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Thinking About Endings: Sad and Tragic Endings, Happy Endings—and the Chance to Bring About New Beginnings

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Thinking About Endings: Sad and Tragic Endings, Happy Endings—and the Chance to Bring About New Beginnings

Here we are at the end of another academic year. The theme for this final *Weekly Reader* for 2015-2016 is endings.

First, a very sad personal ending to note. The reason there was no newsletter last week is that I was in Cincinnati attending a funeral. At my advanced age, attending funerals is more common than attending weddings, and I take that as part of aging. But this was a particularly sad wedding for me, sadder than the saddest of funerals.

Two weeks ago, I got a phone call from my sister Caroline. Our brother Jimmy had called her to give her tragic news, news that he asked her to give me because he could not bear to talk on the phone anymore. His 27-year-old son, Russell, had committed suicide that day.

This news was a huge shock, rivaling only a phone call from my brother Joe over 20 years ago to tell me that our apparently-healthy father

had died in his sleep on Joe's couch.

Even though I had not seen Russell in several years, I was so very proud of him. He graduated in May from Ohio State with a degree in meteorology, fulfilling a goal that stretched back to his grade school years. He immediately got a job at a TV station in Bend, Oregon. He started last summer, and I watched his telecasts from afar. I was certain that he would be moving up the career ladder from tiny Bend to much bigger things. I bragged to people to watch out for him, that he would be on the Weather Channel or the Today Show.

I know I am biased, being his uncle, but damn he was good! He knew the weather, and he was passionate about it, with knowledge and passion that came across over the air. He had telegenic good looks, he had confidence, and he had the quirky Bird sense of humor. Viewers in Bend loved him. I have

an internet friend who wrote to ask if this great new meteorologist was my son. No, but I was certainly proud to be his uncle!

What I did not know is that Russell, for all his outward happiness and demeanor, has battled severe depression for many years. I only found out about these demons last week when I got to talk to my brother, who is eleven months younger than I am and from our infancy my best friend in the world. Jimmy told me that he and his wife had pulled Russell out of a dark, deep hole many times in the past. This time, they could not. They were too far away. Jimmy's heart is broken. His family will never be whole again.

I write this not merely for sympathy, although the sympathy of my colleagues at Winthrop who knew about this tragedy has been so comforting. No, I write about Russell because I want something good to come from his senseless death.

“They are in a vulnerable period in their lives, they are away from family and friends, and they are unsure about their futures. And many of them, too many, are suffering from depression. Some of them are being treated for their condition, but many are not. We have a responsibility to help these students when we can. Those of us on the faculty and staff who come in contact with them can be an important resource, a first-line lifeline for students who are troubled, depressed, and yes, suicidal.”



Continued from page 1

Russell felt very alone at the end. He was far away from his very tight-knit family, from his parents and his three sisters. I guess he had nobody to turn to in his distress.

Many of our students are in the same situation. They are in a vulnerable period in their lives, they are away from family and friends, and they are unsure about their futures. And many of them, too many, are suffering from depression. Some of them are being treated for their condition, but many are not.

We have a responsibility to help these students when we can. Those of us on the faculty and staff who come in contact with them can be an important resource, a first-line lifeline for students who are troubled, depressed, and yes, suicidal.

I am not a psychologist, and most of us are not, but I can recognize problems when I see them. We all can. If you think a student is having problems with depression or other issues, I urge you to reach out to that person. Just a question to ask, “Are you okay? Are you having problems?” We can be the first step in helping a troubled student to help himself or herself. The next time that

happens, I will reach out, in memory of my beautiful nephew Russell, and for all the people who suffer.

Go to Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, and type in the hashtag #redforrussell. I was astonished last week when I did so and saw hundreds of people, all over the country, wearing red for Russell Bird, the extended community of meteorologists paying tribute by wearing a red ribbon or red clothes. Red for Ohio State, red for the Cincinnati Reds, red for Russell. It was both heartbreaking and heartwarming to see this incredible outpouring for a lost young man. If only he could have known! As one meteorologist wrote me, after even the fiercest storm, a beautiful day dawns. Let’s do what we can for the troubled students (and colleagues) among us.

