

CELEBRATING *Life*



Photo courtesy Glenn Livermore

A journey through joy, sorrow
and all that lies in between



Phil Starks photo

I recently suffered a loss in the family. And although this loss came in the form of a furry, four-legged friend, I had depended on those four legs for a decade. But the end for my cat, Chad, was upon us. He had endured physical ailments over the past year, and the only certain cure for endurance is death. Watching him die broke me.



Phil Starks

And I was equally broken when I buried him. Before then, I had hoped that the weather would be perfect, and that the location of his final resting place would be ideal. But that was just hope. What I knew was that I would carry him, dig a deep and safe hole, place his ashes at the base, add my own remembrances, say a few words out loud, fill the hole and then sit there until I stopped crying.

Knowing this did not make it any easier.

Walking back home, I asked myself “why?” Not why did he die. That answer was clear: all life is terminal. And not why did he die when he died, although that is a question that I still want answered. No, I asked myself why I felt obligated to follow a specific process so that I could say a true and final goodbye. I asked myself about the role of ceremony in our lives.

We have many words for ceremony, such as rituals, or rites, or observances, and others. For me, ceremony is a broad term that doesn't require a faith-based or culture-specific method of recognizing an occurrence. Instead, I view ceremony as any deliberate process used to mark an event. My ceremony for Chad mimicked the burial rituals of many cultures, but it was just one method of many that I could have employed for his goodbye. The larger question was why did I feel compelled to mark his passing?

To me, ceremony sits in the transition zone between needs and wants. All humans have needs: we need food, water, shelter, sleep and intimate relationships – at least for the continuation of our species. Our wants are much more variable and context-dependent. We may want a new car, a new house or a clear, expansive and insightful comment from Patriots coach Bill Belichick, but none of these things are necessary for life.

Now, ceremony may not be necessary for life, but its absence can leave a void within our lives, such that we feel slightly less whole. And maybe this is the best



Phil Starks with his son, William, whose birth he says was on one end of the ceremony spectrum.

way to describe those things that exceed wants, but do not easily fit within needs: you can survive without them, but doing so diminishes you. What fits within this category must differ between cultures,

and then between individuals within cultures.

Pondering differences between individuals is interesting, but calculating them is almost impossible. Perhaps the differences are best uncovered by examining the differences in individual emotional lives. I often compare emotions to crayons: some people have eight colors in their box, others have 96, and most of us are somewhere in between. It must be challenging for individuals to find common ground when they differ in emotional gradations. More importantly, however, these differences influence perspectives on ceremony – and the need for them. In the end, it will be left to individuals to determine what they can survive without, but feel less for it.

It is far easier to look across cultures. The things we mark with ritual differ significantly across peoples: we have ceremonies for coming of age, for becoming citizens, for reaching retirement and for many (many!) other events. Similarities arise, however. People tend to mark births, marriages and deaths. We recognize life, the possibility of new life and the loss of life.

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Stories Lost: Turtle Mound

In West Andover, overlooking Haggetts Pond, rests a pile of rocks. This is no ordinary collection of stones, however. Measuring approximately 70 feet long, 30 feet wide and 15 feet high, and consisting of everything from the lightest pebbles to 3-ton boulders, this is one massive pile.

This stone mound would be ideal for a particularly bumpy game of king-of-the-hill, but its characteristics make it better suited for hide-and-seek. The mound has two chambers – each approximately 8 feet in diameter and 10 feet high, and a stone tunnel. Its shape, seen from the sky, resembles a snapping turtle, and is thus called Turtle Mound.

What is hidden might surprise you. An archeological dig identified artifacts amidst the tons of stone that may be 5,000 years old. The surrounding trees are considerably younger, however, and



some of the stone contains clear signs of modern activity. Although children have undoubtedly played on and in the mound for centuries, the most interesting hidden feature of Turtle Mound is its story.

Indeed, much of that story remains a mystery. No one knows for certain who selected the site, who moved the stone or

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who built the structure. No one knows for certain why it was built or what its original use was. No one is even sure when it was built. People guess about the whos and the whys and the hows and the whens, and some of these guesses are based on evidence, but no one knows the real story.

If it were known, the story would probably come in multiple chapters. The builders of the structure as it currently appears may not have known each other. Instead, "improvements" were probably made across the centuries. Its uses, too, no doubt changed with the times. It was known to attract tourists (and their money) in the 1800s, and before then it might have served as a root cellar.

