

## Wish I Could Ask Frank

As of June 21, it has been one year since my brother died. One year since my final opportunity to talk to him, one year since he was last reachable by phone. His cell phone number is still listed in my contacts. I haven't been able to bring myself to delete it yet. I'm avoiding the "should" word and waiting for a time when that action seems right to me.

At the moment, I am not sure what to say about that day. I don't like to refer to it as an "anniversary." I know that the word technically means "the date on which an event took place in a previous year," but for me, *anniversary* has a positive connotation. Perhaps this is because before I lost my brother, I only had positive things I wanted to remember on a yearly basis.

Neither do I acknowledge any date from my cancer treatment as a "cancerversary." Although some people find something positive in the yearly commemoration of a diagnosis date or end-of-treatment date, for me those dates don't inspire particular celebration, any more than any day I'm still alive and well.

Anyway, June 21 came, and I put one foot in front of the other and made it through the minutes and the hours, and it went. I spent most of the day in a kind of daze, wondering if it was all for real, reminding myself that it was, not really trusting the answer I gave myself, and starting the cycle all over again with the wondering. In my wondering I asked, and am still asking, other questions. I think to myself, what has been the hardest thing about the past year? I am not sure why I am asking myself this, and I don't have an answer yet. However, one thing that keeps coming to my mind is not being able to talk to my brother. Every day, something comes into my head that I wish I could discuss with Frank.

I'm sure I'm not the only one who sought out Frank's opinion on matters. He had a rare ability to listen to a person's perspective, add his insight and understanding, and from that mix produce "but of course!" ideas, the ones that brighten everything up and settle everything down at the same time, the ones that give you the confidence to handle something that had you all twisted up in knots. In addition to consulting him on such knot-making issues, I also asked him about a wide range of things from the serious to the mundane. What wine to buy. How to manage a conference call. Our parents' financial decisions. Clothing choices. Parenting strategies. Restaurant options. What he thought of an old friend's news, a home improvement idea, a proposed textbook cover.

I didn't know until he was gone that I had, in some backroom of my head, a file of things I planned to ask my brother someday. But I did, and it's still there. Questions must have come up subconsciously from time to time over the years, and I put them in there with plans to address them later, filed under "wine bar hangout 2019" or "family reunion 2028," "random car trip 2032" or "Cape Cod low tide 2039." These are broader questions, questions that need an open-ended conversation, a contemplative atmosphere, and more than five minutes. Questions like: What did he most remember from our childhood – good or bad? What was his experience of this or that friend from growing up? What is his telling of the broken collarbone story? What high school shenanigans did he participate in that he never told me about? What were his best memories from college? What is his perspective on me – my choices, my working life, my

parenting, my lifestyle, my future? How does he view our parents and other relatives? What does he most want to have accomplished at work and in his personal life? How can I be a better sister and friend to him? What does he want for his family? What is sacred to him? What would he change if he could do something over? Who are the people he most emulates? What gets him up in the morning?

I could go on. The in-brain filing cabinet seems quite large.

I don't fault myself for not getting around to asking the questions in the filing cabinet. I could not have known I wouldn't have future times with Frank when they would more naturally come up. The hope of those times used to be a small but steady light in my peripheral vision, always there in the distance. Now, though, wishing for them is like staring directly into that light, creating a grey splotch across my field of vision when I turn away, blocking my view of what's right in front of me, blinding me temporarily. I am working to steer my eyes away from the glare, to focus more on what is real right now.

A thought for you (and for me too, actually): If you have some of those big questions stored in your mind, consider dusting them off a little earlier than you planned. An opportunity might come up with a parent (or parent figure), a sibling (or someone like a sibling to you), a spouse or partner, a good friend, a child, a relative. Maybe throw one or two bigger questions in with the habitual smaller ones. As I have discovered, you can't be certain the opportunity will come along later.

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