

# Chapter 9 – Falling Into the Abyss

A few days after my meeting with Wise Ink, the weather was getting nicer as the unofficial start of summer was approaching. But before summer began I went to my parents' house to celebrate Mother's Day, as I always do. In the past we would take Mom out to a nice restaurant or Old Country Buffet, but as time went on we celebrated more often at home to avoid the big crowds and lines. Sometimes we all bring something to share, sometimes we just order pizza, anything we can do to prevent Mom from having to cook on her special day! This Mother's Day was good, and the weather cooperated, which allowed us to sit outside and bask in the sun after lunch. As I returned home and got out of my car and shut the garage door, my neighbor came up to me in my driveway. Usually when someone says "I'm not sure if you heard about what is happening with my family," your first reaction is "Oh boy, this is going to be a long conversation." It was already a long day and I just wanted to go inside and relax, but I'm a nice guy so I lent my ear. The conversation was nothing like what I thought it would be.

My neighbor began to explain. Her father and his wife (second wife, not her mother) were in town visiting from Portland, Oregon the previous week. They decided to go out for pizza to celebrate my neighbor's birthday. They were enjoying a fine evening and just got served their pizza out on the deck of a local pizza place, when they heard a cracking noise in the trees. Someone said "If you see Bigfoot, call the news!" Just seconds later a massive tree came tumbling down and it was heading right for their table. Everyone got up and scrambled out of the way, everyone was clear as the tree crushed their table...except for one person. My neighbor's father's wife could not escape and got smashed by the giant tree. She was stuck under the tree for quite some time, and when I saw pictures I simply could not believe that she survived, but she did. She had several broken ribs, a broken hip and a punctured lung. It was pretty bad. After hearing the story and seeing the pictures I was in tears, and gave my neighbor a big hug. After what she had been through, she really needed it. I was so glad I didn't try to rush the conversation just so I could go inside and relax. It was much more important for me to listen to her story and offer my compassion.

A day or two later the story was on the local news. The next day as I was mowing my lawn a reporter from another tv station came up to me and asked if the people were home to talk about the story. They were not, so I gave him my neighbor's phone number. It just so happened that this all took place right before my neighbor was scheduled to go to Ireland for a couple weeks. She went a few days late, but being away from her family at such a difficult time I'm sure was quite hard on her.

It turns out that the tree that fell was rotted inside, and later the state found many other trees in similar condition in the area of the restaurant. The family was told that since the trees were on government ground that the restaurant had no liability whatsoever. To this day I don't know the outcome of any lawsuit, but the family was very upset and ultimately had to send the woman who was hit by the tree back to Portland in a hospital plane, which was not cheap. Those folks are very nice, and I pray that the woman recovers fully and is able to live a normal life. Last I heard, though, she was not eating and had lost weight and was only 94 pounds. My Dad's health and my career were top of mind until hearing this story. Once again my life was put into perspective. I was still unemployed, but at least I could walk and

eat and was not in tremendous pain like my neighbor's father's wife. Besides, the previous year I was biking along the lake trail and heard a big tree branch fall behind me. I turned around and thought had it fallen just two or three seconds earlier, I might have been dead or seriously injured. I felt rather lucky then, and even more so now. Unfortunately, a few weeks later I would once again be struck with my own set of problems.

It was well past the time for me to get my semi-annual car inspection and oil change. I usually do it in the Spring and Fall, but just didn't get around to it. It was already the middle of June! I headed to the service station, dropped off my car, gave them the keys and waited an hour or so (6-13). I paid my usual \$35 and went back to retrieve my car. I drove down the dealer driveway a bit and noticed a car in front of me, so I slowed down. Then I noticed the car stopped, so I slowed down a bit more. Then I noticed the damn thing was going in reverse, so I stopped abruptly and laid on my horn. To no avail. I watched the stupid car back up right into mine...CRUNCH!!!

I yelled and got out of my car yelling at the guy who hit me. "What the hell is wrong with you!" I screamed. He said he didn't see me. I yelled back "How the hell could you not see me? Don't you look into your rearview mirror before you back up??!!!" I was incredibly upset. It turns out the guy who hit me was none other than a Honda employee moving cars around!!!! Luckily for me, there was a witness, so the guy who hit me went to go get a manager. He came out and was very nice to me and said we will take care of this on our own dime, no cost to you. "Looks like you'll be getting a new bumper" he said. I was fine with that, but I did have to leave my car in the shop for a few days and drive home in a rental. Not a big deal, but nobody likes being without their own car for too long. A few days later I got my car back with a nice new bumper and license plate holder. It looked good! Another bad incident with a silver lining! But oh, the hell of Summer and Fall of 2017 was just getting started.

A couple days later I stepped out onto my deck and saw my favorite rodent, Whitey, sitting in the backyard tree munching on a big nut. As I often have, I grabbed my phone and quietly walked out toward the tree to take a few pictures. I got closer and closer and closer and took a bunch of pictures, but she did not run away like she usually does. The last picture I took of her was from just five feet away. She never lets me get that close! As she was going to town on that nut, I noticed that she was really dirty. I had noticed that over the previous several months, and wondered why she was so dirty. In the coming weeks, I would get my answer. But for now I was so happy to have such great close-ups of Whitey, which I intended on including in this book. These were the best pictures I have ever taken of her.

The next day (6-16), I went for a bike ride and swim. It was a very warm day and I had a nice relaxing time, trying to get my mind off my car issue and, well, life issues in general. I got home, jumped in the shower then hopped on my computer to check email, and was about ready to mix a nice cold beverage and watch the Twins baseball game. I laid down on my bed to catch the evening news before the Twins game, and just as I laid down a very strange robotic voice came over my computer saying something like "Warning, your computer has been infected with the Zeus virus." I was like "What the hell?" I had no idea what was going on. I had never heard my computer speak to me before!

I watched the news then went back to my computer to see what was going on. I saw a pop-up message on my screen telling me that unless I call this number immediately to have my computer repaired, I could lose all of my data. Nobody wants to lose their data, but it's especially horrible when you are looking for a job. There was so much information on my computer, and I could not risk losing it all. So, like a damn fool, I called the number. I'm sure most of you know where this is going, but I, foolishly, did

not. The phone rang and a man answered saying "Microsoft Tech Support" or something like that, but definitely said Microsoft. He told me I needed to get my computer repaired right away and that he could do it remotely. (You must be cringing at this point!)

I agreed to give him remote access to my computer. Before he "repaired" it though, he showed me some "diagnostic tests" that showed my computer was quickly losing functionality and I could lose my data at any moment unless I agreed to the repair. Of course, the repair was not free. He said because my network firewall plan had expired I needed to renew it, and he offered me several plans. I was getting a bit skeptical because I had never heard of a network firewall plan, and was never told I needed to renew it. I asked him what a network firewall plan was and why I was not notified before it expired. He told me it is different than the firewall on my anti-virus software (Webroot), but didn't really tell me why I wasn't notified that it had expired. Then I told him briefly that I was not sure this was all legit and that I had no way of knowing if this was a scam or not. Anyway, I chose the \$300 three-year plan but was very leery about giving my credit card number over the phone. He said to me rather snidely, "I assume you know how to write a check?" Again I said "Yes, but this seems fishy." He then sort of reassured me by saying "Sir, Microsoft would never ask for your personal information over the phone." At that point I was feeling a little better about the situation, but was still skeptical. I finally gave him access to my computer to do the "repairs", which he said would take about three hours. Meanwhile, he gave me the address to send the check. At this point I'm thinking, if they repair my computer there's no way for them to force me to send them a check! The company name was Rovik IT-PC Support or something like that. They said they were a subsidiary of Microsoft. But since they answered the phone by saying "Microsoft Support" or whatever, that was another red flag. You would think they would answer with their company name, not the name of the parent company.

