

IT'LL BE ALL RIGHT



Funereal organ music reverberated through the expansive sanctuary

as I walked my recently widowed mother down the aisle. The coffin — closed, lacquer gleaming under the heat of the lighting — waited for us at the foot of the podium in front of an oversized spray of flowers. Relatives and friends sat in tight stillness, as if the very act of breathing would disturb the eternal rest of the the deceased or undo the last emotional threads that held together the living.

There was an unsteady slowness to my procession; a surreal detachment from the ceremony. *You were going to get better, right?* I thought as I sank into the pew. Death was so stark, so shocking — it stood in such bold contrast to the blur of everyday life that surely this was an act of fiction. *You were going to continue being a part of my life. You were going fly across the Atlantic, share in my stories, beam with pride at everything I've achieved. You were going to, you were going to, you were going to...*

Like every father and son, we'd had our disagreements over the years. Blame had been passed and disappointment openly expressed. Family can be tough, but graciously, we'd cleared the air, said our apologies, and extended forgiveness before he had passed on. Embracing awkwardly over the rail of his hospice bed just weeks before he had died, my father had uttered his time-worn catch phrase 'It'll be all right.' But as the eulogy was spoken, a fist of remorse clenched in my throat and a stinging heat of doubt burned behind my eyes. Had everything really been said? Had we let go of everything, lay down our differences, and really forgiven one another?

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Two weeks later, I exchanged the bitter mid-continental Kansas cold for the wet, North Atlantic climes of Scotland's outer Hebrides. Easter was approaching, and the daffodils bloomed golden yellow across the holy island of Iona, framed by the towering snow-capped peaks of the Western Highlands. I had come to the wild and remote wastes of the islands to sift through the emotional dross that remained in the aftermath of the funeral. As noon approached on Good Friday, I walked into the somber nave of the island's ancient abbey to participate in the retelling of the equally-as-ancient story of Jesus' death.

At the heart of the church, a towering cross stood, draped with black cloth. The air was still and cold inside the stone church, and even the sunlight seemed to be arrested at the stained glass windows, banned from bringing any warmth to the ceremony. As the noonday bell tolled, symbolically announcing the death of Jesus on the cross this Good Friday, the mournful congregants were asking why this story seemed so disheartening. *You were going to save the people*, so the story goes. *You were going to heal our wounds, free us from our oppressors. You were going to, you were going to, you were going to...*

God had died and took my unmet expectations to the grave in the process. Strangely, Jesus' life and death are supposed to engender in us qualities of forgiveness, faith, hope, and love. Hanging awkwardly on that cross, Jesus gasped his final words of 'It is finished.' But surely this wasn't it, was it? As we somberly filed out into the churchyard, the dumbstruck crowd seemed doubtful. Had we really been forgiven? Had peace with God really been made?

With so much volatile uncertainty and self-doubt going around my head, both faith and family seemed a messy affair not worth the emotional investment. I'd banked heavily on the *'you were going to...'* statements, and when the dividends failed to pay — when it didn't pan out as I had hoped — I felt saddled with a fair amount of anger, disappointment, guilt and regret. *You were going to, dad, but now you're gone. You were going to, God, but you never did.*

The problem with these statements is that they don't make room for the other party to act of their own will. After all, aren't these expectations essentially self-centered desires? I want what I want. And expecting the universe to conform to my desires is not only unrealistic, but wholly selfish. In other words, everyone wants God to play fair; so long as God plays fair in their favor. But somewhere along the line, we're all going to have to be on the losing end, even if it means not getting what we want.

Unless, of course, God's economy operates far differently than I imagine. There's a lot of talk amongst the world's faithful about love being divine: give and you shall receive, love your neighbor as yourself, God is love. Perhaps living a life of faith — much like being part of a family — is less about trying to live constantly on the upswing without guilt and regrets, and more about learning to love selflessly, wholeheartedly and openly.

It was my father, really, who taught me this and seemed unmatched in his ability to live it. My father would persistently befriend anyone who walked through the door. Brushing aside deep, historical divides of faith, he did this especially so with the local Jewish community. Over the years, our family played host to Chanukah celebrations, Passover meals, and Purim parties all the way until his final moments. And in turn, he imparted the wisdom of his Jewish brothers to the local church.

He created bridges where others saw only impassable chasms: with such success, too, that the responsibility for officiating his own funeral was amicably shared between a Jewish layman, a Protestant minister, and a Messianic Jewish rabbi.

