England. The Grant and Glueck study (1939-2014) put it simply: "If you have healthy relationships, your chances of survival increase by 50%."

And, Three, we continue to be a death-denying nation. One of the byproducts of the skyrocketing rate of cremation has been the opportunity to avoid having the deceased at her or his own funeral, opening up all sort of possibilities of new "celebration of life" rituals, more death-denying.

Congratulations on your new program of "Between the Masses." I accepted the invitation because your program can help to counter these three sad trends.

Some truths have become self-evident over the years. One is the fundamental principle of demographics, that each day we become one day older. The second is that every hospital patient with whom I sit, and I repeat every hospital patient with whom I sit, with very few exceptions, did not expect to be in the hospital yesterday. There is a whole life that has been interrupted suddenly, usually many lives that have been interrupted. Share

that with me. I will help you to make meaning. I will listen to your story. I will help you to see it. In the ten-page autobiography required for my certification packet, I mentioned that I had studied three languages: French, Hebrew and Tears. Tears is the language of the Chaplain. In every hospital, we must know where the boxes of tissues are kept. If I wore a lab coat, it would be filled with tissues.

To do this I need you to open up to me. I know this is not easy. And the area we are going to talk about today is the one that is hardest. It sits in the back of our minds and it is easy to ignore it, too easy. The common theology that we as Jews and you as Catholics share include the Book of Psalms. Search your memories and bring forth two excerpts from the Book of Psalms. One is from Psalm 103:15 ... which reminds us, "Our days are like grass". The other is from Psalm 90, my favorite Psalm, which implores us, in Verse 12... , "Teach us to number our days so that we may get a heart of wisdom." Teach us to number our days. Indeed. May this be so for us.

So, let's get serious and talk about preparing for our days being numbered. I am not talking about what happens after our days as we know them. That is for your priests, and my rabbi colleagues, minister colleagues, imams and other clerics. I am

talking about preparing for your finite number of days. I am talking about looking deep inside yourselves, very deep into your personal mirror.

“I am the Master of my Fate. I am the Captain of My Soul,” William Ernest Henley taught us in his poem, “Invictus,” a favorite quote of Nelson Mandela. Trust me, it is likely to come upon you suddenly ... decisions for yourself or for those closer to you ... if you have not thought about them.

I have a wonderful colleague, Rabbi Elliott Cosgrove, at the Park Avenue Synagogue in Manhattan. On Yom Kippur, the holy day of sacrifice, introspection, and repentance that occurs in the fall. On that day, many Rabbis deliver a sermon about just my topic today. On Yom Kippur in 2013, Rabbi Cosgrove titled his sermon, “The Fate That Awaits Us all.” Rabbi Cosgrove spoke that day so eloquently on this matter, as he usually does, that I will just quote from his 2013 sermon: “ ... It strikes me that there are really only two things that can be said about death with absolute certainty. First, that it will happen, and second, that we don’t know when. ... But there also exists a third truth about our relationship to death, observed across time and traditions, and that is our disinclination to engage with the aforementioned first two truths. ...”

CASE: The fire department chief for the ambulance shouted out, "17 year old girl, went off the road, hit a tree, and then, turning to the slot in trauma bay where the chaplain stands, me, the ambulance captain says, "Intentional."

CASE: A 17 year old boy winds up in the emergency room because he breaks up with his girl friend and tries to kill himself. A Christian, the boy turns to me and asks, "Chaplain, will G-D forgive me for this?"

CASE: A man in his 60's leaves his 80's something mother's hospital bedside and asks me, "Where shall I bury mom when she dies? Mom wants to be buried in Cemetery A near Person X, but my sisters in the room want mom to be buried in Cemetery B near Person Y."

CASE: A patient in the Intensive Care Unit, the ICU as we call it, sees me pass and asks me to come over. "Chaplain," he asks, "When can I tell my daughters I am dying?"

CASE: A husband went to play golf and died on the golf course. CASE: A husband left his wife and son, flew across the country for his hobby of parachute jumping and collided with another jumper; his chute never opened. CASE: A patient is alone, and dying, and the daughter, speaking to me from 1,500 miles away, asks me to arrange a priest for Anointing/Sacrament

of the Sick/ what you used to call "Last Rites." Many faiths have them and the beautiful Jewish last confession is about as old as the Catholic ritual. That patient will die alone unless a nurse or a volunteer helps. Some hospitals and hospices even have formal NODA programs, an abbreviation for No One Dies Alone, volunteers trained for that one role.

