

How Do We Want to be Remembered?

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My mother hailed from a small town in southeastern Kentucky, nestled in the Appalachian Mountains; the county seat held perhaps a thousand people when she was a child. The town is surrounded by a loop of the Cumberland river in its twisting among the hills. Every year or two the clouds would darken, heavy rains would fall, and the river would rise, and rise and rise – and its banks would flood, the water inching up porch steps before coming inside. After it crested, the river would leave a muddy residue on the plaster lathe walls, which had to be cleaned and repainted. I don't know they did anything about the black mold which must've formed within those walls. Floods were part of the natural cycle of things, going back as far as anyone could remember.

My mother's oldest sister, my aunt, was a diminutive woman, and she took up the cause of doing something about the flooding. For years and years she quietly but persistently pursued this goal, working with increasingly higher levels of government and developing contacts within the Army Corp of Engineers. She began to be referred to as the 'dam lady', and I suspect there were government officials who spelled it differently.

Flash forward to today. Just a couple of weeks ago I returned from visiting cousins there, and we stopped on a bridge over the diversion channel that now cuts across that loop in the Cumberland River; the town hasn't flooded since the channel was put in perhaps 20 years ago. There's a sign by the bridge; the channel is named after her. It's been years since she's been with us in body, but she remains with us in spirit and her influence lives on.

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If I take this question seriously, I find it daunting. The world's challenges – heck, Loveland's challenges, in the context of this world we live in – these challenges are large, even overwhelming, all those dark clouds bringing rain and the river seemingly ever rising. How can I stop the rain? How can I, not my aunt, but me, stop a flood? More: maybe even convert all that water energy into something useful?

Daunting indeed.

Now, thankfully, being remembered, even just making a difference, isn't the only thing. I take serious solace in this. I have this burgeoning belief in an All-Aware Universe, an inter-connected web somehow aware of my experience of being alive – and everyone else's experience of being alive too. While I want to make a difference, while I'd like to be remembered in a good way, I hold the experience of being alive to be more important. Even if I don't make a difference, even if I'm not remembered, good or bad, that's OK. I have the experience of being alive.

And I have the opportunity of affecting the experience of others' being alive. If the Universe is All-Aware, this awareness I can affect includes even animals and plants I come in contact with. Now, I don't know if we can say this rock has an experience, but perhaps it is not beyond me to treat even the inanimate with the respect it deserves, to strive for care in all I do.

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To care, it seems to me, is at the heart of a positive experience of being alive.

And in caring, a difference is made.

Let me show you a cartoon. I have to warn you, it's a nerdy cartoon. Some of you will get it right off the bat, and this will only prove you're a nerd like me; then I'll explain it for the rest of us. Now, an explained joke is Not Funny, but there's a truth this cartoon points to that is beyond its humor, a truth about making a difference.

Ok, fasten your seatbelt. [Here's](#) the cartoon, by Bernie -Stephen Hutchinson. For those of you in the back, one butterfly is reading the obituaries in the newspaper and says to the other butterfly, "He had a short but interesting life – for instance, did you know he was the one responsible for a tornado in Texas...?"

Ok, it's a nerd cartoon. It's referring to the *Butterfly Effect*, an insight from Chaos Theory. We've discovered systems, like weather, that have a mathematical model (and we believe really are) incredibly sensitive to initial conditions. An infinitesimal difference in an initial condition can eventually lead to a huge macroscopic effect, like a flap of a butterfly wing could lead to a tornado, halfway around the world, months later.

This is different from mere randomness, mere random behavior. There exists butterfly wing flaps that will deterministically cause tornados, our mathematical models show, and we believe this class of mathematical models accurately represents reality. Initial conditions matter crucially.

So, one butterfly to another, reading an obituary, "He had a short but interesting life – for instance, did you know he was responsible for a tornado in Texas...?"

Or, the quiet, persistent voice of a maybe 5-foot-tall aunt might eventually lead to diverting flood after flood, changing the course of a river, in spite of the rain.

Now, the flap of my aunt's wing was not random. I suppose in her trying there may have been times when she wondered if she might be making things worse, creating a tornado of opposition, and I'm sure she faced the headwinds of change and some of those headwinds were of her own making. Yet she quietly persisted, year after year.

I know too she had the support of others. I don't recall ever seeing her drive; her husband drove her on trips to Washington DC, where she became known to her representatives in the Congress, this diminutive lady from a small town in Appalachia. And surely she gained the support of others or it would never have gotten done. But she, she was the initial spark, the persistent flame; to switch metaphors, the wing that kept flapping, until the breeze caught the sail and the boat made headway.

In some ways, I envy her. She had found her cause, her calling, and could focus her considerable energies behind that cause. And that river, it kept flooding, which I'm sure provided continued motivation.

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Some of us are not as fortunate to feel such a tangible calling. Or it might be the goings-on of life, with work, or with kids, or with family matters, or with health issues or all of the above feeling all-consuming, leaving no time for a calling, or so it seems.

Yet the way we do these goings-on of life and the way we experience them is a calling in itself, and can make all the difference. Remember the story about the 3 bricklayers, all on the same construction site: the first was laying brick, the second was building a room, the third was creating a cathedral.

So being remembered is not the only thing, and I believe it's not even the main thing. The main thing has something to do with the experience of being alive. The mechanism by which we can enhance our own experience of being alive is caring, or love, or respect, and we can extend that enhancement to others, even, perhaps, as far as this rock: to all of existence.

Leonard Cohen, in his beautiful song Suzanne, says:

There are heroes in the seaweed, there are children in the morning
They are leaning out for love and they will lean that way forever

Cameron and I lived for a time right on Puget Sound, south of Seattle. The driveway of our rented home led to a working dock, which held large ocean-going fishing vessels and our little canoe, in which we'd paddle out in after a hard day's work or on weekend picnics. And looking over its side down into the depths, the seaweed would all be leaning in the direction of the tide, washed by its waters – just as we are inspired by the breezes we take in and, in exhaling, can't help but create.

In the experience of being alive and making at least some of this experience about caring, we can take in and we can create a good kind of breeze, butterfly flaps leaning toward love, flap after flap, breath after breath, even with every breath we make. If a butterfly's undirected flap can cause a tornado, think about what a persistent, directed flap, a breath at time, might do when each breath leans toward love.

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A tangible calling would be nice; it'd be nice to feel called to change the course of a river, as daunting as that would be, and it'd be nice to be remembered for that. Perhaps some of us will find such a calling; there are 21 people walking free, released from the Aurora detention center because Francey found a way to organize people to pay their bond. But as good as a tangible calling is, in our busy lives, we don't need to have one. We have the experience of being alive, and in that experience we can have faith in the positive form of the Butterfly effect, that good things can happen from creating even seemingly insignificant initial conditions: positive acts of caring, love, peace and justice. Then all we need to do is breathe, breathing in and out that leaning toward love, as do the seaweeds and the children in the morning.