

# LIVES LOST AND LEADERSHIP FOUND

## Lessons from Special Somebodies

IAN ZISKIN AND THE CONSORTIUM  
FOR CHANGE (C4C)



FOREWORD BY DR. JOHN W. BOUDREAU

ROUTLEDGE



## Chapter 1

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# The Presence of Absence

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### The Adam Bomb

My cell phone rang on a warm and sunny Saturday morning, June 10, 2023, just as I was about to begin my workout at home in Sag Harbor, New York. My 93-year-old mother was calling. Instantly, I knew something was wrong.

Most of us have experienced this kind of immediate and visceral sensation during a crisis. Something about the tone and intensity in my mother's voice, even before many words had spilled out, made me stop in my tracks.

"Adam thinks he is having a stroke and he's on his way to the hospital," she said. "He wanted to drive himself, but I told him he was crazy and to call an ambulance."

Hearing my 60-year-old younger brother's name, my first words were instinctively, "Did he?"

"Did he what?" my mother asked.

"Did he call an ambulance ... and which hospital is he going to?" I replied.

I could hear my mother's breathing stop for a moment before she cried, "I don't know, I don't know. What if he collapsed at home and was unable to call an ambulance?" At this point, I don't think I was breathing much better than she was.

If there was any good news to be had on this day, it was that despite his apparent stroke symptoms, my brother did manage to call an ambulance from his condo in the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia. And an hour or so later, my mother heard from the first responders telling her which hospital he was being taken to.

While all this was going on, I had already begun packing and making travel arrangements with my wife Sue's much-needed assistance. I was determined to get to Atlanta as quickly as possible. Before I left home, Sue put her hands on my shoulders, looked at me the way only someone who loves you can, and said, "Breathe." That turned out to be great advice.

To be perfectly honest, I do not remember much about my drive to JFK airport, my flight to Atlanta, or my drive to the hospital to meet my mother later that evening. It was mostly a blur and remains so.

What I do recall about my trip was repeatedly asking myself the same question: “Is this one of those strokes that are relatively mild, where the person is given some medication and physical and/or occupational therapy, and then goes on to live a relatively normal and healthy life? Or is this one of those strokes that are highly debilitating, where quality of life is significantly diminished, and the person requires constant care?”

It was neither.

By the time I arrived on Saturday night, hospital visiting hours were over and my mother was exhausted from a day of sitting with and worrying about my brother. So, despite my best efforts to get to him quickly, I was not able to see my brother until early the next day.

Arriving at the hospital Sunday morning with my mother, immediately we were accosted by two doctors at the doorway of my brother’s room. One blurted out, “It’s not a stroke. Based on the MRI we conducted of Adam’s brain, he has at least two brain tumors and probably more throughout his body. We will need to confirm that through additional tests. Either way, he is terminal and likely has less than six months to live.”

I remember thinking, “Well, good morning to you too, doctors.”

Understandably, my mother did not take the news well and I did my best to keep her from collapsing next to her walker since the doctors did not have the common sense to invite her to sit down before dropping this “Adam Bomb” on us. Even though I thought my head might explode, I had two things to do first. One was to find a chair for my mother. The second was to say hello to my brother since I had not had the chance to see him prior to being intercepted by these two well-meaning but remarkably insensitive individuals.

The next five days involved a shitstorm of tests and more tests, followed by bad news and more bad news. As suspected, my brother had tumors throughout his body, including a very serious melanoma on his leg that had gotten out of control. The official diagnosis was metastatic cancer. The official prognosis went from less than six months to less than six weeks to less than one week to live. Thankfully, despite my brother’s rapidly declining condition, he and our mother and I did somehow manage to share some laughs.

A few days into this ordeal, I had to do perhaps the most difficult thing I have ever done. I sat on my brother’s bed, held his hand, looked into his eyes, and told him, “You are very sick, and you are not going to be with us much longer.” To make matters worse, I think he understood me, but I cannot be 100% sure. The pressure on his brain from the tumors was causing him to go in and out of consciousness and he was beginning to suffer from periodic seizures. He was also being heavily medicated to manage the pain. (I choose to believe he heard me based on his reaction, but I also believe he already suspected what was coming.)

