

A PIECE OF MY MIND

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Non Sei Solo

In the wake of COVID-19, honoring the fallen brings unprecedented challenges. So many victims, yet we cannot gather. Will we remember them? As Churchill once warned, "There are vast numbers...in every land, who will render faithful service in this war but whose names will never be known." Much has changed since World War II, but our fears have not. Becoming sick or injured, losing one's life. Protecting our families.

I think of my own darkest hour. The monitor and ventilator turned off, the room got eerily quiet save for an occasional sob. Gathering around the bed, we kissed him one last time, staples still fresh above his brow. His beautiful brown skin faded to white. Tenderly wrapping him in a brightly colored quilt, we let them take his body away. John-John's battle was over and the world I had known for 48 years, ended.

The previous 48 hours had been grueling. Sixty-foot fall. Unconscious at the scene. "The paramedics won't let me see him!" She begged, "I *need* to see him, please." Air ambulance took flight without her.

Flying objects always fascinated him and he routinely alerted his parents to planes overhead, hot-air balloons, raptors on the wire. Now when a rescue chopper takes flight, she averts her gaze and swallows, hard.

The world has truly changed, thousands dying in hospitals without a single loved one nearby, without a funeral to say good-bye. How long will the pain of their families last?

I got the call driving to a family Christmas party, "John-John fell...." I mechanically pulled into a gas station and let my best friend take over the wheel. He'll be OK, I told myself. Racing toward the hospital, I prayed. Please, let him be OK. Too late, taken to emergency surgery. His mother, an oncologist, had clashed with the confident neurosurgeon who declared, "There's nothing we can do." "But I was skiing with him an hour ago," she appealed. We gazed at the CT scan, hoping for a miracle. Where are the sulci?

We surrounded him in a 24/7 bedside vigil. His sister Jessica, who cared for him as an infant when Helen had postpartum complications, flew home. His teenage brother Paul played songs from his iPod in his ear, desperately trying to rouse him. Ra Ra Riot, Beyoncé, U2. He's not waking up. My mother, who played the organ at church every Sunday for decades, dreaded coming to the hospital to face another tragedy. Where is God?!

Making the arrangements. Excruciating questions. Cremation? No. Traditional burial? I think so. Casket, wooden or metal? Open or closed? Single, companion,

or family plot? And the celebration of life? An odd phrase. So young, his whole life was ahead of him. Funeral home plaque reads, "It's not the years in your life, it's the life in your years."

I watched his sister and brother write eulogies. Insanely curious and funny boy, who loved to ski, watch Nova, play board games, and read books. I studied the decade-old tribute to my younger brother John and a newspaper clipping. Thirty-five-year-old Fresno man drowns in a local reservoir. Little more than a footnote. What about his voracious appetite, roaring laugh, or big bear hugs? Three years later, we named our youngest son after him. I wept; how could this happen to me *again*? As if I had somehow acquired immunity. Perhaps I was the one being too confident. The many end-of-life discussions we had led with patients and their families were no help. You don't really understand until it happens to you.

Hundreds of people showed up that day. Standing-room only at our church, where we had attended mass a month earlier, John-John quietly playing with a Lightning McQueen car while his parents whispered prayers for the faithfully departed. Relatives, colleagues, residents, students, coaches, teammates, his classmates. The community held us, easing our pain.

Non sei solo, said the Pope recently to an empty St Peter's Basilica in a country devastated by COVID-19.

In the months that followed, others came forward, often people we least expected. Helen's patients, neighbors we barely knew, an elementary school teacher. The ski patrollers who tried to rescue him. Strangers discreetly left food at our doorstep, a Christmas feast days

after he died. The departmental administrator played guardian angel. "Go home and don't think about work. We've got this."

Others retreated, not wanting to get too close. Walking outside, there might be a knowing glance at first, but as we grew closer, a sudden look down or away. Was I contagious? I scolded myself for not approaching a colleague at his son's funeral years earlier, hiding in the background searching for the right words. *Right* words? Another oxymoron. Showing up is what really matters.

Witness today's health care Samaritans in the eye of the storm, some taking their own lives. I recognize the fallout. Perhaps they got too close, or bonded. Sometimes it feels like certain patients can't survive without us, like a child can't live without his parents. The loss wrenches your heart. Paul whispering through his tears, "Dad, when John-John died, I thought I would die too." Losing his shadow, his apprentice. Losing my identity.

