

I wasn't holding her correctly. I wanted her to be held, though, and realized on some level that this would be her only experience in this world. I wanted her to feel safe and loved and knew that I could do this for you. "Does she have a name?" I asked, as the nurse left the three of us alone in the room. "Precious." Your sad brown eyes turned and met my blue ones. "My girl's name is Precious," you said, as she died.

I sat with you into the night, you grieving, and me silently rocking your child. I thought of your husband at work, believing he would pick you up in the morning hours, probably worrying whether he could afford to feed another child. I thought of your sons, asleep in your small house. I held your daughter and quietly became part of this experience, this only experience of this child whose life had already ended.

As the sun dawned, I asked again whether you wanted to hold her. "Precious," I had said, feeling a need to use her name. "No," you sighed, still looking toward the window, "but could you tell me what she looks like?" "She's beautiful," I began, my last gift to you, "the most beautiful baby I've ever seen."

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### Grace Is Everywhere

David Loxterkamp, MD, Seaport Family Practice, Belfast, Me  
*Prose—Second Place*

Life is a shallow bay. And the tides that rinse it are ruled less by celestial bodies than by the gravity of events and luminous relationships that mark our earthly passage. Barely below the surface lie ledges and bars that threaten to upend us or rent our fragile cargo. Then why should it shock us when our hearts are at last exposed?

My father died when I was 13 and he 49. This is a fact that resurfaces long after that fated day in 1966 when my youth was sold into sober adulthood. It is a fact not to be solved but sensed, not buried but borne openly, spread over the years, pulled along, rediscovered, appreciated as a body part with which I have limped through life.

Only recently have I come to know this.

The first time, we had come for an evening cruise. Day was ending, but a steady on-shore breeze still whipped the flag at City Landing. To further complicate matters, Belfast Bay had retreated to a dead low tide. While it intoxicated us with whiffs of brine, tidal mud, and sea kelp, it made for a more difficult launch; it ratcheted our concerns for navigating such thin seas as we sped toward the receding light.

Steve Nelson, a marine surveyor who knows the Bay inside out,

commanded the lead boat. The tiny Boston Whaler also ferried his wife and son; I followed in a slightly larger Logic, with Steve's daughter and my son blanketed together on the console seat. "Don't lag," he shouted as we pointed up the channel, "I've lost my running lights."

This was my maiden night voyage, and I couldn't shake the doubt that knotted my stomach. Nor forget the nautical charts that showed us crossing the deepest water of the Upper Bay. Steve guided us along the lee of Northport's bluffs, where we made good progress against a relentless chop. And I scanned the indigo ocean for lobster pots and rogue waves and warning buoys that marked the ledges—Steele and Haddock—that snared many an unwary sailor.

Our destination was the Fourth of July fireworks at Lincolnville Beach. These proved to be brief and disappointing, lasting a mere 30 minutes. The sporadic booms and flashes and crackles were swallowed in the hovering haze. After the grand finale we bent our bows for home.

The sky was now nearly pitch black. The only illumination came from starlight leaching through a heavy mist. Again Stephen commanded the lead, and I nudged my

throttle forward in anxious pursuit. I was aware of faint lights on the shore, and the pulsing beam of Sears Island, and the restive calm of the ocean as it put to sleep. And then, without warning, I was lost. The moan and whir of Stephen's motor were still audible, but he had vanished. Fear rose convulsively inside me. What to do? The Bay, with all its peril, lay cloaked in darkness, and I was alone at the watch.

Drawing a deep breath, I surveyed the tools at my disposal. A GPS screen glowed dimly on the center console; a compass coasted at its side. What good were these, or the VHS radio I had never used? Or a double-hull poured from molded polymer—as indestructible as the Titanic's—or all my familiarity with these waters in the light of day? Gripping the wheel, I peered into emptiness and prayed for the impossible: a beacon to guide me home.

And as I squinted, starlight began to trace a patch of perfect black directly ahead. A hole; a window. A firm, unyielding shape. To my surprise, it lay in the direction of Steven's whining motor. And it struck me, improbably, that this could be his boat. I pushed the throttle and the darkness grew. But immediately my boat began to buck against the waves and drench us in

salt spray. I settled back. The shape shrunk but did not disappear, and I kept my eyes trained upon it, unblinking. The muscles of my neck began to relax, and I leaned into an imaginary maze, threading the eye of the needle. We were traveling by the grace of God.

