

## 'SIMPLER TIMES'

As I write this reflection I am enjoying my last day of Christmas break as our daughter flies out tomorrow and I go back to work. It is -12 outside in Helena where Lisa and I now live and in between writing I've been looking at old and new photos and enjoying the view of both elk and bald eagles through my spotting scope. Time has slowed this past week. We've watched some Hallmark movies, my new favorite genre because of the predictability and happy endings and some of my daughter's and my old genre favorites, action movies. Alas, I yearn for simpler times, times like this week.

With our daughter home I've reminisced about her beginning and our new venture into parenthood. Twenty-seven years ago, this month Lisa and I went to dinner with our folks to break the news that Lisa was pregnant. That night started our tradition of having dinner at Fairmont to celebrate that news and enjoy the magnificent Christmas tree there each year. Was my life ever simple? Probably not, but back in those days I think I viewed it that way. We were so immersed in working and raising a family that we really didn't have much time to think about the noise that surrounded us. I certainly had tunnel vision. My main worries were providing for my family and raising good, happy and healthy kids. Life felt simple and it was good. I still remember, sometimes as if it was yesterday, our Christmas eight years ago as our families went home and I dreamed about what 2014 would bring. Even with the ups and downs we faced in life; I remember feeling at peace.

As everyone knows, that all changed on January 1, 2014 when Jacob chose to end his life. I didn't understand then and still don't understand how Jacob could be feeling the absolute opposite of what I felt that Christmas and how I missed it. Maybe it was my tunnel vision. I know I will forever feel that I failed him. In that moment life was no longer simple for me. In the eight years since his death my family has been forced to explore our grief individually, as a family, and through friends and community. Everything changed for us. We were trying to live a 'new normal' long before it became an overused expression from the pandemic. I consider myself an honest person, but I still make on the spot decisions on whether to say I have one child or two depending on how the question is phrased and the circumstances. It can be exhausting for me to share and for people listening to hear. It's, well, it's complicated. The deception seems to be a mild offense to protect my grief and is fairly common among those of us that have lost a loved one to suicide. I did spill the beans recently when Bishop Vetter led the mass at St. Mary's Parish the week before Christmas. Before mass he visited with our daughter about her travels and during the recessional stopped to talk with me and asked if we had other children. He had talked about suicide and Montana in his homily so when asked, I just blurted it out, and maybe in part because one shouldn't lie to a bishop, that I did have a son but he died from suicide eight years ago. Time then stopped for me while Bishop Vetter asked his name and said a short prayer for Jacob and our family.

I have learned that life goes on and it takes you along for the ride regardless of your loss. But it is no longer simple for me. It is like that moment with the bishop. Some of that is probably OK as I think I am more aware I try and 'take in' life now at a much deeper level. And, I haven't spent the entirety of the last eight years just grieving. Much good has also come my way. We've been

fortunate to travel for several years to college swimming events, a college graduation and a trip to Baltimore, Maryland to move our daughter for grad school. We've become very familiar with Albuquerque, Baltimore and some of the beautiful landscape enroute to each place. We've witnessed new beginnings for families through numerous weddings. Lisa officiated her brother's wedding last fall, which was pretty darn cool. We also made the hard but right decision to move Helena to end my 10 years of driving 130 miles a day. I really didn't realize the impact it had on my physical and mental wellbeing until it was behind me. I also mostly approach life's obstacles with a different and more focused lens. Maybe because of my grief. It is like it is always there with me, mostly in the background, but sometimes it is right in front of me, like during the holidays. It is something I just pack because it goes where I go.

If I have learned anything in the last eight years it is that our life here is short. Suicides or car accidents are tragic ways to lose a loved one but so is losing the people you care about to cancer, heart disease, COVID, old age... the list is endless. So why is it, knowing our time here is short, that we have become so divisive in our families and our communities. I am having a hard time wrapping my mind around it. For a guy like me that yearns for a simpler life, it is 'simply' exhausting. I understand we have become complicated but I worry about our humanity. We have too much in common to let that slip away. I believe we can do better and it has to begin somewhere. Before Christmas I was shopping at Hobby Lobby and saw a plaque inscribed with 'Believe There is Good in the World'. I don't know who the quote is attributed to but it really hit home for me because I do believe it. There is good in the world! I believed it eight years ago and I believe it today. By now if you are still reading you also know I like to keep it simple. So, if you breakdown the quote it says 'BE THE GOOD'. For us to have hope, we need to 'Believe There is Good in the World' and the best way to show it is to 'BE THE GOOD'. In this complicated world, it can be that simple.

On January 1, 2022 at 7 PM at The Original in Butte we are having a Lantern Lighting Ceremony to Renew Hope in the New Year. We will provide the lanterns for free but as always will accept donations. Hopefully Mother Nature will be cooperating with reasonable temperatures and little wind. If you come, please dress for the weather.

If you are in crisis and want help, call the Montana Suicide Prevention Lifeline, 24/7, at 1-800-273-TALK (1-800-273-8255) or text "MT" to 741 741

Happy New Year and blessings,

*~Bill Wheeler*