

MY MOTHER'S ECLIPSE

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This talk was given in sacrament meeting in the Battlecreek 9th Ward in Pleasant Grove on the subject of Gratitude.

My Mother died on July 13, 2017.

One late afternoon about a month later, on August 20, 2017 to be exact, my friend Steve and his wife Jill picked me up along with my adult son Jaron to chase the total eclipse tacking across the United States the next day. We all knew it may be a once in a lifetime event, but none of us were that excited. We've been to several partial eclipses, and while amazing, this more-of-the-same-except-even-more seemed like a lot of work at a busy time. School was starting. I had loads of projects and deadlines screaming at me. I kept asking myself—why are we doing this? Time with one of my sons and good conversations with friends were really the only things that kept me from canceling.

The conversation was lively all the way to Soda Springs, Idaho where we spent the night with Jill's mom and then got up at 5 am to make a run for the "zone of totality," the area north of us where the moon would cover the sun completely. A lucky cosmic accident positions the size and distance of Earth's companion and the sun such that their relative sizes almost precisely match, making this event possible.

We understood that the freeways and major roads might be a nightmare of vehicles as clogged up as a gorilla's shower drain as multitudes of eager astral pilgrims pushed north and south, wending their way to this narrow band of land from which to view the anticipated celestial spectacle. We decided when we first started planning this trip that we

Originally published on bycommonconsent.com, Nov.19, 2017.

would avoid this tide of humanity at all costs. Better not to go at all than face what for me is a terror worse than being placed in a closet with a bobcat—getting stuck in traffic. For weeks we pored over detailed maps of Idaho and marked out a rat’s maze of unimproved farm and ranch roads that would spirit us past the convoys west and east of us. It might take us a while to get up there, but at least we would be moving the whole time.

And so it was. We saw maybe three cars on our pleasant trek to the appointed site. Rambling through the wide-open Idaho flatlands was a pleasure in itself, and soon the joy and excitement of the eclipse were starting to bubble up through the stressful haze of this hectic trip. Once we were embedded deep into the band where the sun’s light would be wholly elided save for the occult corona, we found a wheat field on a small plateau situated well above the surrounding flats, and we parked and waited for the appointed time.

With proper eclipse glasses covering our eyes we repeatedly peered at the sun, waiting for the first hint of the moon’s passing. When it finally did, we cheered and called to each other, “It’s started!”



The first hint that something was wrong with my mom came at her surprise eightieth birthday party. All her children had gathered or Skyped in for the occasion. Multiple generations of extended family and numerous friends joined the soirée, and my mom seemed to be having a great time. However, at some point she seemed strangely out of sorts and she pulled me aside. “Darrell is trying to poison me.”

I knew my dad well enough that this made no sense. But she was insistent. People, she said, were coming around uninvited and dad was spending time partying at night in the parking lot with other residents of their apartment complex. It turned out that she had been

not drinking the water in the refrigerator because she was sure my father was trying to kill her.

My sister came to stay with them to see what was happening to my mom, and the full extent of my mother's delusions became apparent. One night, mom awoke screaming that she was covered in bugs. My sister and father took her to the emergency room.

This began the long process of diagnosing and treating late-onset Alzheimer's. The eclipse of my mother's mind had started.



As the moon bit a larger and larger chunk from the sun, it did not really appear any darker, and any dimming of the light was scarcely noticeable, despite the moon's shadow blocking almost half of the sun. Yet the quality of light changed. It was not dimmer, but everything around us seemed new in aspect as if we had entered into an altered land, a different earth than we had been in, yet the same. I had not experienced this before; it was an aspect unique to the eclipse and hard to describe. It was not as if quantitative measurements of ambient light, read off a light meter in units of lux, had decreased, but like a new subtle lens had been lowered before our eyes, as if we had entered into something like Narnia or an elven kingdom. Everything was the same, and yet it all felt so different.



They put my mom on new medicines, which helped. It slowed the decline and her paranoia vanished. But slowly she began to change. At first, she would forget small details, or have to search a long time for the names of things. She was frustrated and tried to hide that these changes were occurring. She did not like acknowledging the gathering holes in her memories and carefully skirted their edges. She became both more silent and more talkative. She was changing. She was not the

same mother I'd grown up with. Her humor was slowly departing. Her memories of events and people from the past became more focused on a small set of stories that she would repeat when she needed to join a conversation. Not like they were rote recitations, instead she expressed them because they became comfortable and were entrained in accessible recollections. Still, she was not herself. She was narrowing. Collapsing in expression and abilities.



As the moon continued to pull in front of the sun, it finally became notably darker and cooler. Soon, all but a sliver remained, yet glancing at the sun (carefully) with the naked eye, I saw it still blazed in glory. Were it not for the dark glasses I'm not sure I would have noticed the sun was being covered, so bright was that small rind of light, yet everything was changing. The colors were different. The earth no longer looked the same. The shadow of every tree and leaf, of every blade of wheat straw still standing in the field bore the mark and expression of the eclipse—a thousand repetitions of a crescent sun splashed over the ground, every instance a camera obscura simulacrum of the eclipse.



As time went on, my mother forgot more and more. She could not remember my wife's name. She would ask, during conversations about my kids and her other grandkids, who we were talking about. She could not bear for my dad to be out of her sight and she followed him everywhere. He was so patient and endured his inability to escape her for very long with equanimity. For example, when my dad went into the kitchen to prepare dinner, she would ask every few minutes,

“Where's Darrell?”

"He's in the kitchen cooking dinner," we would answer.

"I'd better go make sure he doesn't need help."

