

From Now On

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Near the end of the movie, “The Greatest Showman,” Hugh Jackman (loosely portraying P.T. Barnum) and the “oddities” featured in Barnum’s show sing a song called “From Now On.” The scene begins after the building that housed Barnum’s show and provided a home for the “oddities,” or social outcasts, burns to the ground. Barnum has lost all of his money, his home, and is on shaky ground with his wife. Barnum is sitting in a bar feeling sorry for himself, when the oddities start streaming in. Barnum thinks they are there to collect their paychecks and begins to tell them there is nothing left. But they are not there to collect their paychecks. They are coming together to bear witness to Barnum’s pain from tragedies that could be mostly attributed to Barnum’s neglect of the show while he was distracted by “chasing cheers”--to feed his bottomless need for acceptance.

He sings, **“From the rubble, what remains can only be what’s true.”** The song goes on, **“Let this promise in me start like an anthem in my heart...from now on,”** and the oddities show they want to rebuild with him, singing of coming home again. The song struck a chord in me. I was dancing in my seat by the middle of the song and crying by the end. Raffaella and Joel were getting embarrassed. I’m here to talk with you today about the tragedy, my tragedy, that scene and this song brought up for me and the promises I made to myself **“from then on.”**

It was 1990. I was 22 and in the last semester of my Master of Social Work program at Boston College. For spring break in early March, I set off for Orlando, Florida with my then-boyfriend Eric to visit Laurie Berliner, my dearest friend since high school. In high school, we sat next to each other in every class for years, but we first bonded in chorus freshman year. We had to lip synch the “Amen” piece to Handel’s Messiah during the concert that first semester. The freshman choir had run out of time to learn that piece, so the upper-class chorus sang while the freshmen faked it. Laurie and I sat next to each other. Every now and then, one of us got a little lost in the symphony of Amens coming at different times from the different sections of the choir and mouthed the “men” syllable a few beats too early. If you looked up at the audience, you could see confused looks when that happened--we were in the front row, so it was obvious. It was nearly impossible to keep from bursting into fits of hysterical laughter, so we dared not glance at each other during the song. After that, I knew we’d be friends for life. That was Fall of 1981.

Back to 1990. Five months prior to my visit to Florida to see her, Laurie wrote me this postcard: “Hi! I didn't want you to think I’ve forgotten about you. I think about you all the time, but life is go, go, go, all the time, and I’ve fallen out of the fine art of writing. I am still

loving it here (please visit!!!) I don't ever want anyone to wake me up from this dream. Work is great and so are the people there. I met the sweetest guy--Mike. I'll keep you updated. How is grad life? How's the love life? I don't care if we just send postcards back and forth, just so I know how you're doing. I miss you! Love ya, Laurie." And so, we went to Florida to see Laurie for my spring break. She had just begun her career in hotel management and **clearly** loved it.

On the last day of vacation, Eric, Laurie, and I went to the beach and started back to Laurie's apartment a little before dusk. We were not far from the exit where we needed to get off when **IT** happened. Eric was driving, and I was changing the station on the radio--to find a Prince or Madonna song, no doubt--when, suddenly, Eric lost control of the car. For a split second, the car's wheels had gone off the roadway and onto the shoulder--only there was no shoulder on that portion of the highway. The roadway immediately dropped off to the wide, grassy median. The drop off from the highway lane to the median was unexpectedly steep. It wasn't that Eric was being careless; there was no way for him to have realized the danger.

The car started swerving. I was immediately afraid that we were going to hit other vehicles on the highway. We didn't, but by now the car was really out of control. It was obvious that tragedy was seconds away and there was **NOTHING** I could do. The next thing I knew, the car was headed into the grassy median and began flipping over and over. I was terrified and I thought, "Oh my God we're going to die! There is no way we'll ever survive this!" The terror and panic were overwhelming. I have never had any recollection of hearing any sounds during the accident. I think that's for the better. After the car stopped, it landed on its side; my side was in the air. The first thing I did was look in the back seat to how Laurie was because she had been lying across the back seat sleeping and, unlike us in the front seat, she did **not** have her seat belt fastened. She wasn't there! She just wasn't there!!! I couldn't figure out where she had gone. The thought of her having been thrown from the car seemed too outrageous for consideration, but what else could have happened? I have no words for the abject horror I felt at that moment, which felt hours long.

