

Leader Dogs and Guardian Angels

Written by Vivian Bikulege

Wow. When the Saints come rolling in, they can be like monster trucks barreling over everything in their path, recklessly crushing our emotions and burying them under their gigantic, mud-splattered tires – right along with the cremated remains of the people and animals we have loved.



Each month, for the past three – February, March and April – someone I have cared about, or cared for, has passed away. Add to that the canine companions of my sister and my dear friend at work – both put down on the same Sunday in March – and the Saints have just completed a death rally that rivals a Monster Truck Night of Destruction.

I mean no disrespect. Nor do I believe that I can add anything to the mega-volumes that have already been written about death and dying, or grief and loss. I am grappling with the ideas and the aftermath of processing the finality of each event.

When Art, my father-in-law, passed away in March, it was on the same day that he and his wife Gloria, and my niece Stephanie, were to arrive in Beaufort for a four-day visit. The house was decked-out in spring flowers in anticipation of their arrival, but the décor quickly changed to flowers placed in front of framed photographs honoring Art in the different seasons of his life. To add to this loss, two friends have recently succumbed to cancer and, of course, their passing is bittersweet. Cancer has a monstrous quality of its own and the doors of death often open to the relief of a painless eternity. But it is the idea of dogs and guardian angels that has actually overtaken any thoughts I have had of monsters. Seeing Eye dogs as a matter of fact – guardian guide dogs for the blind.

Art was a longtime member of the volunteer organization Lions Clubs International, and, quite frankly, I did not really know much about them. Most days, I would toss the Lions in with Moose or Elks, just another fraternity named after a species in the animal kingdom that don baseball caps and meet every once in a while for comradery and a few laughs. I knew Art raised a lot of money for Lions' causes. Actually, he would surpass his fellow Lions most of the time in his collections. Over time, I learned that he also collected used eyeglasses, and that Lions "want everyone to see a better tomorrow" by supporting sight programs. Every Christmas, Art sold Koeze (pronounced "cozy") Nuts in support of the Lions' programs, and my husband and I always had a chuckle when he told stories about delivering "cozy" nuts to friends and neighbors. All jokes aside, they are the best and biggest cashews I have ever eaten.

What pulled my heart out of the monster-truck-muck of death this past March was the attendance of a Seeing Eye dog – a pup really, just six-months-old – along with his trainer at my father-in-law's viewing in Michigan. I watched a blind woman make friends with the dog just yards away from Art's casket. I got to rub the young dog's belly. I witnessed the trainer and dog kneel and sit respectively in homage to a life of service. And in the blink of that moment, I knew how much comfort my lion of a father-in-law had brought into this world.

When my husband came out of the front door of our house to tell me Art had died, I was busy watering my plants. I walked away from my husband's embrace to the side of our house, and leaned onto the branches of a crepe myrtle, stunned by the news and succumbing to a sudden

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eruption of tears. At that moment, on a dreary Lowcountry day, the sun blazed through the clouds in a brief burst of light, warming my back. I turned to look at the sun and smiled. I actually laughed. I believe Art was letting me know that he was okay. Along with my dad, I now have another guardian angel in my life.

Death is not a monster truck. It does not have the power to smash life or quash the memory of all of the goodness one person can bring into our world. Days after losing Art, my husband read to me from a book entitled *Life Lessons* by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler. It ends with the timely counsel: "You will never experience the earth with all its wonders in this time again. Don't wait for one last look at the ocean, the sky, the stars, or a loved one. Go look now."

Art worked so hard to give the gift of sight where there wasn't any. He did it by gathering secondhand pairs of glasses, and by collecting pocket change to support training centers for dogs that lead the blind in their daily journey. The Lions Club vision is "to be the global leader in community and humanitarian service." Just now, I am beginning to understand that Art's life is a visionary model for my own, and that the loss death delivers over passing days and months has little power over me. True power rests in our ability to see what needs to be done each and every day of our lives. It isn't an easy lesson, but it makes it easier to get in step with the march of the Saints when they go away from us.