Of course, by then, she could not cook a meal. She could not use a stove and even carrying dishes from the kitchen to the table seemed a challenge. She still remembered me and was filled with delight when I entered the room, but she was less than the vibrant and caring mother I had grown up with.

During her decline she had to stay in the hospital for a time due to a heart arrhythmia, for which she needed a cardiac monitoring device. I stayed with her because my dad had also been hospitalized for pneumonia. It was a dark time with both parents hospitalized. When she was left alone, she became panicked and unmanageable; she was terrified when she awoke not knowing where she was and in the presence of strangers; she was confused because she did not know where my dad had gone; and she was scared because she could not find him. Even so, it was nice to sit with her and comfort her. Then she could still talk about some things, and we chatted from time to time. While sitting with her one day, we had this exchange, which I wrote as a poem:

My Mom Became Chatty at St. Marks
and It Didn't Sound Like the Alzheimer's Talking

You woke up worried about a gathering,
We would all be dressed nicely,
Because that's what Swedish people do.
We need lots of red things,
Do we have enough red things?

We do Mom. I'll make sure.

Swedes love red things.
She stops to breathe in pure

oxygen from a tube.
Is Aunt Thelma Alive?

I don't think so.
*I don't know who's alive and who is dead,
But we must love each other, That's the way it always was,
We loved each other. Both my grandmothers always
loved each other*
I give her a drink.
*There is so much to do. At the thing we will all
love each other. That's the important thing.*



The eclipse would be complete at any moment. Now a mere speck of light, it blazed from behind a single corner of the moon as bright as the buzzing arc of a welder's rod. Even in the last seconds, when nearly the entire celestial orb was covered by the moon, this last pinprick of the sun shone forth—a final audacious gasp of light sent earthward as if refusing to be extinguished. The landscape was visibly dark and strange, like no gloaming I'd ever seen, a deep, otherworldly shade that was both dreadful and wondrous.



This past Mother's Day in May was the last time mom showed a modicum of her former self. She had trouble opening gifts, the wrapping seemed a puzzle that largely escaped her, but we helped, and she lit up with delight as the presents and offerings were unveiled. She sat in her comfortable rocking chair smiling, asking questions, remembering her children and her sister but few others, and ever wondering where my father was and saying she'd better go look for him.

She took a fall one day a few weeks later and could no longer manage going down the stairs to the front room. She had become bedridden, not leaving her room. Her ability to speak at all was draining away. In early July, my brothers and I determined to get her outside into the nature she loved. We hoisted her huddled in her wheelchair down the stairs. She was frightened riding through the air like a djinn but her sons held her aloft and of course, not one of us would have let her fall even if we had to bear her full weight alone.

We took her to Sugar House Park, one of her favorite haunts, and had a picnic. She sat in her wheelchair enjoying the sun on her face and eating the KFC we shared. She seemed grateful and spoke a few words that we felt blessed to receive. Not many. But more than we expected. It was the last spark of coherence in her beautiful life.

She never left her bed after that, and my dad rarely left her side. Hospice had been helping with her daily needs for some time, but we all knew this was the end. She would sometimes hum and softly sing or say things that seemed random and incomprehensible. We knew she was going. Her spark of life was disappearing.



When the sun slipped behind the moon, the universe changed in ways I had never before experienced. I cannot describe what the event itself was like: the sudden darkness, the shock of the fiery corona blazing in the darkness like a sign from a time of more ancient warrior gods and goddesses. To find the heavens I've known throughout my life suddenly alive with a new and powerful presence, so other—it destabilized my familiar world. It was as if every electron in my body reversed and was now spinning in a new direction. I was struck dumb. Awestruck and wordless. I'd never been left so discomfited by any natural phenomenon. I was surprised by how the heavens so familiar to me were changed and

enlivened in an instant. I've often heard the word sublime, but now I understood it, and viscerally so. I still feel it in my mind's eye.



When I walked into the room, my mother was making a sound I'd never heard a human make. It was horrible and frightening. Loud and unnatural. My sister had called me at my BYU office and told me to get up there right away. My sister, one of my brothers, and I watched with my dad. We each spent some time with her alone, saying our goodbyes, and although she could not understand us, we let her know how much we loved her, and how very grateful we were for the things she had taught us and the life she had lived.

After an hour or so, she suddenly made a different sound. We rushed to her bedside. She took a breath and, empty-eyed, settled softly back into the bed. She had suffered the debilitating effects of this disease for years, and now it was over. Like with the eclipse, the world darkened and became wholly other. My mother was gone.



Suddenly, the sun blazed from behind the moon. We stood in awe as things returned to the way we knew them to be. And soon we were packing up our things, loading the car, and preparing for our return to Utah.



For my mother, the end of her eclipse and the return of the light must wait a little longer before it shines forth again, when the entire world may be made anew in an everlasting light.



I was asked to speak on gratitude, and such a subject kept circling back to my mother's life and the things she taught me about living a thankful life. Her teachings have been instrumental in framing who I am. As such, I am grateful also to my Heavenly Father and Mother. Through my mother, I learned to express gratitude to them as well. Not just for the good things they give that lighten my load or open opportunities and blessings. I am grateful that they are there and grace the dark times when the world shatters and crumbles, or when I am overwhelmed with care and concern for those I love. I no longer feel that thanking them for obvious blessings is enough because blessings are often hard to identify as such. Now, I think it necessary to thank them just for being there with me in darkness and in light. When I feel them, or when I don't. Living a grateful life, I think, entails more than being thankful when obvious advantages come our way, or when we can see and enjoy some gifted result. Living a life of gratitude means being thankful that they are ever there: morning, night, and noon. Weeping with us. Holding us in their way. And being with us in grace. Eclipsed by nothing. Ever.