

Unitarian Society of Hartford
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Big Rocks & Golden Handcuffs
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(10 AM Service) - A personal tale of how we put first into our lives' "jars" the biggest rocks that came our way - even if it didn't quite make "cents." - Karla and David Principe

Good morning.

My name is David Principe, and I am a member of the Worship Arts Sub Council.

I feel privileged to have the opportunity to stand before you this morning and to share some of my personal experiences with you today. The very first thing that came to mind as I sat down to write this sermon is that it is a mistake.

You see, I'm writing it because both of my parents are dead, and that doesn't quite seem right, now does it? I was 13 years old on my mother's 40th birthday. Goodness, but she seemed old at the time.

Why, then, did she seem so much younger when she died of cancer at 49 several years later? Had I grown that much older? Had time stopped for her? Had it sped up for me?

There are a number of things about me that were noteworthy at the time of my mother's death:

I was 22, had only recently graduated from college

I had started a relationship that year with the woman whom I would go on to marry.

I was present for mom's final days and her death, but had been relatively uninvolved in her diagnosis and treatment, and completely removed from the details involved in settling her affairs.

And, on the very morning of her death, after over a year and a half into the application process, I received in the mail my formal invitation to join the Peace Corps and to go off to Africa.

Six months later, I was off for nearly two and a half years – abandoning Karla, abandoning my sister, abandoning my father. “Abandon” surely is the wrong word, but I know all three of them felt that way from time to time and there I was, a continent away.

Being away for those first two anniversaries of mom’s death just about broke my heart. What on earth was I doing? The spikes of emotion were intense, and I had no idea that I could be that sad. But, as you can see, I survived, and in what now seems like no time, I was returning home and moving in with Karla. Her life had continued, but she had left a wonderful place in it open for me.

My father’s and sister’s lives had continued, too, but we all still lived far apart – I now in Maine; he in New Jersey, and later in Vermont; and she in Atlanta. But at least we were all back on the same continent. Some of us are blessed just to “know” certain things. “Knowing” that it’s the right time to have a child is one example. “Knowing” what we want to do with our lives is another. Karla tells a story about a sign on a wall that said, “Be a Teacher,” and that was it – she knew - I have never had this calling. I never knew how to convert my passion into a profession, and, in all honesty, I’ve been hard pressed much of my life to pin down just exactly what my passion is.

Seeking some kind of peace with myself and feeling that it was time to change all that, not long after we made the decision to have our first child, I reached into the ether, tried to extract some degree of that self-knowledge, and determined that I needed to go back to college to get another degree. It would open new doors to a way forward. It would help me provide for our family. It would make me happier.

In the end, it would also involve a move of no small proportion: we would leave Maine and head for North Carolina, where there were three programs that I was considering, and which also happened to be where my father’s sister and mother lived.

So, we picked up everything we had and put it into a 15-foot Rider truck. Come to think of it, I believe we even had room to spare. What a laugh.

Fast forward 5 or 6 years: I didn’t ever quite make it back to school. Life had gotten too busy, I got a “fuller”-time job, and we had bought a home. Visions of ever fitting again into a 15-foot Rider were a distant memory.

When we had our second child, Karla stopped working, and then it was all on me. We had decided that we wanted to live in terms of what we felt was most important for ourselves and for our family, and that meant to have a parent at home.

Things were tight, but we were lucky enough to have had a little help to smooth the skids, and we chose to live frugally. We didn't eat out a lot, didn't have lots of new clothes and gadgets; for a time we even made our own laundry detergent to save money. And things were pretty good—what with some job security, deepening roots at our church, and a strong group of friends.

October, 2003: Dad called me at work, which wasn't his habit to do, but he wanted to let me know that he'd had fainting spell and had found a weird lump on his neck; he was having it checked out. He wasn't sure what going on, but wanted to let me know. Like mom, it turned out that dad had lung cancer. His was small cell, where hers had been large cell. He was the smoker; she never had.

The proverbial sweater unraveled pretty quickly from there on out. And yet, in another way, those events seemed to unfold over a long, long time.

Now.

At some point in my life – I want to say it was college, though I can't for the life of me think of what class it was where a professor would take time to go over this with us – at some point someone shared with me the notion of putting a collection of objects into a jar. He pointed out that there's a particular order of operations, and that of all the things you have before you, those that you must put first into your jar are the big rocks—presumably those that are most important. For if you start by filling it with sand and pebbles and other small, less-important objects, you simply run out of room – and suddenly your big rocks are left out and you have to leave them behind.

I think I speak for Karla when I say that once we knew the full scope of what was happening with dad's prognosis — and it did take a couple of months finally to get there—we didn't have any sense that there was any other way to proceed apart from how we did. As with “knowing” about having kids, we simply knew what we had to do. It wouldn't be “convenient” or “easy,” but when it came time, we would go to Vermont and we would take care of him. We would support him and provide him with comfort to the best of our ability, and we would help him to die at home with his friends.

Over the winter he was well able to take care of himself throughout his treatments. As with mom's treatment, I was very far away and pretty hands-off. I wasn't just geographically distant: I really just didn't get too involved in the details. I don't know if it was through simple ignorance or self-preservation.

As winter turned to spring, he made good progress with his treatments and in getting his affairs in order, and at one point the cancer even went into some kind of remission!