But long before then? If we are to believe the only available archeological study, Turtle Mound was used for ceremony. A foot beneath one of the chambers, within an oval pattern of stones, charred human bones and stone tools were discovered. It seems that the chamber was a crematorium. Unless, of course, it wasn't.

It's remarkable that we don't know. People love recording information about themselves. It's a dirty little secret, but when we talk about history, we almost always mean human history.

The amount of tangible work that went in to making Turtle Mound is incredible, and the results of that labor are as visible today as they were two centuries ago. Yet how it came to be? We may never know.

It does make one wonder, however, if we can lose the story of something like Turtle Mound, how many other stories of equal work, but with less tangible evidence, have we lost?

— Phil Starks



Chief Henry Lester Hilton with Phil Starks' mother, Jackie, and his niece, Kerry McArdle, at Starks' wedding in 1999.

Remembering the Chief

My son would have loved him, and he would have called him Grandpa or something like that. Many people called him Henry, my mother called him Lester, but I called him Chief.

To me, Henry Lester Hilton was always the Chief. The Chief wouldn't have been my son's biological grandfather, but neither party would have lingered on this relatively minor detail.

That detail arose because my dad died when I was 9. My father – Merton E. Starks – was a positive force in my life, but early childhood memories are naturally fragmented. The Chief arrived, via my mother, more than half a decade after my father passed. My memories of him are less fragmented.

As a young man, I viewed the Chief as an interloper, even while I admired his skills. I appreciated his abilities in and around the house, with vehicles, with anything that – to a boy – a man should be able to do. He could fix whatever was broken, and sometimes I think he broke things just to learn how to fix them. Although I appreciated his skills, I did not make life easy for him. He was, after all, living in my house in Andover.

I remember, vividly, an exchange where I manipulated his words to my benefit, and then challenged him. He responded with honesty and kindness, although it took me two decades to realize this. The

Chief informed me that he wouldn't back down.

Thankfully, we didn't fight – the man

might have destroyed me. At the time, I didn't know the Chief had been a boxer; CHIEF, PAGE 48

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This is what we celebrate, but why do we celebrate it? The answer is hopeful. We celebrate life because we are social animals, because we are part of something bigger than ourselves. There are many gifts associated with being social. These gifts go far beyond the ability to be helped, nourished and supported by those who love us, and in turn our ability to help, nourish, and support others. The deep gift of being social is that it has shaped our emotional capacity.

But the benefits come with costs. Hope is paired with fear, gratitude with thanklessness, relief with frustration, attraction with disgust, sympathy with cruelty, love with hate, and more.

There may be symmetry in our ability to feel, but this does not mean the emotions are balanced. I feel great sorrow over the loss of my pet, but that sorrow is far outweighed by the joy Chad gifted me. And this emotion is for a beloved pet. The joy we feel at the birth of a child, the hope we feel when paired with a lover and the grief we feel when a loved one is lost is often overwhelming when experienced. The depth of our own emotion can surprise us.

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That is true even when we are alone. But when we collectively express emotion, the results can be transformative. Naming ceremonies reinforce social bonds, weddings expand social networks and funerals distribute grief. When we come together, our joy can be enhanced, and our sorrow shared.

Being social has enhanced the range of emotions we feel, and because we need each other, we celebrate life. To be human is to be a social animal. And while it isn't always easy, I am thankful for it. Although I cannot be certain, I believe that we experience emotion more deeply than other animals – regardless of the number of crayons in our respective boxes. **A**

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Life

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I didn't even know that he played semi-pro baseball. I think I might have known that he was a veteran of two wars, World War II and Korea, but until I earned the distinction for just one conflict, I didn't know the significance of that designation. I didn't know how special he was.

