**CHAPEL TALK:**

**Getting through the Hard Things:**

**Functional Delusion, Faith, Family and Friends**

I have had many blessings in my life and much good fortune.  I grew up in a loving family, I have a wonderful wife and twin sons that I adore and I get to work with extraordinary people at this school who are adults and amazing young people like you ladies and gents.  The days are few when my spirits are not lifted by seeing and knowing all of you.

But my life has had its hardships, as yours may have already had, or may have in the future.

What I'd like to do is briefly describe those and focus primarily on the tools I found and was given that helped me get me through.

So when the winds of misfortune come gale force through your life, you may have a leg up.

What I’ve found works, I believe, whether you are a believer in a spiritual world or not.  And it’s enough of a force multiplier that I think they are worth trying.

**[Here is where I detailed my story of my diagnosis with ALL Leukemia, treatment and my sister Sunni’s death 3 years earlier]**

Grief is understandably paralyzing.

Heavy medical news is understandably paralyzing.

Here is what I found helped me survive this journey:

**Take charge, positively and proactively, in any way possible and lean into service of others.**

**With my sister’s death our immediate focus was:**

* Honoring my sister and celebrating her life.
* We picked every verse that was said, we spoke about her at the service, my mom strong armed the local protest till he let us put balloons in the church, and I sang my sister into her grave.
* Helping my parents survive.
* I could not fall apart because there were things that needed to happen.
* My family and I fell apart with each other, I fell apart with friends but it helped to have a focus on something to do, something or someone to slog through all of this for.

**With Leukemia:**

* I did research, wrote down my meds, learned my nurses names and caught overdosing 5 times.
* I did visualization, etc.  Whatever would help me feel as if I was taking an active role in combating.

**When the question “Why” is unanswerable, give it an answer that will move you forward and make that your answer.  For people that don’t believe in a Spiritual power I term it “Functional Delusion.”  For Spiritual People it is what I think Faith is.**

* Create for yourself a passionate belief in something unreal that will give you strength in the hard times.
* My sister’s death was an unanswerable travesty.  My parents were the kindest people I knew, etc.
* Well meaning but unhelpful advice:  It’s all part of God’s plan or Everything happens for a reason.
* Then God is a sadist.  I had a hard time believing that.  I don’t believe God willingly drops roof’s on church-goers in the middle of a tornado.
* So I gave God the benefit of the doubt.
* I decided that when I died, I would ask God for the explanation of why she died and to see how she was.  And if that seemed inappropriate or she was not flourishing I would dethrone God and raise up a more compassionate regime.
* Hubris, absolutely, but having a plan of action let me sleep at night.
* I did a lot of reading after these events in my life on God and religion and dealing with hardship
* Ellie Wiesel or Victor Frankel, survivors of the Nazi death camps described it best for me: where was God in the concentration camps, he was weeping alongside the victims and placing on them a hand of comfort to help them get through.
* I believe that is where God is in our hardest times, alongside us gently offering support, while we struggle through using our free will.

**With Leukemia I has another unanswerable question.**

* No one knows why it happens.
* So I framed it like this: I had been given this disease because if not me somewhere in the world a little kid would be given it and they would not survive.  If I survived, that little kid made it too.
* Insane, maybe, but in the long stretches of nausea from chemo agents and lumbar punctures and radiation it helped immensely.

**Lean on those around you even if that is counter to your nature:**

* No one “Lone Wolfs” it through something like this.
* The unfortunate thing is that you often have to ask, but as soon as you do, floodgates of support open.
* This is hard if you are someone who does not ask for support easily.
* You can feel like an imposition, like a burden.  You are isolated, you are suddenly “different”
* Get past that and ask those around you for help
* They’ve been waiting, paralyzed to be told what they can do.  To be asked

**On the flip side, if you have a friend or a loved one suffering or struggling, or you just suspect that to be true, don’t be the paralyzed one on the side-lines who is immobilized by not knowing what words to say.**

* Let me give you those words.  Walk to them, be present and listening and say, “How can I help you?”  “What do you need?”  “Tell me what I can do for you?”

**Be compassionate and patient with yourself.**

* Grief comes in waves.
* Depression and darkness can envelop you.
* Allow yourself time, allow yourself the cleansing that comes with crying, let these things pass over and through you.
* If you are exhausted, know you’ll be stronger tomorrow.
* But rushing things will only cripple you.

**Find Humor where you can:**

* Cat sitting on a drain story
* Trick out your room with Christmas tree lights on the ceiling, etc.  You are paying $1500 a night for it so bring friends in a go nuts making it fun.  Festive blankets, and bring your own pillows because hospital pillows SUCK!

**Have your eyes open for positive magical moments because they will come.**

* Sunni’s influence, seemingly from Heaven, of my Donor being found on the same day of the month she died, her waking me up in dreams twice when I had a high fever allowing me to get to the hospital, my children being born on her birthday.
* Walking along outside in the sun, after being 6 months discharged, and realizing I’d had 5 minutes of sheer enjoyment without fear or the sense I was a cancer patient.

**Know that people are at their core kind and honorable and want to help.  Strangers will show you extraordinary kindness.  Humanities compass points toward compassion, and for those with broken compasses it is because something in their life has broken theirs.**

* Ken: Patient that gave me advice.

**Patience is our Watchword:**

* You will have a string of inhumanly bad days, then one good day
* Then more horrible days, then 2 good days.
* Hang in and those good days will outnumber the bad and then be the vast majority.

**Victory is our only Option:**

* Once you’ve committed to a course of action, avoid being told what the odds are.  They are irrelevant and can be unnecessarily disheartening.  The statisticians don’t know YOU.

**Focus on others, if you are drowning in yourself:**

* There are always others walking a harder road than you.  Seek them out for insights and to help them.
* Ron

**Draw strengths from your personal myths and lexicon of heroes.**

* Read, watch, write the things that give you strength or insight.  If it transports you, in a positive way, read/do that.

**Walls are for holding up the ceiling and for raising your spirits.**

* In addition to my “Patience is our watchword” and “Victory is our only option” signs, I had everyone I knew send me photos of them and I stuck them on the wall at the foot of my bed.
* I wrote out quotes from my favorites books or things that people said to me that resonated and stick them on the wall and on my bathroom mirror.

**When the darkness closes around you:**

* Profound isolation
* Call/hang out with a friend or close family member.  Talk to the stars or the heavens if need be.  Sounding board.  TALK gets the bile out of your brain (O’ full of scorpions is my mind)
* Have a good meal
* Sleep
* Know that there are others you love who would be destroyed by you destroying yourself.  If you do not love yourself in a moment of despair, love them and seek help and comfort for that reason.
  + In my darkest moments I resolved I would not take my own life or resign myself to death because it would kill my parents and hurt my friends.

**Sufi Proverb:  Trust in God AND tie your camel.**

* Yes have Faith and Hope, but also ACT and take charge of what you can.
* Know people and powers have your back but strive as hard as you can in the ways that you can.

**And when life, circumstances or other people press you down remember:**

* If I still breathe, I am not beaten.
* If blood pumps through my heart, there is hope.
* Resist, hold fast, battle and outlast.