

Chapel Talk  
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As a college sophomore, I found myself standing on the route 229 bridge, in the frigid January cold, overlooking the Kokosing River in Gambier, Ohio, about which we all sing upon entering and leaving Kenyon College...

Old Kenyon, we are like Kokosing,  
Obedient to some strange spell,  
Which urges us from all reposing;  
Farewell, Old Kenyon,  
Fare thee well.

And yet we are not like Kokosing,  
Which beareth naught upon its swell  
But foam of motion's own composing;  
Farewell, Old Kenyon,  
Fare thee well.

And with an “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust...” a fabric-filled pouch of my godmother Lynn’s ashes was opened, suspended in the air before joining the stream of icy river below. She was a big fabric collector. She took more pleasure in collecting the fabric, seeking out unusual colors, and vintage prints, than progressing to using most of them in intended quilts.

I was not then a student at Kenyon, but a sophomore at Drew University in New Jersey. I had returned to my parents’ and my godparents’ alma mater for this small service. Lynn was 44—my mother’s close friend, her roommate at Kenyon, who married my father’s close friend. She went into routine surgery, made it home, and then died suddenly of a

blood clot on their couch when my godfather left the room to get her a drink. We were stunned. This was the first person who had died in my life who wasn't old, wasn't sick, wasn't expected to die.

When I was your age I was lost and searching—for an identity—for me. What I lacked in self-confidence I made up with purple hair, and black clothes, dark make-up and a sullen attitude. I'd grown complacent—New Jersey was the best state in the country. Big hair and overalls were important fashion statements, and Manhattan was the center of the universe. There were malls. Lots and lots of malls. I couldn't wait to turn 18 so I could move out from under my parent's roof, to live in some hip loft in the Village. When I realized it does take a degree usually to be able to get a job that would allow one to afford the hip loft in the Village, I embraced college-life and found the freedom I so prized.

But my “freedom” was predicated on some adolescent fantasy of no curfews, kegs and theme parties. This became instantly, uncomfortably clear when Lynn died. Suddenly my life seemed trite and incomplete.

Though I've had family in the mid-west my whole life, it was always the “void” you flew over getting somewhere “better.” Though I couldn't articulate it at the time, part of my decision to transfer to Kenyon for my junior year had a good deal to do with Lynn's sudden and unexpected death in February of my freshman year of college.

Thankfully, good does come out of bad. Lynn's death brought my family closer together, and helped repair some of those damages back when I couldn't wait to get away. The reality hit me—I needed and loved my family. I had wasted years pushing them away. Desperately I wanted a connection with them, but I think I still didn't know how to do that, or couldn't yet do that face to face. Instead to connect with them I went to walk in their shoes. My parents and my godparents loved their college experience. All my life I heard Kenyon this and Kenyon that. My grandfather had been to the seminary there too. I have pictures of me from infancy in Kenyon t-shirts. This is why initially I refused to even apply to the place, especially when my mom helpfully suggested we attach copies of

all those photos to my application so the admissions office could be sure to see my lifelong commitment to their institution.

When I did transfer I realized that I didn't need to purposefully rebel anymore. I had hampered my growth and myself by initially choosing a college in northern New Jersey where I was comfortable, with a small, insular group of friends, studying only what I was good at. I needed to stretch myself. I needed to be challenged academically and I needed to meet new people and get far away from my ex-boyfriend!

Locations, smells and people constantly jog memories for me. I can hear a song and remember where I was when I heard it last, I can smell a perfume and remember a concert where someone near me was wearing the same scent. I feel connected to and sentimental about a lot of things. There's nothing like hearing Whitney Houston's version of *I Will Always Love You* which rockets me back to the dark, windowless, cafeteria in my high school every time I hear it, the tan linoleum slippery under my platform, patent-leather heels, when I would slow-dance with Matt Lawrence. We had a deal, he and I. If no one had asked the other to dance, we'd grab each other. We danced together a lot.

Life is full of loss. This may seem obvious, but in looking back I realize that my life has been about rebounding from different sorts of loss. We've all dealt with this: the loss of friendships, relationships, divorce, death, the loss of jobs, of hope and peace.

Recently, I've been dealing with a fresh loss. In December I was back out in Ohio. My mom and I drove out to see my grandfather when we were told he was very ill, and it wouldn't be long. He had been fighting cancer for about a year. He got the clean bill of health in June, and was in full remission, but after feeling sick around Thanksgiving, went into the doctor to be diagnosed with metastatic cancer. When we arrived Grandpa was thin and using oxygen, but was pretty alert and with it. While his body was failing him, his mind was acute. We sat in their den together; my mother and I knitting, Grandpa trying to keep down fluids and watching the DIY network. It tired him to talk too much.

