

How The Soul Is Revealed After Death

By Michael Fine

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You hear stories about how the sense of people who died hangs in the rooms they lived in after they are gone: how their particular smell remains in their clothing or bedrooms after they die; how their furniture retains their shape, the cushions creased in a certain way, the upholstery worn in a certain way as if they were still there sitting in the room; how their books lined on a bookshelf retain something of their essence; how the house creaks the way it always did when they were alive and walking about. You hear stories of how birds, usually doves, or butterflies appear at a certain moment around the time of the person's death, as if their soul had entered a bird or butterfly which alighted and seemed to carry that soul aloft. Or there are sounds in a room, as the people they loved feel the presence of a lost loved one whose soul they sorely miss, leaving an empty place inside the person left behind, evidence that the soul is different from the self, and is made up of the presences of many people both living and dead.

This was different. Amy's mother died twenty-two years ago, when Amy herself wasn't finished yet, when she was just a girl, when she was just twenty herself. Their relationship was also unfinished. Her mother died before Amy was Amy yet, when Amy was still trying life out, putting on parts and styles and relationships to see what fit and then taking them off again.

Amy had a different life than her mother had. It was a different time. You didn't just do whatever you wanted any more, the way her mother's generation did. Actions had consequences. What you posted or was posted about you lived forever on the internet. You didn't get in a VW

minibus and drive cross country to see a Grateful Dead concert, go and live on a commune in Vermont, go off for a year to backpack around Europe, or go sing songs and carry signs about any and every cause that found its way to your doorstep: antiwar or civil rights or antinuke or ZPG, climate change not being a thing yet. You were purposeful and controlled and you made sure everything you did was well-thought out and well-capitalized, had a viable business model and that you had checked off all the boxes you needed to check off, if you were going to succeed in having the life you planned to have.

Elizabeth, Amy's mother, understood none of that. She was a woman of the sixties, a woman who wore flowing dresses and had long hair even after it went gray and then white, a woman who lived for poetry, the Grateful Dead and then jazz and great Classical music and flowers in your hair. That generation. The one that planned a revolution but made a big mess, the one that went off to the farm and got stoned while the fat cats ate the small mice and made global warming, made the rich richer and the poor poorer and created globalization which made everyone and everyplace look alike, all sisters and brothers in conformity, the denizens of big box stores and fast food chains, the culture that bulldozed farms and neighborhoods and left diseases of despair in their wake - left a culture of empty people, searching for meaning, all of which happened while Elizabeth and her generation were getting stoned and dancing naked under the moon.

The doctors and the lawyers were of no help whatsoever to Amy when Elizabeth died. The doctors and lawyers only wanted her to sign

forms or seek counseling or confide her sadness to them so they could comfort her or tell themselves that was what they were doing, though their motives were likely more complex than that. They didn't understand how much Amy hated their little town by the sea which got so lonely in winter, or what it meant to be unfinished, to be going down a road that suddenly ends and then have no way to get back to where you started. They didn't understand Amy's life or soul, which was casting about like a swimmer in deep water, searching for the bottom with her feet. They didn't understand what it was like to be a person who awoke at 3 am feeling about for the furniture in a dark room as she walked.

There was the house, of course, filled with her mother's things. There was a life insurance policy and even a little money, because her mother's people had come from money on one side, enough for her mother to live on if she chose but not so much as to give anyone airs or arrogance. The house was hers. The money went into a trust that paid Amy's living and educational expenses and would be hers when she turned thirty or at the time of the birth of her first child, whichever came first, Elizabeth remembering her own single motherhood, its joys but also its constraints, and remembered how that money and that house had allowed them a certain time and space to be together, as mother and daughter, uninterrupted.

Until they were, of course, interrupted by death.

So Amy ran. Call it what you like but the truth was that Amy wasn't ready to face adulthood and certainly wasn't ready to face adulthood on her own,

regardless of how disordered her relationship with her mother had become. Amy turned tail and ran away. She was living in Chicago then, a city her mother hated (San Francisco was ok. Montreal was good. Paris would have been fine. New Orleans, exotic but attractive. Austin was still okay in those days, perhaps, but too hot and in Texas after all. Miami, off the table.)

