

The Struggle to Be Present When You Could Be Gone

Amid life with brain cancer, I experienced a moment of hope, sorrow and joy at our family's four-top table.

January 1, 2024 By [Adam Hayden](#)

Jersey Mike's, amiright?

We've been into Mike's way before [Danny DeVito](#), at least before he's been making ads for them. I'd like to think that Danny's been sinking his teeth into a Stickball Special for decades, but I'm not making any claims. I don't need a Snopes investigation.

No shade to Jimmy John's, of course. Maybe, actually, shade—dude was a big game hunter who posed for pics with endangered animals he blasted before he sold the chain, but that's for another content niche. We hear Subway is fresh slicing now, so I'll snatch up a footlong when gassing up on the next road trip and letcha know. Shapiro's is the obvious choice for anyone who wants a sandwich at anytime, but my kids haven't proven to me that they are ready to savor all that is a corned beef on rye with spicy mustard. The smoked tuna salad at Caplinger's is on point, but I don't know their dinner hours.

Whitney paid Jersey Mike's the biggest compliment I've heard when she casually declared, "This is pretty close to Dagwood's."

Pretty close to Dagwood's is a big fuckin' deal from an IU grad.

Like any normal family, our dining table is totally unusable for actual dining. A pile of laundry to fold, kids' half-done homework under a Pyrex dish we need to return to somebody. Two random socks that don't have a match and don't match each other. Three to four screws twirling around the center of the table, likely from our chairs that have ten to twelve screws each. It's a real game of Russian roulette when a guest joins for dinner. Anyway, hard to fit a family of five around the table built for six, at least this family of five.

Most dining happens in the kitchen, around the "nook." Does your family have a nook? That term is such an obvious fit for the space, and the four top table we have is an obvious fit for the nook. A bay window, maybe? Does that require a bay? We have a window shaped like that, but outside is a concrete easement that runs behind our property to the large storm drain near the road. The easement window?

The nook—clearly better.

When we bypass the cluttered death trap to retreat to the safer table, we face the problem that some of you math wizzes have already inferred: If it's hard to get the family of five around the table built for six, it's even more difficult to fit the family of five around a table for four. (I'm proud to report that at least three of the chairs have their screws in place and in tact.)

I usually stand to eat, leaning against the counter. This does not bother me. I work from home, and my "sedentary lifestyle," like they call it on the personalized diet quizzes Instagram wants me to take, means I'm sitting most of the day. A standing dinner is fine. Besides, Whitney has the opposite type of job, she's on her feet all day long. She's away from the kids, working outside of the home, and I love it that she can have dinner with the fam, even if I'm standing. One or two of the kids will peel off and get back to Playstation ("Do. Your. Freaking. Homework!"), then I can grab the seat that opened up and finish dinner with Whitney.

I didn't have my sandwich out of the paper bag before the kids were erupting in laughter at the table. I turned and the four of them were picture perfect. Loud, for sure loud, smiling, the kids wiping their oily hands on their pants from the Jersey Mike's oil & vinegar combo, with a dash of oregano. Whitney was asking about their days, and it was a freeze frame of joy in the middle of a tense time in our lives. My recent scan, Whitney's recent foot fracture, we each, Whitney and I, have some things at work we're navigating—nothing terrible, only work. Isaac was sick last night, and his transition into middle school is everything that a "transition into middle school" made you think about, and unless the good Lord blessed you with athleticism, charm, and a great head of hair, you know what I'm talking about—and I bet y'all with athleticism, charm, and a great head of hair had a tougher go than us freaks and skater punks ever gave you credit for. I'm truly sorry for not seeing you as the same scared middle schooler that I was. All that separates us are norms and other peoples' ideas. I guess we learn lessons over time.

We shouldn't confuse joy and happiness. Happiness is fleeting. Happiness was the crunch of your first salt and vinegar chip of the meal, joy is having the meal together. We're a sarcastic and cynical bunch, Team A&W and the Hayden Hooligans, and we're happy a lot—I'm happy a lot. But I'm not joyful as often as I'd like to be. I turned tonight to capture a snapshot of joy. It made me joyful.

I was joyful with the peace of my own mortality.

When I caught this portrait of my family, the first thought that I had was of hope; hope and sorrow, two friends who travel together. I did not have sorrow, then hope, or hope then sorrow. It was as though my hope buoyed me to bounce in the gentle waves of sorrow. I observed my sorrow; I felt hope. See, one of these days I'll be gone. Hate to break it to you friends, but one day each of us will be gone. I felt the waves of sorrow slowly wash the shore of my open wounds. Salty tears and uncertain fears of what may come. I saw my family of five, minus me, laughing and eating, telling each other about their days, elbow to elbow, oily hands and all. My hope lifted like a balloon in flight imagining that one day I won't be here, leaned against the counter, and it will be only those

four. And guess what. They'll make it just fine. In some sense, they're showing me this, because I needed to see it, and no one knew, but the circumstances.

Hope buoys us in our seas of sorrow.

Hope is a dangerous weapon in the hands of the untrained who treat hope like a light switch that is there when we need it, and we simply flip off the lights when we leave the room. No, no, this is not hope. Hope is not a closed circuit, hope is a power grid that requires regulation, monitoring, close attention, and skilled hands. Hope will burn you, when carelessly handled. Hope is a steady state of balance that pulls energy from here and channels it there. Sorrow is joy drained, but when we get enough practice we convince sorrow to share the charge with hope. Two friends who travel together. Giving and taking. No, borrowing and loaning.

It's been hard to be present lately. There is so much that I want to do and all of it is impractical. I guess it really hit me tonight. It's a struggle to be present when you could be gone. That's a puzzle.

I don't know. It's night now, and the kids need to be put to bed. Signing off from the four top, in the nook, looking out the easement window.

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