



Keith.

A death in the family, and thoughts on what-might-have-beens

By Craig Lancaster | April 21, 2017

My older brother, Keith, would have been 51 years old today, if he'd made it this far.

He died exactly two months ago, on Feb. 21. I got the news in a motel room in Minot, N.D., and my emotions splayed out in all directions. Sadness, certainly, for the all-too-short life of someone in my family. Heartbreak for his father, my stepfather, whose voice was one of the last Keith heard before he died in a Texas emergency room. Heartbreak, too, for Keith's mother, the closest person in the world to him, someone who was also there that night and the one who most feels his absence every moment of every day. I felt desperate to contact our younger sister and brother and tell them I love them, the kind of urgency that's clarified when someone else you love is gone and you realize, shit, I can't remember the last time I told him so.

I can't remember if I ever told him so.

And finally, selfishly, I wanted to sleep. I was in North Dakota for a job, and that job was to start early the next morning, and I wasn't near ready. It's a weird thing, the gravitational pull of the mundane even when some bit of personal news numbs you. In the days that followed, I'd tell friends that Keith's death was at once shocking and unsurprising, in that no one expected the news that night but everyone who knew and loved him understood that he was at risk.

We all are, when you get right down to it, but the risk is more pressing for some than for others. Yet life and obligations spin on, until they don't. Keith was gone, and I had work to do.

I didn't sleep much that night. It's been two months, and he crosses my mind more now than he ever did when he was alive, and I feel comforted by those crossings even as I wonder why we let the years just go like that, without even trying to make something more of them.

I miss him.

I scarcely knew him.

That picture atop this? That's us, me and Keith.

We're in the front yard of the house in North Richland Hills, Texas, where I grew up and Keith was an occasional presence. The tank-like Ford LTD station wagon in the driveway—the very car I'd drive in high school—tells me it's 1976 or 1977. Our sister Karen, born in January 1976, would have been a recent addition to our blended family. Brother Cody, born in March 1978, was still in the cosmos.

This, for a few years after Keith's father and my mother fell in love and married, was the kid situation. Me and Keith. Keith and me. The best memories I have of him are rooted in this time, when he was the older brother I gained by marriage, an effortlessly cool kid I admired and envied and badly wanted to please. Later years brought our profound differences into sharper relief, made conversations a little more stilted, amplified the long silences. But there wasn't so much of that early on.



And then there were three: Keith, left, and Craig flank baby sister Karen, circa 1976.

At this late date, 40-plus years after the picture above was snapped, it's hard to get the feeling of those years now that I have a fuller idea of the tensions roiling beneath them. We look happy. We were happy, sometimes. But the fact that we were brothers—stepbrothers, but brothers just the same—meant that two marriages had perished to clear the way.

I've always suspected Keith felt as though I got the better end of that deal, and had he ever expressed it I wouldn't have been able to argue the point. I got his father, the male role model I desperately needed and now my most enduring friend, on a full-time basis, while Keith saw him only occasionally. In my mom, Keith got a



We lived in a neighborhood thick with kids his age and mine. We spent endless days on bicycles, chasing around those streets. We made Easter trips to Six Flags. We took family vacations when family was just the two of us and his father and my mother. I remember marveling at Keith's way with girls, even at that early age, when girls were gross and I didn't want one but somehow knew I would one day.

And let's talk about those bikes, the ones in that picture up there, because those are a story unto themselves. I'm at left, sitting on a failing five-speed with a swoopy banana seat. It was Keith's bike, but I gained it in a trade, because I was obsessed with the gear shifter in the middle of the crossbar. Keith sits on the newer, much more reliable single-speed bike I got for my sixth birthday, the one I gave up in the swap. Keith knew he was rooking me. Our folks, who at first tried to scotch the trade and then let it go through as a life lesson for me, knew he was rooking me. I didn't care. That gear shifter, man. Nothing else mattered. The five-speed was mostly sidelined for repair after the trade. The gleaming one I gave up to Keith served him well for as long as he was with us.

But here's the thing: Eventually, he would go back to Dallas or South Carolina or Alabama, back to his mother and his own blended family, and I would just ride his bike in his absence.

That's a metaphor for something. What, I'm not entirely sure. Or maybe I just don't want to say it out loud.

I appreciate now, in a way I didn't and couldn't then, how uncomfortable Keith must have been sometimes in our house.

The arrival of Karen and then Cody, I'm sure, only exacerbated the parts that were difficult for him, because a house full of kids forced the imposition of a social order that wouldn't, couldn't bend for his occasional stays with us.

At one point, to keep laundry and showers and mealtime in procession, my mother wrote out a "Ten Commandments of the House." You

stepmother he'd probably have gladly given up if it meant his own folks had never split. These are hard things, the kind of things you don't grasp when you're 3 years old and thrust into a new family. The kind of things that come to you gradually, as your own adulthood sets in and mistakes and ennui blast apart relationships and you realize that we're all walking through a world seeded with emotional landmines, just trying to step safely.

Yet there are memories, happy ones. Keith and I playing mini bongo drums and singing Beatles songs into a cassette recorder. Home movies filmed on a Super 8: Charles, his dad and my stepfather, as the monster, Keith and I as the lab assistants trying to subdue him. My mom as the damsel in distress, baby Karen stolen by Charles-as-Black-Bart, Keith and I the rescuers who bring him to justice.

know, thou shalt not leave thy towel on the bathroom floor and such. Corny? Absolutely. Necessary, in one way or another, to the overall operation of a full house? Yes. Keith chafed. In later years, well into adulthood, he still complained about it with what seemed to me to be outsized bitterness.

