



AN AUTUMN'S JOURNEY

Deep Growth in the Grief and Loss of Life's Seasons

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The Colors Turn Early: Grief as Premature Loss

It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.

—Acts 1:7 (NIV)

IT'S EIGHT FEET AT BEST, if even that. When you're a kid, you run with the natural assumption that life will fall in your favor. It grants exceptions and kind of looks out for you. You think of life as some sort of doting grandparent and adventurous friend all in one, inviting you out to wild, frolicking play while hovering close enough to catch you if you fall. It's the best of both worlds, of all worlds really. It makes life terribly wild and inordinately safe all at the same time. So, it's only eight feet. The next limb up was probably another four feet at least. That was a stretch. But eight feet; that was just about perfect.

We had spent days raking those leaves, several days. Pungent remnants of a summer nudged off fall's calendar. We had raked them when they were still electric: royal golds, velvety reds, and sizzling oranges. Covered in pigments liberally scattered from an artist's pallet, the ground had been magically transformed to a patchwork potpourri of splendor on a canvas of faded summer grasses. We hated to rake it up really, to desecrate the canvas. But

the passion for fun prevailed and so they were raked into massive piles, clearing summer's faded canvas to wait for a distant spring.

It was only eight feet. But with both the wild child and protective grandparent of life begging us to jump, we could do no other. Eight feet is only eight feet. But when you're a child entirely wrapped warm in the embrace of the wild and protection of life, you leap, you plummet in a manner that feels much more like flying through a trackless sky fully abandoned to the gracious mercy of life . . . and then you land.

It seemed that you fell forever, but it was all terribly immediate at the same time. Both the vast endlessness and terrific brevity of it wove a puzzling dichotomy, giving the eight-foot plummet two sides and providing me two entirely unique experiences at the very same time. It seemed part of life's mystical ability to be inexplicably different and wildly divergent about a single experience, God being relentlessly fresh every time He touches us.

In the landing, at that very moment, the exhilaration of the entire adventure distills itself into some sort of crazy tonic that instantly saturates your brain, electrifying every neuron with emotion. And there, gazing up eight feet to the branch above and another fifty feet to the massive canopy that bequeathed these leaves, life surges with tsunami force within you. You can't move but all you want to do is move. It's incredible, and it is good.

Off in the distance, the last of autumn's leaves pirouette from trees now heavy with fall's slumber. The breeze has turned a bit brisk, slightly seasoned by the chilled hand of an approaching winter. Birds gathered en masse as throbbing clouds of aviary sojourners bouncing south under heavy skies.

It was only eight feet, but the descent and the landing dramatically sharpened the senses to allow every ounce of fall's vitality to surge in all at once. Life becomes so electrifying that you have to

shut it off or you feel that you'll explode from the inside out. And so, it's back up the tree for another eight feet of wonder.

And Then Adulthood

Decades evaporate, and over four of them rushed by in a blur of time and events. Columns of stately maples, elms, and oaks stood at attention, woodland sentries stoutly ringing a small, broad pond. Its glassy expanse thinned in the middle, drawing its banks close enough to permit a small bridge to cast a slight arch across its tepid waters. A slight chill permeated the air. Tentative but timely, the thin crispness was just strong enough to hint at the turn of the season on that mid-October day. Yet it was sufficiently subtle to cull a rich aromatic delight from the first of freshly fallen leaves. Fall was back . . . early.

Fall had come quietly that year, unobtrusively, as if heeding something reverent and austere. The leaves held a bit that October. Slightly pausing, they turned from summer's tired green to the exuberant blaze of fall. They seemed to hold their canopies close, refusing to fully surrender to a season turning on the axis of the year. Life, it seems, is so very profuse that even the pending death ever engulfing me was muted and restrained in the swell. It's breathtaking and life-taking all at once. Mom was dying. Fall had turned another side to me that I had never before known or wished to know. The plunge was infinitely more than the eight feet of childhood. This time the descent was as endless as the emotional freefall of her dying felt bottomless. The wonder of that season remained, but it has become tightly woven and inseparable with the loss in the turning.

The doting grandparent and adventurous friend seem to have backed away, if not disappeared altogether. "To grow up is to accept vulnerability... To be alive is to be vulnerable" (Madeleine L'Engle). Yet vulnerability is exacting and devastating, especially when the colors turn early.

Mallards slid from low-slung fall skies, cutting smooth lines in the glassy surface of the pond and sending glistening ripples in the same V-formations that these waterfowl had drawn across a graying firmament. With the momentum of migration propelling them, they skimmed under the wooden bridge's span and briefly settled on fall's waters, preening translucent feathers before fall called them back to her skies.

