

## Week 42: Don't Try to Be More Extraordinary (Just Try to Be More Human)

We're riding our bikes through the dead.

Our family—my wife and all three kids—is on our first bike ride after moving back to my boyhood hometown. This town is a lot hillier than I remember it, and the cemetery is the flattest ground we can find for a ride. The day is sunny and just the right amount of warm as we ride along the one-lane asphalt road, through the fields of tombstones. My kids don't even seem to notice, but I can't take my eyes off the names and the dates on the weathered graves. Some have been there for more than a century, names I don't know and names that, perhaps, no one can remember.

Some are more recent.

Less than two years ago, the judge who I trembled in front of during elementary school mock court stepped off this mortal coil and into the mystery of what comes next. It seems like yesterday he sat above us—youthful, healthy, powerful. Time undoes all of these things. We're riding through the dead and the awareness of it does to me what it always does: it makes me want to seize the day. I think of that scene in *Dead Poet's Society*—the young boys looking at the pictures of young men long since passed, Robin Williams leaning in amongst them, in a ghostlike whisper exhorting them, “Carpe diem. Seize the day, boys. Make your lives *extraordinary*.” The urge to do so seizes *me*. Like it does every time I'm faced with my mortality.

But then I'm faced with my *reality*.

My emerging adolescent son is grumpy and disgruntled about being with the family because he is, well, an emerging adolescent. And if I play close attention, I can understand his position. We're not easy to be with. Younger son is complaining about every slope and my daughter, for heaven's sake, hasn't quit chattering since we left the house and at first it was adorable but fifteen minutes later it's like fingernails on the chalkboard.

I consider my options. I can try to *make* everyone see the world my way. I can try to convince them this is all fleeting and we need to suck the marrow from all of it. I can try to make them all happy and joyful and awestruck at the wonder of things. But I've tried that before. I know how it goes. The one guaranteed way to make grumpy people grumpier is to try to make them less grumpy. Ultimately, I know, I want to make this day extraordinary and they're going to keep it so...ordinary. I feel like giving up on turning the day into something it is not.

So, I do.

And it is the giving up that saves me—from the conflict I would have created by trying to make everyone feel a certain way, from thinking I'm not enough, and

from acting like this *life* isn't enough. In other words, it saves me from devaluing most of what it means to be human. Yes, the extraordinary is a gift some of us receive at rare, fleeting moments.

But our humanity is the *ordinary* gift we are, all of us, always receiving all the time.

It includes grumpy adolescent boys and tired legs and joy so bottomless it can't stop talking. It includes yearning and hope and disappointment and despair. It includes fear of missing out, shame about being left out, and the humiliation of being pointed out. It includes success and failure, victory and loss, loneliness and unity. It includes every moment of every day, because the opposite of death isn't life; it's *presence*. Your heart can beat and your mind can think, but if you aren't aware of the moment in front of you, in all its grit and glory, you aren't really alive.

So, I decide to be present to what is. All the ordinary ups and downs of this road we're riding on and this life we're moving through. I welcome all of it and something extraordinary happens. For a moment, I feel fully human. Which is to say, fully *alive*.

As we ride our bikes through the dead.