What can we know of grace? That the very sound of it is soothing balm. That it is poise, proportion, and unpretentiousness; the effortless beauty in a dancer's moves or the disarming balance of a building's proportions. For some, it is the unexpected, undeserved mercy of God and the force behind Julian of Norwich's abiding comfort that "all is well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."

Grace does not shatter fear but loosens its grip. It liberates us with a hope that sees beyond the immediate threat. With hope that is born of the immediate threat. Martin Luther worked this paradox when he enjoined his followers to "sin boldly, so that grace may abound." We see it again in the last, unlikely words of the dying cure in George Bernarnos' *The Diary of a Country Priest*: "Does it matter, grace is everywhere."

Edward Otto Loxterkamp was born the fourth of five children to German Catholic immigrants on the fertile plains of the upper Midwest. I first met him in 1953 when he chose me from a rack of bassinets at St. Joseph's Orphanage in Sioux City. He survived the Flu Pandemic of 1918, the Great Depression, and the Second World War but not his first brush with a coronary occlusion.

My dad coveted a surgical career like the one he had known in the Army. He stenciled the letters "E.O. Loxterkamp, MD, Physician and Surgeon" on the window of his new office in Rolfe, Iowa. But the flood of Captains and First Lieutenants returning from the Second World War swamped his chances for a slot in a certified training program. He

settled for a 2-year apprenticeship in Elgin, Illinois, where he learned to deliver babies, cast fractures, take X rays, inject penicillin, and pat the gnarled hands of the arthritic and bereft who would later adopt him into their families.

The Midwest, or at least our checkered square of it, was level in every direction. Children lived within the tight reins of parental expectation: sports after school, Mass on Sunday, at least one summer job, and—as Garrison Keillor wryly observes—above average achievement in school. In our style of hair, Sunday dress, station wagons, and ranch homes, we were cookies cut from the same cutter. Only the violent thunderstorms and twisters of mid-summer, rising vertically over the parched prairie, provided a rare taste of the unexpected. Until, that is, my father died the summer after my seventh grade.

On that Sunday morning of Memorial Day Weekend, I had left early for a canoe trip on the Des Moines River with my best friend, Kyle. The sun was just warming us when suddenly, atop the Highway 37 bridge, there were hands waving, a hasty disembarkation, and dead silence for the winding drive back to town.

There, blocking the sunlight that filtered through our new bay window, was the silhouette of my father in his favorite flannel shirt. Not on him did fate fall flatly; not on my dad, man of mystery, warmth, and palpable sorrow. Inside, I was greeted by my mother's tears, shed on my shoulders as she broke in two. To my right, I met the haunted gaze of my sister as she climbed the stairs with her friends. And watched as my infant brother was shuffled off to the neighbor's house, leaving only one family member unaccounted for, the one I had counted on first.

At that moment, without conscious awareness, without tears or acrimony, I lost every child's birthright to feel loved.

You are hardly aware when the world convulses, when order is irrevocably shaken down. You cannot even imagine the gaggle of widows with their matronly concern, the pared and uninspired vacations, father-son banquets and road trips, and shared understandings that hung dead on the vine. I was now swept in the surreal drama of rosaries and wakes, relatives on parade, casseroles and pies multiplying on our dining room table, slow bells tolling, funeral biers and incense, and the black hearse that shepherded us to the windswept Catholic cemetery on the edge of town, where the etched stones report a roll call for our fallen community.

My dad, I admit, was no less exceptional in life than in death. And for a child sensitive to his surroundings, this caused endless scandal. He notoriously manned the patio grill at family reunions with the bill of his cap upturned, a soiled apron draped around his potted belly, and a cigarette quivering from his lower lip like the needle of a lie detector as he spun his impossible tales. When it came to household repairs or sighting a shotgun, he was a certified nincompoop. True, he owned a well-tooled workbench, 16-gauge Winchester, set of golf clubs—the usual gear—but he was notoriously absent when it came time to apply them.

His absence was the one sure presence in my life. He missed the start of our family vacations, remained at home most Sundays while we trudged to Mass. If he was not working late at the office, he made house calls or slept in or nodded in his recliner after an evening highball. In the final years he drifted deeper into a depression shaped by his drinking, unhappy marriage, and the family legacy of coronary death at an early age. He made a point of presiding over the evening meal, which began and ended with grace and was sprinkled with the absurd reminder "that if I should die tomorrow, you kids will

be well taken care of.” How could he know this? But he did. And his now permanent absence would sustain me for the rest of my life.