The ornate bridge's sturdy wooden beams and gently curved rails invited the grieving to pause over reflective waters. Death invites lingering and pondering. It provokes it as death raises innumerable and terribly tangled questions about life. Death is a reality that calls the rest of life and all of our assorted strivings into sharp relief, begging dark and foreboding questions. It forces the questions that we are able to deftly deny . . . until death comes. And death had come unexpectedly that fall, ramming the fist of adulthood squarely against the sweet memories of wild laughter and eight-foot plunges. The disparity was stunning and wholly paralyzing.

Several figures lingered on the bridge's broad oak and maple spine. They too wrestled with death, giving us a shared experience that mystically forged comrades from complete strangers. A hospice wrapped in fading gardens invited such pondering and the melding that results from a mutual experience.

Strolling the bridge's oak span, they paused over glassy waters in a momentous struggle to understand how something as final as death figures into the exuberance of life. Behind them leaves pirouetted and avian voyagers charted paths southward as always, but there was a sharp relief of what the child side of me wished to grasp in the momentum of fall and what the adult side of me was mercilessly forced to deal with.

I stood a short distance away at the edge of a sandy bank generously hemmed with dried reeds and brittle cattails that tiptoed

through glistening shallows. Even from there, I felt the thoughts of those on the bridge as sharp and leaden as if they were my own. How does it all work, this life and death thing? How does it hold itself against all the wonder of life to which it seems so contradictory? The suddenness and incongruity of it all pressed upon me with a blackened vigor; I found myself standing in a slumped stupor weighed by forces and crushed by realities that descended without notice or warning. How does it all work, the beauty and tragedy of life? A hospice created a place where such questions were gently entertained in lives where those questions were now being forced.

Tinges of fall color in the surrounding forest reflected in the mirrored surface, dancing on the slight wakes of arriving geese and shimmering when a passive breeze gently rippled the calm waters. Hedges of blueberries and tangles of wild grape filled in the forest floor, hemming in this place of wonder and solace. Inside the hospice, a few feet from that pond and the surrounding woods, my mother was dying . . . quickly, unexpectedly, and without remedy. Nature itself was turning in what was always her favorite season of the year. That fall, she would depart with it. Even though I was desperate to do so, I could no more hold on to her than stop the roll of the season turning in front of me.

Grand and Grievous All at Once

How can life be so terribly grand and so utterly grievous at the same time? I sat but a handful of feet away from a dying mother and attempted to reconcile this most glorious season with a suffocating loss that pressed my heart with such weight that it labored to pound out each precarious beat. Yet I was at the same time drawn back to an eight-foot jump in the arms of a wild grandparent who always bade me gracious favors and loving protection. I saw nature in spectacular display all around me with forested vistas rolling off to vividly

painted horizons. Yet, in front of me there walked those whose faces were veiled ashen in the pending death of a loved one.

How do you reconcile it all? I wanted to believe that life was either good or bad. In resting in one or the other I freed myself of the gargantuan task of having to believe in both. In doing that, I removed the hideous disappointment that befell me when the bad prevailed, and I kept myself safe from unsustainable joy and hope when the good abounded. Either way, I know that one or the other will seize the landscape of my life and just as quickly leave it to the other. I would simply prefer to rest in one rather than have to alternate between both. I was falling much farther than a mere eight feet, and the exhilaration of it all had turned terribly black.

My mother was dying. The juxtaposition between an eight-foot fall and a mother's death was entirely unfathomable. I sat at the pond's edge, groping to seize and hold close the wonder of life on one side in order to believe that life makes sense and that good is sustained even in great and terrible pain . . . or more so, in great evil. On the other side, with great trepidation I tried to reach out and touch the pain ringing both cold and hollow, knowing that I could not deny it nor could I ignore it.

An eight-foot drop and a dying mother seemed as from horizon to horizon in distance from one another, yet I knew that I had to embrace them both. Sitting by that pond, I could not span the gapingly impossible expanse.

It was here, in these places, that we realize the vast dichotomy of life. At one end of the created framework there are set intoxicating joys that exhilarate and enthuse us to the end of our emotions and beyond. At the other end there looms the specter of devastating pain and chillingly dark moments. Life embodies both of these dramatic extremes. And at times we are helplessly tossed between both of them.

Managing the vastness of life is about managing our response to it. When the colors turn early and the riotous leaps of eight

feet turn bottomless, we can choose our disposition and thereby navigate these extremes. Martha Washington wrote, “I am still determined to be cheerful and happy, in whatever situation I may be; for I have also learned from experience that the greater part of our happiness or misery depends upon our *dispositions, and not upon our circumstances* [italics mine].”