Still skeptical, I took a picture of the pop-up message on my screen and posted it to Facebook. Rather than asking people if this seems legit, I just said this sucks and I hope it's legit. Then I started getting messages from my friends telling me it was definitely a scam. I was convinced when one of my friends gave me a link to an article about the Zeus virus scam. My friends told me to pull the plug on my computer so they couldn't get any more information. The only thing I was really worried about was a document on my hard drive that contained my social security number. Unfortunately, that one little number is a HUGE concern if it is stolen. I then told my friends I would not be sending the check, and they all cheered the fact that I had regained my brain! By the way, my anti-virus software (Webroot) did not catch this because it was not a virus, it was a simple pop-up message like people see every day. Still, I should have known it was a scam because the message contained bad spelling and grammar.

A couple days later it was Father's Day, and as I drove up to my parents' place I knew I would not be able to contain my emotions about my computer being hacked. I walked in the door where my family was getting ready to eat, and I just lost it. Tears ran down my face and my mother gave me a hug and asked what was wrong. I said "My computer just got hacked and they got everything." I was just a complete mess. Yeah, a 45 year old man crying like a baby in his mother's arms, not a pretty sight, but it is what it is I guess. Soon after I calmed down my sister told me all the things I needed to do to protect my information. We spent the rest of the day celebrating Dad's special day. It was a nice day, and again we had the opportunity to sit out in the sun after lunch and have a nice conversation. Then I drove home knowing the next day was not going to be fun.

I spent all day Monday making a bunch of calls to credit bureaus (Equifax, Experian, TransUnion), the local police, the police in the town where I was supposed to send the check, the social security administration, my bank, the state attorney general's office and several other places. I put a freeze on

my bank accounts and my credit report and changed my passwords. For the time being I felt I had done enough to at least protect myself from further damage. Now, I had to figure out what the heck to do with my computer. Was it now infected with tracking software? Had they taken over my web camera? How bad was it?

The next day I was off to Best Buy to have the Geek Squad look at my computer. I told the tech what happened and he suggested it might be a good idea for me to get a brand new computer. Great, I thought, still no job and now I need to buy a new computer? I was just livid. The tech showed me a few computers and I took a very long time to decide what to do. Should I just wait to see what the diagnostic tests show on my computer and see how bad it is first? If they can restore it to working shape that will save me a lot of money. But they said the support plan would be much cheaper if I got a new computer as opposed to getting it on my current computer. I took some more time to think and finally decided to buy a new computer. I could always take it back if I didn't need it. I liked the new computer but it was a bit small. Unfortunately, I overlooked something pretty important.

I bought the computer with the support plan and a 64 gig flash drive I could use to back up my data. They took my new computer and my old computer to the back room for diagnostic testing and to transfer all of my data to my new computer and configure it. A couple days later I went in to pick up both computers. They said they were able to do a clean sweep of my old computer and that it was free of viruses and malware, and I could use it if I wanted to. But there was one problem. The hard drive on the new computer was much smaller than on the old computer, so they were not able to transfer over all of my files. This is what I had overlooked before I bought it. So I took both computers home to transfer all of my data to the flash drive and delete what was not needed from the new computer. I brought the new computer back so they could finish configuring it and downloading all my emails to the new computer. Then there was another problem. I don't quite remember what it was, but I had to take the new computer back home again and solve the other problem. I brought it back again, and they took it back to finish downloading emails. I went in the next day to pick it up and brought it home.

After a couple days I decided I really did not need the new computer and would just keep going with my old computer since it was clean and functional. So after all of that, I deleted all my files off the new computer and brought it back and got a refund. What an absolute nightmare I had been through! The worst part about all of this was that it came right in the middle of my preparations for another big freelance economic presentation I was scheduled to give in late July, the one to which I was referred by my friend Elliot. Economic research, creating charts, putting together my presentation and practicing all took a backburner to this computer hacking fiasco.

Well, just when that situation was resolved and my computer was up and running again, about a week later it was time for a little more fun (7-3). I stepped into my shower one day and turned on the water. I began showering and noticed the water was not draining. I finished my shower, got out, dried off and grabbed the plunger and began plunging away. Harder, harder, harder! To no avail. I tried many times to get the thing to drain, and it simply would not budge. This seems like a small thing compared to other recent events, but it was all piling up on me and I just felt cursed. I was yelling and screaming at God and asking him why so many bad things were happening to me. I had just had enough. I was plunging so hard at the drain that I got blisters on my hands. I wanted to avoid calling a plumber if possible, because I know plumbing repairs are not cheap. But I had no choice.

I grabbed some breakfast and called a plumber. He came out and snaked the pipes, but in order to do this he had to take the pipes apart, and they were full of water. Of course, the crazy design of the

plumbing system in the basement (under the main floor bathroom) made it impossible to put a little cup under the pipe to catch the water without some of the water falling in between the sheetrock and the wooden wall pane in the basement office room. So here was the plumber taking apart the pipes and water was going all over the place, down the wall, on the floor. I was watching this and just thinking to myself "Unbelievable." He finally finished snaking the pipes and we went upstairs to check to see if the drain was working. To check the drain he turned on the tub faucet (used for the whirlpool) as opposed to the shower faucet. The tub faucet had not been used in years since I don't use the whirlpool. Well, the drain worked and all seemed to be good. That was a nice \$320 bill! Unfortunately, it wasn't until several hours later that I noticed that the tub faucet was leaking!!! CRIPES!!!! Sadly, I did not have the money to get it fixed, at least not in my bank account, and my credit card was maxed out, so I did not get it fixed for a long time. The good thing is it didn't really raise my water bill that much, but it was just another problem that needed to be resolved.

A couple weeks later it was time for my economic presentation to the Builders Association of the Twin Cities (7-19), an organization that helps and supports home builders and realtors. Despite all the craziness with my car, my computer and my tub drain, I was able to finish my charts and research and practice in time for the big day. This was the biggest and most important presentation of my life, and it went very well. I received a lot of good comments and was even able to get several people to join my budding email list. At the time there were two people on my list (you have to start somewhere right?), and it skyrocketed to fourteen a few days later! Unfortunately, no job prospects came from the presentation. Oh well, at least I was getting my name out there. Once again, I was feeling like I could really do this for a living.

It was still high summer and I was past all my crazy recent events and my presentation was done. It was time to relax a little bit, and it was much deserved. Ironically, the next day would be five years since I lost my job. Wait, what? Five years??? I couldn't believe it. So much had happened since I lost my job, all of which was bad. Not one good thing had happened to me in five years, not ONE!! I grabbed a cold beverage and sat on my deck in the sizzling summer heat and, like always, peered around the yard and across the street at all the wildlife and leaned back in my chair and pondered the last five years. It was five years ago that I first discovered the peace and joy that a white squirrel could bring to a downtrodden man. I stood up again and looked for Whitey, but she wasn't around. Oh well, there were still other squirrels and birds and bunnies to watch. I sat back down in my chair and began to think. Hmm, when was the last time I saw Whitey? The last time I saw her was when I took those pictures of her in the tree eating that big nut. I looked at my photo roll on my phone and I was shocked to see that I took those pictures on June 15, the day before my computer got hacked. Today was July 19. It was never more than a couple days between Whitey sightings.

Immediately a terrible thought crept into my head. Was Whitey even still alive? Then I thought further and looked at those pictures again. I came to the conclusion that Whitey was not dirty all this time, instead it was most likely that the browning of her hair was due to old age. After a few more weeks of not seeing Whitey, I came to the sad conclusion that Whitey had gone to squirrel heaven. I never saw her carcass anywhere though. She probably died in her tree or a patch of weeds or something. Who knows. But I was convinced she was gone. That beautiful little white rodent that brought me so much peace and tranquility and joy after I lost my job had fulfilled her mission. She opened my eyes to the beauty of God's creation all around us, and was there to let me know that life goes on after losing your job, and your driver's license, and your best friend, and some of your relatives, and after all kinds of crazy problems drive you nuts for a time. She was there to let me know that things will be ok. The only good thing was that I didn't see her get killed by some kid throwing a rock at her or by being hit by a car.