And what does one say. “Grandpa I know you’re dying, so here’s all the things I should’ve said to you my whole life...” Unlike Lynn, he was deteriorating in front of me. Instead I commented on the TV programs, none of which I remember, encouraged him to eat bits of canned fruit and applesauce. And he would comment on how embarrassed he was to be in the state he was in; my grandfather, once so vibrant, so opinionated, a man who could fill a room, and a pulpit with ease, reduced to eating baby food, needing help to get to the bathroom and breathing with a machine.

He was born in 1923, and his family survived the hardships of the depression in Ohio. A WWII veteran—he served in the South Pacific in the First Marine Air Wing as a radioman/gunner in PBY Catalina Flying Boats, SBD Divebombers and PBJ Mitchell Bombers. (He sat in the vulnerable bubble under the plane where the guns were—unfortunately a good target). He entered seminary at 40, after a successful career in business, at what was then Bexley Hall in Gambier. After decades of service to parishes in southern Ohio he became the Archdeacon of the Episcopal Diocese of Southern Ohio and after “retiring” to Aspen, Colorado, helped establish a church there. He and my grammy traveled back and forth to Africa numerous times, and he founded an organization to assist Appalachian people. My grandparents were married for 57 years. They had just recently moved back to a community in Oxford, Ohio, to the condo where my grandfather would spend the last days of his life surrounded by family. My grandfather accomplished more in his life than I could hope for. And yet—he was proud of me. He never tired of telling me that.

My grandparents’ den windows look out on a large cornfield. The kind of cornfield that only the mid-west has. Endless-seeming. Limitless. Providing some of the best sunsets you’ll ever see. This Jersey girl was totally converted to open spaces in my time living in Gambier and Mount Vernon. Feeling somehow the tug of the ancestors on my mother’s side who farmed what is now the suburban town my husband is from I suppose. When we had to go, I bent down to kiss him. There was so much in my heart and in my head. But I was mute. Had I taken this man for granted my whole life? Did he know how much he means to me? He filled in my silence as he said, “Whose my favorite girl, my

favorite granddaughter?” There was never a time in my life where he didn’t say that to me. That and he would often retell the story of when I was two I offered him his nightly gin martini saying “Tini Grandpa?” As always I answered, “but Grandpa, I’m your only granddaughter so of course I’m your favorite.” Then we’d both chuckle, as we did that day. “Yeah,” he said. Back at my uncle’s house I knew that was the last time we would say that to each other. I sobbed in my mother’s arms.

I got the call on December 18<sup>th</sup> here in my office that he had died peacefully. Though he was 83 he was not expected to die. He was supposed to be in remission. There is still so much to say. So much love to give. So much I do not know about the man I admired and loved. So much he will not now be a part of: my brother’s wedding if he gets married, the birth of our children, Evan becoming a doctor...

I am still in denial. I can’t look at pictures of Grandpa. A couple weeks ago I called my grammy, she wasn’t home, so the machine kicked on and his voice was still on the machine. I felt like the wind had been knocked out of me... “Leave a message, we’re not home right now...” As if he could walk in the room any moment.

But, I must regard this as the passing of the torch, from my grandfather to me, as Rev. Pierce Klemmt said in his eulogy. It is not the end, rather it is the passing on of a legacy. At least those words somehow comfort me. Grandpa will not be forgotten, so he will always be present in us, in our hearts, and in our actions. And we will carry the torch on for him.

Yes. “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust...,” though my grief now feels like a weight around my neck, and an emptiness in my gut.

I will go to Kenyon for my fifth reunion this June. I will drive a familiar route that still feels like coming home; through Mount Vernon, parallel to the Kokosing and up “the Hill.” Though now there will be another ghost in Gambier. At every turn I’ll be reminded of Lynn, or Grandpa. I’ll be back in a place they adored. At the same time

though, as when I was there as a student, I will feel the place vibrate with history. I will feel comforted by having shared a place with those I love in such a way. And I will not be lonely like I am now, but comforted, as I was as a student there: that there is something bigger than me, that by being in that place I can connect with those before me. That somewhere he is proud of me.

With the crunch of the gravel of Middle Path under my feet I will go...

But when we are far from Kokosing,  
We still shall hear a calling bell,  
When round us evening shades are closing;  
Farewell, Old Kenyon,  
Fare thee well.

And see a river like Kokosing,  
In meadows sweet with asphodel,  
Where mem'ry dwells dear past supposing;  
Farewell, Old Kenyon,  
Fare thee well.