More than navigating these extremes simply to survive, we can put ourselves in a position to effectively savor this vast dichotomy of life. We live in a world of immense and incomprehensible variety. Incredibly, we are shaped and created with the capacity to fully embrace, experience, and incorporate the full depth and breadth of that marvelous diversity. In the embracing, we can experience the vastness of life as both dark and light, subsequently growing in ways unimaginable while managing the venture by choosing our disposition. I prefer eight-foot leaps, but I likewise see the opportunity in bottomless falls.

Turns That Leave the Precious Behind

As I peered over the pond and out to the deep woods beyond, the seasons were changing. Life was rolling on, leaving behind something immensely precious. Nearly, it seems, discarding something it should not. At times life seems insensitive, casting aside that which yet has some remnant of life remaining. Something seems incomplete, a resource not yet exhausted, something seized and stolen before its time.

Sometimes life seems unfinished, the edges not yet sanded smooth, the final touch not yet rendered on a canvas bathed in colors of near perfection, a finish line not yet crossed swelling with applause and exhilaration. It simply should not be over. So it seems. There should be more eight-foot leaps to make, but eventually there will be the final jump. And it had come.

Sometimes completion is not what we think it to be. We hold some idea of what something will look like when it's complete

or has fulfilled its purpose. We apply a standard that in most cases is terribly inferior to the perfect destiny for which this person or this time or this thing had been created. We see the loss of the moment and are blinded to the larger purpose. Life tips on finely orchestrated events that vastly supersede our comprehension. Jesus uttered, "It is finished" (John 19:30 NIV), to an event that his followers could not believe should have finished in that manner. In their minds something was not completed, yet it was completed perfectly.

Grieving acknowledges completion. Whether we can see it or not, it's resting in the belief that there is a completion that gives sense, meaning, and a rationale to our loss. Completion means that anything more is unnecessary. That loss is not about a future now stolen. It takes unfairness away and replaces it with an appropriate closure.

Twice Stolen

In the taking, it's all relegated to the whimsy of memory. Memory is what's left after something's over. It seems wholly incapable of fully holding on to the thing that it's attempting to recall. It's but a lean shadow, a thinning recollection of something marvelous and grand. Memory can only hold a piece of that which we lose. In the holding, it often takes artistic license and amends the memory so that it's either less painful or visually richer. In either case, it's easier to hold. So when we lose something wonderful, in great part we lose a great part of it forever.

Goldfinches and orioles skirted the woods' edge and lighted on bustling feeders hanging sturdy at the bridge's edge. Having been left far behind the hem of a summer long thrown off the edge of the hemisphere, they reminded me of a season past . . . remnants of what was. Summer itself walked with us through lush green days, caressing us with warm kisses of new life. It granted us sultry

nights bespeckled with galaxy upon galaxy of stars packed into its rotund, velvety canopy. It begged us to smell dandelions, to run sandy beaches, to roll in mounds of wildflowers, to ascend the muscular limbs of maple and aspen, to climb lofty peaks, and to wonder in a way that makes reveling sublime.

It was all fading now, relegated to the back alleys of my mind, conjured up in anemic images void of the flurry and flourish, of scent and the sacred. But its time was over even though we presumed there to be more life to be had. Summer had more to give it seems. But sometimes the colors change early.

Inside this hospice, a few steps from fall itself, my mother was passing just like summer was passing. From the inside of her room, her window framed the glorious scene of transition unfolding in front of me. But from the outside looking in, this same window only served to frame her in death. She had yet to draw her final breath, although it was terribly close. Already the images of her were fading. Already she was passing into the far corridors of my mind, cloaked in ever deepening shadow before I felt she should. Already the tone of her voice, soft around the edges, was becoming muffled. Already her gestures, her mannerisms and smile, her tone and touch, the dancing, crystalline blue eyes so full of life were slipping as turning wisps of smoke through my fingers. I couldn't remember the eight-foot fall anymore although I was desperate to do so.

"Now we see only a reflection as in a mirror" (I Corinthians 13:12 NIV), says Paul as he squints, cants his head a bit, and gazes into the next life. I saw but a poor reflection gazing at this life as it unfolded inside a window where the colors were turning early. Already I was grieving not being able to hold her or the memories so poignant and sweet. The colors were indeed turning earlier than I presumed they should. But colors were turning anyway.

Turns of Life Turning Forward

“I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2 ASV), says Jesus. “No man, having put his hand to the plow, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62 ASV). “I came out from the Father . . . and go unto the Father” (John 16:28 ASV).

