



FOR WHAT IT'S WORTH

“Goodbye Dear Friends”

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The first time I met my friend, he ordered a kiddie burger at a sports bar. He wasn't particularly hungry so this big strapping guy grabbed a children's menu to pick his meal. Once we attended a political conference together in DC and I got an earful of his Clinton conspiracy theories and how he believed the then current president would try to pursue a third term in office. We recently were out to dinner when he explained how he became a vegan; we listened with amusement as he peppered the waitress with numerous questions about how each dish was prepared. I attended his wedding and watched as he grabbed the mic to serenade his bride (with a singing voice not quite ready for prime time). While most folks fear public speaking, he was perfectly comfortable proclaiming his love in a way that would have embarrassed virtually anyone else. That remains one of my favorite wedding moments (besides each moment of ours, honey). From one meeting to the next, I was never sure if my friend would be clean-shaven or wearing a beard/goatee; sporting long hair or a burr cut. He was truly a one-of-a-kind individual who marched to the beat of his own drum. And I say that with the utmost of respect, admiration and even jealousy. In a world where so many people play “follow the leader” by acting and thinking in similar ways, he was a nonconformist and was never afraid to go against the grain. (I wish I was more like that.)

I met my other friend on a blind date. Soon after that lunch, she explained that she had just started dating someone (the man who ultimately became her husband). I always sensed that once she realized her dating options (me), she knew she better close the deal with the other guy. (We all won out in the end...right honey?) We remained good friends through the years and she served as wedding planner for our big day. We received so many compliments about our evening and gladly accepted full credit for the beautiful event and how smoothly everything ran. (I didn't sing.) Of course, we could never have pulled it off without her professional influence and calming demeanor. (My nerves may have been acting up just a tad so she greeted me with a congratulatory scotch right before we were introduced for the first time as husband and wife.) She planned every family event at our synagogue and day school and was our source for discounted rodeo carnival tickets each year. One day she showed up at our house with a tricycle that her daughter had outgrown. She knew that our little one was approaching tricycle age so she shared this great hand-me-down. She was one of our favorite people in the world (a common sentiment among everyone she knew). During every conversation, she gave her undivided attention and was truly interested in you and the topic at hand. She was so genuine, so real.

A TRULY GREAT COUPLE

These two friends of mine hosted an annual holiday party and we looked forward to that night each year. Everyone we knew from this certain age group (we were among the oldest) was there, celebrating the season, sharing stories about family, enjoying a night out. Hundreds crowded into their three bedroom home where one held court in the back yard, roasting wienies over a grill, while the other played charming hostess and handed out donut holes to guests as they departed. Above all else, my friends were wonderful parents to their three kids. As busy as they were in work and community, their children always came first in their lives. Room mother at school; coach of sports teams; cheerleader; teacher...they were very involved in everything. Traveling meant long car trips so the kids could enjoy experiences off the beaten path that are easily missed when flying. Mainly, the car trips meant more family fun and memories to last a lifetime.

Late Saturday evening July 2nd, my friends were driving back from one such vacation in Colorado and had made a stop in Roswell, New Mexico in search of aliens. (They found some and posted pics early in the day on Facebook.) Along a very dark two lane road near midnight, a car veered into their lane and took the lives of these two beautiful people, my friends. They were 41 and 40

respectively. Their two sons (ages 9 and 8) suffered serious spinal injuries and were life-flighted to a hospital in Lubbock. They will survive, but both face long, uncertain rehabilitations. My friends' six year old daughter had some broken bones, but physically she is the "lucky" one. Remarkably, this brave girl was able to give the highway trooper all the family contact information following the accident. Their worlds changed in an instance, as did the lives of so many in their circle of family and friends. Shock turned to grief; grief turned to sadness; sadness turned to action. And then the cycle started all over again. Within a few hours, close friends and family members were on planes to Lubbock to be by the kids' sides. They had virtually no time to mourn their losses; they were needed to provide comfort, a familiar face, a sense of normalcy to these children who were about to learn the devastating news.

COMMUNITY IN MOURNING

In Houston, the community came together like never before. Personal reflections were shared and messages posted on Facebook and elsewhere as news of the tragedy spread. The common sentiment became "how can I help?", "what can I do?" Plans began almost immediately to set up funds through the synagogue to raise moneys for ongoing medical care and other critical needs of these children. At our Rabbi's suggestion, individuals flocked to the funeral home to provide a true act of "a righteous man" by reciting psalms and prayers prior to burial. Our Rabbi became a true source of insight and inspiration, though he too was grieving badly. He and his wife were very good friends of this couple. They socialized together; they traveled together. His wife was one of the individuals on that first flight to Lubbock and she (and others) missed the funeral of her close friends to remain with their children. Grief counseling sessions were announced so that parents could learn the most appropriate ways to tell their kids about these tragedies and help prepare them for the time they would be able to see their injured classmates again. In the meantime, we all have been hugging our children a bit tighter, a bit longer these days.

The funeral was gut wrenching and uplifting at the same time (if that's possible). The sanctuary was packed like on the High Holidays as the community came to pay their last respects. Family members shared moving reflections as they told heartwarming stories about our friends. They expressed deep sadness and raw emotions as they pledged to care for those children and provide them the wonderful lives they deserved. Certainly no one could ever replace their parents, but from the pulpit of the synagogue, they promised that they would do their best. They played music and sang personal tributes; they laughed about fun times past and cried about lives that ended far too soon. We joined in their laughter and then sobbed as we remembered our own personal experiences with our friends. We questioned God in his House about how he could allow this to happen to such wonderful, righteous people. How such bad things could happen to such good people. How the lives of these beautiful children would be forever altered as their physical conditions remain uncertain. They would never again experience their mother's kiss, their father's embrace. Yes, they will be very well cared for, but it will not be the same.

In the days following the funeral, impromptu lemonade stands, bake sales, and other fundraisers were planned where thousands of dollars were raised, often from people who had only learned about these individuals in the news. Websites were set up to provide concerned people with updates about the medical and emotional progress of the children. Family and friends gathered in synagogue, the place that had been so special to our friends, to continue to pray and pay respects. Mainly, it served as a meeting place for everyone to gather and be there for one another. We were inspired by the uplifting message of our friend's brother, the children's guardian, who urged us to move beyond our grieving and become positive and optimistic for the sake of the kids. Yes, life must go on for us. Another political conspiracy; another hand-me-down gift for a friend's kid; another family vacation; another holiday party. And yet life will never be the same. Our friends are gone; their kids are hurting; and so are we. Our community is feeling a void that can never be filled. Shock...grief...sadness...action. And so the cycle continues. Rest in peace, dear friends. And please know that your children will forever be in loving hands.

***FOR WHAT IT'S WORTH** is a publication of Brounes & Associates focusing on not much of anything other than personal anecdotes, musings, and mindless thoughts about life. Please call Ron at 713-962-9986 (ron@ronbrounes.com) for questions and/or comments, and check out www.ronbrounes.com for earlier issues and for financially-oriented pieces. For those interested in helping these children, please consider a donation to the "Joshua and Robin Berry Children's Trust" at www.theberrychildren.org. Thank you for your help and your ongoing prayers.*