

LESSONS I LEARNED FROM GRIEF

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A proposed TED Talk by John Eidson

2095 words - 15 minutes

Text

Projection Screen Images

Thank you.

I have quite a story to tell. But I need to be up front. Not only are you looking at the most obscure person to ever give a TED Talk, you're listening to someone who's giving the first speech of his life. I was so nervous at the idea that I thought of not telling my friends I'd be doing this talk, you know, in case I mess up. Anyway, you're listening to a novice, so thank you for bearing with me.

My talk is about the lessons I learned from grief. Five years ago, I lost my wife of 43 years, the only woman I ever loved, the only woman who ever dated me more than once, the coolest person I ever knew, the best thing that ever happened to me. To understand why she meant so much to me, you need to know what my life was like before I met her. *Image fade*

When I was 15, I was diagnosed with Crohn's disease, a debilitating illness of the digestive tract. My dad had just been transferred from the Pentagon to Alamogordo Air Force Base in New Mexico. I was so sick during my last two years of high school that I never went to a football game, a basketball game or a dance, much less even thought of dating. One Friday night in my senior year, I went by myself to a pep rally. But I was so worn out when I got there that I turned around and came home. That brief episode was the total extent of my social life in high school.

I was so sick it's amazing I lived, much less graduated. In high school, I never weighed more than 93 pounds. Not only was I the smallest boy in school, I was smaller than any of the girls. With illness having delayed the onset of puberty, I looked more like a fifth grader, which explains why I never had a date — there wasn't much of a market for 93 pound weaklings.

I gained a little weight during my first year at Georgia Tech, where I pressed hard to be excused from the Physical Education classes that were mandatory for all freshmen. My academic advisor finally relented when my doctor told her something I was too embarrassed to tell her — that I didn't want to shower in front of other male students who'd matured physically. The same issue existed in the dorm where I stayed. I dealt with that by showering at 4 AM, long before the other dorm residents were up.

I was so unsure of myself around girls that I only had three or four dates during my first two years at college, 'blind' dates. I called them back, but none would go out with me a second time. My masculine confidence in the tank and frozen by the fear of rejection, I decided the dating game was meant for others.

During my junior year, my illness flared up with a vengeance, and my weight plummeted. My arms were so skinny that if I made a circle by touching the tip of one of my thumbs to the tip of the index finger, the opening could travel from my wrist to my shoulder, separating only when it passed over the elbow. My parents were stationed in Okinawa, so I was on my own. Too sick to study, or even go to class, I dropped out of school in December 1964, certain that my best days were far behind, and that death was knocking impatiently at my door.

But sometimes in life, pessimistic outlooks don't come to pass. My disease would soon go into a major remission. Nine months later and 50 pounds heavier, I somehow mustered the courage to ask the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen for a date. For some reason I didn't understand, she accepted. And for some reason I'll never understand, she continued to date me. And for some reason no one has ever understood, she agreed to marry me. When that happened, my life took a fairy-tale turn that couldn't have been more perfectly scripted had it been written in Hollywood. I used to tell our friends that the only reason I ever got invited anywhere is because I was married to Margene. And I told them that because it was true.

From the day we married until the day she passed, people would look at her, look at me, look back at her and say in amazement, *How on earth did this happen?* And they were right to wonder just that, for nowhere else in the history of Holy Matrimony did a former 93 pound weakling manage to land such an incredibly beautiful bride. *Image fade*

Margene was bi-polar. She also was an alcoholic. Bless her soul, she tried so hard to stop, and was so ashamed that she couldn't. The last two years of her life, her need for alcohol increased, and with it, my frustration.

In the 43 years we were married, I never raised my voice about her drinking but once, the night she died. When I unexpectedly came up stairs from my office, she was in the bedroom closet, drinking wine she'd hidden in her tennis water bottle. I was so shocked to actually see her drinking that I remember thinking, maybe it's time for tough love. So I blew up at her. At first she was contrite, but then the bi-polar took over.

People who're angry can't have a meaningful discussion, especially if one's been drinking, so I went back downstairs. I was typing an email to our two sons telling them that Mom was drinking again, and the three of us needed to sit down with her and have an intervention, tell her no more excuses, it's time for rehab. While I was typing that email, she slipped into the back yard and shot herself.

On the spur of the moment, I talked myself into being angry. And I tried tough love. And it backfired in the most unthinkable way. A 19th century American writer named Ambrose Bierce said, *Speak when angry, and you'll deliver the greatest speech you'll ever regret.* Thomas Jefferson advised, *When angry, wait ten seconds before speaking; when very angry, wait a hundred seconds.* If I'd done that the night my wife passed, things might have turned out differently.