That would have been awful. But knowing that the namesake of my book and my source of peace and joy during this awful time was now gone was a tough pill to swallow. Thank you Whitey for your presence on this Earth, and thank you God for sending her. She will be missed by everyone in the neighborhood, especially me.

### Chapter change?

In 2017, August was very cool in Minnesota, so I didn't do much biking or swimming. Instead I returned to skill building, taking a few more short online courses in computer programming, data analytics and forecasting. After those were done I found some other really interesting courses I wanted to take. My plan was to take these much longer courses after Labor Day, and after that ramp up my job search efforts again. But, like always, things changed.

Right before Labor Day weekend the eyes of Americans were on two big events. A devastating hurricane (Harvey) was barreling toward Houston, and on the same day it made landfall, many people around the country tuned in to watch the big boxing match between Floyd Mayweather and Conor McGregor. I was not one of them as I am not a big boxing fan, but I was checking in on the fight with a sports app on my phone. But something else happened earlier that morning that made me sad throughout the day. My mother sent us an email notifying us that my cousin, Colleen, had lost her battle with cancer (8-26). She was one of the older siblings in a family of ten kids. She was also the mother of a girl who was viciously stabbed while in her own bed by her neighbor many years ago, for whom my band Rare Medium performed at a fundraising event to raise money for her medical bills. Even if it wasn't for that connection, I still would have gone though. I had been to seven funerals since losing my job, and number eight was now on the books. After Labor Day, it was off to Stillwater, one of my favorite cities where I used to go and watch bands frequently before I lost my job. Unfortunately, this was not going to be a fun return.

Since Colleen was cremated, they held a celebration of life ceremony rather than having a funeral. All nine of her siblings were there, and I at least said hello and hugged or shook hands with eight of them. The other one I didn't get around to. The ceremony was basically some of her friends and siblings sharing stories and memories of Colleen. The room was small so they had a second room with a tv hooked up so we could watch the ceremony. Unfortunately, the audio was not working for the first two speakers, but they finally fixed it and we watched and heard the rest of the ceremony. The speeches and memories were very nice. Her daughter, the one that was stabbed many years ago, talked about how she and her mother would often take walks and look at all the birds. After her mother died she said she took a walk and a gold finch followed her the whole way. She said she could feel her mother's spirit. Colleen also enjoyed taking people on boat rides down the St. Croix River, so after she died her ashes were spread in the river. She also believed in reincarnation, so instead of talking about death and salvation, some of the speakers talked about transition and reincarnation. It was nice to see a bunch of relatives I had not seen in a very long time, but I certainly wish it was under different circumstances.

After the ceremony I spoke at length with a couple of Colleen's siblings about cancer, one of whom just had a tumor in her brain removed. Luckily, though, it was not cancerous. Just before Colleen died I watched two episodes of a very interesting ten-episode documentary series called "The Truth About Cancer." I learned quite a bit and wanted to share what I learned about cancer with Colleen's sisters. Incredibly, they had both watched the entire series already! Our conversations were thus very interesting. I highly recommend everyone watch at least the first two episodes. To watch the rest you have to buy the series for \$75 or something like that. I'm sure it's worth the cost as the first two episodes were excellent and very eye-opening.

After speaking with a few more people I went out to my car to grab one of my Rare Medium jazz CDs. It was for a very special person. I am so glad I had one in my car. I brought the CD back into the building and approached Colleen's daughter, Nicole, who was stabbed all those years ago and for whom my band played that benefit. I really wanted her to have a copy of the CD so she could hear the music that we played for her that night. That night was also my last gig with that band, and up until now, was my last ever professional gig as a saxophone player. Anyway, I had never met Nicole, so I went up to her, introduced myself, told her my band played at her benefit and gave her the CD. She was incredibly touched and thanked me deeply. It was an emotional moment for both of us. After that, I got in my car to go meet my parents and some relatives for dinner at a restaurant about a mile down the road. We had a nice meal and good conversation. As I walked in my Dad said "There he is!", as he always does. Unfortunately, unbeknownst to anyone there, someone sitting at that table did not have much longer to live. Sigh.

Well, it was now past Labor Day and I was planning to take those longer online computer programming and data analytics courses. But, wouldn't you know it, right after Labor Day it warmed up again! I had to take advantage of this return of summer weather as much as possible, so out came the bike for a few more dips and trips around the lake. So a couple weeks of that and getting caught up on my Economist magazine reading (I was behind by like 30 issues!) while sitting in the sun on the deck was the plan. The job search could wait a few more days. Meanwhile, another devastating hurricane (Maria) ravaged Puerto Rico. I noticed that the names of the three recent hurricanes (Harvey, Irma, Maria) formed the acronym HIM, and I thought maybe God was trying to send the United States a message! While so many people were cleaning up from the recent disasters, God had more challenges in store for my own life.

### Chapter change?

On a Monday morning (9-18), a couple weeks after Colleen's funeral, I woke up and checked my email. But there was also a message on my phone asking me if I had heard that my mother was in the hospital. I responded by saying "No, what happened?" Apparently Mom had a very bad episode of vertigo earlier in the morning that caused her to be dizzy and nauseous. She fell into the wall on her way to the bathroom, which woke up my Dad. She told my Dad to call an ambulance, but for some strange reason he suggested she wait it out, hoping it would pass. A few hours later she once again told my Dad to call an ambulance, and again for some strange reason he asked Mom if she could make it to the car so he could take her to the hospital. Her answer was "I can't walk. Call an ambulance!" So he finally called an ambulance that took her to the hospital. Luckily for me, the hospital they took her to was just a few minutes from my house.

While this situation was not life threatening, she was very nauseous and dizzy and was not getting better as the day went on. After we got more information about Mom's condition and what room she was in, I went to visit her at the hospital. She looked pretty awful, all curled up in the hospital bed with tubes hanging on her body. Her nausea was so bad that just sitting up caused her to feel sick. So while she lied in the bed we had a nice conversation. I showed her how to operate the tv and the phone, then, just like Mom, she asked me to take her rosary out of her purse so she could pray later. I suggested we say a decade right then, so I pulled out another rosary and we prayed. My mother is very religious and loves Jesus and Mary. She told me she says the rosary at least once every day, for each one of her children. Wow! I have such a wonderful mother! True to Mom's ways, she asked what we should pray for, and suggested our country. I said "What do you think?! For you to get better!" So that was the intention of our prayers. But what she said made me tear up. She said "God, please accept this rosary for the intention of me getting better so I can help other people." That's my Mom! Always thinking of

others before herself. She's already a saint in my mind! After we prayed it was about time for me to go and for Mom to get some rest. Right before I left, though, she moved the tv remote from one side of the bed to the other. That was enough for her to feel sick again, so I left abruptly so she could have some privacy for whatever she needed to do. I told her "I love you with all my heart!", and left the room with tears running down my cheeks. After I got home I had something to eat, watched a little tv, then said a whole rosary for my mother. I went to bed very worried about her and asked God to get her back to normal as soon as possible. I guess He was listening!

The next day I woke up and there were more emails and messages about Mom to read. It sounded like she was getting better and even was able to keep some food down. I remember when I visited the night before, the nurse asked Mom if she would like to try a different kind of medicine in her IV, but then she also suggested some spearmint oil for aroma therapy, which I guess helps to calm the stomach. Mom opted for that instead of the different medicine in her IV. But since she wasn't getting any better she opted for the new medicine the next day, and that really helped turn things around. After a few more emails and phone calls and still worrying about Mom and wondering if she was going to be able to come home or have to stay overnight again, my father called and asked if I wanted to go with him to visit Mom in the hospital. I said of course, so Dad picked me up and we went to the hospital.

