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February 9, 2020

Move forward with grace and integrity right to the end. Pay attention and give it all you've got.

Anything Can Happen

READING From “Altar” in *Traveling Mercies* by Anne Lamott
[Anne and her son Sam are at the beach on his 8th birthday before heading to a birthday party. She and Sam have built an elaborate sand castle with moats, turrets, and gunners, and it is decorated with shells, feathers, stones and more. She calls it an altar.]

“We have to go,” I told him. The party at our friend’s house was going to start in an hour or so.

”No!” he wailed. “We can’t. What about...our creation? We can’t just leave it here. We have to stay and protect it. We’ve worked so hard on it! The waves will come and wash it away.”

”Honey,” I said, “it was never meant to be permanent. You must have known the tide would come back in.”

He thought about this for a minute. “I’m going to kick it all over, then,” he said. “And I *hate* you,” he added. “And I hate *everything*.”

I didn’t say anything. He walked away from me and the altar, world weary, shuffling with dejection, head down. Sam, I wanted to explain, making the altar was a way to celebrate, to honor you today. The fact that it’s going to wash away heightens how wonderful our *making* it was. The altar didn’t hold as much animating spirit as our *making* it did, the gathering, the choices. It’s like: We made it, we love it – oops, it’s gone. But the best part is still here.

SERMON

Anything Can Happen

What does it take to get up when nature throws us to the ground?

When Betsy asked if I could provide today’s sermon I said sure, but what does the congregation want to hear about? She calmly asked, well, what’s going on in your life? Nothing I started to say. But as a mother – a parent - I realized with Betsy that there is always something going on and that there was this story to tell.

It was late on a cozy Sunday night and I was finishing a chapter of my current book and ready to turn off the light when I got a call from my 31-year-old son in Albuquerque. He is an ER medicine resident there in his first year. He has always been a deep thinker and an almost frightening conversationalist. I’m never quite prepared.

“Mom, did you see the news?” Instantly my mind raced to the impeachment and the NH Primary since, it’s been hard to have any other news. With urgency and impatience - “Mom, did you see that Kobe Bryant and his daughter were killed in a helicopter crash this morning?” I didn’t admit that I had briefly seen one of those banners across the bottom of the TV screen when I was looking for something else, but I had not focused on it and had actually turned off the TV soon after. Kobe Bryant was not my hero and in fact associated with some troubling past history for me.

Almost yelling - “It just doesn’t make any sense,” he said. Now I could hear how deeply troubled he was. He was shaken. “It just can’t happen like that. How does that happen? He was a superhero. More life force and energy than normal humans. He spoke three languages, wins an Academy Award besides all his basketball records – 2 Olympic medals, NBA titles, 60points at his last game. A legend. He was going to coach his daughter’s basketball game for Chrissake. And God just up and cooks him in a helicopter that then goes down in flames on the hillside! What am I supposed to do with that? Who is this God?”

I was fully awake now. Took some breaths. Before I could answer he was on again, “I don’t know how to think about it. He was there as a rising star when I was in elementary school and then through middle school and until I was an adult. It isn’t just tragic – it’s jarring. I need better words for how to process this.”

I was just listening. Until it was my turn. I could feel that this was Erik my young son talking, not Erik an ER doc acquainted with sickness and death. “Erik, I am getting how awful this is for you. There aren’t any right words. I think I know a little of what you mean. Kobe wasn’t my hero but for me it was JFK. You’ve heard the question = Where were you when you heard that Kennedy was shot – everyone remembers exactly where. He felt bigger than life. And we pinned so many hopes on him. He was Camelot.’

Pause.

“Oh, yeah. I guess you’re right. That’s even bigger than Kobe.”

“Well, no, not necessarily, that’s not what I mean. Not bigger or more than. That it was jarring, you’re right. It seemed impossible – it altered so many realities for us. We suddenly felt vulnerable, like you are. Unsafe. The world suddenly had new chasms that we could fall into and no one can protect us.”

But then I said, “Also, Erik, you know, two years after JFK, my superhero, my Dad, was brought down in a fiery crash. His commercial flight came out of the sky and I don’t know if he died in the explosion or the intense fire that followed.” I don’t know what God was doing that night. Maybe out playing bingo.

In my life, nature or something akin to that - has literally thrown my heroes to the ground. Even if it is not in such a graphic, literal sense, every one of us has been faced with a similar shock. One of my first reactions to this news about Kobe is to pause before the kind of assumptions that one person’s celebrity, fame or position makes their death more shockingly unbelievable than

another's. It is probably inescapable. Huge collective grief that occurs with the loss of a famous person is perhaps more comforting because everyone is feeling the loss together and shares their messy, tearful, televised testimonials.

But we can be mindful that to a person who has recently lost their parent, spouse, child or friend, who is not well known, they are in every way deserving of as much solace and it may be harder to come by. My first message - think of someone you know who has lost someone dear to them in the last year and reach out. Ask them how they're doing. Let them tell you the stories that they need to keep alive because they aren't on YouTube, CNN or ESPN footage. Ask them to show you the pictures again, "Tell me again about....."

My second reaction is to ponder the choices we have in the face of such news. As we've heard - talking about "thoughts and prayers, condolences to the family" now ring hollow. We need to be more authentic and stretch further than those words. Ask instead, "What can I do in his/her name? How can I help keep their name/mission/passions alive for you? And - almost as important - "How can I be with you in your grief?" Now and in the weeks and months ahead because there is no fast track on grief. It is not gone with the next news cycle. Grief is hard and long and requiring.

My third reaction is one what many people have been saying in response to Kobe's death. And I believe it is absolutely true. This is what I talked about with Erik:

Erik, I learned at too young an age that life could end on the day you are striding forward with plans and joys like my father. But like my mother, I could live to be 99. We don't know which it will be and we cannot find justice to explain it. It is not a game of fairness. It's a little like Pickett's Charge - civil war soldiers lined up marching across the field with bullets flying and the guy next to you goes down and then the guy on the other side but you keep going. You don't know why. It is not at all something you did or didn't do. It's not what you ate, how you exercised, what you believe, what you were wearing that day, those good or bad thoughts you might have had. You are right when you said you no longer feel any immunity, there is no defense against catastrophe. The ancient Greeks thought it was Zeus.

What is true is that you have today. You have this time right now to live in this day with love, generosity, laughter, gusto. You are awake, alive, with senses that can take it all in. You can feel it, breathe it, own it. You have hundreds of emotions that prick, smooth, excite, jar, thrill, sate, elate, frustrate and more. It is the day you are in. Share it with someone. Be there for someone. If not someone, then your dogs.

Move forward with grace and integrity right to the end. Pay attention and give it all you've got. That's the best I've got. I gave you life, now go and live it.