These cases I just shocked you with are all excerpts from my many experiences. Actually, my calling, or epiphany as you would say, into chaplaincy came in the first few months of my thirty years as the volunteer manager of the Jewish cemeteries in Tallahassee, Florida, when I realized I needed to do more for my clients than just sell the spaces.

There was a wonderful Broadway musical, back in the 1960's, I believe it began as an off-Broadway musical, called, "Jacques Brel is Alive and Well and Living in Paris." A song from the show goes like this: "The old folks never die. They just put down their heads and go to sleep one day."

Well, not so. Sadly, for many of us, the mind and body will not check out at the same time; it will usually be the mind first.

That is why I am going to ask you today to face the concrete steps we all need to do to face for the end of days as we know them. I guarantee you that doing the tough work now will make

it easier for you later and for those who cherish you, later. Let's look at five steps.

FIRST - - You need to have a health care surrogate form. This is a document that says when you cannot make health decisions for yourself, who will make the health care decisions for you? And who will be number two? It sounds simple, because often the surrogate is only needed for a short while. Not every time is finality. But it is not simple. Why? Because you need a surrogate who will make the same decisions as you would if you could. You need a surrogate who will act as if he or she is you, not them, who will be influenced by your thinking, not theirs. And we know from the research that the surrogate is bound to be influenced by her or his own biases, medical and spiritual. So, you need to do more than just designate the surrogate, you need to discuss this with your surrogates.

CASE: I had a gunshot victim whose wife said on the phone to me that she would pay for the funeral but she adamantly did not want to make his health care decisions. CASE: I had an older woman who shared with three chaplains, on separate occasions, and we documented it, that she was brought up Catholic, she wanted "No Religion" on her chart, and that she wanted no anointing if it came to that. When the patient could no longer

make decisions for herself, her two adult daughters demanded anointing. It became an Ethics Consult.

As a side issue, one of the horrible conditions we deal with way too often, is called estrangement. This is when someone who should be morally, ethically, genealogically, and spiritually responsible for you, like an adult child, decides to cut themselves off and not speak to you for one, two, five, ten, twenty, or more years. Chaplains are not immune to estrangement. I pray for Hollywood endings, but have learned that they are rare and far between.

On the other hand, I recently had a beautiful case of an elderly Catholic male patient, very alert, on palliative care, who accepted that he was terminal more than his family did. I spoke with him that his Catholic faith had a beautiful ritual of Anointing or Sacrament of the Sick that sadly too many patients who need it do not fully comprehend that it is being given to them. He thought that over and requested that I send a priest the next day for the anointing. The lesson is clear: when you discuss your wishes with your health care surrogate, be sure to discuss and write down both your health care wishes **and** your spiritual care wishes.

SECOND - - After you designate your health care surrogates, you make your wishes for them to follow in a form that has many names. It may be called "Advance Directives." It may be called a "Living Will." It may be called "The Five Wishes" from a group in Tallahassee, a city we lived in a long time. The nurses or social workers, or even the chaplains may discuss "DNR" or "DNI" forms. These are Do Not Resuscitate or Do Not Intubate forms. These are harsh sounding forms and they are hard, because they are phrased in the "Do Not" parlance. The medical people will tell you that they take you from being a "full code," take all life prolonging measures, to being a "restricted code."

I am part of a small movement to replace the harsh sounding DNR and DNI forms with an "AND" form, where AND stands for "Allow Natural Death." I will be writing a major research paper on this in 2020.

I had a Rabbi who would begin his Yom Kippur sermon each year with, "Finish your unfinished business." He would encourage the congregants to complete their Health Care Surrogate and Advance Directives Forms before others had to do that for them. I am a cheerleader for that.

THIRD, FOURTH AND FIFTH: But ... I have now done this for so long ... and I have made "End-of-Life" care a specialty, that

I know there is so much more that I want you to consider in your unfinished business ... that I want you to consider now ... now that I have captured your attention on the first two forms. There are three more steps I want you to consider. These three steps involve searching your soul. They help answer the awe-filled, awe-struck question, "What makes a good death," by transforming it into, "What makes a good death for me, for me?"

