
THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

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“There are times in the lives of most of us, when we would have given all the world to be as we were but yesterday, though that yesterday had passed over us unappreciated and unenjoyed.” – William Edward Hartpole Lecky

When my dad passed away last July, it was tough. It was halfway through the summer, I had just graduated from high school, and I was preparing to embark on the exciting and nerve-wracking journey that is college. All the while, I was living life in my own little world, detached and disconnected from those closest to me. Most of my days consisted of working one job or another (at the time I was juggling three, for no justifiable reason), and my days off consisted of sleeping in, spending lazy afternoons by the pool, evenings by the fire with friends, and late nights of Netflix. But I got lost in that little world. I forgot to be present, mindful, and – most of all – appreciative. So when my dad, who was neither sick nor ill, didn’t wake up from his sleep one morning, Reality didn’t just bring me back down to earth. It hit me. Hard.

During the first few nights after my dad passed away, I couldn’t sleep. During the day, I couldn’t eat. In the mornings, I would step into the shower, curl into a ball, and hope that the sound of the water running would muffle my wailing and sobbing. In the face of it all, I had the misconception that it was my responsibility and duty to never shed a tear around others, to always maintain an optimistic tone, and to attempt to live each day just as normal. But after such a painful experience, life doesn’t just go back to ‘normal,’ and I would be mistaken to pretend that accepting my dad’s passing as a part of my own life experience has been a simple exercise in resilience and soul-searching. It *was* tough, and it’s *still* tough.

But I’ve grown from this experience. (I know what you might be thinking: How can one possibly find any positivity or room for growth in such an experience as death? But that’s *exactly* the point.) At the beginning of my freshman year here at BC, I didn’t even mention my dad. I figured that if I didn’t talk about Dad, then my new friends wouldn’t ask about Dad and, as a result, we would all be spared the off-putting response that I would be obliged to give. I was wrong for two reasons: (1) similar to how telling a child not to touch something only encourages the child to disobey, not talking about my dad meant that people had more questions about him; and (2) attempting to sweep my dust under a rug so that people - including myself – wouldn’t realize the reality of my life was a *very* poor coping strategy. Only two people on campus knew what I was going

through: my incomparable roommate and one of the nuns on campus. With their encouragement and support (the power of which I'm sure they underestimated), I eventually was able to share my experience with my friends. I shared with a roomful of strangers during my 48HOURS retreat. By the end of this past school year, I was able to tell stories about my dad without regret, remorse, or tears, and now here I am writing about my experience.

Part of this growth experience for me has been a profound attention to life lessons ("Give reminders of love and appreciation," and "Smile often," to name a couple of my own). One of the simplest, yet most important lessons that I've learned from my dad's passing is that happiness goes a long way in making people, myself and others included, feel good. My dad was always happy and always loving. "Hate is such a strong word," he would say to me as I complained about the bits of onion in my spaghetti sauce or the pigeons waddling too close for comfort. Reflecting on his happiness and love has been a way for me to continue learning about my dad and his values and motives. Understanding my dad's life lessons has been a way for me to develop my own, a way to keep positive about the experience that I have endured, and a way to learn and grow in the face of adversity.

This summer, I decided not to work at all. (The reader, briefly scanning this piece while on break at his/her on-campus job, gasps at this shocking violation of "How to Make Yourself Stand Out to Potential Post-Grad Employers" and "How to Be a Good College Student 101".) Instead, I opted for one of my life lessons: do what makes you happy. Now, that's not to say that work can't bring happiness. In fact, I've experience some of the happiness that meaningful work can provide. But after last summer – when I lost myself in an attempt to juggle three jobs and some form of social life and was subsequently plucked out of a fog by the loss of a loved one – I vowed never to become so immersed in work that I would disengage or disconnect from myself, from those around me, or from the present moment. Rather, I wanted to spend this summer doing things that I like: reading, cooking, spending meaningful time with friends and family, smiling, enjoying the little things, listening to Motown or jazz, taking naps, deep-breathing for thirty seconds. And that's what I've done.

Just this afternoon I was reading Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*. In Chapter III, Alice comes to a forest, and immediately forgets what a tree is called. She then realizes that she's also forgotten her own name. In despair, Alice seeks the help of a fawn grazing nearby:

"What do you call yourself?" the Fawn said at last. Such a soft sweet voice it had!

"I wish I knew!" thought poor Alice. She answered, rather sadly, "Nothing, just now."

"Think again," it said: "that won't do."

Alice thought, but nothing came of it. "Please, would you tell me what you call yourself?" she said timidly. "I think that might help a little."

"I'll tell you, if you'll move a little further on," the Fawn said. "I can't remember here."

So they walked on together through the wood, Alice with her arms clasped lovingly round the soft neck of the Fawn, till they

came out into another open field, and here the Fawn gave a sudden bound into the air, and shook itself free from Alice's arms. "I'm a Fawn!" it cried out in a voice of delight, "and, dear me! you're a human child!" A sudden look of alarm came into its beautiful brown eyes, and in another moment it had darted away at full speed.

Alice stood looking after it, almost ready to cry with vexation at having lost her dear little fellow-traveller so suddenly. "However, I know my name now," she said, "that's some comfort. Alice – Alice – I won't forget it again. And now, which of these finger-posts ought I to follow, I wonder?"

(So what? Why is this important? What is it about this single scene in a children's book that motivated me to reflect and write about the experience of my dad's passing?) What I find so striking about this scene is the experience of loss and growth that it traces, and how much my own experience over the past year mirrors the one that Carroll creates. Alice is at first lost, innocent, naïve, and clueless. She is lucky enough to run into a fawn who is willing to guide her through the thicket of the forest and into a clearing. When the girl and fawn emerge onto the field, Alice remembers her name, but loses the companionship of the friend that helped her to remember it. Teary-eyed and anguished at the loss, Alice nonetheless realizes that she has gained something profound from the brief encounter. "I know my name now... that's some comfort... I won't forget it again." My experience has been a lot like Alice's journey through the forest. I was once naïve and clueless, just like the girl. But I was lucky to have my dad to guide me through some of the thicket of life. I was lucky to have my dad to help me remember my own name. Loss is difficult, it's tough, and it's something that I will live with. But I also get to live with the luck, joy, and blessing of having had someone to guide me through the thicket of life, to remind me of my name, and to teach me something about who I am as a person. The life lessons that I have gained from my stroll through the forest of life with my dad are some of the most important that I have learned, and I know that—just like Alice—I won't forget them as I continue my adventures through the looking-glass.