

Short Communication

Failing or Graduating?

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The other day a friend remarked to me that her father who had been ill for some time was “failing”. Her father was in his 80’s and had retired from career he enjoyed for many years that had provided a good lifestyle for him and his family. From all I knew about this man, he had lived a very good life and now he was “failing”? When a person is “failing” there is usually something they can do about it. Failing a course in school means you need to put more time into studying. Failing at work and you better speak to your manager and find out how to fix the situation. As you age, your body changes and will show the signs of “wear and tear” from living; aging is not “failing”. Most of us adjust to the changes, as the friends our age are doing the same. My friends and I joke at the pace and distance of our walks. They are shorter and slower and just as enjoyable, maybe more enjoyable than when we were younger and pushing our bodies to go faster! I don’t enjoy driving at night, so I call Uber or a taxi, I think that is being smart, not failing. At some point in my life, I might decide that maintaining a home is more work than I want to be responsible for and I’ll move to a place where someone else can do that, an apartment or a residential senior living facility. Again, a smart move as I adjust to aging not my failing.

There is nothing I can think of that lives forever. Most everything from items you possess, a car, your favourite pair of shoes, food you did not eat, plants and flowers in the garden, everything eventually ages and is disposed of when it is no longer useful. This is very normal for all of the things that we use in life. They do not fail us, just get used up and replaced, the circle of life exists for things as well as humans. If the item is expensive or difficult to replace, we might buy a warranty just in case it becomes useless before the expiration date. Then we get it replaced for free! This is sort of like your insurance policy, however you don’t get replaced, your survivors just receive money as a replacement.

So, let’s get back to why this lovely man is failing. Perhaps the medical community has failed as they were not able to find a cure for the health problems related to aging. There are some people who are using Cryonics, an expensive process where a person with an incurable disease is frozen immediately after death. People who believe in Cryonics hope that when a cure for their disease is found, they can be defrosted! At this time, not many people have selected this way to prolong life. I guess it’s hard to find a freezer big enough to hold your food and grandma!

What if we changed the word “failing” to “graduating”? When you believe in heaven, graduating will be great fun! Heaven is of course a very large and busy place if everyone who ever lived and believed in heaven is there. We know that air controllers at the Atlanta airport, the busiest airport in the world, have a difficult time keeping airplanes from hitting each other. Heaven must have super angel controllers, as the latest statistics on the worlds death rate shows that 108 people die every minute.

In heaven you are not required to work. Angels fly around playing music, free food is everywhere, and I’m hoping there is an ample and continuous supply of white wine! While in heaven, you will also get to see all of the people in your life who “graduated” before you did. You can also be with someone that you would have enjoyed meeting, but they “graduated” before you may have been born. Perhaps a visit with Abraham Lincoln? I have only visited his memorial in Washington, DC. I trust he is not as intimidating as his statue is! John F. Kennedy will be a priority for me to meet. I will enjoy having coffee with him and of course, Jackie will be invited to join us if she is not busy that day. I’m sure she is very popular and will be wearing the very latest in fashionable Angel wear.

You might be daring enough to have a meeting with people you disagreed with, for me it would be those who supported segregation. How about planning visits with people of influence who gave you bad advice. I would definitely schedule a lunch meeting with my high school counsellor who told me that I was not smart enough to go to college! I will wear a name badge that says, “Professor Joyce Simard”. Now that will be an interesting lunch! And with an abundance of free food already cooked I won’t have to go grocery shopping. I am a terrible cook; you could say I fail whenever I try to cook. In this context the word fail is used properly. I am thankful that the requirements for entrance into heaven do not include a cooking test. Whew!

If heaven is the destination after “graduation”, we must plan for this special time. It is important for everyone to plan for their own, individual “graduation”. I remember how excited I was when planning what I would do after I graduated from high school. Because I was told that I would never be accepted at a university, I have chosen a professional school in the big city of Boston, Massachusetts. I needed to find a place to live, decide what clothes to pack and choose the classes I would attend. Now as I understand the need for a different kind of “graduation” planning, I must decide about medical issues

such a Cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR). Should this be initiated if after I begin breathing again my quality of life will be seriously impaired? Do I want to be tube fed, even if I would not be aware of my surroundings and probably never be able to swallow regular food or liquid again? Do I want to die in a hospital or in my home? These decisions are often called Advanced Care Planning and must be communicated to my family and physicians.

These plans should include more than medical interventions. Do you want to be cremated? If so where are the ashes to be placed? My mother had chosen a very traditional "graduation" party. She rather enjoyed going to the funerals of her friends. They became social occasions, "graduation" parties, usually with good food served. She wanted her viewing to be admired by the friends she left behind, as one of the best funerals they had ever attended! As an only child, she knew my father would want me to carry out her plans. I knew where the dress she was to be buried in was stored, and that she wanted her hair done so that no one would guess that Doris Simard was not a natural blond! She had chosen the catering company based on who had the best food at the funerals she attended. I was also to go to the local florist who knew what colour of roses she wanted for the casket; the roses would match her dress. My mother's funeral was definitely not a failure, but a love filled "graduation" party, just as she planned.

Following my mother's example, I have also communicated verbally and in writing my medical wishes. If I do not have a chance of living a reasonably good life after CPR or tube feeding, I do not want them initiated. And, if at all possible, I

want to die at home wherever that is, with John Denver songs playing and surrounded by friends and family. It is my wish to be cremated with the ashes tossed into the ocean in Rockport, Massachusetts. I know that this is illegal, but I have a very creative family. They would really get a laugh over being arrested or fined for doing something their mother asked them to do! Beautiful Rockport is located on the ocean and is the favourite of the many, many, places where I have lived. My "graduation" party would continue with these favourite treats of mine, not one that is in any way healthy. These non-healthy favourites include M&M's, Cape Cod Potato Chips, onion dip, pizza and plenty of wine! But after all, it is my graduation party.

My hope is that as you read and hopefully smile at my plans, you will begin thinking and putting in writing the plans for your "graduation". Why not host a "graduation" planning party where a small group of family or friends talk about what their party will look like? If you are a healthcare professional, talk with the people you serve about making these decisions now. Schedule small groups in nursing homes, assisted living communities, senior living residences and senior citizen centres. We can change the way end of life planning is thought about, if we replace the word "failing" with "graduating". Let us rethink the way we speak about aging and the end of our life here on earth. It's exciting to know that after we "graduate", we will feel no more aches and pains, have no bills to pay, and for me, no meals to try to cook! Let us celebrate this special time of life and not in any way view it as a failure. This is a time to reflect on our life and prepare for our "graduation" as we all will eventually "graduate"!

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