One of the many books I recommend on this journey is Dr. Atal Gawande's Being Mortal. Dr. Gawande is a professor and surgeon at Harvard. He says at the beginning of his book that he makes money by going into the operating room and he makes no money by not going into the operating room, but there are times when it is better not to go. Dr. Gawande's profound comment in the book is why should you be dying surrounded by what he calls "library silence," punctuated only by, "Dr. Smith, call 5017?" Ask yourself, instead, what do you want to be surrounded by when you are dying?

If you remember the wonderful movie, "Philadelphia," about lawyer Tom Hanks dying of AIDS, you can find on "You Tube" the scene where he is walking with his IV pole to the music of his favorite opera aria, explaining it to a befuddled Denzel Washington, acting as his attorney.

So, ask yourself, please, what do you want to be surrounded by when you are dying? What gives you pleasure in life? What is its recipe combining special people, special music, scenes out the window, and art or poetry to be recited?

I will not be the shoemaker's child without shoes. My wife and I just redid our living wills with the phrase, "These are what brings me pleasure. Please surround me by ...". In my case, it includes the music of Tchaikovsky especially his Fifth Symphony and Beethoven's "Pastoral Symphony," so appropriate for one involved in Pastoral Care. Perhaps you will share some of your deepest thoughts on that during the Q&A.

So far, I have asked you to consider your Health Care Surrogate, your Advance Directives, and What You Want to be Surrounded With. I even hypothesize that if you tackle number three first, then numbers one and two will be easier, because you have been facing your own mortality as we name it.

Number Four of the Five I will introduce you to is the beautiful Ethical Will. It is a gift to the world from my Jewish tradition, but it has recently been picked up by many other faith traditions and has resonance for those professing no faith tradition.

Look at it this way. Some of you here today have children or grandchildren. You are blessed that way. Others are blessed in other ways, perhaps with special friends. If you have children or grandchildren, imagine you wrote down what is important to you in life, what is really important to you in life, in the form of a letter to them we call an Ethical Will. Imagine, if you will, that we ask the same children or grandchildren to write down, if they can, what they think is truly important to you without reading your draft Ethical Will. Then, compare the two letters or essays. If the research holds, the two letters will be very different. The children or grandchildren will not know what you truly want them to know is important to them. That is why you write the Ethical Will. I have guided many through that exercise in Adult Education classes at synagogue.

There are many good books with guided exercises and examples. Here are some examples:

1. From Samuel, age 70, who died of lung cancer about a month after completing his ethical will (from CelebrationsOfLife.net):

Dear Barry and Sandy:

A few words to express my feelings and thoughts while time is running out on me.

Some standard values that I have basically lived by throughout my life, are that I have always believed in honesty and advocated truthfulness. I cherish the family with all my heart. I always felt that I gave of myself to everyone in the family. The satisfaction and gratification that I received in return is in the accomplishments of my children. No father could be as proud as your father is of you. Throughout your lifetime so far, you have more than exceeded my greatest expectations. You continue to move forward in a manner that makes me love you more and more. I'm proud to say "that's my son!" (Source: <https://connectingdirectors.com/54481-ethical-wills-part-three-examples-of-ethical-wills>)

2. From the Ethical Will of Sholom Aleichem, whose stories inspired "Fiddler on the Roof": "At my grave, and throughout the whole year on the anniversary of my death (what we call the *Yahrzeit*), my remaining son and my sons-in-laws, if they are so inclined should say *kaddish* for me. [*Kaddish* is a Jewish memorial prayer.] And if they do not wish to do this, or if it is against their religious convictions, they may fulfill their obligation to me by assembling together with my daughters and grandchildren and good friends to read this testament and also to select one of my stories, one of the really merry ones, and read it aloud in whatever language they understand best [Sholom Aleichem wrote in Yiddish] and let my name rather be remembered by them with laughter than not at all." **["... let my**

name rather be remember by them with laughter than not at all...”] This, my friends, is the essence of an Ethical Will.

Get the picture? I hope some of you will have the courage to tackle your own Ethical Wills.

