

Failure.

As Al sat staring out the window, watching the wood pigeons as they cautiously approached the feed he had put out for them earlier that morning, and watching them warily approach and finally drink water from the bowl he cleaned and refreshed daily, he noticed that not a single pigeon seemed to be in poor health nor did there seem to be any aged or infirm pigeons. Each pigeon seemed to be at the peak of health, and each was picture-perfect for its unique coloring and markings. Al laughed to himself as he watched pigeon after pigeon land on the wires that supplied his internet connection and then try to balance. Their tails and heads would bob in a complicated balancing act, and the overnight snow on the wires was probably not helping.

Al wondered, loud enough in his mind, so he heard the thought clearly, how and when failure affected the birds and animals he saw daily. Several years ago, he had come to know a Douglas Pine squirrel. This little squirrel, Al named Douglas, would spend his entire day- from early morning to near darkness- coming from across the two-lane road, up his lane, and to one of the squirrel feeders to collect sunflower seeds. He would then race home, always stopping just short of the roadway to listen for cars or trucks, and then he would dart across and up a tree to where his nest was. Immediately, he would repeat the process, and he did this seemingly tirelessly. Al would often watch Douglas, and there was a day when the feeder was occupied by a mature grey squirrel, who was much bigger and stronger than Douglas. Douglas was small but fearless and aggressive, and he could easily fend off the much bigger grey squirrels. Al watched as Douglas tried to gain an advantage to take over the feeder, but the squirrel was clever, too, and not easily fooled. Finally, Douglas ran around the trunk of the large tree. Douglas nipped the squirrel in the

leg and continued running. The squirrel raced after Douglas, but by this time, Douglas was already around the enormous tree's trunk and into the feeder, giving him an insurmountable strategic position. He chattered loudly at the grey squirrel, and the squirrel, recognizing his defeat, soon left. Al soon realized that Douglas, though small in stature, ruled this little area he lived in. After that encounter, whenever Douglas approached a feeder, any squirrel in the feeder left. All turf wars seemed to have been settled in Douglas's favor.

One day, his neighbor told him he had seen Douglas the day before and that something was majorly wrong with him. The neighbor told him Douglas was dragging his hind legs as if he'd been hit by a car. Al was sad to hear the news and never saw Douglas again.

A couple of weeks later, Douglas was replaced by a smaller, younger pine squirrel. This pine squirrel made his home in the large log pile Al had meticulously split and stacked earlier that spring, and a tarp covered the log pile. This seemed like the perfect home for the pine squirrel to Al. Al named the new pine squirrel Douglas.

Life settled down once again. No more pine squirrel was scurrying all day, collecting winter supplies. Al missed seeing him, but other wildlife replaced him. During the following spring, Al saw the new Douglas with his pregnant mate, and only weeks later, he saw a baby pine squirrel whose body was no longer than half Al's index finger.

Al saw many animals and birds, from mountain lions, bobcats, and a silver fox to deer, bears, raccoons, bald eagles, osprey, loons, geese, and swans. He was constantly impressed by the awesomeness of where he lived. He didn't have to travel anywhere to see or hear the diversity and the richness of the wildlife as it was outside his cabin in the woods where he lived.

A silver fox made her home on his deck one winter under a table he had stored there. The game camera he had installed had captured many pictures of her over the many weeks she had lived there, and then, one day, she was gone. Another day his game cam took a picture of the always elusive badger, sitting on his butt in Al's vegetable garden, seemingly perfectly at home.

Al himself had lived a busy yet primarily reclusive life, often moving to new places dissimilar to places where he had already lived and seeking people different from any others he had known. His journey had taken him to his present location more than two decades earlier, but for the first decade and a half, he had stayed here only a little. As time passed, and as the world grew more crowded, especially in the urban county where he had made his primary home, he longed more and more for the quiet seclusion his cabin in the woods offered. He scrupulously and conscientiously continued to visit his cabin twice a month for four days each time, and after all those years, he remembered that life was finite. At about the same time, he noticed his health becoming impaired in many different and seemingly unconnected ways. His once-strong body was not as strong anymore. His once-strong body, which recovered from injury easily and quickly, was now no longer so resilient.

