

One Summer, Two Funerals

I am almost 60, the age where the death of a peer from illness is not unthinkable. Still, when it happens back-to-back, first to a close friend from childhood and then to a beloved colleague who appeared to be the picture of fitness, it comes as a shock. And their funerals, two months apart, were as different as the men themselves, impressing upon me how important these rituals are. Indeed, despite their profound sadness, funerals are far more interesting than weddings as far as I'm concerned. As Tolstoy might say, all funerals are unique, whereas all weddings are pretty much the same.

Bruce died on June 25, 2017, at age 59. He had been diagnosed with stage four pancreatic cancer just a few weeks earlier, after going to the emergency room with abdominal pain and severe constipation. He never made it back home. When the end was near, his only goal was to live long enough to attend his son Robbie's wedding in July, an elaborate affair he had happily financed. But rather than toasting the bride and groom, Bruce was eulogized a second time at the wedding by his son.

Bruce and I had been friends for about 45 years, and we were roommates during our freshman year of college, where he met his wife, Sue (who was also his first girlfriend). Though he lived in New Jersey, Bruce remained a New Yorker to the core: his accented, staccato speaking style, his tendency to complain, his love of the great indoors. We were part of a clique of five middle-class Jewish kids, including Bruce's twin brother Alan, who met nearly every morning at "the corner"—on the sidewalk northwest of the intersection of Independence Avenue and West 239th Street, steps from our various red-brick apartment buildings in Riverdale, New York—and walked several blocks to the Henry Hudson monument where we would catch the

first of two buses to the Bronx High School of Science. We spent most of our free time together on the nearby basketball courts, wandering the leafy neighborhood, or smoking pot in a secluded spot and talking about everything adolescent boys talk about. As adults, we scattered around the country, but we never drifted far apart. On the rare occasions we would get together, it was as if we were back in high school—laughing at each other’s jokes, sharing our joys and adversities, dissecting sports teams and politics, and wondering why we did not get together more often. (As the only member of the group living on the West Coast, I saw far less of them than they saw of each other. Alan still lives in the Bronx. A.G. and Andy both settled in Bethesda, Md., after many years abroad or in other cities on the East Coast.)

Brian died a few weeks after Bruce on July 18 at age 51. He had been diagnosed with glioblastoma (a malignant brain tumor) about a year earlier, and he spent his final months taking trips with his family and enjoying the company of friends, despite a heavy regimen of drugs and experimental treatments that added unnatural fat to his boyish face. Brian was a colleague at the California Attorney General’s Office, and although we were not close friends, we always managed to find something unrelated to work to talk about when we saw each other (space exploration being one of our mutual interests). Brian was consistently upbeat, magnanimous, and thoughtful. He also was an exceptionally talented appellate lawyer, whose work and work ethic were widely admired. I could easily imagine him as a judge or, if he had had an ounce of political ambition, a congressman.

Bruce also was a lawyer. But unlike Brian, who seemed to thoroughly enjoy his work as the leader of a team of attorneys specializing in federal habeas law, Bruce mostly disliked his job representing clients in commercial litigation. In fact, Bruce was planning to leave his law firm shortly before he

was diagnosed. When he was in the hospital and knew he was dying, he told me, “At least I won’t have to look for another job.” The hours were long, the partners and clients were unappreciative, and the commute (from East Windsor to Trenton) was taxing. Yet Bruce had still managed to achieve the American dream: a two-story, colonial-style house with a half-acre backyard on a quiet, suburban street, two new cars, an attractive wife, and two well-adjusted and likeable adult children.

I flew to New Jersey hoping to visit Bruce before he passed away, but my timing was off. Two hours after my arrival, as I was about to fall asleep in Bruce and Sue’s guest bedroom before heading to the hospital in the morning, Sue received a call from the floor nurse that Bruce had died. She knocked on my door to share the news, and I gave her a long hug as she cried quietly in the hallway, far more muted than she had a right to be. When I offered to stay up with her (no one else was in the house), Sue said she would be all right, and wanted to call her children in private. Although saddened, I was also, to be honest, somewhat relieved. I had been unsure what to say to Bruce the next morning, knowing he would probably be under heavy sedation and unable to respond, if he was even conscious. Fortunately, it was three hours earlier on the West Coast, so I knew I wouldn’t be waking up Jill when I called her seeking solace.