But Chicago? Amy might as well have picked South Bend or Ames Iowa. The committee on social thought? All the rigor that her mother lacked. Structure. Purpose. Hard work.

Amy listed the house for rent, fully furnished, and fled. A young couple with two small children, a teacher and a chef. She thought they'd last a year. It didn't matter. She just wanted out. She paid her mother's long time handyman Dick Armory to collect the rent, plow the drive, mow the lawn, pay the taxes and insurance and fix what broke - and send her what was left over.

Chronic stable tenants. The renters stayed twenty years. Below market rent for quite a house. So Amy didn't have to go there, in person or in her own mind.

And life happened. As it always does. Until it doesn't anymore.

Amy had a career as a photojournalist. Traveled the world. In and out of conflict zones. Captured the misery left behind by floods, tornadoes and hurricanes, the sad faces of the poor, which were usually yellow, tan, brown and black faces, their homes destroyed, picking through the

wreckage of what had been their lives, their often modest, non-descript but regular lives, the pictures for people in cities to see in the comfort of their living rooms so they could reflect on the misfortunes of others, their own luck, and go back to living in the world as it is, the rich getting richer, the poor staying poor, most people surviving and doing what they had always done, hating the status quo and desperately afraid of change.

Amy had affairs, usually brief, sometimes intense but never persistent, because she was never in one place very long, there always being a disaster someplace in the world, a place to go and frame someone else's life dramatically, so others could see into the souls of those who suffered. Or not. She fell in love rarely and each time experienced heartbreak, real heartbreak, periods when she couldn't see or think straight, when she tore into the depths of her own being, when she wanted all suffering, hers and everyone else's, to stop. But then the phone would ring, an assignment was given, the travel documents and air reservations handed to her in a manila envelope, at first, and then e-mailed to her as PDFs, later on, and then off she'd go, recovering herself in risk, in going to sketchy places where she was in actual danger, and defining herself in the eyes and skin tones of suffering others.

The rent came every month. Sometimes she'd drink it all in a weekend. Mostly she deposited it in an investment account, which sent her larger envelopes every month, reporting the results of her investments which rose and fell with the market but mostly rose over time, none of which really mattered to her, because she never opened those envelopes. They were stacked in the corner of her one-bedroom apartment in Adams-

Morgan, in Washington, a place that wasn't actually home but was a good place to dump her stuff.

The tenants had kids and raised their kids in the house. The kids went to the schools Amy had gone to. They went to high school. They left for college. Then the tenants decided to start a new life in North Carolina and moved away. Dick Armory died, at eighty-five, after having lived a long and full life, a life in which he always kept an eye out for Amy and took care of her from afar as he nursed the old house and its residents.

Suddenly the house, that place Amy knew about someplace inside her but pushed away, out of thinking and feeling, suddenly that house was empty. Sell it, Amy's friends said. Put it behind you. That's right, Amy said. I never go there. I never think about it. Maybe it's time.

The house creaked like it always did when Amy came across the threshold. Even new houses have personalities: some clean and austere, as if covered in Saranwrap, the surfaces protected from the air and all dirt; others manufactured and quirky, the furniture utilitarian and also manufactured, with little real identity, as if the house had been made on an assembly line of houses that all look alike, one of a gazillion garden apartments or condo developments where you can easily get lost and walk into the wrong house, even if you've been living in the same place for twenty years. Even

those places have personalities, albeit small ones – their own plants or wall hangings, their own pictures on the refrigerators, their own painting or posters on the wall which tell you a little about the people who live there now; their own gouges and dings on the surfaces and floors, their own particular paint jobs, a wall of orange or red, or a kid's room painted as a sky with clouds, paint telling about the people who have lived there in the past, the people who have come and gone.

