

These things

By [Ryan Dueck](#)

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I had a day of sifting and sorting through the pain that shoots up and out like a geyser from the cracks in the ground of our lives together. The hospital, the seniors' home, the coffee shop, the parking lot, the playground, the living room . . .

Sometimes it seems that wherever I turn, there is only pain, only confusion, only sadness, longing, anger, regret. Outside the sun shines and the birds sing and all is bright and beautiful, but this is only the surface of things. *Inside*, just beneath the surface, so much is amiss. So many ugly things, always threatening to bubble up and spill out into the bright and beautiful things.

I stopped to see my grandmother after visiting a few other people in her residence, after hearing some painful stories and walking through a few ugly things. She gave me a hug. She smiled and nodded a lot. Near the end of our visit, she quoted Philippians 4:8 to me:

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

We had been speaking about the pain of watching people at the home struggle and suffer, watching people get mistreated and forgotten, watching as dignity and humanity are slowly eroded by the dull march of time, like a faucet with a persistent, steady drip. We had talked of love and grace and of the perverse irony that often we learn lessons later in life that would have been so much more useful about ten, 20, 30 years earlier. We had talked about the making of mistakes and of the struggle to learn how to love one another for who we are rather than who we wish we would be.

"We don't get to choose what we go through," my grandmother told me. "I sometimes wonder what the point of so many things might be. But all we can do is to fix our eyes upon what is good."

When I was younger I read Philippians 4:8 as something like a moral checklist for maintaining personal purity. Behind each “whatever is” lurked a sinister prohibition. I had been well-schooled in the nature of sin. I knew that to be human was to be slavishly prone to falsehood and impurity, to gravitate toward dishonorable, unpleasing things, things that if anyone were to discover, they would condemn not commend me for. This verse was a wagging finger, a foreboding list of implicit don’ts: *Don’t watch, don’t do, don’t read, don’t participate, don’t discuss. . . . Make you sure you keep yourself pure! Make sure your mind doesn’t wander down those seedy back alleys with their myriad temptations and corruptions. For God’s sake, make sure you think about the right things!*

I didn’t hear Philippians 4:8 that way when my grandmother quoted it to me. I heard it as an invitation, a warm embrace. I think I heard the voice of Christ: *I know, there are so many ugly things that are always threatening to overwhelm the bright and beautiful things. There will always be pain, always be rage and chaos and loneliness and disorienting confusion, and you will have to navigate these things. But there are other things, too. True and honorable things, commendable and praiseworthy things. Bright and beautiful things. Excellent things. Whatever else might come bubbling up from the depths, whatever might threaten to spill out of the cracks, think about these things. These are the things that will sustain and preserve you. These things are your mind’s true and lasting home.*

And so I decided to do as my grandmother instructed me. I decided to be on the lookout for excellence and honor and for things worthy of praise. I decided to walk lightly through the ugly things, not because they aren’t real or don’t matter, and certainly not because Christ isn’t present in ugly places and ugly things, but because I cling to the hope that these things are passing away and will one day be overwhelmed and transformed by the excellent, honorable, praiseworthy things.

I gave my grandmother another hug and walked into the lobby of the senior’s center. The stagnant silence of a long hallway suddenly gave way to exuberant laughter and lively conversation. “Hey, coach Ryan!” I was surprised to see a few kids from a soccer team I coached this past year sitting at a table. They were playing board games with the residents of the home. “What are you guys doing here?” I asked. “We come play games here every Tuesday,” one of them told me, a broad smile lighting up his teenage face. “It’s fun!”

“Excellent,” I thought, as I walked out into the mid-morning light.

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