

The last man standing

Description

Gentle Reader,

The focus of my weekly blog is health and how to prevent disease. Sometimes nothing we do can prevent a health disaster. A stroke taking down a healthy man is hard to understand. I refer you to a [TED talk](#) by Jill Bolton Taylor, a research scientist who survived a stroke and recorded what was happening in her brain as she observed it taking her down. If you have ever wondered how a stroke does its damage, listen to her talk.

I have posted many blogs on [diet](#) and [exercise](#) to prevent disease. Many people who follow these suggestions, which are not original with me, still have strokes, heart attacks, or develop cancer to the head-shaking dismay of their closest relatives and friends. Things like “It’s so unfair.” “How could it happen to him/her?” are uttered in disbelief. I recommend another reading of those previous posts to refresh your memory about life style choices for yourself. There are no guarantees. No matter how hard we try.

Today’s post is about me and how it feels to be the last man standing. When my brother Eric died a few days ago following a massive stroke, his departure from this life left me the sole survivor of the original family of origin, two parents and three children. His wife and children carry the greatest burden of pain, loss and suffering. Their lives will be impacted daily by his absence, as will the circle of close friends, professional associates who saw or were touched by him. His kindness, intelligence, generosity and quiet humor will be missed. Profoundly.

A sister's loss is different. I was not part of his life these last 60 years. We lived far apart and saw each other only occasionally for the FOO (Family of Origen) gatherings, Christmas, birthdays, weddings, funerals. We didn't talk on the phone much, once or twice a year. So why do I feel this slicing away of part of myself? This aloneness? We never agreed on the family stories. Now there is no one left to curb my tongue. It feels vulnerable, frightening to be the keeper of the stories. They will always be "Betsy's fiction" because memory is particular. This is not the collective memory of a people with an oral tradition. My recollections of Eric will be as far from Homer's of Ulysses as two stories can be.

As very small children we were together much of the time. We made that migration after the war (WWII) from Westchester County in NY to the Great Lakes Navel base where our father was mustered out of the navy. That winter we woke up early on clear cold days, strapped on our roller skates and raced around the flat streets of Waukegan, IL. Once I rushed into the kitchen to tell Mommy that Eric was hanging from the tree. She flew to the back yard where his jacket pocket had caught on a limb and he was dangling upside down. My fear of heights probably originated from the time I was walking with my parents down the flat stone steps in Watkins Glen, NY. They spotted Eric running full tilt, Lyman right behind him, along the top of the low flag stone wall beyond which plunged a waterfall crashing 60 ft below. My mother whispered in that heart-stopping panic, "Port, do something."

After Waukegan, our family made our way to Oklahoma City. Eric and I were squeezed together, the fillings of a sandwich formed by our belongings and the roof of the station wagon as the family drove south stopping in St. Louis for the night. Our little brother sat between our parents in the front seat.

In Oklahoma City, we rented in a neighborhood peppered with giant grasshopper-armed oil rigs, pumping oil night and day. I remember sitting with Eric, our noses poking through the chain link fence, watching the workmen change out the pipes from the top of an oil derrick. One of the men lost his footing and plunged to his death on the ground a few feet from where we sat. I remember my first thought was to protect and comfort Eric, too small at 7 to witness such a thing. I would have been 8 ½.

My playground memories from that year figure Eric pulling my braids, my back up against a small tree in the school yard, his feet pressed against it, one braid in each hand, laughing sardonically at my surprise and pain.

We often sat on either side of our Grandpa, our little brother in his lap. Gramps took us to the library each Saturday and read us book after book in his deep voice. We stood together at his bedside when he died on Easter. I was 9, Eric was just turning 8.

We finally settled in Eastern Oklahoma, Muskogee, where we lived those formative junior high and high school years. He and I often rode our bikes to a dirt bank by the railroad track, sacks of match box cars and trucks dangling from the handle bars. We spent hours building roads, tunnels, villages in the perfect hard sand. Swimming on the swim team and playing the flute kept us together in high school when our lives were otherwise separating. Eric spent more time with our younger brother Lyman than with me as I began dating and spending time with girl friends, loathing the annoyances of younger brothers.

Why are those early formative experiences so vivid and important above all else? None of them matter to the people who weep at his funeral next Monday. They have little if anything to do with the man he became. His passing leaves them with me and me alone.

Is it totally weird to have this acute pain as if your childhood takes on a surreal, ghostly quality because one of the key players is no longer a phone call away? I never asked him to corroborate any of these stories—and I could tell many more—so I do not know if he even remembered them. There is something so final in the passing away of that one who could have said, “Yes, I remember that. Wasn’t it scary? Wonderful? Awesome?” The mirror is broken.

I would love to hear your stories of your siblings, whether gone or still among the living.

Be well, Do well and Keep Moving.

Betsy

206 933 1889

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Author

betsyjbelle