

Rev. Kim K. Crawford Harvie
 Arlington Street Church
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Let the Life I Lead¹

“StoryCorps began with the idea that everyone has an important story to tell. Since 2003, ... in New York City and in mobile recording booths traveling the country ... StoryCorps [has been] collecting the memories of [North] Americans, ... a wondrous ... celebration of our shared humanity, capturing ... the stories that define us and bind us together.

“In [his new book,] *“Listening is an Act of Love,* StoryCorps founder and legendary radio producer Dave Isay [collects] some of the most remarkable stories from the ... vast collection, and arranges them ... [in] a moving portrait of [North] American life.”²

Reading this book is a little like drinking from a fire hose; I’m trying to discipline myself not to gulp it all down at once. This morning, I want to share a story that’s been keeping me up at night, not because I want you up at 3 a.m., too, but because it calls us to wrestle with the question of meaning and purpose in a deeply compelling way.

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June 8th, 2006. “Brittany Conant, 31, interviews her mother-in-law, Martha Conant, 63 ... in Greeley, Colorado. Martha Conant was aboard United Airlines flight 232, which crashed in Sioux City, Iowa, on July 19th, 1989. Of the 296 people on board, 111 perished. Most of the others were seriously injured.

[Martha Conant is speaking; these are her words.]

“It was a Wednesday. My recollection is that we left Denver maybe 11:30, 12:00 noon. There was enough time for the flight attendants to serve lunch. This was back in the days when there was food served on airplanes. It

¹ In honor of today’s gift of music by “Little Windows,” from the traditional Old Irish hymn

² from the fly jacket

was probably an hour and a half into the flight, and they had virtually completed serving lunch to everybody. There was a jerk and a loud noise. The airplane really lurched. And that was when I knew that obviously there was something wrong.

“The pilot was amazingly calm, and the flight attendants were calm. After the plane lurched, it ... regained stability, and the flight attendants started picking up the lunch dishes. The pilot came on the PA system shortly after and said, ‘We’ve lost an engine. No problem. DC-10s can fly perfectly well on two engines. Sorry for the disturbance. I hope you enjoy the rest of your lunch.’ ... I noticed that [the flight attendants] seemed to be kind of in a hurry, [though,] and they weren’t offering extra cups of coffee or anything.

“It was forty minutes from the time that the plane lurched until we - I’m going to say ‘landed’ rather than ‘crashed,’ because we were intending to land. I think the pilot may have come on two or three times.... Again, everybody was calm. There was one member of the flight crew that came back to look out the window. It looked to me, from what I could see, that we were dumping fuel, but I wasn’t really sure why he was looking out the window. He was calm. He was congenial, talking to people.

“The pilot had told us where we were landing and calmly announced that we would be transported to Chicago, so people making connections would be a little late, but we would get there. So there was confidence that this was just a hitch, that we were going to be fine.

“I remember the pilot teaching us what ‘brace position’ means: feet on the floor, your hands on the back of the seat in front of you, and your head down between your knees - and, of course, nothing on your lap. He told us over the PA, ‘It’s going to be the roughest landing you’ve ever experienced, but we’re fine. And when I tell you to brace, I want you to take that position and stay in that position. Don’t let go.’

“And so we were coming in, and I had no visual cues about how close to the ground we were or how far away or anything like that. The only cue I had was the pilot’s voice. He yelled, ‘Brace! Brace! Brace!’ and I did. The next thing I was aware of was a huge influx of air and gravel and dirt and debris ... hitting me, hitting my face, arms, legs. It was hard to hold on to the seat in front of me. I remember my arms flailing around. I actually grabbed

hold of the tie of the man next to me. It was like my body was being bounced around so much I was out of control.

“There were at least two periods where I blacked out. When I came to, I remember saying to myself, ‘Oh, I’m still alive.’ And then I blacked out again, and then, ‘Oh, I’m still alive.’ All this time there was motion and papers and stuff flying around. I had my eyes closed, so I didn’t see it, but I could feel it. I don’t remember hearing anything other than my own thoughts. And then the motion stopped, and the plane was still.

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“I wasn’t harmed, not physically. Mentally, emotionally, psychologically, I was lightly touched – lightly compared to stories I’ve heard from other people. I guess I feel fortunate and grateful and in a state of wonder about *randomness*. You know that so much depends on where somebody was sitting on that plane – just chance.

“For me, the crash was like [the] proverbial ocean liner turning around. There were some changes that happened right away, as soon as I got my feet on the ground. And others have unfolded over the sixteen, seventeen years since then.