After five days in the hospital, as his life span shrank faster than a popped balloon, we decided, along with the doctors, to move Adam from the hospital to a hospice facility. There, over a three-day period, his life expectancy declined

further from one week to a matter of hours. Adam died even more quickly than expected, shortly after midnight on June 18, 2023.

Here and gone.

The 30-minute drive to the hospice facility to say goodbye to my deceased brother on behalf of my mother and me felt like a trip to another planet. It was a mishmash of complete darkness endlessly interrupted by bright lights from oncoming cars. Normally, I would wonder why all these people were driving around at 1:30 a.m. on Father's Day morning, but my mind was otherwise occupied.

After arriving at my dead brother's bedside, I told him I loved him, forgave him for anything he might have felt the need to be forgiven for, kissed him, and said goodbye. I then drove to my mother's apartment to be with her until about 4:30 a.m., where we shared a lot of memories and asked one another endless unanswerable questions. After returning to my hotel room, I was greeted by my wife, Sue, and youngest son, Matt, who were waiting to support me after flying to Atlanta to be with my mother and me the day before. Their timing could not have been better, nor their presence more appreciated.

The six months that followed Adam's passing involved a whirlwind of dealing with emotions and realities for my family members and me: literally breaking into my brother's condo and tearing the security system off the wall with my bare hands because I didn't have the security code; cleaning out and selling said condo after 30 years of bachelor living; sifting through my brother's finances, debts, and other life surprises; discovering he had no will even though he had told me repeatedly in years past that he did; dealing with estate lawyers, creditors, the courts, and other bureaucracies too numerous to mention; frequently traveling to Atlanta to check on and be with my mother, who was handling my brother's death with amazing strength and resilience, but who also needed time to grieve in her own way while requiring support with certain daily chores; and continuing my own life running my coaching and consulting business and being a husband, father, and grandfather. It was a trying time, but we worked our way through it together.

## **Mom's Moment**

Then, on December 24, 2023, after visiting my oldest son, Tyler, and daughter-in-law, Amy, and 10 minutes prior to Sue, Matt, and me boarding a flight home from Denver, my cell phone rang again. This time, the number on the screen was for the senior living community where my mother lived. I thought, "This cannot be good."

The facility was calling to let me know my mother had just been taken to the hospital with severe stomach pains (a condition she had suffered from multiple times in the past). That was all they knew, and they just wanted me to be aware of what was happening. Armed with this very concerning news but helplessly unarmed when it came to doing something useful in the moment, we decided



to board our flight for New York after agonizing over the best course of action. We concluded that the logical, if imperfect choice, was to get home, learn more about my mother's condition, and then decide whether I should immediately travel to Atlanta to be with her.

Flying for four hours while not being able to do anything for my mother was excruciating to say the least. We landed at JFK airport in New York, and I immediately saw that I had several voicemail messages from the hospital. A doctor and nurse had tried to reach me while my flight was in the air. Again, I thought, "This cannot be good."

I dialed the hospital and a nurse answered. Once I identified myself, she awkwardly asked me to hold so she could get the on-duty emergency room physician on the line. An empathetic and respectful doctor-stranger then informed me how my mother's condition rapidly deteriorated after arriving at the hospital and that she passed away from cardiac arrest. While I was on my flight home, her heart had simply given out from all the trauma her body was experiencing.

Maybe, just maybe, the stress of my brother's death six months earlier had contributed to her sudden decline. Or maybe she was simply a 93-year-old woman whose time had come. Either way, I was not able to be there with her when she passed, and that feeling of regret will stay with me forever.

Fortunately, she died quickly and did not feel any pain thanks to the medications she had been given. My relatively healthy (for a 93-year-old) mother was fine until she wasn't.

Here and gone.

The silver lining with my mother's death was that, unlike my brother, she did have a will and I was familiar with all her finances. Happily, I also did not need to break into her apartment to clean it out. (We all can learn and grow from our experiences and be appreciative of small wins!)

The darker lining in this adventure was losing my brother and mother within a six-month period, barely allowing time to process one loss before having to face the next. However, I am not complaining. Please don't feel sorry for me.

My brother and mother did not suffer nearly as much as they might have. Many other people have had to deal with significantly more difficult circumstances (examples of which you will learn about in this book). By comparison, I was very lucky (and so were they), and I learned a lot about my brother, my mother, and myself in the process. (More about that learning journey later.)

