

True Words

Kyle Strachila

When I was a small boy, my dad's friend, Brian, would invite my dad, brother, and me, to join him at his cabin on Eliza Island, a small island nestled in Bellingham Bay. The purpose of the weekend was to crab Bellingham Bay and collect a bounty from the sea for Brian's annual party at the end of August. For me the trip was an adventure that fueled my passion for exploring, and my favorite part of the trip was the beach. While my brother joined Brian and our Dad near the fire pit each evening cooking up some of the day's catch, I'd run around soaking in all that the island could offer. I loved to chase the waves, tip toeing as close as possible to the lull of their retreat, and then sprint away giggling as they surged to the shore, nipping at my heels. I collected treasures of weathered glass and sea shells and stored them in my castle that I made in the brush. Eventually though, I'd return to the campfire and listen to the older men talk. One conversation between Brian and my dad has stuck with me forever. One of Brian's parents had passed away that year, and he asked my dad about his experience of having lost both of his parents already. Brian asked Dad how often he visited his parents' graves, and whether or not he felt like they were still out there in Heaven. I'll never forget my dad's response for the rest of my life.

"I don't know what exactly is out there, but there's got to be something; some sort of purpose for everything we're doing. I see their graves almost every week when I mow the cemetery, but I don't need to go there to feel them. I don't feel them there, but I know they're out there."

My family rarely had conversations of faith, and we were not very religious. The first memory I have of talking about anything religious is when Dad made Dan and I memorize

the Lord's Prayer to recite during the service after my Great Uncle Stanley passed away when I was 11. We didn't attend church, but my dad always told me that if I ever found a girl who wanted to take me, I'd better find myself in the nearest pew. He was raised Catholic and a Sunday regular of our local church, but for some reason as he grew older he stopped going. Maybe he lost his faith, but I don't think that's the truth.

Because of this upbringing I've never felt a firm grasp on my faith. I was never deprived, but never fully enlightened of my purpose on Earth and what may lie beyond. Honestly, it never bothered me much. I tried reading the Bible but found it boring. I'd gone to church with friends a couple of times but never felt the need to return. I tried talking to God and praying, but it felt like I was talking to myself. Nothing felt wrong yet nothing really stuck, and I never felt that I needed to find answers to my questions right away. I was somewhat confident that something beyond this world exists, but I was unable to grasp what that might be. This search was always on the backburner for me because my family had provided me with a lifestyle without want. I grew up on a small dairy farm surrounded by parents, who loved each other and all of my siblings, and I had an enormous extended family who loved me, and who I loved in return. I excelled in high school, academically, athletically, and socially, and upon graduating enrolled in a public university to continue my perfect life. I grew up happy and loving life... but I grew up ignorant. The innocence of my youth blinded me to the harshest realities that can occur in our world.

This ignorance was completely shattered on February 18, 2014.

My phone alarm woke me up at 9:00 on the dot, but last night's party still pounded in my head, so I shut it off and closed my eyes. I didn't usually skip class, but that morning I did. Shortly after, my phone woke me again with an incoming call from my brother, Dan. I

ignored it, but it immediately rang again. This time it was a call from my Uncle Steve's phone, so I groggily answered, "Hello?" I was surprised when my brother's voice answered.

"Ky? You have to come home... there's been an accident... Dad's dead." His voice broke into sobs.

The moments immediately after still aren't clear. I remember falling to the floor and screaming out in disbelief. My brother's words were blunt, but fit his character perfectly being a man of few words. My uncle took the phone from my brother and talked me through what I needed to do next. Find a friend he said, so I roamed the halls of my fraternity, silently crying, looking for anyone to help. I found Cody, or more like he found me, and he dropped everything to help me. He booked my airplane ticket home while I packed, he forced me to shower, and he drove me to the airport. I was completely numb on the plane, staring out the window while it bounced through typical Washington storm clouds. I tried not to cry, but my effort was probably futile. During my layover in Seattle, I sat in a restaurant, and could barely choke out the word "whiskey," when the waiter asked me what I wanted. I could see the concern on his face as he left to put in my order, and when I went to pay, he refused my money and said he hoped that my day would get better. I sat on another plane, suffocated by the desire to be instantly home, but simultaneously yearning to disappear into nothingness.

Bellingham greeted me with my sister, Sara, waiting for me at the terminal with my Aunt Lisa and her friend Karen. Rain ran down the windows of Karen's car as she drove the long, quiet ride back to the valley, to the farm, where I knew everyone would be. Upon arriving I went straight through the front door and came across all the quiet friends and relatives that had already gathered. My Aunt Liz immediately ushered me into the back bedroom where Mom was being looked after, and she met me with an embrace which felt like a lifetime in the making but would never be long enough.

I felt powerless, empty, and completely out of control, but I didn't want to show that. I wanted to be proactive and do whatever people were supposed to do in these situations. I went out to the farm and finished milking the cows. What crazy person goes out to work on the day his dad dies? I didn't know, but my brain was numb and so I focused on work. After, I drank whiskey that was offered frequently, and hoped it would banish reality from my brain.