Enough sadness! But thank you for letting me share that personal story of grief and loss.

In happier news, but also an ending, Dana Bruneau, the Program Coordinator for the Teaching and Learning Center for the last decade, is moving into a new job here at Winthrop. Dana will be assisting Leah Kendall in the Office of the First-Year

Experience. This new job will put her in closer contact with students, something she greatly enjoys and is very talented at.

If you have had any contact with the TLC, if you have attended or given sessions, if you have been a part of the TLC Conference, you know how great Dana was at her job. She made the trains run on time, and she made the TLC richer and better. I cannot say how much I appreciate her great work and her many talents. We will miss her around here, but we are happy that she can take on this exciting new challenge. If you know Dana, please congratulate her and wish her well!

And as another academic year draws to a close, I want to thank all the people who have helped the TLC operate. Dana and I keep the machine running, but it runs because you attend sessions and offer to present sessions. It runs because you attend the annual conference and make presentations. It runs because you let me come to your class for a teaching consultation. And it runs because a few of you have written guest columns for the *Weekly Reader*. Thank you! And now on to the end.

Thanks For Helping Make the Teaching and Learning Center Work!

Winthrop's Teaching and Learning Center offers a wide variety of sessions each year for faculty and staff, on teaching, technology, professional development, and personal development. From leading class discussion to mastering the Smart podium to tenure and promotion to cooking soufflés, the TLC tries to make sure that all faculty and staff receive

the kinds of professional and personal development that will make them better teachers, administrators, and employees.

To offer this programming, the TLC depends on the talent, expertise, and generosity of our faculty and staff. We do not have a big budget to bring in outside speakers and experts. Even so, we are able to offer engaging,

timely, and valuable sessions every year on a variety of topics. We thank those who have offered their time and talent in past years.

If you have a request for a session you would like to see, please email me and I will try to arrange it. And if you have a session you would like to present, please email me. We will set something up as soon as we can!

A Service From the TLC: Teaching Consultation

The TLC for several years has been offering a service: teaching consultation. At the instructor's request, I (or another agreed-upon person) will visit your class to observe and consult with you afterwards about your successes and challenges. This consultation has nothing to do with the tenure and

promotion process, and no reports will be made to department chairs or deans (unless you so request). The invitation to the consultant can only come from the instructor, not from a dean or chair or any other person. All conversations will be private and confidential. If you don't want me to visit your class and observe your teaching, we could

just meet and talk about your teaching. If I am not available to visit your class because of my schedule, I will find a qualified person to do the consulting. So please let me know if you would like to invite me into your class or for a consultation. Call or email me (803) 323-3679 or birdj@winthrop.edu.

Go2Knowledge—Learning On Demand!

Go2Knowledge is a website that offers a variety of video presentations on faculty and staff professional development. You will find presentations by nationally-known experts in seven categories: At-Risk Populations, Campus Safety, Organizational Development, Student Success, Teaching and Learning, Technology,

and Open Educational Resources. Within each category, you will find a number of excellent and informative videos. The Office of Academic Affairs has provided us a subscription to this service.

People often tell the TLC that they would like to go to sessions, but they don't have the time or they can't

at the times sessions are offered. With Go2Knowledge, you can attend sessions on demand, anywhere, 24/7. The TLC will also have frequent Go2Knowledge Groups, where we meet to discuss a presentation. Log in here: <http://www.go2knowledge.org/winthrop> See you there!

Register for a TLC Session
At
www.winthrop.edu/tlc

The 3rd Annual Winthrop Conference on Teaching and Learning

Many thanks to everyone who attended and presented at our conference on Saturday, February 6. We had 102 attendees, who heard excellent presentations and an inspiring keynote speech by Dr. Dan Mahony. Special thanks to Dana Bruneau for her work in organizing the conference.

Thought For the Week

"The Impartial Friend:
Death, the only immortal
who treats us all alike,
whose pity and whose
peace and whose refuge
are for all--the soiled and
the pure, the rich and the
poor, the loved and the
unloved."
--Mark Twain