Before Margene died, I knew that suicides happen ... in other people's families. Before she died, suicide wasn't even on my radar screen, and neither was mental illness. But I learned in the most painful way that depression is serious business. Deadly serious. If my wife walked up on this stage today, it would be the unanimous opinion of everyone in this room that the happy, fun-loving woman you were looking at was the least likely person you'd ever seen to die by suicide. But around people outside of her immediate family, she wore a mask that hid the pain inside, as do so many others who die by their own hand.

There's an analogy comparing people who die by suicide to a cup of water that finally overflows. Throughout their lives, drops of troubled emotions were added to their cup. But unlike mentally healthy people, suicide victims are unable to empty their cup from time to time. Eventually, the cup is so full of negative emotions that just one more drop causes the water to overflow.

There's no question that I put the final drop in my wife's cup. I also added some others during the course of our marriage. But there were thousands of other drops I had nothing to do with, ones that went all the way back to the unhappy childhood she had.

I put the final drop in Margene's cup, but I don't blame myself for her death. Mentally healthy women don't kill themselves because their husband jumps their case about their drinking. If I'd had any idea in a hundred million years that she'd hurt herself, I'd sure have done things differently that night. But I did what I did, and at 6:20 in the evening of Feb. 18, 2010, I learned firsthand what unbearable grief is when I dropped to my knees in the backyard and saw her lifeless eyes staring blankly at the cold dark sky.

Here are the lessons I learned from grief.

Two months after Margene passed I read a book about the last years of Thomas Jefferson. When Jefferson and John Adams reached their twilight years, they were both quite old. They died on the same date, July the fourth, 1826 -- Jefferson at 84, Adams 91. Given their longevity, they both lost many loved ones over the years.

Earlier in their lives they were political enemies. But later on, they began corresponding, including letters that shared their views about grieving. Jefferson believed that grief is a totally wasted human emotion -- in his view, all it does is cause pain. Adams had a different perspective, and in one of his letters he wrote:

The experience of grief is essential to moral development.

Grief leads men to reflect on the vanities of human wishes and expectations,

to learn the essential lesson of resignation,

to review their past conduct toward the deceased,

to correct any errors or faults in their future conduct toward their remaining loved ones,

and to reflect on the virtues of their lost loved ones, and strive to imitate them.

He continued:

Grief leads men to serious reflection, sharpens the understanding, softens the heart, teaching patience and compassion. *Image fade*

Does it ever.

I could give another whole talk about how much I have learned from each of those profound observations by America's second president, but I'll focus on one here today: Grief leads men to review their past conduct toward the deceased.

I was a good husband to Margene. I'd give myself a solid B, and I think she'd agree. Lessons I wish I had learned far earlier in our marriage were learned only in the aftermath of the most catastrophic night of my life.

Frustrated with her drinking, I let that issue spill over into other areas of our marriage. Looking back, I somehow got it in my head that because I was right about her need to stop drinking, I was right about everything. I let little things she did get under my skin, insignificant little things that shouldn't have mattered at all. But they did, because I allowed them to.

When she'd keep talking on the phone with her sister while I was shaking leaves, I'd stick my head in the front door and snap at her in a strained voice, *Margene, how about giving me some help.*

When she accidentally bumped the vacuum cleaner into the baseboards I'd just painted, *Margene, why aren't you more careful ... now I've got to get the paint out again.*

When she'd pull in the driveway at too sharp an angle, *Margene, now I've got to fix where you drove over the grass.*

Every time I talked to her in an irritated tone, I think it chipped away at her already fragile self-worth. That's not why she killed herself -- the reasons for that went far deeper than an occasionally crabby husband. But my big regret is every time I talked to her in a way I wouldn't have talked to anyone else, it diminished the time I had left on this earth with the best thing that ever happened to me.

I've learned a lot of lessons from grief, but one's bigger than all the others combined:

If I could have a do-over, here's how I'd decide whether to ever talk to my precious wife in a strained voice. If I could have her back, I'd ask myself, how would I react if I knew that the next day she'd be gone. By that standard -- for all of us, for me and all of you -- a hundred percent of the petty conflicts that depreciate loving relationships would never take place. If I could have her back, she'd have the A+ husband she should have had all along.

You all should be skeptical about relationship advice from someone whose wife killed herself, but I'll offer it anyway: Life can disappear in the blink of an eye, and not just by suicide. As you go through your own lives, focus on the big stuff, let the little things go, and make the most of every moment you have left with those you love.

Thank you.

← Project image at this point



Pictures shown in sequence

