

Failure

As the son 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 in the peak of health, and each pigeon was picture perfect as far as their individual coloring and markings. The son 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 that still lay on the wires was probably not helping at all.

The son 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, that the son named Douglas, would literally 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. Douglas was small but he was fearless and aggressive, and he would easily fend off the much bigger grey squirrels. The son would often watch Douglas, and there was a day when the feeder was occupied by a mature grey squirrel, much bigger and stronger than Douglas. The son watched as Douglas tried to gain an advantage so he could take over the feeder but the squirrel was smart too, and was 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 large tree's trunk and in the feeder, and he had taken a strategic position that was insurmountable. He chattered loudly at the grey squirrel and the squirrel, recognizing his defeat, soon left. It soon became obvious to the son, that Douglas ruled this little area he lived in. After that encounter, whenever Douglas approached a feeder, any squirrel that had already occupied the feeder simply 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. The son was sad to hear the news, and he never saw Douglas again. A couple of weeks later Douglas was replaced by a smaller and younger pine squirrel. This pine squirrel made his home in the large log pile which the son had so meticulously split and stacked earlier that spring, and which also had a tarp covering the top. To the son this seemed like the perfect home for the pine squirrel. The son named the new pine squirrel Douglas.

Life settled down once again. There was no more pine squirrel scurrying all day long collecting supplies for winter. The son missed seeing him, but there was other wildlife that replaced him. During the following spring the son saw the new Douglas with his pregnant mate, and only weeks later he saw a baby pine squirrel, whose body was no longer than two inches.

The son saw many animals and birds from mountain lions, bobcats, silver fox, to deer, bear, racoons, bald eagles and osprey, and of course the 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 to hear the diversity and the richness of the wildlife as it was literally 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 caught many pictures of her over the many weeks she lived there, and then one day she too was gone. Another day his game cam took a picture of the always elusive badger, sitting on his butt in the son's vegetable garden, seemingly perfectly at home.

The son himself had lived a busy and mostly reclusive life, often seeking places to live that were dissimilar to places where he had already lived, and seeking people who were different than 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 moved on, and as the world grew more crowded, especially in the urban county where he had made his primary home, he, more and more, longed for the quiet seclusion his cabin in the woods offered. As he continued, scrupulously and conscientiously, to visit his cabin twice a month for 4 days each time, and for all those years, he began to remember that his life was finite. And, at about the same time, he noticed his health begin to become impaired in many different and seemingly unconnected ways. His once perfectly strong body was not as strong anymore. His once strong body, that 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 but he never got the surgery, opting instead for physical therapy to strengthen the muscles holding the shoulder together. That decision and that course of action worked for several decades. But then his other shoulder got hurt quite badly, and he learned he had inflicted major damage to it. Again, he opted for a non-surgical solution, and while his choice seemed logical, his choice 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 too began breaking down. His sleep was affected, and his overall happiness was impacted. His once optimistic outlook was, for first time in his life, severely impacted by his growing attention being spent on the effects of aging.

The son had experienced injuries earlier in the life, of course. Some had required minor surgeries, and some had simply required time to heal. A severe back injury had taken nearly a year to heal, but it had healed, without the recommended surgery, 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 still times, though less frequent, when the pains throughout his didn't bother him, but 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 and reduce the inflammation, or he would use heat for the same reason. Sometimes he would use heat after ice, and sometimes he would use ice after heat. Sometimes these things helped and at other times they did not.

And so, the son's attention was drawn, more and more, from the once strong and carefree sanctuary that his body had been, to a body that was beginning to fail in so many areas. More disturbing to him though was the fact that his body was no longer responding as it used to do. He used to hurt his body and his body used to recover. He used to run long distances and his body would sometimes get hurt, but 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 hurt his body healed. So, as the son's age progressed, he was nevertheless 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.

It is true that the son had seen many people grow old. His parents had grown old right before his eyes. His father had needed glasses, his father had needed teeth, his mother grew tired more easily, and his mother had needed two heart operations. Yes, he had watched his father change from a tall, strong, erect-standing man to a weaker, bent over man who required a cane to walk. What the son did not know nor ever thought about, was the collective influences these maladies had not only on the body, but also on the mind of the elderly people he was watching. Each malady now no longer healed so each lingered. Then another malady would surface and that disease or injury would be brought under control, or not, and then it too got added to the list of things no longer right with their health.