Halfway between the car and the elevators, Dad had to sit down. The pain in his feet - from lack of circulation for which he had that surgery a few years ago - was so bad that he couldn't walk too far without having to sit down. As soon as we sat down though, Mom called me and told me she was cleared to go home right now! I was soooo happy! So I told Dad and he literally jumped up from the bench and said "OK, let's go!" Dad was overlooking the pain in his feet to go get his wife and bring her home. While Mom was talking to the nurse about discharge papers, the nurse said Mom would have to do some physical therapy in the coming days. While the two were talking, Dad made a little joke, asking if Mom had to do exercises with her ears (because the vertigo was related to her inner ear), and twirling his fingers around his ears. I thought it was a little rude to make that joke while Mom was talking to the nurse about important stuff. Oh well, that's Dad, always joking and trying to make people laugh.

We finally left the room, but Mom still felt woozy and wobbly so we walked extra slow back to the car. On the way home we chatted more about Mom's condition and a few other things. When we got back to my house we chatted for a few more minutes in the car, then I touched both my mother and father on the shoulder and said "I love you". I always say I love you to my parents and sisters when saying goodbye, because you never know when it might be the last time you see them. I got out of the car, closed the door, walked toward my house, turned around and waved goodbye. **Little did I know. Little did I know.**

After I got in the house, I looked at the clock and figured there was still plenty of time to go grocery shopping, so I did. On the way back, more crap was in store. Yup, I know, it just seems never ending with me. I had just exited the roundabout on my way back home when I heard a scraping noise. Whenever you hear that while driving down the road, you always hope it's not your car. Well, this time I turned away from a car that I thought had the problem. Nope, this time, it was mine. I got home, unloaded the groceries and went back out to see what the deal was. Just as I suspected, it was the heat shield that had fallen off and was dragging on the ground. Great, I thought. We just got Mom out of the hospital an hour ago, and now another problem had arisen. I was just in complete disbelief with how my life was going.

A few days later I took my car into the dealer to get it fixed (9-22). Before I went in I knocked off the broken pieces so at least it was no longer dragging on the ground. I left the car with the mechanic and went into the waiting room to read while waiting for them to fix the heat shield. After an hour or so, the mechanic came back, sat down next to me, and told me what they found. She said the bottom heat shield fell off, but I really did not need to replace it unless I do a lot of camping or park in tall grass. I said that was not the case, so I told them to skip it. That saved me \$200! She then said the reason my airbag light was on was because of a faulty seat belt buckle switch, which they would replace for free since it had a lifetime warranty. I was happy about that too! She also said one of my rear brake lights was out, so that needed to be replaced but wouldn't cost too much. I said OK. Then came the dagger. She said that while the mechanic was raising my car up on the lift, he left the door open and it caught the lift on the way up and the bottom of the door got dented. She said they needed to keep my car in the shop and they would give me a rental. NOT AGAIN!!!! I was extremely upset and asked to be taken back to see the door. It wasn't that bad, but they said they would repair it for free. I really didn't want to go home in a rental and be without my car for the second time in three months, but I figured if I left it there they could get everything done and I would have my car back in a few days all repaired. I asked how long it would take them to repair it, and she said it could be over a week. That did not make me happy, but I agreed to leave the car there and take a rental home. Once again, I just could not believe how so many bad things could be happening to me. I was just fed up with it all, so incredibly and totally just fed up!!!

When I got home I sat on my deck and absorbed a few rays. About an hour later I grabbed my bike. I needed to get away from it all, again. It was very warm for late September and the forecast called for a big cool down in a few days, so I had to go swimming a few more times! Biking and swimming Friday, Saturday and Sunday to close out the season was the plan. On my way home from the lake on Sunday I was biking right toward a giant wall cloud. It was a race to get home before the rain hit. I was worried that my car was sitting in the Honda lot and that if this storm produced hail my car would be damaged. That would just be par for the course for me. I looked up at the cloud and prayed to God that my car would be spared. It turns out there was something much worse on the horizon. Literally. I got home, grabbed a drink and something to eat, watched a little tv and stepped outside onto my deck. I looked up at the stars and said to myself, "Well, this is it, summer is well and truly over after tonight." I went back into the house, closed and locked the door, and thought it was a good end to the summer biking and swimming season. I was sad to see my favorite season end though. The next day, it was the end of something else.

### Chapter change?

Dad dies suddenly at cabin (worst day of my life) (9-25, notified 9-27)

The day that my mother went to the hospital for vertigo (which we later found out may have actually been a mini-stroke), my father was planning on going up to his cabin in northwestern Wisconsin to pick apples and tend to his orchard that he had planted over the years. There are about 100 trees in that orchard now! But Mom going to the hospital changed his plans. However, even when I was talking to him on the phone when Mom was still in the hospital, he said "It doesn't look like that is going to happen now." I said, "Um, no." He loves his wife and he loves his cabin, but being at Mom's side was much more important. Still, it was tough for him to stay home and be with Mom. His cabin is his happy place and he goes up there a lot during the summer months. But he knew he had to be there for his wife, and it gave Mom some peace of mind when he told her he was not going to the cabin. This whole conversation about the cabin came up because I asked him if he had Mom's cell phone so we could call him at the hospital for updates. He said it was sitting at home on the counter and he was planning on taking it to the cabin with him. **Some rather ironic foreshadowing here.**

Well, a week later, after Mom was out of the hospital and recovering fairly well, Dad thought she was doing well enough that he could head up north. So he packed his suitcase and his truck and gave Mom a goodbye hug and kiss. Mom told him to drive safe, as she always had. But for some reason, this time she added "I want you back", which apparently startled him a little, as in, why would she say that? She never says that. She also gave him her cell phone and told him if anything happens to call 911. He just kind of scoffed as he usually does when Mom tells him what to do. Dad jumped into his truck and was off to his happy place. That was Monday morning. He was only going to be up there a day because he was planning on going to a political meeting Tuesday night. I was actually thinking about going to the meeting too, but the weather was crappy and I had heard some of the stuff they were going to be talking about before. I figured if Dad called and asked me to go with him, I would go, otherwise I would skip it. So Tuesday came and Dad did not call, so I stayed home and watched some sports.

My beloved Minnesota Twins were in the final week of the baseball season and they were contending for a playoff spot for the first time in years. I watched the game Tuesday night. On Wednesday night I sat down on the couch to watch the Twins again. The game was in the second or third inning when my phone rang. It was my parents. I figured it was probably Dad calling to talk to me about the meeting the previous night, like he often did in the past after meetings. But instead it was my mother calling. She asked how I was and I said fine. She said she had some bad news. Really? More bad news? How much more bad news can I possibly take? My cousin just died, my mother just got out of the hospital and my car was still in the shop. What now?

Mom began to tell me what happened. She said Dad went up to the cabin on Monday morning and was planning on going to that meeting Tuesday night. Well, Dad never came home Tuesday afternoon, so Mom figured Dad probably just went straight from the cabin to the meeting. But the next day she woke up and Dad still was not back. She then figured he just skipped the meeting so he could spend more time up north with his apple trees. As the day wore on she became more and more worried and started calling some people. She ended up calling my Dad's good friend Mark because she knew his brother lived in Port Wing, where my Dad's cabin was. So Mark called his brother Jim, and he and his wife went to my father's cabin to see if he was there. As they pulled up, they saw his truck. He was still there, probably either in the cabin or out in the orchard. They knocked on the door, but nobody answered. I'm not sure if it was locked or not, but Mom told them where the extra cabin key was so if it was locked they were able to get in. They opened the door and saw my father laying on the couch. It didn't take them long to realize...that he was dead (9-27).

*A moment of silence please for my father...*

They called the police and the coroner and then called Mark back with the horrible news. Mark then called my Dad's good friend Pete because he figured Pete would be the right person to break the news to my mother. Pete and his wife Jean went to my mother's house, followed by a police car. Mom said that when she saw that police car coming up the driveway, she pretty much knew what they were going to tell her.

When Mom told me all of this she said "They found him on the couch in the cabin. He passed away." I shrieked "WHAT???!!!!" I immediately turned off the tv. Mom gave me a few more details but I couldn't really listen because I was bawling at the top of my lungs, uncontrollably, and hyperventilating a little. She told me to call her back when I calmed down. A few minutes later I called her back and she asked me if I could come and spend the night with her. She didn't want to be alone. So I packed a few things and headed off to be with my grieving mother.