## **The "Why" of This Book**

At the time of this book's release, more than two years have passed since my brother died and it is nearly that long since my mother's death. That has been enough time to be well into the healing process but likely never enough time to fully accept that they are gone.

Their deaths and my father's passing at the age of 46 more than 54 years ago (see my last book, *The Secret Sauce for Leading Transformational Change* [Routledge, 2022], pages 6–7 for more on his story) have inspired—compelled—me to write this book.

But before we get too far along with the purpose and priorities of the book, there are some things you need to know about my brother and mother, and how I felt about them.

I want to acknowledge what I learned from them as well as their impact on others. You also need to know about them to understand me and where I come from as the lead author of this book. This level of disclosure about my brother and mother will also set the stage for many of the other stories you will read in *Lives Lost and Leadership Found*.

## About Adam

Adam Brett Ziskin was born in Jamaica, New York, on October 13, 1962, grew up in Massapequa, New York until the age of 18, and lived the rest of his life in Atlanta, Georgia. He died unexpectedly and way too early at the age of 60 on June 18, 2023, of metastatic cancer. I am very grateful it took only eight days from diagnosis to death so that Adam did not suffer long.

He was simultaneously a very simple, straightforward, complicated, and multilayered person. Adam was extremely private yet incredibly giving. And he hated being the center of attention, which means he likely would not be thrilled to be so prominently featured in this book. (However, my mother would be ecstatic that I was bragging about her baby, Adam!)

Adam loved his family and friends and solving technology-related challenges of all kinds. In fact, he was a whiz who could fix anything with wires, buttons, switches, screens, or flashing lights. He also loved mashed potatoes, grits, meatloaf, chopped steak, pizza, and Mexican food. Adam enjoyed movies, TV shows, and music, and was an expert on news, current events, and weather (or thought he was). He took great pleasure in researching a wide range of subjects on his iPad and sharing what he learned. He had a great singing voice, loved to laugh, and regularly walked for exercise.

Adam was incredibly thoughtful, helpful, and polite. Even in his final days, when he could barely speak, he insisted on saying “thank you” to everyone at the hospital who assisted him. That was how he was wired and what he learned as a customer call center manager for many years.

Adam also had zero tolerance for stupidity, bureaucracy, bad customer service, laziness, and long lines. He was amazingly patient and impatient at the same time, depending on who he was dealing with and what issue he was addressing. While Adam was quite introverted and self-effacing, he took great pride in the success, happiness, and recognition of others, whether they were relatives, friends, work colleagues, or strangers. He never wanted to hurt anyone

and often took the brunt of difficult circumstances, preferring to shield others from pain, discomfort, or inconvenience.

He had annoyingly neat handwriting and the world's most organized car trunk, yet his condo looked like a bachelor had lived there for 30 years. He saved mail, coupons, receipts, and advertising flyers forever. Like I said, Adam was a very simple yet complicated person.

I am a firm believer that every person has the capability to be truly great at one thing, yet very few people ever achieve greatness. While Adam had many talents, he was world-class as our mother's best friend and protector. He devoted his entire life to ensuring she was happy, healthy, safe, and well-fed with an impossible array of fat-free, taste-free foods. I will always marvel at the way Adam unselfishly dedicated himself to supporting her. That is Adam's greatest legacy.

## **Meet My Mother**

Marilyn Joy Ziskin was born in Brooklyn, New York, on April 13, 1930. She lived her childhood and early adult years in Brooklyn and Queens, worked in office assistant jobs in Manhattan and on Long Island, took care of her husband (Ted) and raised two sons (Ian and Adam) primarily in Massapequa, and then spent her last 41 years living and working in Atlanta, Georgia. In her 93 years, my mother's experiences were filled with ups and downs, joys and worries, pride and pain, and never-ending laughter and love. She died on December 24, 2023, the same way she lived—in a hurry—after entering the hospital with severe stomach issues that ultimately led to cardiac arrest.

My mother divided her life between New York and Georgia, but she was 100% New Yorker through and through. Things had better be done fast and right. If she liked something, you knew it. If she did not, there was nowhere to hide! She was all about telling it like it is.

No matter her age or stage of life, my mother was defined by her resilience, toughness, directness, high standards, and love for the important people in her life. She was caring and supportive, and believed in people no matter their age, gender, race, religion, job, or socio-economic background. Once she liked you, she loved you. If she didn't care for you, you did not exist to her.