No body, of any 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 a built-in obsolescence. The son never gave much thought to the 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 actually had hands of course, but that saying always seemed to be a good and comforting euphemism. The son believed in God, but he believed in the non-religious god that he spelled with a lower-case 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 god nor the religious God could conquer the built-in obsolescence of old age.

As his own father had grown old, there came a time when the son visited his father. His father's wife, the son's step mother, had died four years earlier. The son was quite surprised by how well his father had managed to live after her passing, as she literally did everything for him. She cleaned and she cooked, she paid all the bills every month, she sent out the birthday and Christmas cards, and his father read the newspaper every day and did the crossword puzzles, drove to the airport to watch the airplanes, and he watched Jeopardy every night. After his wife died, he surprised everyone by cooking for himself, keeping the house somewhat clean, and he even sent out birthday and Christmas cards. Of course, the son had no idea to what extent his

father was doing these things. The son only knew for sure that he was getting his birthday and Christmas cards. As the son and his father sat at the kitchen table, the son said to his father, "Dad, I know you're never going to die. But, in case there's an accident or something, what do you want me to do? 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. The son readily agreed. The son then asked his father how he was doing, and then he asked his father, "Dad. How are you feeling? Are you feeling like you want to join mom soon?" His father shook his head yes, took a deep breath, and shook his head in the affirmative again and again.

Not many months later the son learned his father had fallen and the neighbors had come to his rescue. Soon after that a neighbor of his father phoned him that his father was ill in bed. The son dropped everything and drove the nearly sixty miles to his father's house. His father was quite ill, and he had messed the bed because he was too weak to get up and use the bathroom. The room smelled so bad the son almost puked. After phoning for an ambulance he waited. Once his father was in the ambulance and headed to hospital, the son 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 an hour or so, a young and intense doctor came to speak with him.

"Your father is gravely ill. I know this is going to be hard for you to hear but your father is not going to leave this hospital alive. Oh, he might very well seem like he is getting better, but don't be fooled. Your father will not leave this hospital alive."

The son 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, there were several drips attached to his father's arms, and his father seemed peaceful lying there. The son stroked his father's head, and sat there for a long time. Finally, he kissed his father's forehead and left. Each day he came back and each day his father seemed to be getting better. On the fourth day his father was moved from the ICU to the floor below. The son was ecstatic, and he immediately contacted home help to arrange for his father's full recovery at home. Oh, he knew what the doctor had told him, and he remembered it word for word. He just simply did not want to believe it.

The son needed to take the next day off, as his business had been neglected for days. He of course felt guilty for taking a day off, but the very next morning he once again drove down to visit his father. His father seemed completely confused this morning. He was trying to take his sheet apart, so the son asked his father what he was doing, and his father replied, "I want a cigarette. Give me a cigarette!" The son replied, "Dad. Are you nuts? You're in a hospital!" At that moment, the doctor walked in with two nurses, and they began their routine and monitoring, when suddenly the doctor ordered the nurses out of the room. The son was left with alone his father, and taking his father's head in his arm, and while stroking his grey hair, he told his father it was okay if he wanted to go. His father took another long, deep breath and died in his son's arms. The son 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. The son moved to a chair and simply began crying. He cried a long and loud cry, and he

cried as if he were a young boy, 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, the son was still crying. As the black body bag was zipped tightly shut, the son cried harder. As his father's body was being wheeled quickly through the hospital and out past waiting patients, the son's eyes were so full of water it was like opening your eyes in a swimming pool; you can see but your vision isn't clear. Finally, his father was in the van and speeding off to the morgue. The son somehow made it back to his father's house where he cried even more.

As the son remembered that day his father died, he also saw the failure that not only awaited him too, but the failure that awaited every living creature on this planet. The son came to see that his father's death, which had annihilated him emotionally for several months, had happened quickly and without pain and suffering. Failure for his father's life to continue had been a kind failure.

The son didn't like failure. The son 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 failure of the body, along with its predisposition to fail, and even the warning that every thing will have the same ultimate fate, had not prepared the son for his father's failure to live longer. But as the son reflected, he realized that his father's failure to live longer was a good failure. His father had not suffered an agonizing or painful death. One week ago, he was eating well and driving his car to the store and to the airport. Yes, his arthritic shoulders and hip hurt him constantly, and he would grimace 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 or anything.

The End.

Written by Peter Skeels © May 10th, 2022