Amy's house was still Amy's house. Or her mother's house. Or both. It was the place where Amy had grown up, the rooms that still inhabited her dreams, the halls and the drawers and the cabinets that held the things that appeared in her dreams and her memories. She still knew what spoon was in what drawer, or thought she did. How the furniture was arranged. How to navigate through the rooms in the dark. It still had the same smell – it smelled of pine and ocean air, because there were pine trees and arborvitae planted around the house, and they were tall enough now to make rooms that had once been full of light now shrouded in shadow -- but the house also smelled of face cream, coffee grounds, and a particular kind of lavender goat's milk soap Amy's mother used, bought from the goat dairy back in the woods, in Greene, run by two gay ex-nuns Amy's mother knew, back when people didn't talk about that sort of thing.

An easy chair in the living room had been moved, but it still had the old Victorian reading light suspended over it, the one with the fringed tan and dark red lampshade. The old mahogany coffee table had acquired some new dings, but the house, other than the lost light in the living room, was pretty much the same. The old Mission-style dining room table, and

her mother's collection of old library chairs surrounding that table. The impressionist paintings done by one of her mother's lovers on the wall – gauzy, pastel, but greens and blues and some orange and red, paintings that pull your eye to them, that made you focus, that were precise and calming at the same time.

The kitchen was still yellow. Light still flowed through the kitchen windows, which looked out on the yard, though bushes had grown up in front of the side windows. There were still stripped yellow curtains. The kitchen still smelled of vegetarian stews, vegetarian lasagna, and blueberry pie. Amy didn't go there though. Not yet. She saw it from the hall between the living room and the dining room. Then she walked upstairs.

The stairs to the second floor had their own familiar creak, despite the now-worn red Persian rug runner at Amy's feet. The massive oak banister retained its smooth finish. There was nothing Amy had loved more about this house, as a child, than walking down the stairs, one hand on the banister, which was cool to the touch, smooth as silk, and felt like it was solid enough to support the whole world.

The new people had boxed all Amy's things and left them for her in her closet, so her room felt hollowed out, just a shadow of its old self. The bed and the chair and the desk were the same. But there wasn't anything for Amy to walk in and remember – none of her old posters, no dolls or the hats she collected when she was a girl to rediscover, nothing that made her remember her past life and her old self as a child, recovered just by walking in.

I'll go through the boxes later, she told herself. I'll have to get a dumpster here. Talk to Goodwill about the furniture. The real estate people were coming to stage the house in two weeks, and they told her to move or get rid of the old furniture and cut down the trees that were blocking the light in the living room and kitchen. New people, people with money to spend who might come down from Providence or Boston or even up from New York because the beaches were so close, they'd want to see a house that didn't have a personality yet, a house full of light and with furniture that was impersonal but warm and welcoming, so they could invent a personality for the house that matched their own expectations, hopes and dreams.

Then Amy went back downstairs to the library. Where her mother's books were.

Few people understood that Amy's mother Elizabeth was a reader. A thinker. A poet. And to some, a muse. They knew Elizabeth as a jewelry-maker, first and foremost, and then a bit as a filmmaker, who made experimental films that questioned the existence of the material world, that hinted all experience was a dream – pretty wild stuff. Short films, thank goodness, so that no one had to suffer sitting through them, as the films and their ideas seemed too wild for some. Most men experienced Elizabeth as an object of their unrequited hope and impossible desires, her long graying hair and the twinkle in her eye (which was her curiosity, not her sensuality – though she was a sensuous person to be sure) and the

confidence with which she carried herself a distraction, to those who thought they had a firm grip on themselves, who believed their own propaganda, and an obsession, for the insecure and awkward, who were used to never getting what they wanted and had turned off wanting what they knew they'd never get after all.

Amy's experience of her mother was different, of course. Amy's mother had retreated into her own isolated world by the time Amy was born and occupied herself with her jewelry making and her books, and with the world she and Amy made together, or more precisely, in the bubble she had made for Amy, their own private world, in which each of them was the center of the world for the other.