I hugged, I was consoled, I helped console, and tried my damndest not to cry in front of others. I couldn't sleep that night. I was too restless to do something, to fix it, to do anything, everything... but I couldn't do a thing.

I refused to do nothing, so two days after when plans were being made for the funeral, a relative, I can't remember who, asked if I wanted to write something to say at the service. They reassured me that if I didn't want to speak, I could write it down and have a stronger community member read it. I spent most of my time before the funeral writing that speech. Through my experiences in clubs in high school I had spoken hundreds of times before in front of audiences up to 3,000 people, but I knew I needed this one to be my best, for Dad.

Silent tears crept down my face as I shared memories and stories in front of those who held my dad dear in St. Peter's Catholic Church, the church my dad had grown up attending. I shared how he would just watch Dan and I unload our shotguns when we all went duck hunting, but never fired a shot of his own because he claimed he got a bigger kick out of watching us miss instead. I told of his countless pranks that filled our home with laughter, like the time he hid under the kitchen counter and then jumped out as Dan walked by, that made my brother jump almost to the ceiling. I shared how my dad shaped me, and how that everything that I am and will ever be is because of my drive to be a man like him. My legs trembled noticeably, but my voice stayed steady.

However, afterwards I felt guilty through all the “he would have been so proud,” comments I received, or the remarks of “you’re so strong.” I wanted all the focus to be on him, but I didn’t know how to express this in any tangible way that would bring me comfort.

I took responsibility for nearly everything that needed to be done because I felt so alone, even though I was surrounded by more family and friends than most people. I needed to do everything because I wasn’t there for Dad when he died, like everyone else. I needed to do everything I could to make up for this, to him and myself. In small towns like ours there’s always a local who tends the cemetery; to make sure the grass is kept at a decent length, the grounds stay clean, and that the members of the community are properly laid to rest. In our community, Clipper, my dad had been the caretaker of St. Joseph Cemetery for as long as I could remember. He obviously couldn’t bury himself, so I grabbed a shovel. Digging the hole for my dad’s cremated remains was heart wrenching. I moved full shovels of soft, loamy dirt under the supervision of my uncles the day before the burial. The next day I lowered my dad in his tiny box into the ground and stood aside as family members picked up handfuls of dirt to place upon his box, I learned how traumatizing an experience it is to bury your own family. I grabbed a shovel and sobbed nearly uncontrollably as my entire family watched me cover my dad in his final resting place. I could hear my aunts whispering the Lord’s Prayer, but I pretended I didn’t.

Every other time a death or an accident occurred in my life, I couldn’t think of anything to do besides turn to a God I wasn’t sure existed. I’d seek explanation and would be satisfied with the idea that those lost were in a better place, and that everything that happened was all a part of “God’s plan.” I grew up hearing sayings from relatives that “God has a purpose for everything,” and I believed it then. Now it felt so cruel, and I refused to even consider the idea that God had a purpose for my dad dying. If that was God’s plan then I

didn't want to be part of such a plan. If such a loving God could make your greatest nightmares reality, then that wasn't a God that I want to praise. Yet I felt he was there.

After the funeral, I was ready to move on. Not from my dad's death, or to stop grieving. I knew that my life was changed forever. I needed to find a new routine. I dropped out of school for the semester after a bit of resistance from my uncles. They told me that Dad would want me to go back to school and finish my education, but I silenced them when I asked them what he would have done if he were in my shoes. I filled the role of "farmhand" that I often was absent from growing up, and helped Dan keep the farm going.

For the most part, days working on the farm were pretty typical. I woke at four in the morning and bottle-fed the young calves, threw grain and hay to the older ones; and then bed them all with sawdust. Around seven, Dan would find a project for us to tackle like small repairs on the tractors and equipment; moving animals to different pens, breeding, basically just staying productive until it was time for the afternoon chores.

At night I'd fix myself some sort of cheap dinner because Mom didn't really cook anymore, then I'd watch TV with her, and frequently go to the kitchen to put whiskey in my Pepsi so she wouldn't notice. When I went to bed, the whiskey coaxed me to sleep, but some nights sleep evaded me. Then I'd pick up my Bible and flip through the pages desperately searching for answers, but I'd get frustrated and slam the book down on my bedside table telling myself that old written words couldn't heal my pain.

I drank, a lot, but acted as though I was okay. It just seemed like a new normal. I worked on the farm and tried not to think about more than the day in front of me. By doing this, the farm was tolerable. I had no problem working the farm, but why was I there? I wasn't supposed to be a farmer. I do love the farm. I love my family, and I love my brother

and I wanted to do everything in my power to provide for everyone and to make everything seem okay, but at times it was overwhelming. The truth was that at the end of the day farming wasn't what I wanted to do, and even though I was willing to do it, the fact that I was infuriated me.