Just like the drive home after I lost my job, I was in a daze, not really paying attention to the road. My car was transporting my soul back to my childhood home to grieve with my mother. Actually, it wasn't my car transporting my soul, it was the rental I was given while my car was being repaired. Yeah, unreal right? My cousin, my mother and my car had been top of mind recently, and now my father just died. I was utterly incredulous. When I got to Mom's house my sister greeted me at the door. We hugged and she said "Let's get you inside." I walked in and there was Mom, on the phone with a list of numbers to call next to her. She had already contacted the funeral home and began making a list of things to do for the funeral. She was on top of it. She was obviously in a lot of spiritual pain, but things needed to be done. It had not hit her yet, and as I write this she told me it still had not hit her fully, almost four months after Dad passed away.

I sat down and waited for Mom to get off the phone. I gave her a hug and she told us what happened. Then she paused and said there was more, and we weren't going to like it. The horrific thought that immediately crossed my mind was Mom was going to tell us that Dad took his own life. But, thankfully, that was not the case. She said that Dad went up to the cabin on Monday morning, but his friends did not find his body until Wednesday afternoon. The worst part was the fact that, because he had been there for two days, there was a bad stench in the room and Dad had started to decompose quickly. His face was sunken in and the couch and floor were soiled with body fluids. It was so heartbreaking to hear this. Dad lived a good, religious life, and to hear how it ended was just incredibly sad and gut-wrenching. The coroner's initial assumption was that Dad had passed away around noon on Monday, so he was only there for two or three hours before something happened. The coroner said it was probably a heart attack, but three weeks after his death we still had not learned the official cause of death. We suspected Dad was probably doing work in the apple orchard and probably felt some pain and went inside to lay down to rest. But he never woke up, and he never came home. The Lord took his soul as he was laying on the couch, which was directly underneath a picture of Jesus hanging on the wall. Dad loved Jesus until the very end. We are pretty confident our father will spend eternity in heaven, because he always said "Praise the Lord" and "Lord be with you" to his family. He always told us to say our prayers and tell God we love Him. I know he is now in the loving arms of our Lord and Savior, and that God will grant him eternal rest in paradise.

After more chatting and hugging and crying Mom said it was not necessary for me to stay overnight; she would be fine. I asked her if she was sure, and she said yes. I said OK and gave her a kiss and a long hug and walked out the door. Before I got into my rental car, I stopped to look up at the stars. I was in complete shock and disbelief. I didn't know how I was going to handle this. The rental car then transported my soul back home. No music. Just thinking of Dad the whole way home. I got home, had a little something to eat, and then sat on the couch for a while, just staring at nothing. My Dad was dead. It just didn't seem real. I thought back and realized the last time I saw him was when my parents dropped me off after getting Mom out of the hospital. Remember, I told them both I love you, because you never know if it will be the last time you see someone. Those were the last words I said to my father. I love you. That gave me at least a little peace. Unfortunately, that was also my last goodbye to him and the last time I saw his face. Before I went to bed, I knelt down and said the rosary for my father, just like I had only one week ago for my mother when she was in the hospital. Then as I lay on the couch I had a little conversation with my Dad. I was crying like a baby. This isn't real. This isn't real.

The day after learning my father was dead, the family gathered at the funeral home to plan Dad's funeral. It was pretty rough. I was struggling to hold myself together, while listening to everything the funeral director was saying. Later in the meeting he dropped a bomb on us. He said that because Dad's

body had decomposed so quickly they were not able to embalm him, so we had to have a closed casket funeral, and the casket had to be metal and sealed because of the stench. We were not going to be able to see him one last time or have closure with a final goodbye. The ironic thing is my Dad was an avid woodworker, but his casket could not be made of wood. Unreal. This was all breaking my heart into a million pieces. At the end of the meeting we went into another room to pick out Dad's casket. Not easy. We looked at a few models and picked one. I suggested we get a brown one because Dad liked to work with wood and in the garden, and brown was a good color for those hobbies. My sister suggested a light blue one to match the color of Dad's eyes. We went with the blue one, and it looked really nice sitting above the grave after the funeral. After the meeting I went home and pulled out all of my photo albums and picked out pictures for the collage. It was bittersweet going through all those pictures and reliving the memories. I had some soft, new age kind of music playing in the background. It was a spiritual moment.

A few days later we gathered at Mom's house to put together the collage. The funeral was the next day as we had to have it soon because of the condition of Dad's body. I got there first and started going through really old pictures of Dad all the way back to his baby photo from 1941. It was pretty neat to see so many photos of my father in his younger days. You really get to know your father better when you see those kinds of pictures, and then you wish you knew so much more about him. I picked out some pictures and arranged them on a collage board, figuring my sisters would ultimately choose whether or not they wanted to keep certain ones. My sisters arrived and we ate lunch. Right at the end of lunch, though, things went south.

I had mentioned to my mother after Dad died that I would like to play my sax at his funeral to honor and remember him. Mom wasn't sure that was a good idea because she knows I'm an emotional person and that I always get emotional at funerals. She wasn't sure I would be able to handle it, especially if I played Amazing Grace or On Eagle's Wings, two songs that always make me cry at funerals. So we dropped the topic for the time being and I gave myself some time to think about it. The day we put together the collage Mom was going through the funeral plans and brought it up again, telling my sisters that I wanted to play a song on my sax, but rather than doing it during the funeral it might work better to play during the lunch. I was shocked, saddened and stupefied at what happened next. My mother asked me when I wanted to play the song, and she suggested when everyone was eating. I thought it would be better to play either before the lunch or after, when people are not eating so they can listen to the song without silverware clanging and paying more attention to their food than the song. I have given economic presentations and played music while people are eating in the past, and that's what happens. They don't pay much attention to you. I didn't want to play afterward because I don't like playing sax on a full stomach. That was probably being a bit too picky though. That got my sister's goat. She sighed and said "It's not a concert Ed." I said "I know, it's three minutes of a little music for Dad." Then she said "It's not about you. You don't have to play your sax at every event." She was getting mad and making me mad too. I told her "It's three minutes. THREEE MINUTES!! It's NOT about me, it's about Dad!!!" Then we got louder and louder and the profanity started flying and my mother had to step in between us before it got really out of hand. I said "I can't believe you have a problem with me honoring my father at his funeral." I was in utter disbelief that she was behaving this way toward me, her own brother. Later, when the girls were putting the collage together they asked if I wanted to help tape pictures onto the boards. Being in a bad mood I said no and just sat there watching the Vikings game. I was heartbroken that my own sister didn't want me to play at my Dad's funeral, something I had always hoped to do when the time came. Later, as we were driving to the church to drop off a few things, I told my mother I was not going to play at Dad's funeral. My sister didn't want me to, so I just decided to end it right there.

I was mad and sad at the same time, but it almost seemed like my anger took away some of the sadness of the moment. It kind of prevented me from grieving for a little while.

The next day I woke up, took a shower, dried off, stood in front of my closet and said to myself, "I'm going to bury my Dad today." I was totally out of it, but it was time to go. My rental car would have to transport my soul to the church without me paying much attention to the road again. Here I was driving to my father's funeral, in a car that wasn't mine. It simply did not feel right. I didn't have my car, and now I didn't have my Dad. I was very sad, but was fine until I got into town. I had a feeling that I would lose it when I pulled up to the church and saw the hearse outside. Amazingly, I held it together. I took a picture of the hearse then went into the church. I teared up a bit as my family was standing there all red-eyed. A few minutes later the funeral director asked the men to help carry Dad's casket from the hearse into the church. When that hearse door opened, and I saw that flag-draped casket (my father served in the Air Force), it started to hit me. We reached in, grabbed the casket and hauled it up the stairs and into the church. I was carrying the man that gave me life. Because the casket was metal it was very heavy, just like my heart.