It was May. The library was also dark now because of the boxwoods and azalea that had grown up in front of its window. The sun was starting to sink in the southwestern sky. Amy flicked on the overhead light, which was an old chandelier made to look like a candelabra that held six candles with shaped light bulbs where the candles belonged, and she tried to open the three windows that faced west. It was a struggle. They were old double hung four-over-three sash with storms behind them, and Amy wondered if they had been opened at all since her mother died, since there was no reason for anyone but her mother to come into this room, it's books and records so personal, so peculiar to her mother's taste. But the windows opened easily after becoming unstuck, their lead counterweights thumping behind the sash, the muffled screech of the hidden pulleys almost undetectable. Amy blessed Dick Amory for being the man he had

been, for not allowing anyone to paint over the windows, and for taking the windows apart and greasing the pulleys every few years.

The aluminum storms opened easily. Amy pulled down the screens, and then cool glorious moist sea air filled the room, carrying the pollens of the maples and the ash trees, the forsythia, and the lilacs, as well as the scent of seaweed and salt.

Where to start with the books? They were arranged in alphabetical order by author, in sections by the topics that mattered to Amy's mother. The fiction section took up most of one wall. The poetry section, half that but still huge. Feminism. Sociology and social thought. Anthropology. Criticism. Religion. Art history. Dictionaries of foreign languages. Maps and map books, from the days before the internet. London A to Z (but A to zed, as it was then pronounced). Paris. Rome. Krakow and Budapest. Zuruich. Alexandria. Venice. Tbilisi. Zagreb. Marrakesh. Dar Salem. Nairobi. Constantinople. Johannesburg. Sydney. And so forth. Elizabeth had stopped traveling when Amy was born, but she had never stopped imagining the lives of distant places or stopped telling Amy stories of the places she been and the many places she only imagined, where she knew someone and learned about the place from the letters of someone she had once known.

What a brilliant woman Amy's mother had been! People thought of her as a maker of trinkets most of her life, a person men came to see when there was a present to buy. Women came to see her when they wanted something for themselves, an adornment to objectify their hopes and

dreams, or the part of themselves they recognized but kept hidden, and they recognized that Elizabeth and her jewelry could help with that, so women held her in higher regard than men did. Everyone thought she had gone off the reservation when she started making these films that no one in Wakefield, South Kingston or even Providence understood, which made everyone even more respectfully confused when people in New York, Paris, Milan, Moscow, Tel Aviv, Austin, and Cannes seemed to think there was something there, and afforded her films considerable respect. Elizabeth didn't fit into anyone's category of what a woman should be, which should have made life difficult for Elizabeth and for Amy but didn't. At least not until the end.

Amy began to pull the books down, one at a time, starting with Feminism. Elizabeth had all those wild radical feminist books from the sixties. Shulamith Firestone. Ti-Grace. Kate Millett. Andrea Dworkin. Simone De Beauvoir. MacKinnon. Brownmiller. Morgan. Jill Johnston. All that stuff about the patriarchy, colonialism, racism, capitalism and all those grand illusions that writing books, having women's groups and telling truth to power was going to change anything, which it did and didn't do: all their critiques were right, of course, and all the marching and carrying signs made sense, if you were a writer or an academic. The books were dog-eared and underlined, their pages pockmarked by the little red and yellow stickers lawyers use, little plastic stickers with red and yellow arrows on them, which usually tell you to sign here or initial here.

Elizabeth understood and thought about all of it, and Amy herself understood and admired those ideas, in some portion of her soul, just because her mother acknowledged or referenced that thinking as Amy grew up, even if she never dwelled on it. Amy's mother lived her life as if the sturm and drang of that thinking made no difference at all. Capitalism continued unabated. Greed was everywhere. The patriarchy ruled. Racism had failed to evaporate. The world was still run by men in suits. Only now some of the men in suits were Black women (too few! Amy thought) and sometimes the suits are dresses or leisure suits or tee shirts and jeans. Perhaps one day the world will be run by people in drag who are all tan, Amy thought. But the world will still be run by someone, and usually to serve themselves.