Jesus' actions in the present were all about the future . . . that time which stands a nanosecond in front of us and beyond the larger season that we call today. Out there is something called eternity, that thing which seasons cannot define or contain. Eternity is the future infinitely multiplied against itself. It's the ultimate destination that always held Jesus' gaze, yet it didn't hold mine as much as I wish it did.

Was this season over? Was eternity rushing upon my mother? Or was that all simply a marginalized perspective drawn tight by blinders of fear or absence of vision or thinness of faith?

In actuality, it's a step into something that will never be over. Eternity is the end of the end. There are no more endings there. The end of this life is the beginning of an endless eternity of ceaseless beginnings. And so, is the end really an end, or the beginning of that which will never end? Is eternity the extermination of even the notion of an end? Then we are obligated, if not forced, to ask, What is more in death: loss or gain? Are we losing something, or is what we're gaining so vast and terribly grand that it essentially wipes out any loss whatsoever? Does it eclipse eight-foot jumps?

Does it matter . . . really? Was it suggestive of a past now being lost before its time, or was it a past being set aside upon which an endless future was to be built? Was it about the limits that the past imposes upon us because its story is unchangeable history written in incomplete relief, or was it about the limitlessness of a future as a story yet to be crafted, formed, and told that will not be held hostage to whatever the past was or was not? Was life about a checklist of accomplishments completed and thoroughly marked off with

some prescribed tedium? Or was it about joining a much more vast adventure that is not defined by our expectations, but by the hand of a God who perfectly brings every life to closure at the perfect time in order to seize that exact adventure and set us out on horizonless hills? Will it make eight-foot jumps in the throes of childhood appear terribly minor by comparison? I think so.

How It All Fits

My mother was dying. For the first time in my life I found myself caught between a past on the verge of a seeming premature passing and a future that I was not ready for. It was fall. October was slipping away and my mother with it. In it I felt both my dread of loss and my lack of faith in the future. If my mom didn't somehow figure into my future, any vision that I would cast instantly disintegrated into a bitter talcum that blew an acidic residue all around me. I couldn't let go because the past was fading fast, the future was inconceivable, and eternity was simply too incomprehensible.

Panic stricken, facing uncertainties behind and before, I held on to that which I couldn't hold on to without seeing both the promises for her and me. I sensed something infinitely grander, but at that raw place of unexpected loss I couldn't grasp it. I could see it all around me in the flush of a season celebrating death so that it could celebrate life. But the bridge that this created for me, much like the stout maple and oak arch that spanned the waters before me, was simply too difficult to cross. I edged up to its footing and I knew the passage that it called me to. I needed to cross. I wanted to cross. But I could go no further.

The Colors Are Turning

The leaves rustled in the wind, its fingers culling nature forward in both death and dance. It was an odd combination indeed . . . celebra-

tion and cessation all at once. A nonnegotiable bargain struck for us by the sin of the first man, a counter offer on a cross without which life would stall, stagnate, and eventually cease to be life. Seasons must turn. Season is built upon season in an escalating dance. Oddly, the cross itself was accomplished so that we can pass from the season of this life to the season of the next. On the cross, Jesus built the ultimate bridge. He jumped, but infinitely farther than eight feet.

Geese and an assortment of waterfowl moved in slight circles on glassy waters. Massive assemblages of birds skimmed the treetops as feathered aviaries on a mystical journey to southern skies. The grand arch of the sky lent itself gray and cold. Nature was beginning to tuck itself in. The colors were changing early and I was not ready.

I turned to leave. As I did, my gaze was drawn to a small metal plaque by the bridge. I stumbled upon the words that were etched there: “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you *hope and a future*’” (Jeremiah 29:11 NIV, italics mine). I was and I am grateful for the promise, but I stood at both bridge and woods’ edge, running fingers over the raised wording on this simple plaque but unable to claim its message. The colors were turning early and I was being prepared to let them turn. I was being prepared to let life go out of my reach, to let it all run ahead of me without me. Around me life was advancing in dark directions that were not of my creating. Yet I had to let it advance and in the advancing find some hope or rationale that would permit me to join it, to know that out there in terribly unpleasant places lay a hope and a future. I had to let go and I had to leap.

CHAPTER 2

Drawing Out of Reach: Grief as Letting Our Losses Go

When you lose someone you love, you die too, and you wait around for your body to catch up.

—John Scalzi

DID YOU EVER RUN WITH leaves—a wild race born of wind and liberated foliage? It's a race, but more than that it's really an invitation to partnership and farewell. Racing with the leaves was not about finishing first; rather it was about a romp enjoyed in the midst of a transition being celebrated. It was playing with a friend before that friend was called away home.