The next morning (a day before the funeral), I discovered in the guest room an undated snapshot of Bruce and Alan on the street in front of their red-brick apartment building. They could have been no older than 14, when it was much harder to tell them apart by their looks. (Under Bruce’s high school yearbook photo were the words, “I’m not Alan.” Under Alan’s photo: “I’m not Bruce.”) They are standing on opposite sides of a small tree, laughing, no doubt at some wisecrack. Both are fit and just a tad pudgy,

before weight problems would plague both of them as adults. It occurred to me that, as close as they were in age and spirit, they probably never expected to outlive one another.

Bruce's service was at a Jewish mausoleum in New Jersey, where he had lived for the past 30 years. The chapel was packed with about 100 people, including some I hadn't seen since high school and a months-long college girlfriend (she was Sue's roommate; together with Bruce, we were something of a foursome for a while). Bruce's nephew Glenn is a rabbi and he led the service, keeping the Hebrew to a minimum in keeping with Bruce's secular Jewishness. If anything, Bruce worshiped at Yankee Stadium on Sunday afternoons. In Bruce's honor, Glenn donned a Yankees cap for most of the service. Sue had chosen to lay him to rest in his favorite Yankees jersey; she had heard him complain too often about having to wear a suit to work every day.

A.G. and Andy, who were closer to Bruce than I was and visited him in the hospital during his dying days, gave moving tributes. Standing a few feet from the coffin, they spoke of Bruce's devotion to friends, his zest for baseball, music and literature, his generous spirit, his constant joking, his irrepressible impulse to correct poor grammar, and his erstwhile athleticism. Although accustomed to public speaking (they both have had high-profile positions in government and academia), it was all they could do to hold back their tears. Their wives, sitting on opposite sides of me in a hard-backed pew, wept quietly as I loaned each one a shoulder or a hand.

Robbie delivered the eulogy. With a voice and mannerisms that left no doubt about the existence of DNA, he maintained a steady cadence as if he were the best man toasting the groom. He began by saying it was fitting that

the funeral was held on such a warm, sunny day because his father would have enjoyed it by sitting on the couch and watching a ball game. He then recounted life lessons learned mostly from watching Yankee games with his old man. He spoke longingly of games they had attended together and described key hits and outs as if they had occurred yesterday. He recalled that Bruce had once insisted they remain to the end of an extra innings game despite how tired they would be the next morning, knowing that the memory of the game would far outlast the next day's weariness. Toward the end of the eulogy, Robbie referred to the Shakespearean timing of his dad's death, two just weeks before he was scheduled to be married in Berkeley.

Although Robbie's voice never cracked, Glenn (the nephew rabbi) lost his composure when he delivered the final words before Bruce's coffin was wheeled away. The immediate family—including Sue, daughter Leah and Bruce's bothers Phil (nine years older) and Alan (two minutes younger)—followed the casket to a nearby section of the mausoleum where it would be inserted into an opening in the wall like a giant safe deposit box. My eyes were fixed on Alan, who had always been unfailingly loyal to his twin brother and was at his side at the hospital almost as often as Sue. Alan had told me that he was able to provide some relief to Bruce's family at the hospital by cracking jokes (his rapid-fire wit is legendary among friends and family) and cautioning everyone to take Bruce's cancer one day at a time. But at the funeral Alan appeared to be in shock, incapable of delivering a tribute, which undoubtedly would have been the most poignant. When the service ended, he lumbered slowly alongside the casket with other members of the immediate family, steadying himself with a cane he uses after two extensive surgeries to his back and neck.

I suspected that Alan was thinking of Bruce's unwavering assistance during his own medical ordeal, tracking down doctors and nurses at the hospital and gathering information for a possible malpractice lawsuit, which Alan later filed. But Alan could do little for Bruce, whose tumors were so numerous and invasive by the time he entered the hospital that the only care he received was palliative. There was some early talk of stabilizing Bruce's condition so that he might be able to attend Robbie's wedding; but he just developed one complication after another, and the ever-increasing pain caused him to yell out in agony and anger. Two weeks after entering the ER, Bruce was in hospice. Two days later, he was gone. (A Sacramento friend who is a bit older than me put it crudely: Bruce had taken the express.)