Here's a little grace I probably should have granted him when he was still alive: Life on Crabtree Lane was a different thing for him than it was for the rest of us. I should have been more tolerant of his intolerance.

When Keith was 13 or 14, he came to live with us. Our full house got fuller. Ours was a garden-variety three-bedroom suburban home, built in the late 1950s. The concept of a den and a master suite and bedrooms for all—that's HGTV stuff, detached from the reality we knew. Karen, the only girl, got the small room just inside the front door, a spot that in later years became an office. Cody, the baby, got his own space. Keith and I doubled up in the back bedroom, across the hall from our folks.

The differences between us—not always grudges or disagreements, but just our being people who probably wouldn't have chosen each other for friends—were beginning to expand. He liked Lynyrd Skynyrd and Molly Hatchet. I liked Paul McCartney. He liked muscle cars. I thought our Chevette was quite the sensible automobile. (I was, perhaps, wrong about this.) I read everything I could. I never, not once, saw



him crack a book. In later years, if we'd talked about such things, I wouldn't have understood the depth of loss he felt when Dale Earnhardt died. He probably wouldn't have understood how I mourned Mary Tyler Moore.

Sometimes, we could bring those divergences together for the good of both of us. When he was 16 and I was 12, I'd do some of his homework.

**The whole crew, Thanksgiving in the late 1980s.
Standing are the four kids: Karen, Keith, Craig, Cody.
Mother Leslie and father Charles in front.**

When I was 17 and he was 21, he went with me to a junkyard and helped me salvage a long side window for that old Ford station wagon, a replacement for the glass I'd shattered by punching it in a fit of frustration and anger.

Mostly, though, we co-existed warily, sometimes spilling over into hostility. I have two memories, in particular, of violence between us. The first was in our backyard, Keith maybe 14 and I about 10. Fed up with our quarreling, Charles strapped massive boxing gloves on us and let us go to town. Keith, taller than I (but not for much longer), kept dropping punches atop my head like a sledgehammer, wearing me down.

A couple of years later, he came home late one night from work, into our shared bedroom, and flipped on the light, rousing me from sleep. I said something uncharitable. He walked over and ground his thumb in my eye. We ended up scrapping in the middle of the room, until Charles came in, squinty-eyed and in his underwear, holding us apart and letting us know that the real pain was coming if we didn't knock it off.

Minutes later, lights out and the two brothers in their own beds, here comes Keith's voice across the darkness: "Someday, they won't be able to protect you. Someday, I'll get you."

Someday never came, of course. We grow up. We follow the arc of our developing lives and we consign old grudges to time and tide.

Keith finished high school in 1984 and was gone soon after, into an apartment in nearby Haltom City and later a house in Arlington and, still later, another house in Grand Prairie, the one he lived in until his death. I graduated from high school in 1988, dropped out of college in 1991, worked in Texas and Alaska and Arkansas and Kentucky and Ohio and Alaska again and California and Texas (again) and Washington and California (again) and, finally, Montana, where I still live.

The years piled up, one at a time and then, seemingly, in stacks of five, a byproduct of the compression of memory. I don't think Keith and I saw each other more than a dozen times in all those years. We traded fewer than 10 phone calls. I knew what he was up to, and he knew where I was, and neither of us seemed to want or need more than that.

This is my struggle now, when I'll never see him again. I think we put a social expectation on ourselves that we should be closer to our family members than we sometimes are, that we should be more in touch, that we should spend more time than we do. That expectation is heightened retroactively by guilt and regret when there are no more chances. I can't help but wonder if I should have done or said more to Keith toward the end of his life, when he was heavy and unhealthy and unhappy.

The humane thing, I think, is to release ourselves from those imposed obligations. There was a closed door between Keith and me, and we both put it there. It wasn't locked, though. We'd occasionally open it at a family gathering, have a nice, trivial chat about whatever was going on in our lives, and then we'd go back to whatever our day-

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The brothers, together for the last time, Christmas 2014.

to-day existence looked like, without much thought about each other. That wasn't a failure. It's just the way of things. We were both OK with it, because if we hadn't been we wouldn't have let it stand.

You can't change your mind about that just because the bargain we all make—that the first breath of life will someday cede to death—comes on a timetable that catches you flatfooted.

The other thing I've been thinking about a lot since Keith died is family and what it looks like, and I've come to a conclusion that's neither original nor particularly insightful: family is whatever you make it.

Keith was my brother. I didn't think of him as a step, though he surely was, just as I was to him. I didn't fixate on how brotherhood was pushed

on us, that we didn't share blood or a last name. I was adopted at birth; I don't share blood with anybody in the family I grew up in. I learned early on to think expansively about the definition of family, and to be accepting, if with some reservation, about the limitations of how much you might like someone even if you love him.

I did love him. I miss him now, even though I never did before. I'll have the rest of my life, however long that is, to wonder what we might have said to each other in future years if we'd both grown old, buried parents, seen nieces and nephews have their own children. Maybe nothing more than we did in the previous 40-some-odd years of knowing each other.

Then again, maybe so much more.

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