My mother battled through having an absentee father, becoming a widow at the age of 41, losing her mother and sister-in-law with whom she was very close, surviving cancer and other health issues, nursing her younger son Adam through a heart attack, and more recently losing Adam to cancer just six months before her own death. She loved life but it did not always love her back. My mother was very strong.

Likewise, she was uncompromising and unyielding in her quest to make issues, circumstances, and people better. At her core, my mother was an advocate ... that was her superpower. She fought for her family, friends, and

those less fortunate (even when those people may not have wanted someone to fight for them or possibly did not realize they needed someone in their corner).

When she was frustrated or dissatisfied with the level of service she was receiving (and to be honest, that was quite often), my mother would declare, “Are you kidding me?” or “I give up!” Adam and I would laugh at her because we knew two things about our mother ... she was not kidding, and she never gave up. My mother had many layers, but she was fundamentally a very straightforward person. Don’t lie, cheat, or steal. Do your best. Put family and friends above all else. Tell people you love them when you do. Tell people they are not meeting expectations when they are not. Set high standards and hold people accountable. Stand up for yourself and others.

On her worst days, my mother would complain—a lot. On her best days, she made everyone around her better. She had a lot more “best” days than “worst” days.

My mother had a great sense of humor and enjoyed making other people laugh. But she took her roles as mother, mother-in-law, grandmother, great grandmother, wife, sister, sister-in-law, daughter, aunt, friend, colleague, and neighbor very seriously. She loved sunshine, ’50s music, exercising, walking, dancing, drinking cheap white wine with lots of ice, and eating a very short list of things—all of which had no fat or taste. And my mother gave my brother and me the greatest gift of all ... she believed in us unconditionally.

## **Absence and Honor**

The concept of “presence of absence” has been attributed to many people but it was brought to my attention by my mother-in-law during the process of losing my brother and mother. I think it sums up how life is without them. Every day, in every way, I feel the positive impact that Adam and my mother, Marilyn, had on my life. Every day, in every way, I also feel the emptiness and silence they leave behind. Their presence—and their absence—will always be with me.

After taking a few months in early 2024 to reflect on my brother’s and mother’s deaths and what they each meant to me, I decided to do two things, among many, to honor them and what they taught me. The first was to write this book to create a platform for myself and many others to share what we have learned about life and leadership in losing somebody special to us. The second was to write a song, “Here and Gone,” to express my sentiments and gratitude directly to my deceased father, mother, and brother.

Even though I do not really believe they can hear me, I know you can. See Chapter 10 for the lyrics and for a link where you can hear me perform the song.

As you will note in Chapters 5–7, each essay in *Lives Lost and Leadership Found* concludes with three things the contributors learned about life and leadership from the loved ones they lost. In that spirit, here are the three most important things I learned from my brother’s and mother’s passing.



## Three Things I Learned About Life and Leadership

1. Face reality and deal with it.
2. Advocate for the people, issues, ideas, and ideals you believe in, including for yourself.
3. Tell people that you care about, respect, and/or love them—then show them.

## The “How” of This Book

While the idea for *Lives Lost and Leadership Found* came to me following my brother’s and mother’s deaths six months apart, that experience made me think about other people’s experiences with loss and the leadership-related implications. Most of us have been affected by the passing of someone close to us. Even though there is pain and loss, as leaders we can also grow and learn from the life and death of someone we cared about deeply.

I therefore believe that people can benefit from the individual and collective experiences of others who have lost special somebodies in their lives—people they loved, respected, admired, and from whom they learned something about life and leadership. Accordingly, this book very intentionally incorporates views and experiences well beyond my own. I include the insights and perspectives of many other leaders and colleagues I admire greatly, who have themselves lost and learned from somebody special.

Before we address those special somebodies’ stories in the soul of this book (Chapters 5, 6, and 7), Chapter 3 highlights perspectives from “famous” people who most of us know as public figures but who struggled privately with the loss of loved ones while continuing to make big impacts as iconic leaders and societal influencers. Then, Chapter 4 summarizes dozens of additional learnings and even more diverse thinking from more than 150 individuals who responded to a simple two-question survey we conducted in the fall of 2024.