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a funeral to say good-bye. How long will the pain of their families last? I still cling to that brightly colored quilt and last kiss, faint glimmers from the ICU. Artifacts. Polarized Spiderman sunglasses dangling on his bike. Halloween costume and Cubs uniform neatly hung in the closet. Drawing that earned him a red ribbon in the Yolo County art competition. Tennis shoes he finally learned to tie. Pokémon cards. Lifelines.

Yet also in our house, land mines. I stared longingly at the tree we had decorated together days before he died, tinsel carefully placed by his little hands. "How can you leave that thing up?" she cries. "It just reminds me that we'll never ever have another Christmas with him!" Even small tasks became taxing. Taking his brother to school or taking out the trash, it didn't matter. "Maybe we should go back to work," she posited. "I never want to work again!" And the almost daily retort murmured under my breath, "It's not my fault, you know."

Until December, 2011 was a banner year. Jessica graduated from Harvard, Paul learned to drive, John-John endured an ill-advised 12-mile bicycle ride with his father. But other moments now loomed larger, his first *and* lasts. Standing on a stepladder to hang ornaments. Getting a single in Little League. Watching a movie in a theater with his friends. Graduating, from kindergarten. And, riding a ski lift without an adult. Quicksand.

More questions. How did he fall? He was an experienced skier. He rode that lift a hundred times before. Where was his coach? Worse, where were *we*? How could we have let him out of our sight? As with my brother, why him and not me?

Desperate to know what happened, we approached the resort but were stymied. "We're not sure, a freak accident," said a spokesperson. "Can't we just move on?" As if there was nothing more to do. *Move on?* I resisted, looking everywhere for data. According to a 2012 National Ski Areas Association report, ski lifts in the US are very safe, with an average of 0.3 deaths per year or 0.146 deaths per 100 million miles traversed, 5 to 10 times lower than elevators or cars. No child had ever reportedly died falling from a chairlift. By any measure, John-John should not have died. He wore protective equipment, had every social determinant in his favor. Maybe it *was* just a freak accident.

Together with a courageous risk manager, we interviewed bystanders, anyone we could find. What did you see? Where were you standing, exactly? How many feet away? Was the restraining bar put down? "Yes, we always do that." Are you sure? "Well, maybe." "Definitely not down." I rode the chairlift over and over, sat on the spot where he fell, looking for clues. What were his last moments like, was he in pain?

We'll never know precisely what happened, but it became clear he didn't have to die. Holes in the swiss cheese were perfectly aligned. Coach fell behind to help a less-experienced skier, lift operator was distracted, and 3 young boys ascended the mountain unattended. Not quite all the way back in the seat, he inched forward, slipping. Where's the bar, something to grab onto? "Hang on!" Skis heavy, pulling him down. Down. And such a dry winter, little snow to cushion his fall.

A young skier marked the spot with a homemade cross: John Henderson, May 23, 2004—December 20, 2011. *Non sei solo*.

Hoping to spare another family, we worked with the resort to improve chairlift safety for children. A minimum height requirement to ride without an adult, mandatory lowering of the restraint bars, webcams to monitor and provide feedback to lift operators. Over time, a culture of safety took hold, flattening the curve of my guilt.

The darkest hour became a month and a year and a decade. Long dormant marital conflagrations were reignited. Roller-coaster ride, just hold on. Being a good father but passable husband didn't cut it anymore. Therapy, finally, but three steps back for every one forward. Unshakeable resentment, maybe it would be better to start over. Was all our effort wasted? Teaching him to play piano, swim, say hello to strangers, share with his brother. How do you soldier on?

I learned to anticipate the bumps, soften the edges with yoga. Accepted the slow, painstaking progress of repairing a marriage. We lived out a few dreams delayed, made new memories. Spain with his godparents, Wrigley Field, Springsteen in the Meadowlands, our 30th wedding anniversary. The ties that bind.

But the loss—the distance—still aches. Daddy, do you remember? Lying on my mat in silence, I answer. John, it's so hard sometimes, but of course I do. How could I forget? I'm so proud of you. You are always with me. Promise.

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