His doctor told him the tear in his shoulder's rotator cuff would require surgery. Still, he never got the surgery, instead opting for physical therapy to strengthen the shoulder muscles. That decision and that course of action worked for several decades. But then he hurt his other shoulder severely and learned he had inflicted significant damage. Again, he opted for a non-surgical solution, and while his choice seemed logical, his decision didn't repair the damage. The decision for his second shoulder to use physical therapy and strength conditioning lasted for several years until that shoulder began breaking down. His sleep was affected, and his overall

happiness was impacted. His once optimistic outlook was, for the first time in his life, severely affected by his growing attention being spent on the effects of aging.

Al had experienced injuries earlier in his life, of course. Some had required minor surgeries, and some had needed time to heal. A severe back injury had taken nearly a year for him to recover, but it had healed without the recommended surgery and with no recurring issues. So, at first, he was surprised that his body was now not healing. He was not only surprised, but he was also more than a little angry.

There were times now, though less frequent, when the pains throughout his body didn't bother him. There were also times, and these were becoming more frequent, when the pains in his body controlled entire days and weeks. He would use ice to try to reduce the inflammation or heat to increase circulation, hoping that would help, and sometimes he would use heat after ice, and sometimes ice after heat. Occasionally, these treatments helped, but usually, they did not.

And so, Al's attention was drawn, more and more, from the once strong, vital, and carefree sanctuary that his body had been to a body that was beginning to fail in so many areas. More disturbing to him was that his body was no longer responding as it used to. He used to hurt his body, and his body used to recover. He used to run long distances, and his body sometimes got hurt from falls or low-hanging branches, yet his body would always recover. He would ride his mountain bike for hours on wilderness trails in the mountains, and his body got hurt many times, and as many times as his body got damaged, his body healed. So, as Al's age progressed, he was shocked when his body stopped healing automatically. He was shocked when his injuries lingered way beyond the length of time he felt his injury should have healed.

Al had indeed seen many people grow old. His parents had grown old right before his eyes. His father had needed glasses, his father had required false teeth, his mother grew tired more quickly, and his mother had needed two heart operations. He had watched his father change from a tall, robust, erect-standing man to a weak, bent-over man who required a cane to walk. Al did not know nor did he ever think about the collective influences these maladies had on the body and the mind of the elderly people he watched. Each disorder no longer healed, so each lingered. Then another illness would surface, and that disease or injury would be brought under control, but because it wasn't healed, it too got added to the list of things affecting their health.

No animal or bird on this planet was meant to last forever, and while some parts can be replaced, the overall age of everything born has built-in obsolescence. Al never thought much about how or why some people only lived a short, sickly life while others lived a remarkably long and healthy life. He believed that life was in God's hands. Not that God had hands, but that saying always seemed a good and comforting euphemism. Al believed in God, but he believed in the non-religious god that he spelled with a lowercase g to denote the non-personification of the god he believed in. And since his god wasn't a person, his god could not have hands. Yet, as a force, his god could still do without hands what a God with hands could do. His god could heal and guide, but neither his nor the religious God could conquer the built-in obsolescence of old age.

As his father had grown old, there came a time when Al visited his father. His father's wife, Al's stepmother, had died four years earlier. Al was quite surprised by how well his father had managed to live after her passing, as she did everything for him. She cleaned and cooked, paid all the bills monthly, sent out the birthday and Christmas cards, and his father read the newspaper daily, did the crossword puzzles, drove to the airport to watch the airplanes, and watched Jeopardy every night. After his wife died, he surprised everyone by cooking for himself and

keeping the house somewhat clean, and he even sent out birthday and Christmas cards. Of course, Al had no idea to what extent his father was doing these things. Al only knew that he was getting his birthday and Christmas cards.

As Al and his father sat at the kitchen table, Al said to his father, “Dad, I know you’re never going to die. But what do you want me to do in case of an accident or something happens to you? Do you want to be cremated?” His old father now smiled and instructed his son to cremate his body and then to mix his ashes with his mother’s ashes, and then he asked his son to take those ashes out in his son’s boat and to spread them under the Golden Gate Bridge; a bridge his father had watched being built as a little boy. Al readily agreed. Al asked his father how he was doing, and then he asked his father, “Dad. How are you feeling? Do you feel like you want to join mom soon?” His father shook his head yes, took a deep breath, and shook his head in the affirmative repeatedly.