It happened in fall's own autumn when the leaves turned dry. They had long lost their color, becoming curled and brittle, gnarled sometimes like hands beset with arthritis. Winter's impending snows skirted the horizon and teased the forecast. It was something like the last hurrah before fall slipped away. As a kid, it was an invitation to play one more time, to playfully challenge the remnant of leaves that had yet to sleep.

It most often began in the street as a brisk winter wind dove and spun from graying skies, slipping just centimeters over the asphalt. The myriad leaves strewn about seemed to grab hold for

one final thrill, hitching a ride for one more bit of hilarity and fun. They raced, spun, and tumbled down the road, at points catching themselves in winter's eddies and spinning in perfect circles as if caught in a delirious waltz. Pooled in some sort of scripted conglomeration, they would suddenly burst forward en masse to continue their pell-mell race down the road.

For a kid, it was all too inviting. It was play and farewell all in one. You had to race, to run in some sort of camaraderie, or you felt that you were somehow betraying fall and being brutish about its departure.

And so we raced. It was playful enough until winter blew a briskly firm wind that sent jovial leaves bounding past us at a pace we could not match. Left behind in a deluge of wildness, we would pull up and stop, breathlessly watching the leaves hurl themselves down the street and into the bosom of winter. It was more than just leaves. Rather it was bidding a season farewell, watching it roil and dance down the street, turning back and waving goodbye as it went. Fall was drawing out of reach, leaving us behind to wait for the next season.

Breathless and aching, I felt it was a bittersweet moment—those times when you don't want to lose what you have while you're simultaneously looking forward to what's coming. It was about wanting to hold all things at all times, not in the sense of seasons, for seasons don't hold; rather they give and then take. We want all the accumulated good of life to be constantly present, rather than a good thing having to leave in order to make room for another good.

Kids don't understand goodbyes. I saw it all as kind of circular, that whatever I was losing would come back. Fall would come again. We'd race again. The hello and goodbye of this season would happen again and again. I did not embrace loss as perma-

ment so it was easier to let go knowing it was eventually coming back. Kids don't understand that sometimes things leave forever, that finality has a nonnegotiable terminus where an end is indisputably an end often without apology or explanation. But I didn't know that. Fall was drawing out of reach only to return on the backside of next year's calendar. And so we waved goodbye to fall and ran wildly into winter.

Drawing Out of Reach in Adulthood

It wound in stilled wonderment past the sturdy walls of the hospice and around the pond, mystically inviting grieving passersby to a soulful stroll. Brushing the edge of a dense forest caught in the early stages of releasing fall's blaze, the brick path offered those on its gentle concourse the opportunity to brush the edge of their own existence as well. Death does that, and a hospice is a place for death.

The path was an artistic fusion of decorative bricks laid out in relentless mosaics. It was ever changing and always beautiful. Gracefully worn at the edges and framed in slight strings of emerald moss, the path was a brick menagerie aged and gentle. It wound around the entire pond, encircling the waters with a gentle but slightly distant embrace.

It had known the footsteps of many whose strides were made heavy with pending loss. Tears had mottled its surface. Sobs had run in rivulets deep into its crevices. The lamenting of lives lost and opportunities squandered had drawn the brickwork tight. Grief and celebration held simultaneously had prompted wonderment, the path often attempting to understand the contradiction. It had aged indeed but with the sturdy mantle of wisdom and the tender softness of a rare empathy. It didn't dominate but invited the passerby with muted whispers to a curious walk along the edge of life and death.

That Thin Line

The first of fall's leaves had begun to litter the path by the time my brother and I walked it. They wanted to race, but their invitation was more than we could heed. The invitation to frolic and farewell was the same, but I had no heart for it. Fall would be back. My mother would not. Fall drew out of reach every year only to return. As a kid, I didn't understand that sometimes things leave forever, that finality has a nonnegotiable terminus where an end is indisputably an end often without apology or explanation. Mom's departure would be permanent, without apology or adequate explanation.

The path seemed to weep as only true sympathy can beget weeping, brushing aside fallen leaves as so many tears, itself declining one more romp. Something about this path seemed thick and generous with empathy, somehow knowing our pain because of the pain of so many others whose steps and heartache still lingered in the crevices and cracks of its brickwork. It beckoned, inviting us to a contemplative stroll that took the mind beyond the simple hedgerows of the heart and deep into the wilderness of the soul.

Death invites us out there, beyond the comfort of life's edge. It seems that the thin line where life and death meet is a tempestuous and fearful place. One does not cross over only to return on the backside of some calendar. Goodbyes are not followed by hellos, at least none that happen on this side of that line. There was a foreboding permanence that this line was not circular; rather it was linear, moving on to something else someplace else.