A few moments later Mom told us kids to come to the front of the church to greet people. I was not prepared for this. I thought it would be more of a mingling kind of visitation. I did not know we would be forming a greeting line to greet every single person that came to the funeral. But there we were, lined up in order by age, waiting for people to come in. They started coming in, and they kept coming and kept coming. It ended up being standing room only. I just could not believe how many people were there to pay their last respects to my Dad. I also could not believe all the nice things people were saying about him. He had his faults, like everyone, but he also did a lot of good things for people like making wooden crates and chairs and bookshelves and dressers and delivering apples from his cabin and being very involved in the political scene and the church. People were saying so many great things about my Dad. One of the most memorable was "Your Dad was bigger than life." That was pretty jaw-dropping. One of the most touching was when two of my Dad's friends said the same thing with tears in their eyes, "He was my friend."

Halfway through the line I looked out and could not believe my eyes. Standing in line was a woman from my choir. I hardly even knew her at that point, but she was a very nice woman. Here she was coming all the way out to the edge of the metro area for my Dad's funeral, and I only knew her for a few months. I just could not believe it. She was also on crutches after breaking her foot a few weeks prior. Unbelievable! She hobbled up to me and I introduced her to my family. They all said it was so nice of her to come. She gave me a hug and a card and then left. She couldn't stay for the funeral though because she was on her way to visit some relatives to mourn the passing of one of them. That was a sad day for her I guess. I thought to myself, wow, here is this woman whom I have known for only a few months at my Dad's funeral, but my friends were nowhere to be found. A few minutes later though, I spotted one of my friends and his wife in the line. That made me happy and I thanked them so much for coming. He was really the only one who I thought might show up, and he did. Remember, my circle of friends had kind of fallen apart after my friend Brian died, so I didn't expect anyone but him to show up. That's the sign of a true friend though.

The line finally ended and we took our seats for the funeral. To be honest, I held up better than I thought I would. Maybe all the other eight funerals before this one prepared me for my Dad's funeral, I don't know, but I wasn't a blubbing mess like I thought I would be. The service was very nice and the priest had some very kind words for my Dad. He said Dad would often corner him on questions of the faith, and stumped him many times. He also said he often saw my father at church events and praying in

the church. That was very touching. I could tell Dad's death was affecting the priest in a big way. The songs Mom picked out for the service did not include Amazing Grace or On Eagle's Wings, but they were songs that usually get me teared up anyway. I was actually able to sing for the most part, but I obviously got choked up at certain times. But it was very sad to look over and see my mother, who loves to sing and sang in the church choir for many years, with her head down, not singing. I was so sad for her.

After the service the pall bearers lifted Dad's casket back into the hearse and we walked behind the hearse up to the grave site. Thankfully, the weather was not as cool as expected and the rain miraculously held off. We walked up the hill, they took Dad's casket out and set it on the casket holder above the grave. The priest said a few last words and prayers, then my family and I walked up to the casket to say our final goodbyes. We leaned on the casket, said goodbye, kissed the casket, then everyone poured a little sawdust into the grave to honor Dad's incredible woodworking talent. As I turned away from the casket, someone hugged me from behind. It was my cousin, who lost his father almost exactly a year earlier. That was especially nice of him considering we had recently gotten into an argument on Facebook during which he said some pretty nasty things to me. It was very nice of him to be there for me in my moment of need in spite of that. As everyone turned to walk down the hill into the fellowship hall for lunch, I had a few last words for Dad. I told him I never really knew that he meant the world to me. Then I corrected myself and said I always knew, just not how much. That really doesn't make sense, but that's what I said to him. I tapped the casket one last time and slowly walked down the hill for lunch. After I walked into the fellowship hall I peered back over my shoulder and watched as they lowered my father into the Earth. I just stood there and watched. It was the saddest moment of my life.

As I entered the hall there was a big line and some people were already eating. Playing my sax before lunch would not have worked at all, as I was nearly the last person to enter the building. My sister was right I guess. We got our lunch and sat down for a nice meal. A little later my aunt got up and read Dad's farewell letter, which was basically a summary of his life. Apparently he wrote this letter about a year before he died, and even picked out a song he wanted played at the funeral. I guess he kind of knew the end was near, and he had been saying things like "I'm falling apart" and "When I'm gone". I guess he even told his friend Pete a few weeks before he died that he was on his way out. He could see the writing on the wall. If there is anything good in all of this, it's that Dad died in his happy place, his cabin, doing what he loved, tending to his apples and trees. To me, there is no better way to go. It's certainly better than dying in a nursing home, a hospital or in hospice.

After the luncheon I planned to help my sisters clean things up and load things to take back to Mom's house, but I got into a long conversation with a couple people I didn't even know. By the time I was done talking to them, people were pretty much gone and everything was packed up. Oh well. Before I left I chatted for a couple minutes with the father of my childhood friend. I had not seen him in ages. It was nice of him to come to the funeral even though I was no longer really friends or even in contact with his son. He also graciously helped to fold chairs and tables afterward.

I walked out to my rental car, started it up, drove down the street a little ways and made a right turn into the cemetery. I had to say bye to Dad one last time. They had already filled the hole and there were flowers on top of the grave. I said a few parting words, dragged myself back to the car and headed to Mom's place for a small gathering of relatives. While there, everyone had a beer, per Dad's request. We also had ice cream at the luncheon per his request too. Before the funeral I put together a short summary of things about Dad and our favorite memories of him. While everyone was drinking a beer I read it aloud to everyone. It was a nice moment. About an hour later people started clearing out and the family said our goodbyes to each other. But before I left I wanted to find that card that my fellow choir

mate brought for me. I opened it up and couldn't believe my eyes. The entire choir had signed the card and said some very kind words. It was one of the nicest things anyone has ever done for me. I walked out of my mother's bedroom with tears in my eyes and again gave Mom a kiss and a big, long hug and sauntered out to my rental car. I stopped by the grave site one last time and said goodbye to Dad, then headed home. It was a slow, somber ride, again with no music, just thoughts of Dad filling my head and heart.

The song I wanted to play at my father's funeral is entitled "I'll Try Not to Cry, but It Won't Be Easy." The melody came into my head after my friend Brian died a couple years before. Dad, I'll try not to cry...but it won't be easy. I have always loved you and I always will. Thank you for everything you have given me, taught me and done for me. May God grant you eternal rest in Heaven. Praise the Lord!

We had planned to go up to our cabin the weekend of October 6-8 for the Applefest in Bayfield. Of course, after Dad died, the trip was cancelled. But then, after the funeral was over and everyone had left the house, my mother asked me if I would go up to the cabin with her to help clean up, load things and bring back Dad's truck. She also wanted to find Dad's keys and especially her cell phone that he brought with him. We could also go to the Applefest if the weather cooperated. So, just a few days after Dad's funeral, my mother and I headed up north, and would be met later in the evening by my sister and her family.

Early on Friday morning I visited my father's grave briefly before heading to Mom's house. As we passed the church on the way to the cabin, an eerie fog hovered over the cemetery. It looked just like a cemetery should look, all gloomy and spooky. The fog stayed with us for most of the three hour drive up until it finally cleared about an hour before we reached the cabin. I heavily feared what my emotions would be and what we would find when we reached the cabin. As we pulled into the driveway, I saw Dad's truck sitting there, just as he parked it two weeks before. We got out of the car and Mom opened the door. I looked to the left where the couch used to be, the couch on which my father took his last breath. But the couch was soiled and ruined so it was sitting outside upside down. I stood there for a second and just stared at the spot where my father died. The floor was a little dirty so Mom prepared to scrub the floor, cleaning up any remaining odor left behind by the body fluids of her late husband. I can only imagine the thoughts running through her mind while she cleaned. I looked up and noticed that there was a picture of Jesus just above where the couch used to be. My father died right below a picture of his Savior, how apropos I thought. The cabin also had several crosses inside as well as many rosaries scattered in different places, and there was a big, life-sized cross standing out in the apple orchard too, so when the Holy Spirit came to take my father home, it was clear that he revered, feared and loved God, and that he should go directly to Paradise. I believe he is there. I truly do.