“Immediately, I decided that I wanted to live with as few regrets as possible. And for me that meant repairing relationships that had been compromised, and trying very hard not to leave anything undone. So not leaving home in the morning, for example, being upset with someone. Or not passing up a chance to tell Dale, my husband, or one of the boys how much I love them. Or not turning down a chance to tell a friend how much I appreciate her. At first it was very intentional and required a lot of attention. It was hard to do that because it wasn’t my habit. But whenever I thought, ‘Oh, this is hard,’ then I’d think, ‘Yeah, well, I might not be coming home tonight. It’s not that hard.’ And it’s just turned into a way of being.

“What’s been longer in unfolding is a reprioritization of my life. At the time this happened, I was traveling on business. I worked hard, and it took a lot of time and a lot of attention.... I paid lip service to the notion that my family was my first priority, but when push came to shove, it didn’t always work out that way. And so one of the changes that took longer to put into place was to really come down solidly in that value of family first. That took a while longer.

“When survivors - especially the survivors that weren’t injured very much - were being fed and cared for in Iowa, there were a number of priests and pastors and social workers around. And I ended up talking to a young man who was a social worker, and he said, ‘God must have had a reason for saving you. You haven’t finished your life’s work yet.’ I was quite troubled. It felt to me like I was saddled with a lot of responsibility. ‘What is this work I’m supposed to be doing that I was saved for?’ Part of the struggle was, ‘What is this all about? How do I assign any kind of meaning to this traumatic experience, when so many people lost their lives, and so many people were severely injured and have never recovered? How do I assign any meaning when I walked out scot-free?’

“If you go with that statement, ‘Well, God has more work for you to do,’ then the flip side is, ‘God didn’t have any more work for all those other people.’ And I don’t believe that. I don’t believe in a God that is arbitrary like that and intervenes in our lives in that ‘destiny’ kind of way. What I came to was that there is randomness. There is chance in our world. It impacts all of us in big ways and small ways. And on that day, chance impacted me and all the other people on that plane by where [we] were sitting.

“One of the things that has accompanied me, followed me, surrounded me, wrapped me is that feeling of gratitude for whatever happens. That event was like being picked up by the scruff of the neck and shaken.” Here, Martha Conant laughs. She continues, “And God says, ‘This is your only life! Just be grateful for it.’” Now she is crying. “Just be grateful that [you have] these days and these hours and these wonderful people in your life. Just be grateful for that.”³

* * *

Martha Conant’s life is a perfect sermon. Just briefly, here are four of the lessons we might receive from it, which are also all sermons in themselves:

First, living without regret. Are you surprised that this is Martha Conant’s very first response, that this is how she framed her very first change-of-heart? I really love it; the idea that we stop choosing regretful behavior. Her commitment to clean it all up as she goes along, driven by that bone-deep knowledge that she might not get another chance to do it right, is really inspiring. She feels very awake to me; like the crash was a giant alarm that went off in her life. As hard as it was for her, she made a habit, a practice, of

³ pp. 105-109

staying awake to this lesson. So let's take that in: the idea of the spiritual practice of living without regret.

Second, there's that reprioritization. I don't get the feeling that that happened for her in a weekend - that realigning of her values with her life choices. It sounds like it was a lot of hard work, putting her family and her work in the right order. It's really an extension of living without regret; we do that by getting our priorities right. I hear that what she did was to think hard about what mattered most to her, in theory, and then to look hard at what mattered most to her, in practice. When the two didn't match, she fixed it, and kept fixing it, keeps fixing it, one day at a time. Again, a spiritual practice, a discipline, keeping our priorities lined up.

Third, she has that piercing insight about randomness, and it clearly permeates her life. I would reframe this as *embracing mystery*; in Zen, we speak of "don't know" mind. Believing in randomness is a tricky theology, because it can leave us very passive - at worst, we end up believing that everything just happens to us, and that we have little or no agency in our lives. But I love the way that seeing her survival as a lucky turn of the wheel has fortified Martha Conant to embrace the mystery of life and death, and to come fully into the present. She says yes to the chance that kept her alive, and lives, deeply, into the preciousness of her life.

And finally, fourth, there's giving thanks. I love that she both laughs and cries as she speaks about gratitude. She lived to tell the story, and she tells it not just as a tragedy, but as a blessing. All we really have is the present, the gift of the present. "Just be grateful," she says, that we have "these days, and these hours, and these wonderful people" in our lives.

My spiritual companions, I invite you to join me in a reflection on Martha Conant's awakening. As we learn by heart the lessons of living without regret; reordering our priorities; embracing mystery; and giving thanks; we participate in an awakening that affirms that we, who have now been touched by this tragedy, as well, will not squander the benefit of its lessons.

May we, too, choose life.

Let us live a legacy of love.

