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Chapters

turning the pages through grief

Experiencing Joy ...with a Tear in Your Eye

By Randy Krzmarzick

Randy is a farmer, and a columnist, who lives in rural Sleepy Eye, Minnesota

I was carrying around in my head the death of yet another friend last week.

Some loss and disappointment, smudged with regret is part of life. Dealing with that, keeping it in perspective, aware without being overwhelmed by it, is part of mental and emotional health.

But sometimes losses come in waves, one after another, barely giving you time to brace yourself before the next.

Jan was a friend for a long time. I tried to remember when I met her and that is lost in a small-town past. In a place like the small community I live in, you've known everybody forever. Jan was a California kid; that might explain

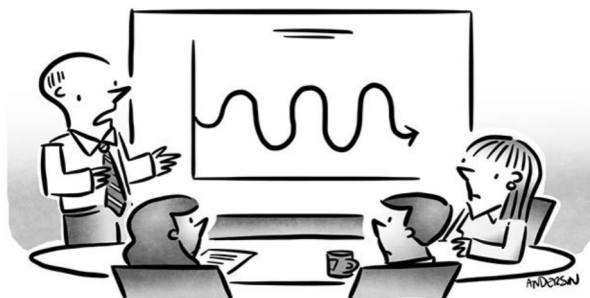
her spunky and bright personality.

We knew her battle with cancer was nearing an end when we got a call from her daughter. Jan had passed peacefully under the blessed care of hospice, husband Bill and family at her side. It was an end we all would choose if we could only choose these things.

Kraig was only 48 when he died suddenly two days before Christmas. His passing was a shock, but the circumstances are almost as if from a story. A deeply spiritual man, Kraig was taken from this life as he was bringing his family to church one morning. It was at once an odd and beautiful circumstance that his last moments were by the church which was a second home.

My friendship with Kraig began inside that church. I have the

continued...



"OK, everyone take their Dramamine?"

**FEBRUARY
2023**

The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched – they must be felt with the heart. — Helen Keller

...continued from front

5 o'clock Wednesday morning hour in the Perpetual Adoration chapel. Kraig had 6 a.m. stint. Each week, we had time to share during my going and his coming. It was a moment to check in with each other: family, jobs, plans.

Often there was a nod to the presence of Jesus during our visit. And usually humor. Kraig would ask tongue-in-cheek questions with a serious look, then break into his wonderful impish grin.

How was I to know that day would be the last time I would share smiles with him?

I spoke of a time of waves, and this has been one for me. I remember my friend Dean and his untimely passing last fall. Then came three others—all people who bring a smile as I conjure their memories.

As I wrote this, came word of the death of a former classmate. Jerome lived in Arkansas. It was always a pleasant visit when he came back to town. A few hours later, news of another local friend's passing.

I felt like I should hurry and finish writing this before there's more.

Wakes and funerals are now a large portion of my social life. As we advance in age, everyone in our circle is doing the same. It makes sense that death comes to our door more often. You never think about that when you're young and the only funerals are your friends' grandparents.

It's also true that small towns have aging populations. Everyone graduated with larger classes than their school has now. Nursing homes are an opposite story.

COVID accelerated deaths for a time. Historically, pandemics have reduced population in a cruel way. I thought about other times when death rates rose beyond the ordinary. If you graduated in the Sixties, you likely knew young men killed in Vietnam. War is a pandemic that is totally preventable, one that our species never seems to prevent.

There are statistics and trends, but the numbers are real people. And there have been a lot of real people close to me who have left us lately. I told my wife, I feel like there's more people I knew than I know.

So, what does one do with this sadness? I'm trying to figure that out. I have texts

on my phone from Dean that I've saved. I think of Jan when I take things to the food shelf where she volunteered. Wednesday mornings, Kraig is large in mind by his absence.

Each unique moment is a reminder of that person. It's like pings I get on my phone, something briefly called to attention.

The sadness never completely fades. When someone is gone, there is a gradual transition to celebrating the memories. With that is the realization that there will be no new ones. It is all past.

A big part of relationships is looking ahead, to what we might do the next time we see each other. There is an open-endedness to every conversation with a friend. There's a future. "We should have a coffee," or "We should go to a Twins game." There's always the next time we'll see each other. Until there's not.

I suppose, too, the death of someone close is a reminder of our own mortality. Creaking knees and wrinkles in the mirror are hints of that. But losing a friend is a jolt. Conversations after a death of a friend are filled with, "We need to count our blessings," and "Each day is a gift." Perhaps living a good and decent life is the best way to honor those who've gone before.

Still, there is a heaviness to it, losing these fixtures in our lives. I can easily tear up talking about them, and I do.

At the same time that there is darkness in loss, we may feel called to bring light to the world.

I read the following recently. Laura Carstensen, a psychologist at the Stanford Center on Longevity, has studied the emotional changes that occur with age. "We find that older people are more likely to report a kind of mosaic of emotions than younger people do," she said. "While younger people tend to be 'all positive or all negative,' older people are more able to experience joy 'with a tear in the eye.'"

Yes. Joy...with a tear in my eye.



Sometimes the best advice is a break from advice. Enjoy your favorite beverage and these tidbits of this & that about February.

- January's flowers are violets, which mean modesty and faithfulness, and primrose which signifies young love.



- February's birthstone is the amethyst. It is thought

to product soothing dreams, clarity, strength and wit.

- The word February comes from the word 'februa' which means cleansing or purification, and reflects the rituals undertaken before spring.

- February 14 is Valentine's Day. Folklore for this holiday includes the first man an unmarried woman sees on February 14 would be her future husband.



- February 5's full moon is called the Snow Moon.

- February is the only month to have a length of fewer than 30 days!

- February 20 is Presidents' Day.



- February is Library Lovers Month