While Mom cleaned the floor, I looked for Dad's keys and Mom's cell phone. Nothing. I looked and looked and looked, but could not find either. Then I went out to Dad's truck to look, and there was Mom's cell phone, sitting in the ash tray. I guess even if he were alert enough and able to call 911 when he was having a serious problem, it would not have been possible because instead of being in the cabin, the phone was in the truck. Besides that, the reception up there is so terrible that you pretty much have to walk to the end of the driveway to get any reception. That also would not have been possible. Thus, even though Mom gave Dad her cell phone to use in case of an emergency, it did no good. Sigh. Remember, it was the cell phone that instigated the conversation about Dad going up to his cabin when Mom was still in the hospital. Now here was that same phone, which Dad brought along in case of emergency, unused and sitting in the truck during the biggest emergency of my father's life. I just sat there and looked at the phone and wondered if his life could have been saved had someone else been

there with him. At the same time, I know that would have been a very traumatic and frightening thing for any of us to go through.

After more searching for Dad's keys with no luck, I decided to go out into the orchard and snoop around. I noticed a wooden crate (that Dad made of course!) with a bag of apples inside sitting near the front of the orchard. The bag was labeled "A-26", just a way for Dad to keep track of which apples came from which trees. The A-26 tree is way in the back of the orchard, but the apples were sitting next to the tree labeled "J", which is in the very front of the orchard. That led me to believe that Dad was bringing the apples from the back of the orchard to the cabin, when something suddenly happened which caused him to drop the crate of apples and go into the cabin.

The coroner said it was very likely he died of a heart attack. He was doing strenuous work on a very warm day, and that likely triggered the heart attack. Dad had been complaining of chest pains for a while and even had pleurisy, and he was in the emergency room the night before my mother went into the hospital. After my mother got out of the hospital, I heard Mom say that they were both going to schedule doctor appointments to have their issues looked at. Mom made her appointment, but Dad never called to make his. Why? Why didn't he call and schedule an appointment if he was having chest pains? I recalled how, when having lunch with my parents a year earlier, that we were discussing health issues. For some strange reason, Dad pretty much said he didn't care about his health. I asked him why, and he responded, "I don't have an answer for you." That was very odd, and kind of broke my heart. It appeared that Dad really didn't want to be around much longer. A year after he made that statement, he was dead. He died, it seems, because he wanted to. Why? I assume it was because he was in so much pain with his feet and back and chest, but I will never know for sure. That makes me very, very sad.

After I brought the crate of apples up to the cabin, I grabbed some bags and went back to the orchard to pick some apples. I found a lot of really good ones, and ended up picking three bags worth. Unfortunately, the vast majority of the apples were bad from hail damage or bugs, and I know that when it is a bad apple crop, Dad would get depressed. I wonder if maybe that also contributed to his wanting to go. I can imagine him walking into the orchard and looking around at his precious apples and seeing their bad condition and just thinking, I give up. That also makes me sad. As I was picking apples it was incredibly quiet in the orchard. Walking around and picking apples in silence was a profoundly spiritual experience, especially walking by that giant cross in the middle of the orchard. I just took it all in, knowing that this was the last time I would pick apples from Dad's orchard, as Mom was already talking about selling the cabin. It was never Mom's thing, and she wanted to part ways with it. She even wanted to sell it before Dad died, but that was a pretty difficult conversation. Dad knew the time to sell was coming, but he just wasn't ready to let it go yet. I guess the Lord had other plans though.

Later that night after Mom and I had done some more cleaning and had a nice meal, Mom took a nap while I watched a little hockey. Luckily, the Gophers were playing Duluth so it was actually on tv. Our cabin tv only has a few channels so when I saw the game was on I was pretty surprised! A little while later my sister and her family pulled up and I helped them unload. Then my brother-in-law and I went upstairs and got the love seat and brought it down and put it where the couch used to be. As we sat and watched the hockey game and chatted, I was sitting right where my father died. It was just a surreal moment, us talking and laughing and pretty much just carrying on with life in the cabin that Dad built with his own hands...but without his presence. A little later, we played some Boggle and Scrabble and Monopoly to end the night. The next day we went to Applefest, even though it was drizzling outside. The rain held off for the most part but it was cool and cloudy and gloomy. We spent a couple hours at the festival then headed back to the cabin. Mom took another nap while some of us shot clays in the

front yard. After supper, my brother-in-law and I fulfilled Mom's request to have the couch on which Dad died burned. So we hauled it to the fire pit, doused it with gas, said "God bless you Dad", and lit it up. It burned very quickly, at times raging as the wind blew through the frame. It was another sad, somber and spiritual moment for me as the flames and smoke rose upward toward Heaven.

Sunday came and it was off to church. One of the songs sang during mass was also sung at Dad's funeral. That brought tears to my eyes. After mass it was back to the cabin for a little something to eat, cleaning and packing things up. We packed our trucks and cars full of stuff! When all was done my sister and her family took off. Just before we left the cabin I motioned to Mom to come over to where the couch used to be, and have a little moment of silence for Dad. We hugged and Mom said a couple prayers as a river of tears cascaded down my cheeks. I was so incredibly sad. We loaded up the last few things, closed and locked the door and the shed, and headed for the vehicles. Mom got into her car, while I slowly crawled into Dad's truck. I had never driven it before so had to make sure I knew where everything was and how things worked. I said a little prayer for a safe trip home, and we were off. My father drove his truck up to the cabin two weeks earlier, now I was driving it home. It was all so strange and almost impossible to believe. We made it home safely and unloaded the truck. Before I left Mom's house I took down the collages and found all the pictures I contributed. I put them in an envelope, grabbed a few things, gave my mother a long hug and headed home. My mind was in outer space as I drove home. I pulled into my garage, shut off the engine and leaned my head against the steering wheel. I was mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually exhausted. I still didn't have a job, and now my best friend, the little white squirrel and my father were all gone. I felt totally and completely empty.

I got out of my car and was greeted by a couple neighbors. They asked if I had bought a new car and I told them, no, mine is in the shop. I then told them that my father had just died and they consoled me. My neighbor, to whom I gave a big hug after her father's wife got crushed by that tree, returned the favor. I was there in her moment of need, and now she was there in mine.

A little over a week later I returned to my mother's house to help mow the lawn and other odds and ends. It just so happened that this was also my father's birthday, so I planned to stay for dinner, along with two of my sisters. After mowing the lawn and scarfing down some sandwiches, we all headed down to the cemetery to visit Dad's grave. We said a few prayers and sang Happy Birthday. He would have been 76 years old. We went back home and had some birthday cake and chatted some more. This was also the first time when we finally got the official cause of Dad's death. After three weeks of waiting for the death certificate and coroner's report, Mom called to find out why she had not received them. It turns out they were sent to the wrong address; a house that no longer exists! This, and the fact that the funeral director did not correct the date of Dad's death on the funeral home website and did not include our memories of Dad in the obituary on the site, made us quite unhappy with their services. They were screwing up all over the place. The service itself went well, but so many other things did not. Well, like the coroner initially thought, the funeral home representative told Mom over the phone that Dad died of a heart attack and pleurisy. It was good to finally know the true cause rather than just speculating. It brought some sense of closure to Dad's passing, one that we did not get at the funeral due to the casket being closed. After a little more chatting, I grabbed a few leftover things from the cabin and headed home. To get my mind off of things I plopped on my couch with a beverage and immersed myself in sports for the rest of the evening.

About a week later I decided it was time to return to the choir. A few days earlier I had received a voice message from the woman who came to Dad's funeral on crutches. She just wanted me to know that they missed me and that I should take my time and come back when I was ready. They really are good

people, and it was so nice to hear such kind words when I was so emotionally and spiritually down. The first few minutes of rehearsal were a little rough, as singing is an emotional thing for me, especially when singing about religious things so soon after my very religious father's death. I thanked everyone for the card and told them it was so heartwarming and nice of them to do that, especially since I really didn't know them that well. I had only been with the choir for four months.