Not many months later, Al learned his father had fallen, and the neighbors had come to his rescue. Soon after that, a neighbor of his father phoned him to say that his father was ill in bed. Al dropped everything and drove nearly sixty miles to his father’s house. His father was very ill and had messed up the bed because he was too weak to get up and use the bathroom. The room smelled so bad that Al almost puked. After phoning for an ambulance, he waited. Once his father was in the ambulance and headed to the hospital, Al opened the windows, changed the sheets on his father’s bed, put the dirty ones in the washing machine, and headed to the hospital. His father was in the ICU, and after waiting an hour or so, a young and intense doctor came to speak with him.

“Your father is gravely ill. I know this will be difficult for you to hear, but your father will not leave this hospital alive. Oh, in a few days, he might appear to be getting better, but don’t be fooled. Your father will not leave this hospital alive.”

Al now had tears in his eyes, and he asked if he could visit his father, and the doctor took him to his father’s room. There were monitors galore, several drips attached to his father’s arms, and his father seemed peaceful lying there. Al stroked his father’s head and sat there for a long time. Finally, he kissed his father’s forehead and left. Each day, when he returned, he noticed his father’s health had improved. On the fourth day, his father was moved from the ICU to the floor below. Al was ecstatic and immediately contacted home help to arrange for his father’s full recovery at home. He knew what the doctor had told him and remembered it word for word. He did not want to believe it.

Al needed to take the next day off, as his business had been neglected for days. He felt guilty for taking a day off, but the next morning, he again drove to visit his father. His father seemed completely confused this morning. He was trying to take his sheet apart, so Al asked his father what he was doing, and his father replied, “I want a cigarette. Give me a cigarette!” Al replied, “Dad. Are you nuts? You’re in a hospital!” At that moment, the doctor walked in with two nurses and began their morning routine and monitoring when suddenly the doctor ordered the nurses out of the room.

Al was left alone with his father, and, taking his father’s head in the crook of his arm while stroking his gray hair, he told his father it was okay if he wanted to go. His father took a long, deep breath and died in his son’s arms. Al kissed his father’s forehead for the last time. The monitor’s beeping changed to one long beep, and nurses were soon there, doing what they do when a patient has died. Al moved to a chair and began crying. He cried long and loud as if he

was a young boy again rather than a grown man. He cried without being able to control his grief at all. An hour or so later, when the man from the morgue finally appeared, Al was still crying. Al cried harder as he heard the noise of the zipper on the black body bag being zipped tightly shut. As his father's body was being wheeled quickly through the hospital and out past waiting patients, Al's eyes were so full of water it was like having his eyes open in a swimming pool- he could see, but his vision was watery. Finally, his father was in the van, heading off to the morgue. Al drove with eyes still watering so much he could barely see, and somehow, he drove back to his father's house, where he cried even more.

As Al remembered the day his father died, he also saw the failure that not only awaited him but the failure that awaited every living creature on this planet. Al noticed that his father's death, which had annihilated him emotionally for several months, had happened quickly and without pain and suffering.

Death is the ultimate failure, of course. Most of us try to live a healthy life while hoping for a longer life, but there is no circumventing or besting the finish line that waits patiently for us to arrive.

Al didn't like failure. Al had wished only for success in all things for almost all of his life, and only now did he learn that success in death could only be found by a failure to live longer. The body's failure, the predisposition to fail, and even the warning that everything will have the same ultimate fate had not prepared Al for his father's failure to live longer. But as Al reflected, he realized his father's failure to live longer was good. His father had not suffered an agonizing or painful death. One week ago, he ate well and drove to the store and the airport. Yes, his arthritic shoulders and hip hurt him constantly, and he grimaced in pain whenever he tried to move. He could no longer tie his shoes, so he wore slip-ons, and yes, he had made many health concessions

as his body slowly but surely surrendered to its ultimate fate. Failure to die is not a permanent option for anyone, not even his father.

The End.

Written by Peter Skeels © May 10th, 2022