Contributing authors include senior HR and operating leaders, academics, coaches, consultants, board members, founders/CEOs, clients, students, and others. Famous people include U.S. Presidents, CEOs, entertainers, sports heroes, and others. Survey respondents represent a broad array of leaders, employees, community and family members, and others. All the experiences, feelings, learnings, and stories they share are as different as the loved ones they lost. Yet, there are common themes that emerge from their ideas and insights.

Our book is first and foremost about leadership—informed and inspired by lessons learned from losing someone special. It explores four critical questions:

1. What did we learn from people important to us during their lives and deaths?
2. Can anything positive be gleaned from their passing?
3. How have these experiences of loss changed us as leaders and as people?
4. What can we *do* with what we have learned?

While our book is much more about leadership than loss, we do also use it to honor the important people we have lost. After all, they have inspired us and made us better people and leaders. That is their gift to us all.

If you are familiar with our last book, *The Secret Sauce for Leading Transformational Change* (Routledge, 2022), you can consider this book a follow-on because it explores leadership and transformational change at a very personal and individual level, namely, how the death of someone special affected and influenced us as people and as leaders, and how these difficult challenges changed us (hopefully for the better, but perhaps not).

*Lives Lost and Leadership Found* is intended to help you benefit from the diverse individual and collective experiences of the contributing authors. The book is uniquely positioned to focus not only on the personal impact the deaths of key people in our lives have had on us, but also (and as importantly) on the leadership impact and legacy they represent. It is not a book about grieving or feeling sorry for yourself, even though it reveals and explores raw emotions. It is a book about how we as leaders can, should, and will inevitably be influenced by what we have learned about life and leadership from people we loved who taught us valuable lessons through the way they lived and died.

## The Structure of This Book

Our book is structured to allow for maximum variety of perspectives and lenses.

- Following Chapter 1 (this chapter), we provide relevant background research on the cognitive, physical, and emotional impacts of losing and grieving a loved one in Chapter 2.
- In Chapter 3, we address the loss experiences and leadership implications endured by “famous” people who had to overcome loss on the way to making significant contributions to society.
- Chapter 4 summarizes key themes from survey inputs offered by 150 respondents to two questions: (1) “If a person important to you passed away recently or a long time ago, what is the one most significant thing you learned from that person about life and leadership?” and (2) “What was that person’s relationship to you (parent, grandparent, spouse, life partner, child, grandchild, sibling, friend, colleague, boss, mentor, etc.)?” The blend of insights from this crowdsourcing process is powerful and, in some ways, surprising.
- Chapters 5–7 feature 35 compelling essays written by our contributing authors, each with incredible poignancy and wisdom. These chapters highlight three essential life and leadership lessons including courage (and resilience), compassion (and relationships), and curiosity (and purpose). Each essay concludes with “Three Things I Learned About Life and Leadership,” as a concise means of summarizing key learnings imparted from special somebodies to our contributing authors.

- Chapter 8 succinctly captures a series of “Tensions of Intentionality,” making it as easy as possible for you, the reader, to understand the competing priorities that must be mastered because they make the biggest difference to your learning and success as a person and as a leader.
- Chapter 9 describes “The Smoothie Effect,” my analogy to help you relate to the emotions and experiences reinforced throughout this book.
- Chapter 10 offers some conclusions and the song lyrics for “Here and Gone,” my tribute to my father, mother, and brother who have all passed away but remain a part of me through the valuable lessons they shared during their lives and deaths. You can also access a link there to hear me perform it.
- In the Epilogue, contributing authors share how they and, in some cases, their family members, friends, and colleagues felt as a result of writing or reading their respective essays, including how feelings and emotions manifested themselves.
- The Appendix provides a framework for writing your own essay to honor your special somebody.

As you read our book, we invite you to think about and celebrate someone in your life who has passed away and has made you better every day through the life and leadership lessons they embodied. That person is one of the special somebodies. So are you.

*Author's Note: In addition to the lessons described in Chapter 1 and throughout this book, I want to underscore something else very important I learned from my brother Adam's death. I have always known it, but his death served as a stark reminder. **DO NOT IGNORE YOUR HEALTH OR TAKE IT FOR GRANTED!** If Adam had undergone regular skin checkups and addressed related findings, he quite likely would not have died from an untreated, out of control melanoma that went directly to his brain. Physical and mental well-being are essential ingredients for life and leadership. Please consider this a free public service announcement.*