But it wasn't meant to be, and, as memory serves, it was barely a week before they were saying to him, "Oh, John, we're so sorry..." And it was back.

We were scheduled to take a two-week vacation in Vermont in June. Karla's mom was celebrating her 70th birthday, and we'd have a few nice days to see dad and get caught up. But as we got closer and closer to the date, his condition worsened quickly. By my last day before vacation, it wasn't clear that he would live throughout the month. I packed up my computer and told my boss that I wasn't sure when I was going to be back... and he looked at me and said simply, "Don't worry about it. Call me & let me know when you get a chance." And that was it. That is, that's where everything in my life really seemed to change. To make a long story short, we spent the summer up at the lake with dad. Well, technically, we spent the summer up at the lake with Karla's parents, who have a place just down the road from my father's.

For those of you who have spent extended periods of time living in close quarters with your kids, pets and parents under your parents' roof—or, with your kids, grandkids and their pets under YOUR own roof—well, you know how stressful that can be. Add to that taking care of your dying father and your 4 and 6-year old kids, and, well, it was a wicked summer.

My job was to take care of putting his affairs into order. He'd prepared a will and a trust & gotten a bunch of legal things put together about which I knew very little, but now I needed to plow through his affairs and come to understand them and prepare them for transition. For me it was a whole new world.

During those weeks that we were there, we worked with dad and his doctors to smooth out his meds, and we finally determined that it was not entirely the cancer that was making him so deathly ill at the moment—though it had not gone away, that much we knew—rather it was the thalidomide that they had prescribed to fight the cancer. We got him off that, and in what seemed like no time, he was vastly improved and really able to take care of himself once again.

I was finishing up preparing his estate stuff, Karla was ready to head home, and so we did—she first with the kids, and then I a week later. I wasn't ready to leave quite as soon as she—I needed to have a few more hours and days with dad—but then there I was, back in North Carolina, back at work, and life.

To short months later—a year after that first call from dad—came the next call, this time from a cousin in Vermont. Dad's condition had significantly deteriorated: he'd finally become dehydrated and passed out, and they'd taken him to the hospital. They wouldn't release him until we arrived. Once again I said to my boss, "I need to go." Once again he said to me, "Call me."

My sister drove to North Carolina from Georgia that night. The next day, the five of us, and our dog, piled into our caravan & set out for Vermont.

October in Vermont can be lovely. As it was, the fall foliage that year was beautiful indeed, and the irony of coming here in the twilight of my father's life was not lost on me.

We worked to make dad's house livable for him in his final days; we coordinated visits with friends, family, nurses & aides; most days we found ways for us to eat dinners together with our kids; and Karla & I alternated sleeping at dad's house so he'd never be alone. It was a complicated performance.

Gradually there were fewer and fewer leaves on the trees; the days were growing much shorter, and all of our older neighbors on the lake took flight and migrated south for the winter. We seemed to be very much alone in the darkness waiting for dad's foliage to fall, too.

He didn't want to die—he wasn't ready to die—I think he still felt responsible for all of us, which was ironic given who was caring for whom.

In the end Karla & I stood over his bed with along with his sister, his brother-in-law and my sister, and we told him over and over again throughout that day that it was all right to let go. His death was peaceful and serene, and when he was gone, we all knew that we had at least one large rock nestled safely within our collective jar.

I did my duty over that next year and put into final motion the plans that dad had made. In general, cleaning up after a life is a messy affair. It takes a long time, is enshrouded in the loss that preceded it, and the end result is somewhat anticlimactic with the protagonist long since gone.

That year after his death was hard, but we finally got through Thanksgiving and Christmas, and we were starting to feel as if we were allowed to look ahead again. When we did, what we saw were difficult but important decisions for us to make.

We saw, again, opportunities to determine and to live that which was most important to us, and this gave us a glimmer of hope and possibility that we hadn't felt in a long time: We wanted to find good education for our children, we wanted to be close to our families, and we wanted to be close to Vermont, which was so important to us both for so many years.

Once again, it would not be easy: I would walk away from my job of seven years, which paid our bills and provided our insurance. Karla had to become the main breadwinner while I began the search for a new career. We would have to find new friends, a new church, a new home .. new lives. But in the end, it came down to what we wanted to put first.

I was on the phone several months back with one of my oldest friends. Slightly older than I, he's always known where he wanted to go and what he wanted to be. I envied this knowledge when I was younger, and I wondered what it was that drove him.

We talked about his recent disappointments in his work—he is very high up on the corporate ladder, and things up at the top had changed and were going to continue to change for the foreseeable future in a way that wasn't to his liking. We talked about his search for something else, and what stuck in my mind most was not his struggle to figure out what would make him happy: rather, it was the “golden handcuffs” he described shackling him to his job.

“They pay me too well. No one else could ever offer me the same deal.”

And with those words, I reflect upon the choices that Karla and I have made in these past few years—decisions that certainly didn't make that kind of financial sense. We've chose to make hard deals with ourselves—but we made them because we felt they were based on our deepest values: on caring for loved ones, on seeking solid education for our children, and on being close both to our family and to our families' history.

We know that the future will hold other opportunities for us to choose which items we put into our jars. Some we will choose well and others perhaps not so well. Some will be hard and others will be... well, harder. So be it.