Funny what sticks with you. Amy knew all that and thought that way because her mother taught her those ideas, not by sitting her down and explaining, exactly, but by living out what she said and thought day by day.

But marked up like this, who was ever going to want Amy's mother's books? Who knew about or cared about any of those ideas anymore? The world had moved on. Those ideas seemed dated and quaint, a footnote to the history of a culture that is unrelenting.

Perhaps there was a used bookstore that would take all the books at once. People were listening to records again. Amy looked over at her mother's record collection still neatly arranged the way it had been when Amy was a child, in alphabetical order. Perhaps some dealer in used

records would buy everything, the records and the books all together. Amy would still have to find a way to get everything boxed, though, and then men would come with a truck. She could hear their footsteps on the porch and wooden floors as they tramped through the house, their inelegant feet caring nothing about the kindness and wisdom that had lived in this house once. The thought of those men made Amy shutter.

She put the books she'd taken down back in their places on the shelves, not that anyone cared any more whether those books were put away correctly or not.

Then she climbed the stairs again.

A part of Amy never believed her mother had died by her own hand. It made no sense, not then, not now. Elizabeth was never a person who despaired. Elizabeth was her rock however difficult their relationship had become before Amy left for college. Her mother. Like life itself. Who would always be there, learning new things, having new ideas, exploring. Until she wasn't.

Her mother's bedroom hadn't changed despite the interlopers, despite the tenants who had made themselves at home there, who had slept in her mother's bed and likely loved there. Four poster bed. The view out the window to the salt pond. The little balcony above the trees. The needle point on the wall – needle point, not pictures or paintings or posters of folk musicians or political movements. The staircase up to the attic, where

Elizaeth worked, where she sat, perched over the known world, looking down, not out - where her mother sat and dreamed in beads and stones, in gold wire and hooks and clasps.

Men had come and gone in her mother's bedroom, decent men, more than not. Occasional outlaws, but even those were outlaws with a certain hurt dignity, more conventional than they looked when you got to know them, every one of them protecting something in their souls and afraid to risk disclosing who they really were and what they believed. Elizabeth, Amy's mother, wasn't afraid like that, not ever. Amy wondered how she did it. She wondered then and she wondered now. How could a person be so self-contained? So self-assured? How could Elizabeth love unconditionally the way she did? Carefully but without holding anything back. How had she been able to love Amy like that, how had she had the courage to bring up a child alone, in a place where doing that meant she would end up alone herself?

Her mother's things had been packed away in boxes and stored in the attic by Dick Armory, who built clothing racks there to hold her mother's dresses and winter coats.

The narrow stairs to the attic were unpainted pine. The banister was unpainted as well, just an old pine 2x6 nailed to the wall.

The sun was setting. The clouds on the horizon were rose colored, orange and red. Amy's mother's workroom floated above the trees. There were cobwebs in the corners and over the windows but Amy could still see

everything: the neighbor's houses, the white church, the salt pond, the cars on the roads nearby, their headlights on but still weak in the remains of the daylight, the salt pond, the old dark green wooden swing set next to the garage, the garden, or where the garden used to be, still fenced but now overgrown, and the grape arbor her mother built next to the stone wall in the back, overgrown as well. Mothballs, Amy thought. That's what I'm smelling. Dick Armory must have scattered mothballs up here to protect her mother's clothing until Amy could get home and sort everything out.

But then under the mothballs, a different scent, a scent that was warm, light and musky all at once. She's here, Amy thought. My mother is in this room.

She turned to look. And looked carefully in each corner of the room in turn.

The corners were dark but empty. Amy paused to listen. Nothing. Not even scuttling mice or the twitter of squirrels. She was too high up.

This was where my mother lived, Amy thought. This is who she was.

I'll never really understand her, Amy thought. I can't get her back.

The sun went behind a cloud. Dusk had fallen.

Amy switched on the overhead light and went back downstairs.

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