Resentment for the farm developed inside of me, fueled by the belief that it was preventing me from everything I ever hoped to accomplish in life; robbing me of the life I was supposed to live. I had chosen to drop out of school and attempt to fill my father's shoes but it wasn't really a choice, I had to do it. I was grateful for my upbringing on the farm, but never considered a career in farming. Such feelings boiled inside me with such intensity that at times I would scream out my fury to the sky. I'd scream out to God asking him how he could do something to such a strong family and questioning what we ever did to deserve it. How could he take away my dad who had meant so much to so many people?

I didn't stop there: I'd also scream out to Dad as if it were his fault he'd died, and the reason I was so unhappy with my life: "Why did he have to leave?" "Why did he go?" "Why would he leave me to work on a farm he told me himself I'd be better off leaving?" I would shout my anger up to the sky and let my tears stream until I eventually calmed down. I'd immediately regret my outburst, and clutch the necklace with the shotgun shell pendant filled with Dad's ashes in my fist, while I dropped to my knees and begged him for forgiveness, promising my words didn't mean anything and that I was thankful for every opportunity he'd given me.

About a month after his death, I had a dream that I was on the farm on a beautiful summer day, and was walking across the crisp grass from the house out toward the barnyard. When I reached the gravel in front of the shop I looked down the lane and saw a red tractor approaching chased by a small cloud of dust. I was confused as to who was driving but after

it pulled up in front of the shop my heart skipped a beat when I saw Dad climb down out of the cab.

“Dad!” I remember yelling as I sprinted to him, nearly tackling him to the ground with my hug. “Dad everyone’s been looking all over for you!” He chuckled as I pulled him toward the house, and he couldn’t hide his smile as happy chaos ensued when every member of my family proceeded to hug and kiss him. I know words were said, but I can’t remember any, though I swear I can still hear the sound of everyone’s pure laughter. The last part of the dream I remember was when the chaos died down, and Dad and I were lying under the apple tree in the yard like we would when I was younger. The leaves and branches above us shaded the fading light of an early evening sun, and the air was comfortable as it should be after a warm summer day. I remember the grass felt cool underneath me as Dad told a story, but I realized I wasn’t paying attention. A dark feeling plummeted in my stomach when I interrupted him...

“Dad, what are you doing here? Where have you been?”

“What do you mean? I’ve been right here... with you and-“

“But you’re supposed to be in heaven.”

“Why would I be in heaven?” He looked so puzzled and I could feel the tears swell my vision.

“Dad you died about a month ago... don’t you remember?”

Hurt and confusion flooded his eyes at receiving this information. He started to choke and stammer, and I woke up screaming in tears of confusion, hurt, and guilt. I felt that Dad was trying to communicate with me, but in my subconscious dream I rejected listening to him

and it engulfed me with guilt. I knew he was still out there somewhere, and I just wanted to make sure he knew how much I loved him.

My uncle had told me a story in the days after my dad died. An older woman had approached his ex-wife, who worked in an assisted living home, in the days after my dad's death and said, "Your family has experienced the loss of a great man, a great leader for your family, and I'm terribly sorry." My aunt was taken aback and rightfully uncomfortable but said yes, they in fact had. The old woman continued, "It happened suddenly and he wasn't ready to go." My aunt could only stare and listen at this point. "He was trapped, between this life and the next, torn completely apart watching all of his loved ones grieve over him but there was nothing he could do to help them. He was at unrest. There were three older people, two men and a woman, trying to comfort him from the other side. They beckoned him to join them, but he didn't want to leave his family, so God sent a black dog to join him in crossing to the other side and he went."

As my uncle told that story I felt angry because I thought it was going to be one of those clichéd stories people tell in times of grief to try to comfort those who desperately seek it and are willing to latch onto anything. As I listened though, I got chills. I assumed the three older people were my grandparents, Dad's parents whom I'd never met, and his uncle, my great uncle Stanley who served as a role model for my dad his entire life. All three had contributed to bringing Dad up to be the man that he was, and it seemed fitting that they were ready to reward him for a life well lived. The dog made it even more real because the same morning Dad died, just hours later in fact, my cousin's black lab escaped from his pen, ran into the road, and met his death beneath the wheels of a semi-truck. The story further instilled a sense within me that something beyond our grasps exists once our souls leave our bodies and we transition from this life to the next. I was willing to consider that the old woman who

had told my uncle the story had a deep connection to a world unknown to most of us. I started to come to grips with losing my dad, and that maybe God's plan could make sense after all.

Dad always told me that his favorite time working on the farm was early in the morning. I thought he was crazy because for me waking up at 4:00am was the worst part of the job. He would argue that it was actually perfect; that no one was on the highway and not even the birds were awake then. He especially loved it on clear winter mornings when the moon was bright and made the sky seem like it was glowing. He said he'd look up to the sky and just feel at peace with the world and know that everything was going to be okay, but he didn't know exactly how to explain it. I still thought he was crazy, but since his passing I've experienced my fair share of early farm mornings and can now say that I feel the exact same way. I no longer feel lost and trapped when I work on the farm. When I experience the lull of the early morning with the only sound being the hum of the milking machines, I too feel at peace. I feel as though all is right with the world and that Dad is amongst the stars; his smile casting a glow in the early morning sky.