

Obscure maybe, but irreplaceable

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Most of us live our lives in relative obscurity.

Few of us achieve that proverbial 15 minutes of fame when the spotlight is shining directly on us.

Most of us, well we just settle. We settle for mediocrity. We have fairly "normal" 9-to-5 jobs, average homes and families that range somewhere between the Ingalls (Little House on the Prairie) and the Simpsons!

We buzz around in our own little worlds, often oblivious to what's going on around us. But that's not to say we don't have an impact farther afield.

When it all comes down to it, the only important fame we could ever hope for is to be a superstar in our loved one's eyes. They are our ultimate fans, and our harshest judges.

They are more valuable than a platinum-selling album.

Our spouses, who openly or silently support us unconditionally, deserve a front-row ticket to the show. Contrary to popular belief, or at least modern day management, no one is replaceable.

There are people who I miss; people who will never see me letting loose and singing into a fake microphone with the kids in the family room. There are those who will never witness another birthday, anniversary or miracle here on earth. There are those who will not share a piece of my milestone birthday cake later this year.

If I could only hold them one more time, I'd make it count. I would feel like I've won again. But the prize is intangible, like a gentle breath blown on dying embers. I've said goodbye to four family members over the past decade - my dad, sister, uncle and mom. That's four too many.

There's still so much yet to be done, and we'll have to toil on without them by our side, in the bleachers, or at the dinner table. Four fewer to cheer us on. A foursome of voices, all silent for some time now. It's like taking away a primary colour from a famous painting - you just can't look at it the same way ever again. It's like removing the centrepiece from an award-winning garden.

But there are forms of natural energy, cheap and never-ending enthusiasm. They come in the form of children. When I look into the eyes of my kids, I feel like a superhero - strong, yet vulnerable and weak. It's humbling. I'm a role model, yet they're holding the kryptonite.

Our eldest once told us that since we created her, she owes us a great deal. If you're a typical mom, undoubtedly you have a box or drawer somewhere filled with the home-made greeting cards from the kids. Pull them out and read them over, it's like chicken soup when you're sick in bed!

While I have plenty of in-my-face evidence that I've helped create three human beings, I never really thought of the whole giving life thing. Creation, even after three successful attempts, still amazes me.

I am profoundly confident there is much more at work than mere genetic material coming together in a biological soup. No matter how it's described in medical terms, creation is magical, mysterious and heavenly. It's a gift that should humble each and every one of us mortals.

As I mentioned, average people could spend their entire lives without making a dent in the social fabric. Sure, we are all responsible for several ripples in that huge pond of humanity. And, if we have close friends and family, there's little doubt that we've touched

many lives in some unique and special way.

But it all ends pretty much the same way.

There's often a small box, a shoe box perhaps, at the bottom of the closet or in some corner of the attic or garage. This box is what remains of us when we're gone.

Its contents vary, but often include old letters, photos, postcards, a few favourite objects like a keychain, coin, watch or trinket.

Sometimes it contains old toys, keepsakes and a few Valentine's Day cards made by the kids when they were preschoolers.

They're memories, in one small, convenient container ? our lives in a nutshell. Not grand, glamorous or cosmopolitan. Just a few pieces of what was.

Of all the dreaded tasks I've had to perform over the years, wrapping up the lives of loved ones were the worst. It was very sad really, in an almost regrettable or guilty way. I?remember each experience with a hollow feeling.

In my family members' cases, four ripples in the pond were reduced to a handful of knick-knacks, souvenirs, old clothes and personal bits of paper. There were some strange and gaudy picture frames or odd-shaped bottle openers picked up on some Caribbean holiday decades ago.

With each piece or item that I carefully wrapped or disposed of, I felt it. It was a very strange feeling, like someone standing behind you at the bus stop. I?found myself smiling, instead of weeping. These crazy little items spoke volumes, reaching out from beyond.

I'm sure there was a story behind every item, something that made them smile, laugh or even cry.

There are things I still can't part with, like my dad's fake Rolex that I picked up from a guy on a street corner in New York City for \$10. There's my uncle's cowboy hat, adorned with feathers and pins. When he wore it, his chest widened with pride. There's a bank envelope with my dad's handwriting on it, containing a few old \$1 and \$2 bills he got before they were replaced by loonies and toonies.

I?thought about my personal shoe box and what I'd like it to contain.

I'd fill this container with some souvenirs from trips Kim and I?took in our younger years ??key chains, lighters and cheesy dice from Las Vegas. I'd toss in the two tiny pieces of the Berlin Wall snatched up by souvenir hunters as the wall came crumbling down.

I'd include one or two photos of myself smiling ear to ear, like the one on the bench at the hotel in Cartagena or eating conch fritters at The Fatman's Nephew in Nassau. Perhaps I'd include one of my rings, toy airplanes or Star Trek collectibles.

Not very fascinating, valuable or interesting to anyone, really. Not much of anything at all.

But everything IS me. From my playfulness and concern for the past, to my search for a better life, it's all in there, if you know where to look.

Obscure, maybe. Replaceable?

Definitely not!