Of course, Sue's grief was as deep as Alan's, having lost a husband of nearly 40 years. Yet in the days after Bruce's death, she showed remarkable grit and perseverance. She made all the funeral arrangements herself; she handled the necessary paperwork with his law firm; she wrote his obituary; she spent time with all her neighbors and friends who came to the house to offer condolences. When Glenn was soliciting memories to inform his sermon, Sue recalled that Bruce had said, not too long before he was diagnosed, that he did not like getting old, and that he did not even want to turn 60. I wondered if Bruce might have known at that point that he was seriously ill, and was trying to prepare Sue. But now, all Sue could express was anger at Bruce for not wanting to live much longer—as if his attitude had led to his illness, rather than the other way around. They say that anger is the second of the five steps of grief (after denial, and before bargaining, depression, and acceptance), and I supposed Sue was in that phase.

After the hour-long funeral service, we all head back to the house to sit Shiva. Alan seemed to be buoyed by the presence of many of his high school colleagues and former students. That night, I sat next to him on Bruce's couch, and, joined by Robbie, his fiancée, and some of Robbie's friends, we watched a Yankees game on television. Alan and Bruce attended many Yankees games together every season, so this seemed like an appropriate way to honor his memory. As the Yankees closing pitchers blew a two-run lead to lose to the White Sox 4-3, Alan bemoaned Major League Baseball's reflexive use of relief pitchers even when the starters are red hot. It occurred to me that if Bruce's life was supposed to last for nine innings, he had been taken out before the end of the sixth.

Two months later, on August 26, I attended Brian's funeral at the Christian Warehouse Ministries in Rancho Cordova, a suburb of Sacramento. The place felt more like an auditorium than a church, with comfortable chairs, a broad stage, and curved rows of pews. There were no crucifixes, no paintings of Jesus, no stained glass. Attendants distributed glossy programs to the 300 or so attendees, "Celebrating the Life and Faith of Brian [S.]," it read, explaining that Brian "entered this world" on December 12, 1965, and "entered eternity" on July 18, 2017. Photos of Brian and his family adorned the program, along with several biblical passages. As we filed into the church, we heard the music of a guitar-playing duo—a man and a woman, both looking to be in their 40s—singing Christian songs in perfect harmony. (The names of the songs included, "So Very Well," "I Can Only Imagine," "Trust in You," and "Home." Brian's wife Lisa had composed the lyrics for one of them.) Large photos of Brian stood on easels in front of the stage, and a Jimmy Dean-like picture of him leaning against the hood of an antique, yellow 1950s car was projected on two video screens hanging from the ceiling

on both sides of the stage. The photo showed a composed, confident, and strikingly handsome man—leaning on an elbow, long legs crossed casually at the ankles, smiling and looking off to the side in a seemingly candid pose.

After a musical introduction, a pastor reading Brian's obituary from his hometown newspaper, the Orange County Register. The obit highlighted Brian's career at the Attorney General's office, including arguing cases in the California Supreme Court and the Ninth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. (At Bruce's service, there was no mention of his career, although his profile on his law firm's web page cited some published decisions stemming from cases in which he had prevailed. There also was no mention of his years on the local school board.) Brian's obituary also mentioned that he loved the outdoors, that he was an avid hiker and bicyclist, that he twice climbed Mt. Shasta, and ran the California International Marathon. He was described as a "strong Christian" who read the bible daily and sometimes gave sermons to small groups at his church, and also provided marriage counseling.

The eulogy was given by a childhood friend who is now a doctor in Santa Rosa. He recalled riding bicycles and playing soccer with Brian while growing up in Santa Ana, jumping into neighbors' pools on hot days, and working on old Volkswagens as teenagers. Although Brian was a grade ahead of him in school, they were best friends, and traveled to Europe together after high school, with Brian mapping out every spot on the tour. As described by his friend, Brian was a born leader, a person with a strong moral compass, a sunny disposition, and a fast thinker. Once, when retrieving a stray soccer ball from the yard of a crabby neighbor, Brian made sure to call out to his friend in a loud voice, "That Mr. ____ sure is a nice man," before darting off with the ball.

Other childhood friends spoke of Brian's ability to connect with people of different backgrounds, and to stay in touch with them over the years. Along those lines, Lisa's brother recalled that, although Brian grew up in a placid and orderly household, he was unfazed and even comfortable amid the boisterous revelry and arguments at his in-laws' house on Thanksgiving Day. One of Brian's colleagues (a fellow supervisor, like me) said that he recently shared with Brian a bottle of wine that he had been saving for when they both retired. They each had cultivated a palette for fine wine, and the colleague said that when he tasted the expensive bottle after years of anticipation, he was disappointed. But Brian pointed out a pleasing aspect of the aftertaste—just another example of his tendency to view the glass half full, be it a wine glass or an hourglass. (I'm sure Bruce would have expressed outrage over price gouging and the label's overrated reputation.)