A Glimpse of Both Worlds

This precarious line calls into question so many things we prefer not to call into question. Latent feelings lying deep within

some sort of emotional substrata are awakened and rise despite our desire to keep them submerged. Edging up against our own humanity is always a frightening thing. Living in the denial or ignorance that finality is final allows us to live with a sense of the eternal in a world terribly temporal.

There is that inherited bit of eternity that lies deep within us that rails against the confines of the temporal, awakening a deep sense that we were originally designed for life without limits. When limits are laid out as lines across the landscape of our lives, much like that path, we find ourselves facing something that was not meant to be, but something that is anyway.

Yet, this line is filled with a sublime richness, handing out pearls of wisdom and priceless insights that give away, in some nearly magical way, some of life's most closely guarded secrets. It is here that the dichotomy of life and death, of the finite and the infinite, of the eternal and temporal edge up to each other and eventually intersect in one place. The two sides of life merge in a rare and uncanny way, giving us vast glimpses of the whole of existence.

Somehow winding down its broad path afforded the grieving the privilege of encountering a path not often traveled in both heart and spirit. Here the deep wood drew up shoulder to shoulder with the brick path, much as death and life draw shoulder to shoulder in such moments.

It was not a clash, but one aspect of life being fully present with the other likewise fully present, life standing side by side with death in a partnership of sorts. It was indeed the consummation of the entirety of existence, an extremely rare convergence where each inhabited a single place at a single moment. It was really not about anything waving goodbye only to say hello in the turn of some season. It was about the complete appropriateness of this finality as being the crowning touch to life. It was the need for a

final exit that set the stage for a final entrance in a place where hello was in reality “welcome home,” and “goodbye” would be eternally unknown and therefore entirely absent. Something surged within me as two aspects of the same thing came together on a simple brick path that wound tight against fall’s wood.

Our Fear of the Line

I lived on the life side of that line, as far away from the line itself as possible so as to be as far from death as possible. My mother was drawing ever closer to that line, moving to cross from this side to the other. Her illness had thrust me to the edge of that demarcation, as a means of either keeping Mom from crossing over or attempting to see that the place she was heading toward was both prepared and fitting. I don’t know. An illness had pushed her near the line when I was in kindergarten at a tender five years of age. Thankfully, she did not cross then, although she had brushed frighteningly close.

Now some four decades later, the crossing was imminent. There would be no return, no coming back on the backside of the calendar. Leaves blew down the tight brick path into a pending winter. I felt no urge to bid them farewell, nor did I feel brutish and insensitive by not doing so. The farewell that I was facing supplanted any desire for any farewell ever. Yet I attempted to grasp the appropriateness of a final farewell in exchange for a forever hello.

Other loved ones had crossed over this path . . . aunt and uncles and grandparents, descending into some sort of abyss that permitted no spectators, leaving me distanced by the fear of that place. From this side, I couldn’t see what was there. Like the forest running deep and dense, death quickly drew those I loved out of sight behind veils of shadow into some place that I couldn’t see. If there was life out there, I couldn’t make it out. And if there was, could it ever possibly be as colorful as life on this side of that line? What

was Mom crossing over to? Seizing the hem of a winter wind, the leaves bounded into the deep wood and cavorted out of sight.

The Known Unknown

“For I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2 ASV). Somewhere out there a place was prepared for Mom. Across that line that she was approaching lay a provision unknown to me. It was said to be spectacular, the stuff of mansions. But I wanted to see it to affirm it as being so in order to lend me some comfort. She was drawing out of reach. When you draw out of the reach of one place, you draw into the reach of another. However, I couldn’t see that other place.

I held to the belief that whatever that place was like, it was magnificent. Magnificence begets mystery, somehow becoming so grand that it’s too grand to be randomly disclosed. It is the stuff of privilege, holding secret its bounty until those destined for it see it for the first time. Grandeur disclosed in a sudden massive display is thrilling. I hoped that heaven was such a place. Despite the fact that I couldn’t see it past the deep wood and shadows of life, I prayed that it was out there waiting for Mom in indescribable splendor, a welcome growing in wild anticipation of her arrival from which any departure would be eternally unnecessary.

Despite the wonder of all of that, my first and most fierce intent was to stop this crossing over, oddly railing against a journey I could not stop. Sometimes life appears to carry out its plan without seeming to cast an eye toward those affected by that plan. I felt alone and invisible, lost on a gentle brick path teased by parting leaves that wound around a quiet hospice.