Finally, number five. Number five is related to numbers one through four we have already discussed. Number five comes from the Forward, Prologue and Thesis of David Brook’s wonderful book, The Road to Character. Mr. Brooks, who writes for The New York Times, challenges us at the beginning of this book with the questions: Are we describing ourselves by what he calls our “Resume Virtues” or are we describing ourselves by what David Brooks calls our “Eulogy Virtues?”

When someone asks you who you are, is your “elevator speech” that you are a lawyer, or an accountant, a teacher or a doctor? Yet, if you were awake at your funeral, would you be described as, “He was kind to his children and house of worship,” or “She baked dinner fo her neighbor and sat with her when she returned from the hospital?” Why aren’t we describing ourselves by what David Brooks calls our “Eulogy Virtues?”

On August 22 of this year, just a few short months ago, CBS news reported a quote from former basketball star Bon Cousy who, incidentally, went to my high school. CNS reported the

quote from Mr. Cousy when he was presented with the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Trump. Not knowing what I just shared with you but saying the same thing by speaking from the heart, Cousy said, "If I had known I was going to be eulogized, I'd have probably done the only decent thing and died for you."

I have participated in many end-of-life classes where the professor assigns the students to write their own eulogy or obituary. It is a good exercise, especially if it is revisited over and over again.

So, now, we have all five steps I ask you to consider today in looking in the mirror and addressing your "unfinished business."

1. Who will make health care decisions for you when you cannot make the for yourself?
2. What health care and spiritual ritual decisions do you want to them to make? And be sure they know this and are on board with you.
3. What do you want to be surrounded by as your life as we know it begins to fade?

4. What values do you live by, that are important to you, that you want your close ones to know and take to heart so write them down as an Ethical Will.

5. and, Five, look inward and elucidate your resume virtues and your eulogy virtues. If they differ, can you get them closer? Do you want to get them closer? How do you want to describe yourself, by your resume virtues or by your eulogy virtues? What are they? Who else knows them?

This is one of my roles as a professional, Board Certified Chaplain, along with all my colleagues. Any of us can help take you on this journey of the five steps.

Recently, we celebrated the 25th anniversary, or what we call in Yiddish, the Yahrzeit, of the last Rebbe or spiritual leader of the Chabad Chasidic movement based at 440 Eastern Parkway here in Brooklyn. He was Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson. There were many tributes to him on his 25th Yahrzeit. My favorite came from Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the recently retired Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom. Rabbi Sacks' speeches are easily accessed on Rabbi Sacks' own web site and on YouTube.

In his tribute to Rebbe Schneerson, Rabbi Sacks described Rebbe Schneerson by saying, "The most transformative moments in life occur when someone cares more about you than about

himself.” Let me repeat that, as it is so precious to me. “The most transformative moments in life occur when someone cares more about you than about himself”

As a professional chaplain, I cannot resist the opportunity to offer a blessing or to offer a prayer. And may you be blessed to encounter people who care more about you than about themselves. Maybe it happens only once, twice, or three times in your lives. May you be blessed to be aware of those moments. And to bestow those moments on others.

The British philosopher Sir John Lennon taught us, “Life is what happens when you are busy making other plans.” Don’t let that happen to you.

May you be blessed with G-D’s angels, *melachim*, as we say in Hebrew, who introduce themselves to you with their name and with, “I am here to help you.” May you be blessed with angels who, for one brief moment in time, show you that they care more about you than about themselves. And may you notice that and may you be blessed to do the same for others.

Thank you for inviting me to share these thoughts with you today, Perhaps you have some questions now.

continued...

Additional Resources

THANK YOU for inviting me to speak at your church. Since I delivered the speech in a more casual, extemporaneous style, some items in my prepared text might not have been covered. You will find them in the printed speech above. Those who came raised excellent questions and asked for links for more resources, especially resources I made reference to that were in the casual talk but may not be in the speech itself. I have prepared a list of those resources below. I am grateful to Kerin for arranging my talk. Kerin can forward any additional questions to me to help you. I pray that my talk helped you and helped your church. I would love to return some time to learn with you more, e.g., a workshop class on writing ethical wills. I extend my appreciation to your priests for their warmth and hospitality. It was a pleasure to meet them. Your church and its neighborhood are beautiful.

