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## Pressing Replay on a Life

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I watched my daughter lean forward to hear Dr. W. ask, “What is your biggest fear?”

Dr. W.’s first name was Hope, a suitable name for a young doctor, not yet forty, in the specialized practice of caring for the dying. Hope spoke warmly but with clarity and volume, aware that the Cisplatin chemotherapy had damaged Molly’s hearing. On previous visits to my daughter’s home, Hope had designed a hospice plan, ordered narcotics and oxygen, and scheduled attending nurses. On this day, she brought a message: “Weeks, not months.”

Molly and Hope sat in the centre of Molly’s living room. My wife, Linda, and one of Molly’s friends sat in a corner. We were a defeated army listening to the terms of surrender in a quiet room. The late-morning sunlight filtered through the Douglas-firs of the Seattle suburb. Molly looked straight into Hope’s eyes and said, “My biggest fear is that my children will forget me.”

Molly rose that day to see her children leave for school: her daughter to second grade, her son

to preschool. Then she rested for an hour before dressing for the meeting with Hope. Her mom helped her into a button-front cotton shirt that opened easily so that Hope could examine the port in her chest for any signs of infection. They chose a matching bandana for her head. Some of her red hair remained, peeking out, stubborn as her melanoma, unyielding to Taxol or Cisplatin. Before the strong chemo drugs, the doctors had tried surgery, interferon, radiation and forty-two infusions of interleukin-2. She paid a price for each of them.

Molly's two children, Remy and Max, were eight and four. Their memories were fragile, capable of being overwritten. That's why she had family pictures taken after the diagnosis fifteen months earlier, in March of 2008. A framed enlargement showing Molly, her husband, and her two children hung over the fireplace. When the dying became certain, she went to a gift shop with a girlfriend and picked out birthday cards for Remy and Max for the next five years. She checked out in a hurry, anxious to avoid questions from the clerk, unable to contain her emotions if asked, "Why so many cards?"

Earlier that month, she met with our minister, Karl, to discuss her memorial, a sad bookend since he had conducted her wedding service only twelve years earlier. He came to Molly's house, sat with her, and said, "There is nothing to be afraid of. Death is a natural event." Then, holding her hands and looking into her eyes, he said, "But it's just too damn soon." After goodbye hugs, Molly, knowing

she would never see him again, said to her mother, “Kind of like full circle.”

Our minister was right about death being a natural event—as long as the parent dies before the child. I should have gone first. It would have been natural for Molly to help with my services. We were both good planners and list makers. If I asked for a New Orleans jazz band, she would have said, “Oh, Dad! Really?” I could have talked about wills and distributions to her children and felt accomplished. If the new framed picture on her wall was my final portrait, I would have been content and she would have promised to take care of Linda.

Molly’s answer—“That my children will forget me”—faded in the quiet of the living room. Hope was still. I swallowed and said, “Honey, your kids are growing up in a world of computers, websites, and virtual images. We can put your voice on a website. You can leave them your thoughts and messages. I can do it for you.”

Molly turned to me and said, “How would that work?”

I said she could record her thoughts on friendship, college, dating, or anything kids are curious about, and I would take care of the rest. I imagined my grandchildren waiting anxiously for fresh messages to pop up on their private website, a multiyear stream of reminders of their mother’s love, like getting loving phone calls several times a year, insurance that they would never forget her. She nodded and said, “Let’s do it.”

She announced our plan to her friends: “We are going to come up with some mommy/parent-

ing/life questions that I will answer for little Max and Remy. The answer is really always that I just want them to be safe and loved and have amazing lives.”

We chose sixty-three questions and wrote them on index cards. Molly scribbled her answers on the back of each card. For an hour or two each afternoon, boosted by oxygen and Fentanyl, she was comfortable and alert and we worked on the project.

We sat close together on the sofa in her family room. Seattle was warm in late June but Molly bundled herself under a quilt. She grew thinner each week as the tumors ravished her flesh. The cancer had induced cachexia, a terminal condition. No diet or supplement can offset it. We had hiked and skied and shopped together for thirty eight years; I had watched her carry Max as easily as a loaf of bread. Now she could not help him into his bed. When I hugged her, she felt breakable. Her pale skin felt cool to the touch. She picked up a few cards and checked her notes on the back. She set her water bottle on the coffee table, said, “Okay, I’m ready,” and pulled a card that read, “Will You Be Watching Over Me?”

Molly said, “I’m not sure. But I believe in Heaven. I believe I’ll be with you always. When you need me, hold still, listen, and maybe you will hear me. And also listen for yourself—the answers are within you.”

The next question was, “How do I be a good friend?” and she said, “Be kind, consider their point of view. Don’t gossip. Be trustworthy. Be fun!”

Molly directed a long answer to Remy for the question, “How were we alike?” She spoke of a shared love of animals and I remembered the goofy Weimaraner she raised before Remy was born. At mention of how they both enjoyed reading, I regretted the opportunities I let pass by to read to her when she was young. Molly’s tone was soft and clear—no apparent sadness—as she told Remy that they shared a love of “dress up.” When Molly was growing strong and tall, I griped about the cost of multiple pairs of designer jeans, the ones that “all the other girls are wearing.” I told her every day that I loved her, but was losing a race to make up for the times of neglect.

The next card read, “What was it like when I was in your tummy?” Molly said, “This is for Remy,” and continued with, “Peak experience of my life, my purpose for being here, pretty darn easy and a beautiful, fussy baby!” For her son, she restated, “Peak experience and reason for being,” before telling him that she was a little more relaxed with him. Then she recorded, “We drove fast down to Swedish Hospital in the VW in the middle of the night and you came fast!” The last sentence was spoken with pace and humor and a smile, which I mirrored. She was my peak experience.

I wanted to give her a thousand questions to answer, to spend all day with her. As long as we were working on the project, she was alive. In her mind she was helping Remy and Max with the puzzles of life. Her love and wisdom were strong, but her stamina was limited. She looked at the stack of index cards and said, “We can do more to-

morrow.” She needed to rest before the highlight of her day—watching her children eat dinner. The nightly meal was a noisy frenzy orchestrated by Linda and centred around casseroles or trays donated by neighbours and friends. Molly still sat at her customary head of the table, leaning forward to hear every bit of gossip about second grade and preschool.

It was June 2009. Molly, my only daughter, was 39 years old. She had exhausted all possible treatments for metastatic melanoma. During the prior six months, I had chased down renowned experts, tried to enroll her in trials of experimental drugs, conjured up off-label options, but the melanoma was relentless. I moved from Los Angeles to Seattle to take her to chemotherapy and doctor visits, run her errands, and even paint her bathroom. I stopped praying for the doctors to help her. They had done their best. One night, I asked God instead to please make just one, small adjustment: just give it to me. How could that upset the balance in the universe or break the laws of nature? The sincerity of my prayer gave me a moment of euphoria and I slept easily with a vision of her recovery bringing joy to her children.

My love for Molly was always manifested in actions. Loving deeds were easier to finish than loving sentences. I hung shelving for her stuffed animals, taught her to drive a stick shift, carried her bags, and showed her New York. The love stays as I fulfill my last promise to her. Since her death, I have edited and posted a half dozen of Molly’s messages. Her voice, the one I have missed for two

years, sounds a little hoarse, as if she has a cold. I choose a photo or two to post with her words—she is close by, almost touching my shoulder, barely out of sight at the corner of my eye. I smell the coffee she loved. I ask her, “Which message goes next?” and I listen.

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