

WHEN DEATH COMES TO CALL

by Phyllis Chesler



2020 is the year in which hundreds of thousands of human beings died in a plague unleashed by Communist China and mishandled by dazed and un-informed countries everywhere.

The horrific global death toll had been a statistic, too overwhelming to process personally.

And then, Mr. Death hit closer to home. Within eight months and twelve days, I lost seven people, five of whom were very dear to me.

2020 is the year in which I lost Fred (January 18th); Channa (June 29th); Diana (July 28th); Helen (August 12th); my brother Jack (August 14th); Sher (September 9th); and my cousin Harriet (October 1st).

So many deaths, so close together, made it impossible for me

to mourn each death properly. Until I felt compelled to write this, I did not even realize how many deaths there were.

These deaths were also somewhat unreal, surreal. I attended only one in-person Memorial Service at the beginning of the year; all the rest were zoomed Memorials or gravesite funerals. Death was at a remove. It was reduced to a TV reality show, and with two exceptions, there was no pressing of the flesh, no in-person visits to the mourners.

Thus, I am memorializing them here.

January 18, 2020

First, my good friend Fred Feirstein, the playwright, poet, and psychoanalyst just up and died. He was visiting his psychiatrist when he suddenly keeled over and was gone. I thought: Was this his final and ultimate critique of psychiatry?

But how could this be, we just had dinner the previous week...

Fred—of the warm smile and the worn sneakers—how could this be? Fred. His cardiologist had just pronounced him in good enough health but Death, nevertheless, “kindly stopped for (him)” the very next day as he waited in yet another doctor’s office. A nurse pounded on his chest, the doctor tried mouth-to-mouth resuscitation but to no avail. Death had to take him by surprise, there was no way he would ever have “stopped for Death.”

Mr. Death left me quite alone for five months but then he came to call; actually, he came to stay.

June 29, 2020

Channa Uncyk was in her late nineties and she’d been sick for a long time. But still, she hung on, she refused to go, she would not give in. Of course, she was a Holocaust and forced labor camp survivor and so, she still fought Death as if he

were Hitler. She conducted herself as if she was indestructible. Like me, she was a Brooklyn “girl,” as is her daughter Pearl, who is my son’s mother-in-law and his wife’s grandmother. Channa revived my nascent Yiddish and always smiled—no, she beamed—when we talked. I did too. Channa was short and tough and funny and sharp and her three children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren loved her so. Channa used to call into to Sean Hannity’s program and was so much of a “regular” that he sent a condolence basket. Amazing. Touching. Passing strange. And, although we were quarantining, in this case, cheesecake in hand, I drove to far-off Brooklyn to pay a shiva call and we all sat in the backyard and dined on food sent by the family’s shul.

July 28, 2020

Dr. Diana Russell, a great feminist scholar and activist with whom I’ve worked since the mid-1970s, died quite unexpectedly. Suddenly, she was gone. Diana was from South Africa and her mother had been a British aristocrat. She was tall and had a wry sense of humor but she published many serious and important studies about the sexual violence women faced both at home, on the job, and in life. She published influential works about pornography—and co-organized the first-ever International Tribunal of Crimes Against Women, which took place in Brussels in 1976. She also published a work about South African Apartheid and about the women who courageously opposed it. She was one of them. Darling Diana was ill-treated by the academy and fell on economically hard times. But nothing ever stopped her. She was working on a multi-volume Memoir when she died. We spoke about half a dozen times a year, but year after year. I now wish that I had called her more often and more recently. Her work will forever speak for her “in the gates.” But *she* is gone. I cherished her—and she is forever gone.

August 12, 2020

Helen Freedman was a gallant and indefatigable warrior. She was a strong and passionate advocate for Israel. Over the years, we met at many demonstrations, she interviewed me and I interviewed her, and we developed a friendship and remained in each other's lives for more than fifteen years. Her office was nearby and she would sometimes call and just drop in. Helen would always visit me when I was recovering from surgeries. Above all, she was *kind*. She fiercely battled the cancer that would eventually kill her; she had no self-pity; and she continued to turn up at demonstrations even in a diminished state. I will always miss her bright and optimistic energy.

So many people have been part of the tapestry of my life, and that tapestry has been unraveling for a long time. Beloved figures have been fading away, disappearing, since the mid-1940s, when my maternal grandparents died and then, in 1967, when my own father died.

I refuse to remove the names and contact information of those who have died from my various lists. By now, there are many hundreds of names whom I still keep close to me, whose names I see whenever I consult my contact lists. It is my way of remembering them, of refusing to allow Death to part us.

August 14, 2020

Jack, one of my two brothers, died. We had not been in touch for the longest time. When he was eighteen years old, his motorcycle crashed and sent him into a six-week coma. After that, his personality changed and not for the better. After he tried to have me killed, and then sued me, I no longer tried to "save" him. He cut ties with everyone, did not speak to his grown children or to our other brother, moved away to make a new life. He was a terrifying wife and child abuser who left devastation in his wake and the rabbi who buried him believed him to be a good man. Had he only known the truth "he would have tried harder to get him to repent." My brother Jack, the little boy with shining curls who used to follow me around

when he was three years old, left his estate to eleven charities and not a penny, not a grosch, not a prutah, to his three children.

It is a myth that all Jewish families are close, warm, loving, and stable. Some families are downright dangerous and if one is lucky one flees them as soon as possible. I did. And I have always suffered from survivor guilt because my two younger brothers never made it out.

September 9, 2020

Sher Hite was a hugely successful feminist author and sex researcher. Sher was beautiful, charming, generous, and offbeat. Whenever she stayed with me, she'd visit the nearby thrift shops and buy vintage clothing. Once, she did not want to leave... enough said about that. Sher wanted to be remembered and taken seriously by feminists and often felt that that was not the case. She was very close to my darling Barbara Seaman (who is also dead—I hope they're enjoying each other's company wherever they may be). Ah, I remember Sher's Fifth Avenue ground floor duplex apartment right opposite Central Park, with its grand piano on which her first husband Frederick used to practice and perform. I remember her calling me to ask whether I thought an advance of \$850,000.00 was really enough for the paperback rights to *The Hite Report: A National Survey of Female Sexuality*. "Sher," I said, "hang up, take the money, and run." This was way back in 1976, just yesterday. I am so sorry she is gone, she was an innocent and whimsical presence here on earth.

October 1, 2020

My cousin Harriet, a beloved primary school math teacher, died on my birthday after having battled cancer for a good long while. I am eternally in her debt for how well she treated my eight-year-old son when he was a student at her school. Alas, alas, Jewish families... to my sorrow, she could

never get over my not having invited her to a family celebration. I thought she was close to my brother Jack and could not risk his turning up and creating a scene, since his ex-wife and daughters would be there. Despite all my explanations and apologies, she refused to talk to me ever again. But her death shocked and saddened me. I remember her older brother, Ken, who reached out to me so lovingly before he died of cancer; and I remember her parents well. I even remember when she and her younger brother Marc, (an exceptionally decent fellow), were born... just yesterday, a lifetime ago.

I lost a friend and gained some new ones in the wake of all these deaths.

I have only this to say: May they all rest in peace and may their families and loved ones be comforted.