Darcie Sims, Ph.D., of blessed memory - - I had the honor of helping alongside Darcie at some conferences. She was a featured speaker often at Compassionate Friends, one of two support groups for people who have experienced the death of a child of any age. (The other is Bereaved Parents.) Darcie's great teaching is that the head and heart need to connect. For

example, when the doctor says “terminal cancer,” the head may know but it may take a while for the heart to know. When then both know is when more emotional support is needed. The same goes for hearing about a death. I used Darcie’s guidelines in designing my speech to introduce you to the five steps going from more head-involved to more heart-involved, and then suggested it might be easier for you to know follow the five steps in reverse. There are many of Darcie’s wonderful talks posted on [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com). Be sure to enter her name as Darcie Sims and not Darcy, which is another character. Here is one of the many opportunities to learn from her on [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OcS0j2N1t58>

Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks - - Rabbi Sacks just retired from being the Chief Rabbi of England, but he remains very active in speaking and on the web on this site and through Ted Talks. A good place to start is with his Ted Talks on YouTube. I used a very recent and a very favorite quote from Rabbi Sacks in my speech: “The most transformative moments in life occur when someone cares more about you than about themselves.” Here is a link to a 2017 Ted Talk by Rabbi Sacks. There are many of his talks on YouTube and on Rabbi Sacks’ own web site. (I subscribe to his FREE e-subscription to his web site postings.)

JewishSacredAging.com - - This is the project of my friend and colleague, Rabbi Richard Address of Cherry Hill, NJ. He has resources on his site. He has FREE e-subscriptions. Every few days, he will e-mail you a commentary on the Torah portion of the week (Five Books of Moses), or a agues commentary on Jewish Sacred Aging (If you enter my name in the search box on his home page, you will see the articles I have contributed so far there), and every week or so, he will e-mail you about a 40 minute podcast interview he has conducted with one or more people in he style of Terry Gross "Fresh Air" on NPR. I highly recommend

<https://jewishsacredaging.com/som-pod-8-30-2019-rabbi-david-levin-and-rabbi-simcha-raphael-hosts-of-the-philadelphia-death-cafe/>

This is a recent interview Rabbi Address did with two rabbis who facilitate "death cafes" around the country, which are small informal discussion groups on end of life issues. If you would like to do one of your own sometime, please listen to this podcast first, then you are welcome to invite me back to help facilitate it and find questions. Hint: I find listening to these podcasts a great way to multitask for 40 minutes while doing aerobics like pounding and ellipse.

On the jewishsacredaging.com web site home page there is a link to resources. I think on page 16 resides two poems/prayers for a ritual to say to yourself when you have to remove a wedding ring. The first one, "With this ring..." I wrote in 1992 when my first wife died and

a rabbi recommended that I write a ritual where one did not exist. I do not know the origin of the second one.

Rabbi David Wolpe - - A great author, a great rabbi, a great teacher, with a great synagogue on Los Angeles. I probably mentioned that one of his great books has as its title and theme one of the many names for G-D in the Bible: "Healer of Shattered Hearts."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gIohmGj5qgk>

This is a link to Rabbi Wolpe at a Ted x talk at Emory University. Rabbi Wolpe's brother is the director of the Ethics Institute at Emory. Rabbi Wolpe, at a speech we went to at Temple Emanu El Manhattan recently, quoted his brother as saying that all ethical consults are never yes/no, black/white, but rather a balance of values. I have had the honor of sitting on Ethics Committees at Hospices and Hospitals and he is absolutely right. I highly recommend this 15 minute Tedx talk by Rabbi Wolpe, where he heads towards a main theme: saying something that changes someone else's life, and noticing them and telling and thanking others when that has happened to you. In my autobiography essay for certification, I cited the two examples of twice, at two different times, someone said to me, "I am - - - and I all help you," and it changed my life. May you be blessed to give and receive such moments.

Ethical Wills - - Judaism's gift to the world. There are now many books on it, with Jewish themes, Christian themes, secular themes. It does not matter. It is your story you are gifting others through your writing. To me, the landmark book in the field is from 1991, so it may not be widely available: [So That Your Values Live On - - Ethical Wills and How to Prepare Them](#), by Rabbi Jack Riemer and Nathaniel Stampfer.

Thank you, again, and have blessed days ahead.

Chaplain Barry E. Pitegoff, BCC