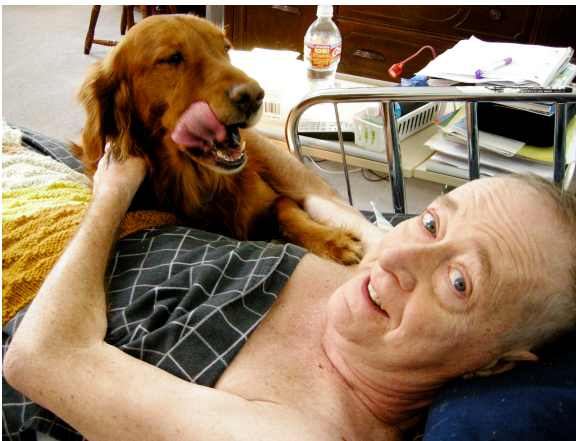
Where others might find it unbelievable or awkward, I found it incredibly apt to see these three men singing 'Great is Thy Faithfulness' from the same hymnal. It only attested to the fact that my father could bring people together. I wept through all 3 stanzas. After the interment at the cemetery, a family friend and long-standing supporter of my dad's ability to engage the other, took me under his arm with these words: "In Jewish tradition," he said sagely, "a boy becomes a man twice: the first time is at his *bar mitzvah*. And second, at his father's funeral." For the sake of the wisdom in that phrase, I hope I'm becoming the kind of man he was: open, giving, eager to learn, and willing to engage.

Perhaps I'm not so far off. As I hit the 5-year mark of living in the UK, my application is in the post to officially change my status from 'Temporary Resident' to 'Permanent'. Somewhere along the line, my takeaway cups of coffee have morphed into warm mugs of tea, my American playfulness has had an air of British sensibility tacked on to it, and my Midwest twang has edged closer to a faux-Oxford lilt. They'll make an Englishman of me soon enough, I suppose.

I realize just how much I've changed from the overtly American, Midwest-raised, college graduate that stepped off that plane in 2005. But becoming quasi-English in the short space of these years is a lesser change than what I've experienced through the people from all walks of life who have crossed the threshold of mine. They've changed my perspective, enriched my mind, and showed me the diversity of the human race. If it's true that we're all God's children, then I'm glad we've found each other.

Berber tribesmen drum late into the evening after a trek into the Moroccan Sahara (left). Sailing at sunset in Penzance Harbor, Cornwall (right).





Rizgar and Ali enjoy a laugh late at night after the shop is closed (*top*). Jared and Rachel, married in May, smile in the photobooth (*middle*). Dad and his faithful companion, Homestar (*bottom*).

My friend Rizgar knows what I mean. Immigrating to England from Turkey 14 years ago, he has only recently attained citizenship. In tiny Cleobury — where the prevailing sentiment is often ‘England for the English’ — an outpost of Turks has taken root to ply the population with battered cod and fried potato wedges slathered in salt in vinegar. With untiring regularity, Rizgar and his fellow countrymen heat up the fryers, fire up the ovens, and stock the fridges for the near constant flow of local farmers with a peckish appetite for the classic British fish and chips.

Late at night, after the doors have shut and the till is counted, I often find myself drinking Turkish tea and discussing life over a few rounds of backgammon. As I enter the shop, Rizgar heartily greets me over the hum of the fluorescent lighting, the brightness reflecting off the thin sheen of grease on every visible surface. The game board is spread out before me, the dice clatter noisily, and the tokens clack against the wood as the moves are counted out. In between turns, we talk about the weather, our families, our home countries. He asks about Christianity & Judaism; I listen as he talks about Islam. The game is quickly abandoned in favor of the discussion, and before long, I hear the church bells sound out the midnight hour. I push back from the table — ‘work tomorrow’ is my excuse — and reach for my hat and coat. But Rizgar stops me momentarily and falters over his English. “Fourteen years,” he says, “and it’s hard to learn the language. English people don’t always speak to me.” He motions to leather-brown skin; his chestnut-colored eyes roll with exasperation. “But you,” he clasps my hand in both of his, “you are a special person. You talk with any kind of person. You are an open heart.”

As I walked home that night, wrapped against the on-setting autumnal chill, my heart grew a size. In the midst of a backgammon game, I found new ways to love my neighbor as myself. In working towards integrating myself into British culture, I am learning new ways to pray. My thoughts flickered back to those last few days with my dad, those ridiculous Purim noisemakers clacking wildly in his hands as he sat up in bed, smiling in the face of death as we were regaled with stories by a Jewish friend. His love knew no boundaries of race, color or creed. He may not have left behind any wealth to speak of, but my inheritance has been richer than I ever could have imagined: his ability to connect, his open-mindedness, and his lifelong investment in faith, hope, and love.

The year my father died will forever be remembered as one filled with detours and doubts, and the grief of losing him will inevitably still strike from time to time. There’s no shame in shedding a few tears for the loss of a loved one. So long as I realize just how much I really loved him, those doubts of whether or not we settled everything before he died will vanish, and in every single way, I know ‘it’ll be all right.’

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