Drawing Away and Fading

A number of the bricks embedded along the way contained inscriptions of names and dates etched deeply into their reddish

clay surfaces. Some had filled with dirt and scattered speckles of moss, the footprints of time revealed in their growth. Others were entirely fresh and sharp, being new to this gentle path. Each name represented a history likely embellished with both wonder and tragedy, a story now completed and slipping with ever increasing vagueness into a misty past. They were inscriptions . . . a handful of letters shouting out names in brick and mortar relief, leaving the world one remaining voice that would forever speak the names of those who had died in this place.

The names cascaded through my mind as torrents of people whose faces I attempted to visualize and whose lives I found myself fabricating. They were entirely unknown to me. Yet, it seemed all too appropriate to resurrect them in my mind at least, to not allow death to draw them out of reach entirely. It seemed some primitive effort to minimize the power of this line by pulling a foggy fragment of these people back across to this side.

The brick path was a curious path, made for the living by those now dead, made so that the drawing away might not result in being entirely drawn from existence itself. It was an inevitable path, one that we all walk, skirting the immortal at one time or another. Some are in front of us along this path, others are behind, and yet others refuse to walk it even though not walking it is not an option. Life on one side and death on the other.

The record of those passing across that line were etched as whispers on fired clay beneath our feet so that names and lives would not be forgotten as they drew out into the deep wood. All of these names had drawn out of reach, leaving the single footprint sketched out in a handful of letters. These bricks held their ground while fall's leaves bounded over them and raced off to winter. Mom would cross this line. Her name and her life were already being etched across my heart.

The soles of our shoes scuffed the path's surface that day. We paid little attention to the support that it laid under us and the guidance it provided us. We were adrift in a mother drawing out of reach in this place of death. It is likely that the path served the most anonymous role conceivable, being a path upon which the grief of those walking it made the path entirely obscure. Mom was becoming obscure as was the entire scope of life itself. Yet this path gave us a footing that we didn't even recognize, much as God gives us a sure footing when what is precious and sacred is being drawn out of reach.

The Onset of Grief as the Inability to Stop Loss

Grief often begins before the loss impales us. Grief finds its origins in the anticipation of loss, and it deepens as we become increasingly convinced of the ruthless inevitability of the loss. At his most dire moment, Jesus uttered the plea, "If it be possible, let this cup pass away from me . . ." (Matthew 26:39 ASV). His grief was related to what had not yet transpired. It was ground not in the loss itself, but in anticipating the loss.

It may be that anticipation of loss is something of guesswork and speculation, being our attempts to manage or deal with a pending loss. Sometimes it seems that we attempt to visualize loss as some sort of proactive strategy so that the fury or fire or ferocity of loss itself is contained before it befalls us. Such endeavors call for great speculation, thought, and a host of presumptions that frequently render the process itself in excess of the actual loss.

Likewise, it seems that grief arises from our inability to stop the loss. Our grief also appears grounded in the realization of our weakness as held against the enormity of what looms before us and our inability to coerce life into avoiding those things. It's that we can't stop loss. We're powerless before this thing called life. It

will forcefully move through our days, our hours, and our most guarded core with no consideration for what costs its movement may incur. Often life pulls across this line and out of our reach the very things which we so desperately wish to hold on to. And Mom was drawing out of our reach.

Obedience and Understanding

Are we willing to be obedient to that which we may not understand? “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:9 NIV), declares God.

It's not about understanding the movements of God and creation. It's about finding some meaningful abandonment and embracing an entirely confident surrender to that which we can't grasp and therefore don't understand. We intentionally set ourselves squarely outside ourselves, allowing us to live in places we have no hope of comprehending, choosing to believe that there is no other place so grand to be. We realize that the vast majority of this thing we call life and all that makes life grand and massive and terribly exciting is out there, in a place that only God understands. And there, we are left without any understanding except that we are perfectly placed and at home more completely than in anything else this side of eternity.

It's impossible to find this place, much less reside there, unless we trust that in God's hands all is purposeful with a value far, even infinitely beyond whatever loss might be sustained. Is it a matter of fighting the pull of life or attempting to redirect the great torrents that come against us, to halt the army of departing leaves that race down the road and into winter? Or is it assuming control by the relinquishment of control? Is it seizing with a brash intentionality the belief that in the pulls, torrents, and torments God has a grand

purpose if we only dare to look, ask, or step aside so that we can run to this place of faith, safety, and utter abandonment?