Along with absence came a sorrow that I still wear like a sodden cloak. You can see it in my eyes, if you refuse to accept the conventional alibis of fatigue and worry. It chafes me as I hurry from one distraction to the next. It grounds my dream of fleeing the responsibilities of family and career. I see it in the photograph taken when I was 10, dressed as my dad for the town centennial parade, his felt fedora and black doctor’s bag and wool coat hanging heavily from my gangly frame. Over the years I have filled out the sleeves and now extend a heartier handshake to those whose eyes betray that hidden heartache.

I am running now, as I do often in a hot summer’s afternoon. Running a 10 miler, the longer run around the rim of my community. I have known and nursed this place for 22 years. It is Memorial Day, and though a familial melancholia has returned to me like swallows to Capistrano, rarely do I connect it to the day my father died. I am running well. I have settled into a

synchrony where the heart beats twice my gait, and my stride is double the rate of respiration. All fuse to a steady cadence that slips behind the fireworks of ideas and memories that will distract me, briefly, from the plans and regrets of my occupied day.

And then it catches me, a cord knotted about my neck, a spasm that denies more than a trickle of air through my windpipe. For a second or two, I am scribbling notes recorded from the left side my brain. No air, despite my convulsive attempts to breathe. What should I do? What can I do? Run, I coach myself, keep running. Even as I am overcome by scintillation and panic, I run faster with a small, still, but gathering confidence. And in a moment the plug in my throat dislodges, and I am breathing again. Alive.

In another 50 yards I am stricken once more and then again for a total of four more attacks. Each time the sequence repeats itself but with less terror and greater calm. It is no coincidence, I allege, that these convulsions are occurring on Memorial Day, the 40th anniversary of my father’s death, with him running at my side, cigarettes and all. So I demand an explanation: do you

know what you are doing, dear Papa? Do you have any idea what I am doing?

I am reentering the emptiness, dimming the lights. I am living in absence, your absence—embracing its sorrow. Is not this darkness and uncertainty, Edward, a Rosetta Stone for understanding your life as a general practitioner, a life absorbed in the hapless suffering of your patients and your doomed effort to alter its course?

I am, with each step, walking a labyrinth, making a pilgrimage, blindly sailing the roiling sea. Darkness is ablaze. I am steering into the eye of the unknown where grace abounds. This is what you taught me, and still proscribe. In our 13 years together, you never doubted me. You inflated me with love and hurled me 40 years beyond where you knew you would no longer lead. Your absence remains an abiding presence. Because of it, I’ve taken chances, erred boldly, celebrated life’s parade of the odd and peculiar, and ran with a cinch around my throat. What is it that you have been telling to me? Absence makes the heart grow . . . As I gather you up around me, father, grace is everywhere.

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### Healing Words

Peter A. de Schweinitz, MD, University of Utah  
*Prose—Third Place*

We hurried up the stairs from Radiology to 7th East, slowing down for directions at the nurses’ station, then following her anxious directions to the end of the hall.

Not since anatomy lab during my first year of medical school had I even seen a dead body. Certainly patients I had cared for had died but busy with the schedule of a medical student, I had never been there to witness the process, nor even its immediate aftermath.

At the head of the bed stood Mr Nadauld’s wife, a gray-haired,

well-kempt woman. Small sounds of grief emerged from her wrinkled face. After a quick pause to take in the room, Dr Bentley strode directly to the body. He checked for a pulse and then withdrew to the foot of the bed, where stood three or four grown children. How does a family react when bereft of a father? With grim sorrow and tears, like at a funeral, I supposed.

This family did not look sad. Instead, they addressed Dr Bentley in quick, overlapping bursts. They were angry. The women didn’t

make me very nervous. “We told them he couldn’t breath,” one said. “They wouldn’t come!” another insisted. “Oh Dr Bentley, he was in so much pain!” cried Mrs Nadauld. No, these women didn’t scare me. It was the young man with the thick brown hair, full goatee, and broad chest who caused me to take a step backward into the corner. He seemed to peer straight at me. Really, his glare fell on my attending, who now stood directly in front of me like a protector. The young man’s temporalis muscles undu-