Next, I felt panicked and confused. I couldn't get out of the car. I tried to push out the windows in the front seat, but, to my surprise, they were intact. With my side of the car facing straight up, my door was too heavy for Eric and me to open; we were trapped. My panic grew, since I thought cars always exploded after flipping over. Then, someone, a stranger who had pulled over, pulled us out of the car and carried us to the grass nearby. In the days before cell phones, somehow an ambulance was summoned; the strangers stayed with us until the paramedics arrived.

I was terrified as to the condition of Laurie. The people at the scene of the accident told me Laurie would be transported to the hospital via helicopter. Nobody--not the strangers at the scene, nor the EMTs in the ambulance--seemed willing to answer my persistent question: "How is my friend who got thrown from the car?"

While at the hospital Emergency Room, my feelings of dread intensified. I suspected that Laurie was either paralyzed or dead, but I prayed feverishly that she was not seriously

injured. I had my medical scans done. I cried. I prayed. I waited. And I asked questions of EVERYONE who came into my room: "How is my friend who got thrown from the car?" But nobody would give me a straight answer.

Finally, when all of my tests and scans were finished, a few doctors and the social worker, who had been the very first person I met as I got wheeled into the ER, came to my bed to tell me the news. Before the doctor spoke, I sobbed, "Don't even tell me Laurie is dead. Don't try to tell me that!" And with their response, my worst fears were confirmed. Laurie had died at the scene of the accident. They had tried to revive her at the hospital, but they couldn't. After telling me this, all of the medical professionals left the room--all of them except the social worker. I was despondent; I cried, I howled, and I moaned in the social worker's arms for what had to have been 15 or 20 minutes.

"From the rubble, what remains can only be what's true."

But how was I going to find my way out of the rubble? How was I ever going to forgive myself for having been involved in the accident that had killed my dearest friend? I was devastated. And 22. And trying to finish the last couple of months of graduate school.

Harold Kushner, in [When Bad Things Happen to Good People](#), writes that it is not suffering itself, rather it is our response to suffering that can either cripple us or help us grow. I know I'm not the only one in this room to be profoundly transformed by tragedy. But how to begin rebuilding? How do you make meaning of senselessness? For me, the answer lay in my experience with the ER social worker. She was the only person out of the entire team of professionals at the hospital who could tolerate my pain. She was the only one who held me--a complete stranger--and comforted me when I was in shock and at the depth of my despair. She asked me about Laurie. I told her that ours was a rare friendship--pure and beautiful. We rejoiced in each other's happiness and cried for each other's pain. The social worker listened, and she was able to bear witness to my pain and suffering. That was powerful to me. I still remember that her name was Pam, and she had blond hair and blue eyes. She wore a navy suit and a badge that read, "Patient Advocate."

"A man knows who is there for him when the glitter fades and the walls won't hold."

I did manage to graduate with my MSW later that semester, with the help of an extremely supportive network of family, close friends, and the Boston College Social Work faculty (who made sure I got free counseling). And, while ultimately my relationship with Eric didn't withstand the impact of the car accident, we initially shared an intense bond forged by our survivor guilt, our anger, our despair--and our gratitude--that we dared not speak aloud with others--that I wasn't the one who had died. Only Eric and I were witnesses to how close I had come to sitting in the back seat. You see, I had suggested to Laurie that she sit in the front seat so she could direct Eric back to her house from the beach that day. She declined, but I

persisted, thinking she was only being polite. Finally, she told me that she wanted to sit in the back seat so she could take a nap. So, I gave in and sat in the front.

“Let this promise in me start like an anthem in my heart...From Now On...”

I promised Laurie--and myself--that I would make meaning of her tragic death, that I would have more to show for the accident that killed her than the tiny scar I wear on the top of my left wrist. Over the course of the next several months, I discovered what I needed to do to make meaning of this senseless tragedy: I needed to do for others what the ER social work had done for me.

And so I abandoned my plan to do private practice mental health work and chose instead to devote myself to oncology social work, which I did for 19 years. As an oncology social worker, first at Massachusetts General Hospital and then at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, I worked with people with cancer and their families as they faced terminal illness. I helped people heal from gaping wounds, like the chasm left behind by Peter (not his real name), my young osteosarcoma patient. I first met Peter and his parents the day he got diagnosed when he was 16. After several amputations that went progressively higher up his leg, Peter felt lucky to be alive for his 21st birthday. He glowed as he recounted how his father took him and a few close friends out for a beer to celebrate this milestone. That was the last birthday Peter lived to see. And over those five years I worked with them, I bore witness to Peter's and his parents' pain. And I cried with my nursing and social work colleagues when he died.