Paul wrote that “faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1 NIV). Faith is not about dissection or deductive thinking or rationalization or endeavors designed to rein the infinite into an intellectual corral where it can run itself in predictable circles. Faith is about deciding not to know. It’s not about ignorance or the lack of commitment to gain and garner knowledge. Rather, it’s about acknowledging that all knowledge will quickly collide with a grand wall which human intellect cannot scale, dismantle, or burrow under. It’s acknowledging its presence and embracing, even seeking, its arrival. It’s about knowing that the vast majority of life is surrender to what we can’t know and a God Who we can. If we can do this, then when death comes and it moves into the shadows of the deep woods beyond our vision, we can accept it, embrace it, and in time even cheer it on.

But here lies the great defeating rub. The lynchpin upon which our thinking is prone to either lavish graciousness or unbridled hate is understanding, or lack thereof. We demand to know. Tell me about this crossing over. In light of its unfathomable permanence, explain its rationale and process to me! Show me how it fits and how it’s the better option.

“It is not for you to know times or seasons, which the Father hath set within His own authority” (Acts 1:7 ASV). We hate that, particularly in crisis. It’s not enough. It explains nothing. It asks me to believe without hard data or fast facts that would give me a reason and platform to believe. Our lack of faith demands the infusion of information. Information shapes an explanation. And we hope that the explanation is sufficient.

It’s God’s odd, seemingly incongruent dichotomy that we grow the best when we know the least. Lack of understanding provokes

faith and forces it. If we don't understand, we either seethe with rebellion or take a radical posture of resting in a grander plan whose scope and breadth we simply cannot see or adequately apprehend. Mom was drawing out of reach, and I was forced to the precipice of this decision to demand to know or let it go. I found it easy in theory but enormously taxing in reality. I wrestled with it imperfectly.

Beating Grief Equals Surrender

Is beating grief the wrestling with surrender and surrendering to surrender? Would grief not only be reduced, but possibly abolished? Surrender is largely synonymous with abandonment in the sense of abandoning our right to fear and embracing our greater right to peace. "And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding" (Philippians 4:7 ASV) is ours if we rest in surrender rather than the terrible angst of information that is always insufficient in loss.

Surrender is a choice. As a choice, it is a privilege. We have the privilege of surrendering to God. Surrender in a relationship with God is not about defeat as we presume it to be. It is a supremely tactical move vested in wisdom and faith.

In dealing with grief, it is handing over our lives and our pain with the full acknowledgement that surrender to God means the defeat of grief. "Not my will, but thine, be done" (Luke 22:42 ASV). It's not acknowledging our inadequacy; rather it is acknowledging God's adequacy. We move away from the need to know and move toward the need to believe. Knowing is never sufficient—genuinely believing always is.

Surrender is letting go to something infinitely bigger than I, who sees a plan much bigger than the one I see. It's resting in the conviction that the path unfolding before me is rich even though its escarpment and ascent seem only the stuff of pain and

its glories largely obtuse. It frees me to set a course along that line between this life and the next, drawing into the lungs of my soul both halves of life as living and dying.

More profoundly, it's embracing the fact that Jesus crossed over this line into death and then of His own accord and power came back across this same line into life again. "He . . . is risen" (Luke 24:6 ASV): three simple words that are said of no one else in all of human history. Sometimes the grandest of all events are best described in the poverty of a few simple words. In a handful of syllables it was declared that Jesus crossed back over. He did both sides of it, and He controls both sides of it. He returned on the backside of the calendar. If indeed He controls both sides of this seemingly precarious line, then the line is really of no accord.

The sun set a rapid course for a horizon tinged in the color of autumn and chilled by that October fall. The path drifted into the chilled shadows of fall, the leaves having ceased their romp. The day's advance marked far more than the closing of a simple day. For the first time and the last time in my life it marked the closing of my mother's life as well. She seemed tied to this day, passing as it would pass. She was moving out of reach as was the sun and the day it defined.

Oddly, I had no alternative but to surrender. I fought the only option presented to me for an option that I did not have. A few of autumn's leaves swirled at my feet, dancing it seemed on this line between life and death, inviting me to race. They pirouetted as some grand waltz between life and death as if this place marked celebration, seemingly understanding the permanence of Mom's transition. The words "nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt" (Matthew 26:39 ASV) seemed so easy for Jesus to say. The seasons seemed to grasp them. However, they were not easy, but Jesus said them anyway. I struggled to do so, for in doing so I released

that which I did not hold. I stepped back. In the stepping I let go of that which I didn't hold, and I let my mother draw across that path and out of reach.

Tears once again mottled the surface of a gentle path that brushed the edge of a dense forest. The leaves raced off the edge of fall, and I found myself unexplainably able to release them to the next season. Although it was a fight, in the slow release I sensed a pending space to begin grieving. I cried in the fight against myself and the first thin wave of grief that the fight permitted.