

Reflections Past and Looking Forward-

My wife and I have arrived at 2023 as we usually do now, in a very subdued fashion. For New Year's Eve, we went for a hike, had a very early afternoon dinner, attended mass, watched a couple of movies and were in bed before 10 PM. It was not a raucous New Year's Eve celebration. As my many post-loss friends know, there is a subtle build-up to 'the day' that is hard to explain and also hard to wrap your mind around. You try not to think about it but it is there hovering in your subconsciousness, waiting for the day to arrive. When that day arrives, you reminisce, relive, and wonder what the future would have been; if not for your tragedy. And there are always some tears. For us, that day is January 1 of every year. It is also a very short and long nine years ago. Jacob would have been 24 years-old, yet he is frozen in our memories at just 15.

We were fortunate this Christmas to have a house overflowing with family and love. So much so that Lisa and I camped out in front of our Christmas tree on Christmas Eve. It was a joy to see my wife, who loves taking care of others, just shine. There were conversations, card games, movie watching, baking, eating and a good hike once the sub-zero temperatures passed. For me, this worked as a good, albeit temporary distraction. More than anything on 'the day' and always, I just really miss him and wish I could tell him again what it meant to be his dad. I wish that he could see his family now and know that we've stuck together through the ups and downs of the past nine years.

I have learned many lessons from this loss, but the three almost always on my mind are 1) you cannot control all the things that happen to you, but you can control your response 2) tomorrow is not guaranteed for any of us, so LIVE and LOVE every day 3) be good to yourself. I have pledged to follow these lessons learned and mostly do a pretty good job and fortunately, when I veer off track, Lisa is there to guide me back to what is important.

As you know by now, we've decided not to hold the January 1st Lantern Lighting this year. Many things factored into my thought process including the unpredictability of the weather, declining participation, and aging volunteers (including me). I also have found it increasingly difficult to have a very private day in a very public forum. As fulfilling as it has been, it has also taken its toll on me. Fortunately, I had the support of Lisa and our board with this decision and hope you too will understand. This is part of the being good to myself pledge.

Looking to 2023, Lisa and I are very involved in the LOSS (Local Outreach to Suicide Survivors) program in Lewis & Clark County, where we now live. It is the first of its kind in Montana and hopefully will emerge as a prototype for other communities in this beautiful state. We plan to soon begin accepting applications for the 2023 scholarships and have been fortunate to provide almost \$40,000 in scholarships in the past eight years. Personally, I celebrate every day being married to the love of my life for over 30 years now. We have many blessings for which to be thankful including our kids, family, and many friends.

Happy New Year,

~Bill Wheeler

If you are in crisis and want help, call the Montana Suicide Prevention Lifeline, 24/7, at 988 or text "MT" to 741 741