If these tributes weren't enough to impress upon us that Brian had lived a virtuous and full life, we were treated to a 15-minute slideshow presentation of Brian at all stages, from a boy with a bowl haircut and earnest face to a fully grown man with a beaming smile, enjoying wholesome activities like hiking, swimming, scuba diving, eating ice cream, sipping wine, and visiting Disneyland. There must have been hundreds of photos, and the soundtrack to this exemplary life included "Here Comes the Sun," "Fly Me to the Moon," and "Obla Di Obla Da." There also were a couple photos of Brian shortly before he died, showing his bald head and bloated face—but still smiling.

In a final tribute, one of Brian's female friends from church proclaimed him not just a "good man" but a "godly man," who understood that whatever was good in him was a gift from Jesus Christ, which Brian knew how to share. Picking up on that theme, the pastor encouraged those in the

audience to follow Brian's example of living a life inspired by Jesus and his teachings. After the service, I signed the guest book and ran into a former colleague who had retired about 10 years earlier. She confided that, despite all the words of praise to God for having given us Brian, she was just feeling angry at the unfairness of it all. It brought to mind Sue's expression of anger shortly after Bruce died. I wondered if I would ever go through that stage.

I never spoke with Bruce about God or religion. Like me, he had been bar mitzvah'd, but I sensed that he had not been to temple very much since then. A.G. and Andy shared with me Bruce was terrified of dying (despite the misgivings about aging he had expressed to Sue). I have no idea whether Bruce prayed for a miracle or just for the strength to handle his death with courage and dignity. I had no similar first-hand accounts about how Brian privately faced his death. On the website "PostHope," an online service for connecting people during times of need, Lisa had posted early on that when Brian was first diagnosed, he dropped to his knees and prayed. Her updates on Brian's status and prognosis were built around biblical passages about life's blessings and the beauty of friendship and love.

Would Brian have been the same moral, thoughtful, and gracious person without his religious commitment? Would Bruce have been more serene (with fewer straws chewed into flattened plastic strips) if he had been more religious? Would he have been more stoic in the face of death? Fairly or not, I cannot help but think that Brian enjoyed life more than Bruce, had a wider circle of friends, and left behind more admirers. But I cannot say that religion was the main ingredient. I do not doubt that Brian found inspiration and solace from his devotion to Christianity, and perhaps his life might have been less rewarding without it, but I do not think he needed Jesus to point the way for him. By all indications, he was an exceptional young man, and

my hunch is that most exceptional kids turn into exceptional adults. So, I suspect that Brian would have been the same type of loyal son, friend, husband, father, and lawyer even without his faith.

And Bruce? While he did not seem to have any deeply felt religious beliefs, he was a man of principle. He kept his word; he made sacrifices for his family; he was honest; and he was without guile. In my book, that adds up to a life that matters. Although Bruce and I had not spoken much over the decades, I knew that he, like me, had a skeptical view of the world, which occasionally turned cynical. He also could be philosophical at times, which informed his sense of humor and his appreciation of the absurd.

Above all, Bruce led a virtuous life—in the sense that he did not knowingly harm or take advantage of anyone. He may not have had many close friends, but he was uniformly liked by all who met him. He was devoted to Sue from the earliest days of their relationship when he helped her write all of her college papers. Both of his kids are delightful: Robbie, who teaches English as a second language, has inherited some of Bruce's finest traits: he is intelligent, sharp witted, and outspoken, with a keen appreciation for movies and rock music. (He also is deeply devoted to his new wife, Carrie.) Leah, whose career is in public health, also is intelligent, gracious, and unselfish. Her attentiveness and closeness to Sue in the days surrounding the funeral was as evident as the endless supply of Shiva food. Certainly, Bruce's example had something to do with how his kids turned out.

Indeed, my suspicion is that, with a stack of family photographs, audiovisual equipment and more time to plan, Bruce's family could have staged a funeral service more like Brian's. (In keeping with Jewish tradition, Bruce's funeral was held within days of his death.)

No doubt, Brian had some flaws that were not acknowledged at his service, just as Bruce's professional and civic achievements were omitted from his. Bruce did not have Brian's good looks, athletic prowess, or personal charm. Nor did he have strong religious beliefs that might have helped him through the final terrifying weeks of his life. But Bruce and Brian both shared the same principles of honesty, fairness, generosity, and compassion. They both had a group of lifelong friends and tight-knit families; and they both provided much joy and support to those around them, including me.

(September 2017)