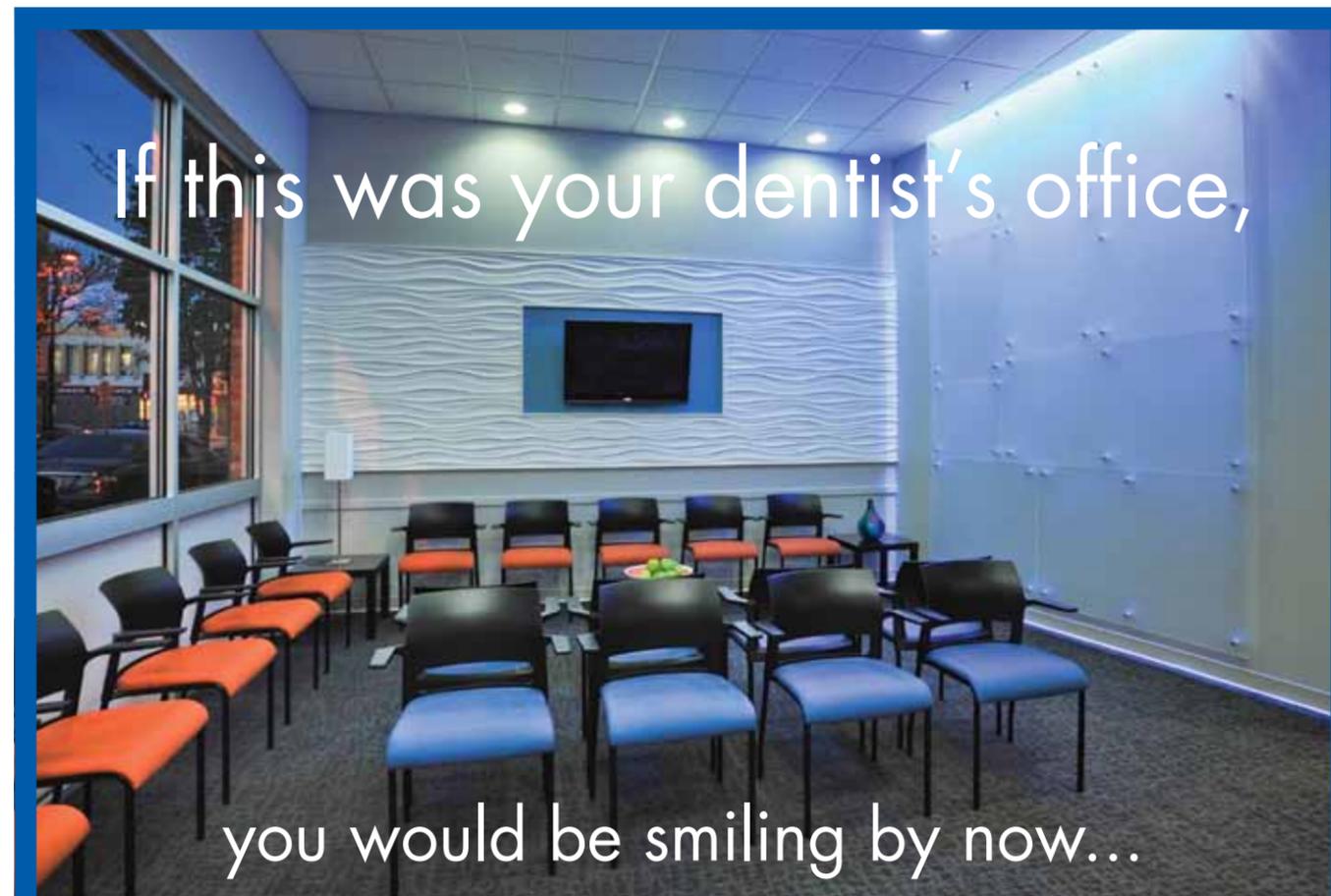
I'm not sure anyone did. The Chief didn't brag, not about golfing at his beloved Andover Country Club, not about the wars, not about his role as Andover's fire chief (the position that suggested the nickname I used for him). And he could have. He spent 22 years as our fire chief, another as the president of the Massachusetts Fire Chiefs Association, and fought tirelessly for our first responders. It was under his tenure that firefighters' work weeks were reduced from 72 to 42 hours. He didn't even brag about installing a telephone across from the fire station that allowed children to call Santa every Christmas.

Now that he has passed, I wish he had bragged. I wish he wrote his life's story down. I'd buy a copy, I'd share it with my son and I'd give it to my students. But like almost everyone, he let his perspective of his experiences die with him. His thoughts became forever out of reach in December 2001.

What haunts me to this day is the mistake I made on my wedding day. The day was chaotic, and I was trying to balance the emotional needs of all of our guests. I forgot one. I forgot the Chief. I toasted many people, but I did not toast the single greatest male role model I had in my life. I think the Chief forgave me, but I have never forgiven myself.

Until now, the memory of my failure has helped keep the Chief's memory alive. (That, and all of the HLH-inscribed tools in my basement). But just recently, my son witnessed the blinking lights on a play mat that pleases most kids. My boy flipped the mat upside down to investigate what made it work. That's when I knew, blood aside, that William Starks was Chief Hilton's grandson. I won't forgive myself, but I no longer need the memory of my failure to remember the Chief – I just have to watch my boy.

– Phil Starks



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