

Dust to Dust

It's Ash Wednesday, kneeling at the communion rail at church, waiting for ashes, and I can hear the Pastors and their soothing, quiet voices, "Remember you are ashes and to ashes you shall return." My wife, the love of my life, is kneeling next to me. Just a few weeks ago in this church, with these Pastors, we lay to rest my mother-in-law. And here we kneel again. The sound of both Pastors speaking makes a round of voices repeating ashes to ashes and dust to dust.

My mind drifted to a time when I did not understand mortality. That time was childhood. How I survived it is beyond me. I spent most of it in dangerous and precarious situations: in trees, on rooftops, exploring unfinished homes, exploring drain pipes, an old one-lane bridge, playing with fire, putting out fires, using tools to build forts in the woods, usually high in trees, exploring the creek, crossing the creek, and floating home made boats in the creek. I got hurt many times but dad or mom would always scoop me up, take me home, or sometimes off to the hospital, and then soothe and comfort me into health. And this, I thought, is what life would be forever: a constant adventure and when I fell, comfort and repair by the hands of my loving parents.

On Wednesday, kneeling there at the communion rail I was drawn to a vivid memory of chasing a kite. One of my best creations broke from its string, having reeled off more than two spools of line tied together with knots that only a knife could undo. But when the string broke, I ran and leaped and dashed across the gravel roads and muddy ditches of my youth, past hidden skunk dens and rickety bridges, chasing and running after my kite, my beautiful kite now gone and flying on its own. What an implausible happening that the string would break and I would be left to my own little legs to chase the wind, stealing my creation, made of sticks and tape and glue with the Sunday funnies stretched across balsa wood, and my old top sheet torn in strips as a tail, all now aloft on its own. I ran through weeds and brush whipping my face and eyes until they streamed with tears and my face was scratched and sweaty and bleeding. This was my first loss in life. Something dear to me was taken, unexpectedly, without my consent, now gone, on the wind. There was nothing I could do. I came to an abrupt stop, hands on my knees, out of breath, exasperated as I squinted into the sky, my kite getting smaller and smaller as it drifted out of sight pulled further aloft by the wind which tossed my hair and moved the weeds and grass around me.

"Remember you are dust and to dust you shall return," my Pastor quietly whispered to me as I felt his finger trace the sign of the cross on my forehead leaving a grit of ashes on my skin. I knelt there a moment longer thinking about the immortality I felt as a kid. How often I was cut and wounded and stitched back together, but mortality never crossed my mind. When I chased that kite, two spools of string into the stratosphere, I knew I would never die. My kite was mortal, but not me. I knew I would live forever running through these weedy fields, climbing trees and exploring the next bend in every path.

As a kid I only learned about death second hand. My family tree is immense and as a young child my family was always attending a funeral or a wedding. I never knew which. They were all the same to me; people would be crying and laughing and hugging and kissing, there was always food and drink and everyone spent most of the occasion saying hello and then saying goodbye. I'd put on my little three piece suit and just go with my folks and my sisters. "Who's getting married, mom?" "No one," she would say, "Your Great Aunt Stella died, but she was very old." Then in another week or two I'd be told to get into my three piece suit again, and I'd wonder who died and mom would tell me that no one died, that today was my cousin Elaine's wedding. And so went the cycle of relative gatherings, marriage and death, death and marriage, every one a celebration of food and hugs and kisses that my siblings and I would attend with my mom and my dad, both permanent fixtures in our lives, just like the endless fields of weeds that surrounded our home.

The family funerals were death by proxy. It was always a great aunt or great uncle, two or three generations away who would die. But after I was married, it seemed all too soon that the funerals were of relatives in the next generation older than mine; uncles and aunts that were one generation away. Then one day, it was my mom who died on a humid morning in late July. I was grown and married with young children, and my sisters too were married and had children, and we laid our mom to rest, not some great old relative, but our mom who was torn from us without our consent. I was forty years old and the death of my mom was the end of her struggle with cancer, but it still hurt with a deep sadness. The string between us had been severed. There was nothing I could do or have done. This was an unwanted occurrence that I could not chase after to save, and no running or chasing could stop her slow disappearance while she lay ill. I watched my mother's health flutter away, adrift and mortal, blown far away, off to heaven, by a cancerous wind that left her family bereft and grieving.

My dad is still alive, remarried, healthy and active. I am intensely grateful that he is still by my side, an important part of the life of my sons and my daughter, and one of my finest friends. The endless fields around my childhood home, where dad still lives, are now filled with houses and it's been a long time since I fell from some great height and needed rescue from a boyhood antic by my dad. But things between Dad and I are as nature and the universe intended. He's growing old, as am I, but we have shared two lifetimes together. When I was a child and he was there for me. Now I am a man and he is still there for me. Yes, someday dad will die, as will I. But for now, however long or brief it may be, I do not have to chase the wind or run through the weeds hopelessly against an incurable end. How fortunate am I.

So many of you share this same great fortune; I see you, all, grasp life with such zeal and enthusiasm for family and fatherhood. We are all simply dads! That's all. And we want for our children a wonderful childhood filled with wonder and adventure and the pleasure of endless, parental love. But sometimes these desires are interrupted by forces of nature, by unwanted events, by things that we can not control such as when death steps in.

We recently lost one of our own, a dad, just like you or me, named Steve Ballagh. He was far too young to be carried away. He was far too young to leave his wife and three daughters behind, shocked at this unexpected severing, wounded and numb, feeling a deep loss and complete lack of control because their dad was taken from their lives. Steve's children should be off chasing kites, and their first loss in life should be that favorite kite. Not their father! The girls should be running through the weeds, giggling and laughing, feeling the immortality of childhood; not having to experience the agony of the unexpected death of their father.

We, as Federation, need to assist Steve's young daughters. Please imagine what they have been through; all the tears and the hugging that never removes that ache of loss, the loss of their father. But how do we console the inconsolable? These young ladies have a long road ahead of them in understanding their loss. But we can help in doing what we do best: providing the camp experience. The Federation will be collecting funds, from all of us, to help Steve's daughters enjoy a YMCA camp this summer; perhaps MacLean for a week or maybe Tecumseh. Although we can never replace Steve as a father, we can help the young Ballagh sisters to further enjoy the camps we attend. Surely time at one of our great camps will help these young ladies find peace and acceptance.

Now is the time to help. Donate. Open your hearts and your wallets. It is tragic when a father is taken from his children's childhood. It's an unrighteous event of mortality that reminds us all to hug our kids every night, tell them you love them and be grateful for your life well lived.

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