Then there was Gail, 40 years my senior, who, after our first meeting questioned my ability to help her because I looked too young to know anything about pain and suffering. (I was 24.) Her daughter called me to ask for an older social worker. So, I went back to Gail, and while I didn't share the story of my accident with her, I did tell her that I had shared journeys with others in situations that were similar to hers and that I would like the opportunity to accompany her on her journey, if she'd let me. I continued, saying that if, after another session or two, she'd still like an older social worker, I'd find her one. As she spent the next 3 years in and out of the hospital battling leukemia, we shared many moments of sadness and joy together. We ended up having an amazing relationship. After Gail's death, her daughter wrote me a beautiful card thanking me for the comfort and support I had provided her mother and mentioned how glad she was that I didn't give up after the initial request for an older social worker.

And there was Lynne, who prior to her diagnosis of metastatic colon cancer, appeared to have it all--beauty, a high-powered career, a doting husband, money...and fantastic jewelry. Soon after Lynne's diagnosis, her husband left her for one of her "friends." While she dealt with her intense anger and hurt, and grieved for the children she would never have, we slowly, painstakingly worked together to rebuild her life--on her terms. She lived 3 more years, long

enough for close friends to throw her a lavish 40th birthday party. She died without regret and surrounded by those who loved her.

I loved those years in oncology social work. It was an honor to be invited into the lives of all of families. Yes, it was emotionally intense, sometimes even depleting work. And, no, I didn't make much money doing it. But every day--every day--I went home knowing that my work had made someone else's pain a little easier to bear. My clinical oncology social work was simultaneously profound and humbling, exhausting and invigorating, seeped in death and life-affirming. I do believe I made good on my promise.

Now I'm a health scientist at CDC, where I've been for the past 9 years. I still work in cancer, but on a macro level. I bring the voices of the patients and families I worked with for all of those years to all of my projects and research endeavors. While I admit that working in public health isn't as immediately gratifying as the clinical work, there is something to be said for working to try to improve the lives of millions of people, especially the most vulnerable. I'm not saying I'm "all that." But that is the work of public health.

Through my tragic car accident, and in my work with those near the end of life, I've learned some things about living. These are things I'm sure you already know, but these lessons bear repeating, both by Hugh Jackman and by me.

"From now on, what's waited 'till tomorrow starts tonight."

I think that statement is more than an admonition not to procrastinate. It's about embracing life, even when we're exhausted, or in pain, or overworked. I mean, don't most of us feel exhausted a lot of the time? I know I do. But even so, we are challenged to live each day fully, to make memories with our loved ones, even if it's as simple as playing a game of Ticket to Ride, or Candy Land, or my family's favorite, the Great Dalmuti. It means we should pause for a moment each day to take in the beauty of the sunset and also find the joy in the mundane--helping with homework, making dinner, loading and unloading the dishwasher--even savoring the slog to work in Atlanta traffic by listening to NPR or jamming to our favorite music. Rather than dread the carpool line at school (as, I admit, I do), we might, instead, focus on it as a golden opportunity to talk with family on the drive to/from school.

"From the rubble, what remains can only be what's true."

I think, more than anything, I've learned **this** lesson from working with people who were facing their mortality. Focus your energy on the people who mean the most to you. Work hard to maintain and nurture relationships--with your partner, with your children, with your parents, your siblings, your friends, and your colleagues. Keep in touch--and not just on FaceBook. Focus on activities that give you meaning. Do work that you find meaningful. And work hard in the service of others, whether it's volunteering at UUMAN, serving at North Fulton Community Charities, offering time to the schools, organizing a Get Out the Vote drive, or a March for Our

Lives event. I think these lyrics also mean, and I'm quoting my friend, April, "Keep the main thing the main thing." In other words, we shouldn't get distracted by the "drama" or waste our precious time with destructive, divisive behavior, or, like Barnum, seeking the approval of others. Time is short. We need to be kind to each other, take care of each other, support each other, yes, truly love each other.

Now, I'm not saying that living our lives according to these tenets is easy. In fact, it is often exhausting, time-consuming work. But, come to think of it, nobody ever said living according to our Unitarian Universalist principles would be easy. Amen. May it be so.