A few days later was my first mass with the choir since Dad passed away. The hard part was going back to rehearsal, so I figured mass would be a little easier. Before mass we always rehearse for 45 minutes. Just before we started to rehearse, our choir director's wife entered the room carrying their three month old little baby. As all the choir members were looking at this little baby, just beginning its life, I was lamenting the end of my father's life. It was a very powerful and moving juxtaposition. I made it through the mass fine, but I may not have made it through so well had I read the words to one of the songs we sang. We sing a lot of non-English songs, and one of the songs we sang that day was in Latvian. When I got home I read the English translation of the song. These were the last two phrases:

*"When others persecute you quietly or quietly use seduction: carry the burden of your life, carry the cross with Jesus Christ. Then quietly life's autumn comes, and harvest's best of fruit, then flesh be given to the ground, to quietly then join the saints."*

Had I read that before mass or had we sung that in English, there is no way I would have made it through the song without sobbing. It was so relevant, because it talks about fruit (like Dad's apples), the cross (like the ones in Dad's cabin and the big one in his orchard) and death. Needless to say, I'm glad that we sang the song in Latvian!

## Thoughts about Dad

### Lessons from Chapter 9

Mothers should never have to cook on Mother's Day!

If someone wants to share what is going on in their life, listen. Even if you don't feel like it, listening to them makes them feel like they matter. It gives them a chance to get something off of their chest, which everyone needs now and then. A hug won't hurt either. And you never know when you might need someone to be there and listen to you.

Losing your job really sucks, but I must say I'd rather be unemployed than crushed by a tree and suffer broken bones, a punctured lung and have trouble eating and walking. Perspective!

It is understandable to be really upset with someone if you get into a fender bender, but if you can, try to be calm and understanding. People make mistakes, and yelling at someone does you no good. Sure, it gets the stress and anger out of you, but it transfers that stress and anger to someone else. Try to take the high road. I know, easier said than done! And who knows, something good may actually come out of the incident.

If you get a message telling you to call a phone number otherwise your computer may freeze and you may lose all of your data...IGNORE IT!!! It is a TOTAL scam!!! Bad spelling and grammar are a huge red flag! And by all means, never give your personal information or credit card information to someone over the phone, unless you totally trust the company and have done business with them before.

If your computer does get hacked, you need to protect yourself immediately. Call all the credit bureaus (Equifax, Experian, TransUnion), the local police, the police in the town where they ask you to send a check (if applicable), the Social Security Administration, your bank, the state attorney general's office and such. Put a freeze on your bank accounts and credit report and change your passwords. Also, take your computer in to Geek Squad or a computer technician and have them inspect it and make sure it is clean of viruses, tracking software, malware and other dangerous stuff.

If you buy a new computer, make sure the hard drive is big enough to store all of your data and more.

Plumbing repairs are expensive!

God works in mysterious ways. He can even make a downtrodden man smile a little just with his own creations, like a white squirrel. Open your eyes, His beauty is all around us!

It's too bad that as life goes on, the only time we see friends and relatives is when somebody dies. We should really spend more time with our friends and relatives before it's too late.

I highly recommend everyone watch at least the first two episodes of the documentary called "The Truth About Cancer". To watch the rest you have to buy the series for \$75 or something like that. I'm sure it's worth the cost as the first two episodes were excellent and very eye-opening.

If you have a connection with someone, give them something to remind them of that connection, even if they really don't even know you, especially in a time of sadness or strife. Trust me, they will be touched!

Whenever natural disasters strike, do what you can to donate to the cause. Even if it's just \$20, give at least something.

We all love our parents, well, most of us. But that love grows infinitely stronger when you see one of your parents lying on a hospital bed. So many thoughts go through your head, the biggest one, of course, being how much longer you have to spend with them. No matter your relationship with your parents, tell them you love them, visit them in the hospital if they are there and pray for them. Just do it. And always tell your loved ones you love them when saying goodbye. You never know if it might be the last time you ever see them.

Leaving your car at the shop and driving home in a rental sucks, but in hindsight it really is not that big of a deal. Besides, you might get to drive a brand new car for a week, giving you the chance to see if maybe you might want to buy one like it someday! A multi-day test drive!

Get out and enjoy the nice weather while you can...especially if you live in Minnesota!

It can be hard to skip something you love to be with someone you love in their time of need, but it is very important to do so.

Losing your job stinks, but losing your father is so much worse. If you are unemployed and your parents are still alive, find happiness in that. You are very lucky.

If you are expecting a loved one to come home around a certain time and they don't come home, don't wait too long to start calling around to find out what is going on. It's better to be proactive in these situations.

It can take quite a long time for the death of a loved one to sink in fully. Allow people to grieve at their own pace.

If someone asks you to be by their side in a moment of grief, by all means be there for them.

When a loved one dies and you can't see them one last time in the casket, for whatever reason, it prevents you from having a sense of closure. It's a horrible feeling.

It is really hard to walk through a funeral home and pick out a casket for your recently deceased loved one.

Going through pictures of your recently deceased loved on can be very painful, but also joyful as you relive the memories of the times you spent with them.

It's pretty neat to see so many photos of your loved one in their younger days. You really get to know them better when you see those kinds of pictures, and then you wish you knew so much more about them.

If you would like to sing or play music at someone's funeral, don't offer, wait to be asked, lest it come off looking like it's "all about you."

Try to keep things civil in the family after a death. The last thing anyone wants is more stress and bad feelings.

It is a true honor to be the child of someone who served our country. Be proud of your military father or mother!

A person's impact on their community is seen in the number of people that show up to their funeral. It is amazing how much of an impact someone you know very well had on the community without you even knowing it.

It is very heartwarming when someone you barely know is there for you in your time of need.

True friends will be there for you in your time of need.

If you get the chance, watch as your deceased loved one is lowered into the ground. It truly is the last goodbye, and a moment you will never forget.

When you hear people saying things that hint that the end of their life might be near, they are often right.

To me, there is no better way to die than while doing something you love. It's certainly better than dying in a nursing home, a hospital or in hospice. If your loved one dies doing something they love, take peace in that.

One nice thing about funerals is seeing people you have not seen for a long time, sometimes even since childhood. It is good to reconnect, even if for just a brief time. They were a part of your life. It is your life in motion.

Put together a short summary of things about your loved one and your favorite memories of them. Read it to other people if you get the chance.

A small act of kindness can mean the world, especially if it comes from someone you barely know.

Give your parent all the help they need after your other parent has passed away. They really need it. Think about all they have given you and done for you during your life. They deserve your help, and you owe it to them big time.

If you or a loved one go on a trip, make sure there is a way to contact people in case of an emergency, especially if you or your loved one is getting old or having health problems. This is a good idea even if they are at home. It may not be such a good idea for someone to go on a trip by themselves at all if they are old or having health problems.

Make sure you or your loved one makes a doctor appointment if necessary to get checked out. It could be a matter of life and death.

After your loved one dies, spend some time in the midst of their hobbies if possible. It can be a profoundly spiritual experience.

If you get the chance, stand where your loved one passed away, have a moment of silence and say a few prayers for their soul.

It is a little easier to get back into the swing of things after a loved one dies when the people you associate or work with are kind and loving. Be that kind and loving person!

### Chapter change

Thanksgiving/birthday/Vikes game (Nov 23)

Locked out of my house!!! (Nov 28)

Applying for CAE job again (Nov 29)...passed up, they hired a new economist!

Christmas concert (Dec 16)

Christmas (Dec 25)

TV going out

Mom's new computer (buying/setting up/troubleshooting)

Mom tells me she's ready to go, but not before I get a job! ☹️

More job apps (MMB, Cargill)

Finishing up the Port Wing apples ☹️

Ceiling fan project

Selling the cabin